

Thrawn Ascendant
How an Evil Genius Villain Became a Sympathetic Antihero
By Ashlee Nelson, PhD.

Timothy Zahn first introduced the now popular character Grand Admiral Thrawn in 1991, as the lead antagonist of his novel *Heir to the Empire*¹ in the what was then canonical Expanded Universe (now, and hereafter referred to in this article as Legends). The character was further developed in the next two novels in that trilogy, *Dark Force Rising*² (1992) and *The Last Command*³ (1993), and though dead following the conclusion of that trilogy, Thrawn also played a significant role in the *Hand of Thrawn* duology, *Specter of the Past*⁴ (1997) and *Vision of the Future*⁵ (1998). A version of Thrawn also appears in the later prequel-era novel *Outbound Flight*⁶ (2006). A popular character among Legends fans, Thrawn was notably re-introduced into the new canon as an antagonist on the animated series *Rebels* during the third season in 2016. This opened the door for the reintroduction of Thrawn in the literature of the new canon, allowing Zahn to produce two further Thrawn trilogies thus far: *Thrawn*, featuring *Thrawn* (2017), *Thrawn: Alliances*⁷ (2018), and *Thrawn: Treason*⁸ (2019); and *Thrawn: Ascendancy* featuring *Thrawn: Ascendancy: Chaos Rising*⁹ (2020), *Thrawn: Ascendancy: Greater Good*¹⁰ (2021), and *Thrawn: Ascendancy: Lesser Evil*¹¹ (2021).

However, while ostensibly the same character, the characterization that we get of Thrawn across these texts changes significantly. Even more fascinatingly, it is not a simple matter of a division between Legends and new canon: the characterisation of Thrawn in *Rebels* has more in common with his initial appearance in *Heir to the Empire* than he does to the version that we see developed in the *Thrawn* and *Ascendancy* trilogies. Furthermore, the way that Thrawn is characterized in the *Hand of Thrawn* duology, and even the way that he is developed in *Dark Force Rising* and *The Last Command*, is more nuanced and less straightforwardly villainous than his appearance in *Rebels*. An analysis of the portrayal of his character and his development across both Legends and the new cannon offers us a unique

¹ Abbreviated in citations as *Heir*.

² Abbreviated in citations as *Dark Force*.

³ Abbreviated in citations as *Last Command*.

⁴ Abbreviated in citations as *Specter*.

⁵ Abbreviated in citations as *Vision*.

⁶ Abbreviated in citations as *Outbound*.

⁷ Abbreviated in citations as *Alliances*.

⁸ Abbreviated in citations as *Treason*.

⁹ Abbreviated in citations as *Chaos*.

¹⁰ Abbreviated in citations as *Greater*.

¹¹ Abbreviated in citations as *Lesser*.

look at the way the new canon has allowed for significant changes in previously established characters, while also calling into question our understanding of this character and what assumptions we might have for him going forward, with the presumed inclusion of him in upcoming live action shows such as *Ahsoka*.

When I set out to write this article, I had not re-read the Legends Thrawn books in more than a decade. I had, however, freshly finished reading the *Ascendancy* novels.¹² Prior to embarking on a fresh re-read of the Legends material, my partner Joshua and I debated our understandings of Thrawn's character in order to determine how my more recent absorption of new canon Thrawn had colored my perspective of his character (Joshua having not yet read the *Ascendancy* trilogy, yet having more recently read the *Thrawn* trilogy than I). I posited that while Thrawn was a villain in Legends, he was not a flat stock villain, that he did villainous things in pursuit of what he sees as the greater good (not merely for seeking power for power's sake, or for xenophobic or otherwise bigoted motivations, or for purely facisitic reasons). I did think he was more of a villain than the Thrawn in the new canon, who presents more as an hero who takes some actions that are perceived by some as negative, than as a villain however honorably motivated. *Rebels* Thrawn, I posited, lay somewhere in-between. Joshua disagreed with this assessment, arguing that Legends Thrawn was wholly straightforwardly a villain, and that my love of the new canon Thrawn had skewed my recollection and perspective of Legends Thrawn. As this article will demonstrate, we were both a little bit right and a little bit wrong; and as I will return to in the conclusion, the ways in which this plays out offers an interesting perspective on the hero-ification and sympathizing of Thrawn's character, and the change in Zahn's writing that begins post *Heir to the Empire*.

