Ace Ma
Chicago, Illinois

In Bloom
Plaster, mexo clay, epoxy clay, newsprint, fake flowers, acrylic paint

The idea to create a human figure came from my research essay, where I looked into stories where an artist's creation is brought to life. While examining those stories, I felt great pity for the synthetic beings and how meaningless their lives would be without their creators. I wanted to create something that could come to life and be happy without me. So, with that in mind, I started to build my person.

I started by creating an armature from PVC pipe and using a styrofoam head for a base. I then built up more body using newsprint and tape. Once that was done, I layered over the paper with plaster and waited for it to dry. Once the first layer of plaster was done, I cut out any pieces that looked out of place and then went in with the second layer. I spackled over the plaster to get a smooth surface before sculpting the face. I shaved down the foam so the face was flat and built basic shapes using a two-part sculpting clay. While I kept the body portion of the sculpture pretty realistic, I opted for a more stylized face with big, exaggerated eyes. Once the face was done, I sculpted the hair, rolling out strips of mexo clay and connecting them to thin cardboard ribbons for stability. The eyelashes looked a lot like petals, so I decided to run with the flower theme. I decided to go with the color palette of lotus flowers, with shades of pink and yellow. Once I finished painting the face and hair, I covered her body with various plants. To do this, I cut up different fake flowers, separated each petal, and glued them to her arms and legs in a scale-like fashion. Finishing up, I draped her legs in a green floral fabric and adorned her hair with flowers. I was very proud to see how she grew and came to life as I worked with her. Towards the end, It felt like I was working with another person, not an artwork.

To You, Someday.

Ace M.

The Oxbow School

OS49

Writers Note: This paper offers a personal perspective on the desire to create artificial life and how the things we make reflect our own wishes. By examining characters like Victor Frankenstein and Pygmalion to contemplate the power we hold as creators, it questions the ethics of playing god in our narratives, and the hypothetical awareness and consciousness of our imagined characters.

I.   Imaginary Friends and Unfinished Stories

Ever since I was young, I have always loved to create characters. As a kid, everything scared me. The dark, growing up, school, and especially people. The fear was so bad that making friends was practically out of the question. I had hidden myself so deep that no one could find me, and I was too afraid to come out. No one to talk to and no one to listen. In my loneliness, I found solace in my imagination. The real world was frightening; things could go wrong at the drop of a hat, and there was no way to control it. In my imagination, I could control everything. I made myself many friends, but the one I remember clearest is a fairy with long blonde hair and shiny wings. I don't remember her name anymore, just that she was beautiful. Her voice was sweet and her laugh rang like wind chimes. She was not scary. Her face never held any judgment or annoyance, only joy. She listened to me talk for hours, about things that no one else cared to hear. On bad days she would sing to me, gently take my hands in hers, and whisk me away from the frightening world I found myself trapped in. Because of her I was no longer lonely. I saw her most in my dreams. There, She walked me through worlds greater than my own. Filled with colors and magic, endless forests filled with magical creatures and kind people. In those worlds, I was brave, I was popular, everybody wanted to be my friend. Waking up and realizing how alone I was was always disappointing. As I got older and realized how much I wanted a connection

with another person. Perhaps it's because of those dreams that I was able to break out of my shell later and make real friends. The fairy was great, but she wasn't real. Even I knew that.

As time went on, the number of my imaginary friends shrank, and my number of real friends grew. I knew I had to grow up someday, but it was sad to say goodbye. Eventually the long silvery hair of the fairy was replaced by a blonde girl in my third grade class, and the only chimes I heard were in classrooms. In place of my fictional companions, original characters and stories formed. I loved making characters and giving them backstories and voices. Each character I made had their own tragic past, relationships, and stories. I loved them; I drew them constantly, on my homework, sketchbook, and desk, wherever I could. They made passing time in school easier. My favorite was a girl named Hana. I had given her long brown hair adorned with flowers and very sad eyes. Her story was one of the saddest, riddled with misfortune and loss. As time passed and school got harder, the world I made for them began slowly disappearing. Drawings on homework weren't acceptable, sketchbooks were covered in math problems, and desks were supposed to be spotless. My time with them dwindled, and I stopped drawing. Hana's story remained unfinished. It's been a while since then, but I haven't been able to draw her again.

Somewhere along the way, the characters I made began to exist as a source of guilt for me. I wrote them such sad pasts and sent them on complex, grueling journeys, and yet, I never gave them a happy ending. I left them in stasis, a horrible, nightmarish world like the one they had saved me from, but I hadn't given them an exit. I began to question why I had made them in the first place. Why had I chosen to write such devastating backstories? Why did I give her such sad eyes? What was the point? Was it because I was selfish? Because I took some type of sick satisfaction knowing I had power over a life like that?