It is key, with all textual versions of Thrawn, to keep in mind the perspective through which our view of his character is filtered. Though none of Zahn's books rely on a first person narrator (with the exception of some short journal passages as in *Lesser Evil's* epilogue), he does frequently focalize his third person narration through characters. And while some of those characters may be immensely likable, when they are Imperial characters (as nearly all whose perspective on Thrawn we are given are), we must consider their own bias in favor of the Empire and often the Grand Admiral, as well as the fact that, likable though they may be, they too by nature of being Imperial, are fascists. To that end, our first introduction to Thrawn is filtered through the perspective of the Imperial Captain Pellaeon. He clearly reveres Thrawn as a military leader, referring to him in thought as "possibly the greatest military mind the Empire

¹² See my review of *Lesser Evil* on *Talking Trek Wars*:
<https://www.talkingtrekwars.com/har/star-wars-thrawn-ascendancy-lesser-evil>

had ever seen" (*Heir to the Empire* 4). With respects to Thrawn's position as military leader of the remnants of the Empire within which Pellaeon serves, and the command structure for which he clearly fiercely respects, Pellaeon displays nerves with respects to the possibility of displeasing Thrawn, treading trepidatiously and with qualms about interrupting him during his meditation in his inner sanctum (*Heir* 5-6). However, we also see early layering to our perception of Thrawn: on the first page he appears, his discussion with Pellaeon begins with his asking Pellaeon's thoughts on the art he meditates upon; art which he must view holographically, due to its having been "lost" or otherwise on planets occupied by the New Republic, details that he delivers with what we are told "Pellaeon thought he could hear a note of regret in the other's voice" (*Heir* 6). The early introduction of the concept that he might have "regret" for art having been lost potentially points to an attempt by Zhan at introducing the character as more complex than the more obvious and single-minded villainy of the Emperor (whose failings as a leader are noted by Pellaeon in comparison in the previous pages [*Heir* 3]). This respect for art, and for what it can tell him about a species is fundamental to Thrawn's character. All versions of Thrawn rely on what is seen as an idiosyncratic ability to predict the actions of an opponent based on an analysis of the art of their species. In the *Heir to the Empire* trilogy we again and again see Pellaeon impressed by Thrawn's ability to predict his opponent's actions through study of their art. In the new canon *Thrawn* we are told that even among the Chiss this ability of Thrawn's is inscrutably his own: "[t]he other Chiss didn't understand. They never had. He'd been asked innumerable times how he was able to build such detailed tactical knowledge from such obscure and insignificant ingredients. The question carried its own answer. To Thrawn, nothing in a species' art was obscure or insignificant" (179).

However, in *Heir to the Empire*, this potential in his appreciation and respect for art for a more nuanced characterization seems little more than a quirk, and despite Pellaeon's perception that Thrawn is more rational than the Emperor or Vader, Thrawn's actions and words are, in fact, decidedly villainous. In chapter one we learn that Thrawn seeks, in his own words, "[t]he complete, total, and utter destruction of the Rebellion" (*Heir* 12). This is further reinforced during his initial conversation with C'baoth when he states that his end goal is to obtain "power" via "[t]he conquering of worlds [...] The final defeat of the Rebellion. The reestablishment of the glory that was once the Empire's New Order" (*Heir* 51). This thirst for destruction of his enemies is mirrored in his actions against any who oppose him; Thrawn jumps immediately and "coldly" to threats of violence when the natives of Wayland do not immediately answer his request to be taken to the Guardian of the mountain: "[i]f no one will take me to him, this entire city will suffer" (*Heir* 42). This promise of violence is immediately fulfilled, when, in retaliation to being shot at,

Thrawn orders the demolition of the entire building in which the shot came from, stating “[t]hose are the consequences of defying me” (*Heir* 42).

Thrawn likewise displays a disregard for other species as life-forms, and treats the Noghri as a disposable resource, noting casually, with a shrug, of their deaths in the pursuit of the capture of Luke Skywalker and Leia Organa Solo: “[a] few Noghri, more or less, won’t seriously drain our resources” (*Heir* 87). Later we get an even more extreme demonstration of this ruthless disregard for life, when he tells Pellaeon that he will get no more practical use out of the understanding of a particular species’ art because he “wound up destroying their world” (*Heir* 176). This is done wistfully but that wistfulness is directed towards the art, and that he only began to understand it after his extermination of the species that created it (*Heir* 176). His ruthless disregard for life is not xenophobically limited to non-humanoid species; in a discussion of the potential capture and turning of Luke Skywalker, he notes that it may be more prudent to “simply kill him” (*Heir* 151).

As in Pellaeon’s initial assessment of him, Thrawn purports to be unlike Vader or the Emperor, not an iron fist of control around those he commands. As he remarks to Pellaeon upon the other’s taking charge of a conversation with C’baoth, “I have no qualms about accepting a useful idea merely because it wasn’t my own. My position and ego are not at stake here” (*Heir* 90). However, we later see him deal with a subordinate who makes a mistake in pursuit of Luke Skywalker with cold, ruthless violence: after questioning the operator of the tractor beam that lost hold of Luke’s X-wing, and questioning the Ensign responsible for training him, we are given a seen of discipline that is downright Vader-esque in its abrupt brutality:

Thrawn waited until Rukh was standing at his side, then turned back to Colclazure. “Do you know the difference between an error and a mistake, Ensign?”

The entire bridge had gone deathly still. Colclazure swallowed again, his face starting to go pale. “No, sir.”

“Anyone can make an error, Ensign. But that error doesn’t become a mistake until you refuse to correct it.” He raised a finger—

And, almost lazily, pointed.

Pellaeon never even saw Rukh move. Pieteron certainly never had time to scream.

From farther down the crew pit came the sound of someone trying valiantly not to be sick. Thrawn glanced over Pellaeon’s shoulder again and gestured, and the silence was further broken by the sound of a pair of stormtroopers coming forward. “Dispose of it,” the Grand admiral ordered them, turning away from Pieteron’s crumpled body and

pinning Colcalazure with a stare. "The error, Ensign," he told the other softly, "has now been corrected. You may begin training a replacement." (*Heir* 185)

Likewise, in *Dark Force Rising* we see Legends Thrawn take punitive measures against the Noghri with dramatically violent abandon of the sort practiced by the Emperor, ordering his Star Destroyer to fire upon the hills surrounding the Noghri village because the maitrakh spoke back to him and initially denied his ultimate authority over the Noghri, punishing the Noghri even after the maitrakh backs down, as a "reminder of what it means to defy the Empire" (*Dark Force* 196-197).

In addition to these displays of violent punitive measures, we see Legends Thrawn display flashes of the very ego he claimed to Pellaeon he did not have. As, for example, in *Dark Force Rising*, when Mara Jade attempts to set terms for her negotiation with him: "[a] dark shadow had settled across Thrawn's face. 'Do not presume to dictate to me, Mara Jade,' he said quietly. 'Not even in private'" (255). That this flash of controlling ego occurs when the two are alone together underscores that it is not just performative military hierarchy, but an actual response merely to the challenge of his ultimate control over others and position of power that he enjoys as (as he understands it at the time) the lone remaining Grand Admiral of the Empire. A position that he both internalizes and expects others to recognize, as in his statement to Mara during a later confrontation: "I rule the Empire now. Not some long-dead Emperor; certainly not you. The only treason is defiance of my orders" (*Dark Force* 279)¹³. Yet the text does still attempt to portray Thrawn's character as having the ability to be dispassionate and rational in his actions, as for example in his response to his defeat at Sluis Van in *Heir to the Empire*: rather than respond to the loss with an instant retaliation to "seek to cover our defeat in a frenzy of false and futile heroics", as he puts it, Thrawn more coolly orders a retreat: "[w]e've lost this particular prize, Captain. But that's all we've lost. I will not waste ships and men trying to change that which cannot be changed" (399). This attitude is remarked upon internally by Pellaeon as notably different and more rational than other Imperial commanders (*Heir* 398-399).