II.   The Perfect Woman

It dawned on me how often I see humans creating artificial or fictional lives to satisfy selfish desires and curiosity. The longing to play god and control another's life, disregarding whatever cruelties we may unknowingly impose upon them. Yet our moral compasses typically stop us from inflicting that dark curiosity onto other living beings, things we qualify as equals. So, we create surrogates, creatures that are lesser than us. Fictional characters and synthetic lives to satisfy ourselves with.

I remember a story I heard when I was younger, something I prayed would happen to me. The Greek myth of Pygmalion and Galatea. The "love" story of a man and his greatest creation. The story's protagonist is Pygmalion, a sculptor renowned for his talent. However, despite his relative popularity, he remained unmarried. This was because he felt great revulsion towards the women of Greece. He loathed the prostitutes that roamed the streets and renounced real women. In his isolation, Pygmalion sculpted a woman from ivory, literally creating his "perfect wife." He called the statue Galatea, and she was everything he wanted. Silent, submissive, and beautiful. Eventually, Pygmalion prays to the goddess Venus to bring Galatea to life, and they supposedly live happily ever after.

As a kid, I thought the story was romantic. The idea of my creations coming to life was invigorating. But now I can't think of it with anything but abhorrence. The message of the myth is the love that an artist has for their creation, at first Pygmalion treats the statue *like* a real person which seems sweet if not a little self absorbed. When Galatea is brought to life, he takes her as his wife, but the dynamic between Pygmalion and Galatea shifts. Whereas before, Pygmalion was caring for the inanimate imitation of a human, he is now looking after a sentient

being. Their relationship is not husband and wife but master and servant. The power imbalance is created by the fact that Pygmalion literally sculpts Galatea with his hands and is enhanced by the fact that she is a woman. He grooms her to be his perfect wife. She loves him and respects him as her husband, but that's all she knows. He regards her as his most incredible creation yet; but to him she is nothing but his wife. As the protagonist, Pygmalion is the story's main focus; it's all about his struggles as a man dissatisfied with real women, but what of Galatea? Sure, her existence solved the Pygmalion's problem, but what about the rest of her? She's doomed to live the rest of her unnatural life being nothing more than Pygmalion's wife. We never hear about her thoughts or feelings. All we know is that she loves her husband, but how could she do anything else? She was made to serve him. It's the only thing she knows; there was never any other choice besides being his wife. If Galatea had been given another option, if she knew she could be something else, would she stay with him? Would she be satisfied to live her life with the sole purpose of pleasing her master?

III.   A Life Worth Living

Of course, as I thought about this, I felt disgusted with Pygmalion, the selfish man who created a life with no purpose but to please himself. But then I realized that I had done something similar in the past. My imaginary friends. I didn't make them to have honest conversations with me; I just wanted someone to listen, and I never even thanked them. The fairy who saved me, did she ever think about what else she could be doing? Was she truly happy listening to me ramble on and on, with no way to respond except positively? At first I thought: "thank goodness they aren't real," but then again, neither is Galatea. It's the principle that bothers me. The thought that if

they did somehow gain consciousness, their lives would be centered entirely around serving others and that they were doomed to exist in silence. That isn't living, it's just being alive.

How would the characters I've made react? Knowing that their lives were ruined for entertainment. If Galatea and my characters gained awareness of the world around them and understood how trapped they were in their roles as entertainment to selfish masters, would they be angry? Would they yell and curse their makers for ruining their lives? Would they attack?

IV.   Frankenstein's "Monster"

I am reminded of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* often regarded as a horror novel, but which I see as a tragedy. The protagonist, Victor Frankenstein, tries to play god, defying the laws of nature to create new life in the pursuit of knowledge. When he is dissatisfied with his 'monster,' he tosses it aside. The creature is a big newborn baby thrown into a cruel and uncaring world. After some time, the beast gains knowledge and grows bitter towards the creator who abandoned it. It spends the rest of its life ruining its makers, killing his brother and adopted sister. However, Victor is given a chance to right his crime against nature as he faces his creation. Despite its hatred toward Victor, the monster is hopelessly lonely. Abandoned by its parent and shunned by its human peers, it craves companionship. It tells Victor that if he makes it a companion, it will leave him and his family alone. Victor agrees at first but eventually decides against it for fear of more failure. By refusing the creature's wish, he dooms himself and his family. The monster, enraged by this second betrayal, kills Victor's best friend and wife and lures him to the Antarctic, where he eventually dies.