Notably, Thrawn's character is the most statically villainous in the first book in the trilogy, *Heir to the Empire*. In particular, by the time Zahn writes his character in the final book in the trilogy, *The Last Command*, we see more nuance to his portrayal as a commander. Contrary to the harshness with which he dealt with the failure of Pieterseon to capture Luke in *Heir to the Empire*, in *The Last Command*, following another failed capture attempt, rather than punishing the tractor beam control operator who loses Luke's X-Wing, he promotes the man to Lieutenant,

¹³ Unless otherwise noted, all italics in quotations are as in the original text.

praising his innovative attempt at holding on to the X-Wing despite its covert shroud maneuver (68-69). From Pellaeon's perspective we observe:

[Pellaeon] stood there beside the newly minted lieutenant, feeling the stunned awe pervading the bridge as he watched Thrawn leave. Yesterday, the *Chimaera's* crew had trusted and respected the Grand Admiral. After today, they would be ready to die for him.

And for the first time in five years, Pellaeon finally knew in the deepest level of his being that the old Empire was gone. The new Empire, with Grand Admiral Thrawn at its head, had been born. (*Last Command* 69)

This is counter to the earlier ruthlessness of Thrawn. It seems an attempt by Zahn to balance out the earlier ruthlessness, to keep Thrawn more positioned as Thrawn himself had attempted to place his character when he told Pellaeon that he did not have the ego of the previous leaders of the Empire. The Empire, and thus Thrawn as its head, are still the villains of the book, but we are being told that there is something more to Thrawn, that he is a leader capable of being followed not solely out of fear or because of the chain of command, but because those who serve him feel deep loyalty to him. He is a character, this seems to attempt to show, who is capable of rationality and even acts of kindness.

Nor is this a fluke occurrence - later on in *The Last Command*, we see Thrawn deal with a General who makes a costly tactical mistake, to which Thrawn's response is a mild chastising and an opportunity to do better next time (196-197). When Pellaeon questions the lack of "a more punitive response", Thrawn responds "evenly": "Drost is a good enough man in his way [...] His chief weakness is a tendency to become complacent. For the immediate future, at least, he should be cured of that" (197). This underscores the change in Thrawn's severity as a commander that we see between *Heir to the Empire* and *The Last Command*. It is not a change that is accountable by any in-universe cause - not that much time passes between the two books, nor does any significant event occur that would explain such a change. We can thus draw the conclusion that this shift comes from Zahn, and how he characterizes Thrawn. Whether this is an unconscious shift on Zahn's part or an intentional attempt at softening or making Thrawn a more sympathetic character is unknown. However, given the further re-positioning of Thrawn's motivations that Zahn does in the subsequent *Hand of Thrawn* duology, it seems likely that the shift to a more nuanced character that we see in *The Last Command* was intentional.

The *Hand of Thrawn* duology ex post facto offers us more complex motivations for the villainous actions of Thrawn in the previous trilogy. Though in the *Heir to the Empire* trilogy it

was clear that Thrawn's goal was the destruction of the New Republic for the glory and power of the Empire¹⁴, in *Vision of the Future* Pellaeon describes Thrawn's motivations as having been murkier: "Thrawn wasn't human, you know, no matter how human he might have looked. He was an alien, with alien thoughts and purposes and agendas. Perhaps I was never more to him than just one more tool he could use in reaching his goal. Whatever that goal was" (79). The shift here is indicative of the shift that takes place in this later duology, which seems to attempt to further move Thrawn from the straightforward villain he was in the original *Heir* trilogy, to the more complexly and even honorably motivated version of his character that we see in the new canon. It attempts to position him as something of an antihero for his people, whose motivations for obtaining power in the Empire are not merely to crush the New Republic for the sake of crushing the Empire's enemies, but because he wants a strong Empire in order to protect his people, the Chiss. Protecting his people has, this duology claims, always been his ultimate goal (*Vision* 429). We learn from the Chiss Stent that despite Thrawn's exile, there are those that still hold him in the highest regard: "[a]ny true warrior would have given up whatever was necessary for the chance to serve under him" (*Vision* 425). Indeed, Stent represents a continuation of Thrawn's role within the Chiss political structure despite his exile: "'[w]e are Syndic Mitth'raw'nuruodo's Household Phalanx,' he said, and there was no mistaking the pride in his tone. 'We live only to serve him. And through him to serve the Chiss'" (*Vision* 429). Such is Thrawn's heroic position that the average Chiss, we are told, knows of Thrawn's honorable mission, and despite the ruling families' exile of him, the team that continues his work has "a steady flow of young Chiss arriving at our various bases and garrisons to enlist in our fight" (*Vision* 429-430).