Victor Frankenstein's downfall is one of his own makings. His thirst for power and knowledge and desire to play god creates an unnatural being, who he throws away, disregarding

his responsibility to either nurture or kill the monster he made. Even after facing his greatest failure and creation, he refuses to take responsibility and grant it the slightest grace of companionship. The creature is the result of an egotistical madman who tried to play god. Its entire life, it was abused, mistreated, and abandoned, and when faced with the cruelty of an unforgiving world that it cannot change, it lashes out, comforted by the fact that if nothing else, it has the power to hurt the people that hurt it. Again, I am disgusted by Victor Frankenstein's actions. His blatant disregard towards life appalls me, but when I think about the monster, I feel a string of guilt. Its anger is so sad, its life is so sad, it asks its creator to do one thing for it and is once again let down. The creation that despises its creator. I fear that my creations would feel the same. It would be fair for them to react like the monster, to lash out at the one that hurt them. If I could play with their lives, why couldn't they toy with mine? I was irresponsible. The hardships I forced upon them did not stem from malicious intent, but I doubt that would matter.

V.   Playing God and The Responsibility of The Creator

I realized how similar I was to the characters I considered distasteful. Pygmalion and his wife Galatea, Victor Frankenstein and his monster, the desire to control another life, break past the laws of nature, and play god are such human traits. Yet, I failed to realize it in myself. We, as humans, as artists, scientists, sculptors, and writers, are the ones who play the roles of god and the devil. We dictate what happens to the lives we create; we have options and infinite pathways that we can take. But for the creations, there is only one path. One cycle: To be brought to life by a human and serve a purpose. If they fail to do so, they are regarded as failures and tossed to the side.

Is that it? For the likes of people like Victor Frankenstein and Pygmalion, maybe. I would rather face the anger of everything I've ever wronged than be satisfied living like that. No matter how silly it is, I don't want to become someone who carelessly ruins lives, even hypothetical ones. The stories I write may not be *real,* but they are to me. In a world plagued with meaningless suffering and fear, the last thing I want to do is create more. Especially to the beings that pulled me from such a dark space. If I allow myself to enjoy inflicting fruitless fictional pain, what will stop me from doing the same in reality?

VI.   To You, Thank You

I owe a great deal of debt to the things I've made. The characters that gave me joy, the imaginary friends who broke me out of my shell, and the art I poured myself into. Although I was the one who made those things, it is because of them that I am able to enjoy my life. Beyond a reflection of myself, beyond being "my creations," I want them to be happy. I want to give more. I want to give them life, their own lives.

And I want to apologize on behalf of myself and on behalf of humanity.

To Galatea, the girl who will never know true freedom, I am sorry. I'm sorry that you will always be known as the wife of Pygmalion, that you were made to please everyone but yourself, that you were never given a way out and that you may never know how vast the world is. In my dreams, I imagine you in a world where you are free to explore, meet people, and find things you like. A world where you can say no and exist just because you do, not because you are someone's wife.

To Frankenstein's creature, I'm sorry that you were abandoned. I'm sorry that you were created on a whim and thrown into a cruel world that refused to understand you, for the betrayal

you've faced and for your loneliness. I'm sorry that even now you are regarded as a monster, and I'm sorry that I called you one. I envision you in a world where you were raised with love and care. There, people do not scream at the sight of you or shy away from your eyes. You are given a name and loved by many. You are surrounded by people who love and understand you, and you are happy.

To my creations, I am sorry for the harsh lives I have given you, the things I've taken from you, and the happy lives I have yet to reward you with. I swear I will make it up to you. I will write to you a happy ending that will make all your suffering worthwhile. I will draw you enjoying your lives, and smiling in the sun. To the things that I've made and thrown away, I am sorry, my frustration brought you into existence, but I tossed you aside. I will think of you as I make more, and pray that I find you in the next thing I make. And to the fairy with golden hair, whose wings shined like crystal, and who laughed like wind chimes, I'm sorry that I never thanked you. I'm sorry I didn't give you a chance to respond, that I silenced you. You have done more for me than you will ever know.

To all the things I've made, thank you. For everything you've done for me. For the times when I was able to escape into your worlds, and for giving me something to be proud of. Thank you for listening to me and allowing me to use you as a tool for my own happiness. Thank you for giving me purpose. Come to me in my dreams, and tell me what you want. I will give it to you. Talk to me as I make you. I will look for you in everything I make, I will make you happy. This time, you talk to me. Whisper your greatest desires. I will listen this time.

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