Thrawn's motivations are so drastically altered in this duology from the original trilogy, that Admiral Parck goes so far as to suggest that should Thrawn return, there is question as to whether he would serve the Empire at all, or if he would instead serve the New Republic, if it was the stronger power and in a better position to be of benefit to the protection of the Chiss (*Vision* 434-435). Furthermore, it is even suggested by Mara that Thrawn's ultimate motivations to battle the threat to the Chiss might be so valid that she and Luke should leave his Hand of Thrawn operation to continue without interfering with it (*Vision* 466-467). Nor is this revisionism to Thrawn's motivations limited to knowledge by the Hand of Thrawn organization. Pellaeon states of Thrawn's attitude towards the New Republic: "Thrawn was never interested in vengeance. His goal was order, and stability, and the strength that comes of unity and common purpose" (*Vision* 665-666). This is in stark contrast to the Thrawn of *Heir to the Empire* who

¹⁴ See *Heir* pg. 12, 51 for examples.

professed that his goal was “[t]he final defeat of the Rebellion. The reestablishment of the glory that was once the Empire’s New Order” (51). It is clear that the more complex version of Thrawn that was being developed in *The Last Command* is repositioned in *The Hand of Thrawn* to be an honorably motivated gray character, one who is a hero to his people, who is self-sacrificing, and who seeks not to crush and to conquer, but to defend and uphold. We later see Zahn make an attempt at writing this version of Thrawn in *Outbound Flight*¹⁵, where the character’s professed motivations are those stated in *Vision of the Future*, to protect his people regardless of the consequences (*Outbound* 436). This less villainous and more noble character is the foundation upon which the version of Thrawn in the new canon literature is built.

The first version of Thrawn in the new canon literature appears in *Thrawn*, which came out in 2017, nearly 20 years after the last significant work focused on him, *Vision of the Future* (which was published in 1998). As we learned in *Vision of the Future*, from the start of *Thrawn* we are told that new canon Thrawn’s driving motivation is to protect his people, even if the ruling body of the Chiss disagrees with his methods, and even if that means being exiled by them (21, 24, 35-36). Moreover, even the action that he took that resulted in his exile is positioned nobly: though he committed a preemptive strike against another species, an act which one could initially interpret as perhaps ignoble, we learn from Thrawn that it was against “Evil, [...] Nomadic pirates who preyed on defenseless worlds. I deemed it dishonorable for the Chiss Ascendancy to stand unmoving and not assist the helpless” (*Thrawn* 85). Therefore even though it was preemptive from the perspective of the Chiss Ascendancy, it was not only for the greater good of the protection of the Ascendancy, but in defense of those who had been attacked and could not defend themselves.

As this article earlier emphasized, much of our perspective of Thrawn is filtered through narrative focalized through characters who respect and care about him. In the first new canon trilogy, the majority of our introduction to this new version of Thrawn is presented via the perspective of his friend and fellow Imperial, the immensely likable and good natured Eli Vanto.

¹⁵ Though Thrawn’s character in *Outbound Flight* is notably characterized as more nobly motivated (following the ex post facto character background changes in *The Hand of Thrawn* duology) than he was when we last saw him alive in Legends, the narrative lenses through which we see him (primarily Jorj Car’das) are so distinctly alien and removed that we do not get a real sense of Thrawn’s actual thoughts, motivations, or emotions. There are some indications of what we will later see fully developed in the new canon books, such as Thrawn’s desire to hide the deaths of the crew of *Outbound Flight* from Maris Ferasi because “[t]here are all too few idealists in this universe[...] Too few people who strive always to see only the good in others. I wouldn’t want to be responsible for crushing even one of them;” but on the whole our sense of Thrawn is so limited by the remove at which his character is presented, that this offers little in the way of further development of his characterization (*Outbound* 449). It is only after reading the new canon literature, that the characterization of Thrawn in *Outbound Flight* contextually makes sense; it is possible to read Thrawn in *Outbound Flight* as similar to the Thrawn that we are given in the new canon, though there is not enough evidence to suggest that they are exactly the same characterization.

In a sense, Eli himself has a “humanizing” effect on Thrawn’s character. Much of the narrative in *Thrawn* is filtered through the lens of Eli’s perspective, to whom Thrawn becomes a source of friendship of a kind, and who Eli comes to greatly admire. When Eli finds it difficult to believe That Thrawn would sacrifice cruisers to be bait for pirates - “Thrawn wouldn’t do something that coldhearted. Surely he wouldn’t” - we the reader have this interpretation of Thrawn’s character reinforced; we must assume an honorable reason for Thrawn’s actions because Eli tells us to (*Thrawn* 367). This sympathizing effect of Eli’s perspective is picked up again in *Treason*, when Eli is reunited with Thrawn, and once again any coldly calculated action by Thrawn is interpreted more emotively by Eli: “even in the midst of that, Thrawn was thinking about how his actions might affect his subordinates. Surely that level of consideration meant that he hadn’t simply sent Eli off without a second thought. Didn’t it?” (*Treason* 131). Eli’s resolute faith in his commander and, he believes, friend, directs the reader also to interpret Thrawn’s actions more emotively and compassionately. There is, we are meant to believe, a reason for any seeming coldness on Thrawn’s part, it is simply that we mere mortals have not worked out the Grand Admiral’s genius plans. Likewise, at one point in *Thrawn*, Thrawn posits that a pirate has engineered a battle in order to “invite me here to demonstrate his handiwork” by setting up a complex smuggling system that only Thrawn could interpret, which involved Clone War weaponry because he knew of Thrawn’s interest in it (193). At first Eli considers “[o]n the surface, for Thrawn to even suggest such a thing bordered on the egomaniacal”; a rational reaction to Thrawn’s claim, and one which one may consider a fair descriptor to Legends Thrawn. However, Eli’s next thought is immediately “[s]till, the Chiss was seldom wrong about tactical matters. And Nightswan wasn’t exactly an ordinary mastermind, either. It was entirely possible that he would do such a thing simply for the challenge of it all” (*Thrawn* 193). Thus we are told that Thrawn is not egomaniacal, he really is just that impressive of a tactician. We should not judge Thrawn because he knows he is smarter than his enemies, but accept his seemingly preternatural tactical and strategic abilities; or so *Thrawn* wishes to have us believe.

New canon Thrawn is even more explicitly compassionately lenient in his treatment of those serving under them than we saw in *The Last Command*: “[t]he grand admiral was smart and subtle, but never used his brilliance to show up or humiliate anyone. He demanded results, but never perfection, and had amazing stories of patience for those who were truly working to their fullest ability. He cared about his people, to the point of standing up for them even against the disapproval of powerful men like Lord Vader” (*Alliances* 209). This assessment of Thrawn’s character as a commander is not terribly different from the more lenient version we saw of him in *The Last Command*. But the new canon is even more explicit in telling us blatantly in the

above passage that Thrawn is lenient and compassionate, rather than leaving us to conclude this from an example incident as in *The Last Command*. Much like in the Legends books, the effect of Thrawn's unique style of leadership is to inspire a dramatically impressive degree of loyalty, such that one character posits if Thrawn's style of leadership became military standard, "the Empire would stand forever" (*Alliances* 210).

That being said, at the same time as the new canon's depiction of Thrawn seems to set him up as a heroic figure, and sympathizes him through the gaze of Eli, there are some echoes of the original, ruthless Thrawn that we saw in *Heir to the Empire*. There are some details in this initial version of Thrawn in the new canon that point to him not being a wholly heroic character, or at least to his moral compass being aligned to a different perspective than what we would typically think of as straightforwardly "good" or possessed by a hero character. In *Thrawn*, for example, upon encountering a slave ship of Wookiees, Eli states that he is "not completely comfortable with the idea that the Empire is using slaves"; Thrawn, however, does not agree with Eli, but instead offers a number of alternative explanations: "Terms are not always as they seem, Commander [...] They are called *slaves*, but they may in fact be indentured servants. They may be prisoners working off their sentence. They may have sold themselves into slavery as a means of repaying debts to others on their world" (296). When Eli questions whether Thrawn thinks any of those explanations are actually likely, we get the following: "'No,' Thrawn said, his tone hardening. 'But it does not matter. However these beings were pressed into service, they are now Imperial assets. They will be treated as such'" (*Thrawn* 296). Thus, to Thrawn the status of the Wookies as slaves is a non-issue. The fact is that they are, and that Thrawn as a Commodore of the Empire supports the Empire and does not even offer a true sense of moral struggle here. Even his equivocation over the terminology seems here more about offering Eli merely potential alternatives than caring himself. The "hardening" of his tone intimates an undercurrent of harsh uncaring with respect to these beings as anything other than what the Empire dictates them to be. Near the end of *Thrawn*, the rebel Nightswan suggests that Thrawn, in joining the Empire, has become blinded to its ruthlessness by his involvement as a member of the Imperial Navy; it is in Thrawn's pragmatically cold response that we see how the more sympathetic version of his character we've come to know through Eli may, in fact, have been a misreading: "Certainly the Empire is corrupt. No government totally escapes that plague. Certainly it is tyrannical. But quick and utter ruthlessness is necessary when the galaxy is continually threatened by chaos" proclaims Thrawn, ultimately concluding that any rebellion "must die" in service of the greater good of the safety offered by the power of the Empire (*Thrawn* 389-390). This Thrawn that believes that the Empire's power and stability are the

surest way to protect against those outside forces that threaten the Chiss Ascendancy, and who would seek to kill off any rebellion that threatened that same stability, echoes the Thrawn of the old EU who sought to crush the New Republic. This initial new canon version of Thrawn is less a softer Thrawn than it is a muddled Thrawn - it is a Thrawn with many of the same motivations (at least, as they are presented in the *Hand of Thrawn* duology) and the same characteristics, but it is the narrative perspective through which he is presented that alters our perception of him to a more sympathetic one rather than necessarily an actual softening of his character.

This is not to suggest that the new canon Thrawn is not at all more tempered than Legends Thrawn, merely that our perception of that tempering is exaggerated by the perspectives through which we see him. It is easy to lose sight of the fact that a character as good naturedly likable as Eli is himself a member of the Empire, and his view of Thrawn's actions as a fellow member of the Imperial Navy are colored by this. However, this coloring is a choice by Zahn, as are other ways in which new canon Thrawn is without a doubt less starkly villainous than the original Legends version. As for example, the way that he seeks to minimize casualties of "Imperial resources" or civilians (*Thrawn* 392). Yes this is couched as a practical choice (again, the use of calling the civilians "resources") but it is still counter to the way that Legends Thrawn ruthlessly crushed any opposition with no regard for casualties. That this is intentionally meant to distinguish this Thrawn as having an underlying sense of honorable compassion is underscored by Governor Pryce's later comment to him "[d]o you think there's anyone else in the Imperial Navy who cares as much as you do about limiting casualties?" (*Thrawn* 421). Just as the Legends novels attempt to position Thrawn as being a less villainous character by comparing him to the Emperor and Vader, the new canon also attempts to position Thrawn as being a character less evil than the Emperor. He tells Nightswan that hope exists for a better leader of the Empire once Palpatine is dead (*Thrawn* 390). Furthermore, he questions and seems to have concerns regarding the Emperor's planned use of the Death Star, which we then learn he goes on to oppose, advocating for his TIE Defender over the Death Star as the Empire's tool of strength and control (*Thrawn* 423-424; *Alliances* 4). While the Defender program would still be a means of potential subjugation, it is at least not a weapon of planetary destruction.

One of the most significant points that *Alliances* sets up for our understanding of the characterization of Thrawn in the new canon, is that whatever alliance he has to the Empire comes second to his allegiance to the Chiss Ascendancy. This is of stark difference to Thrawn's initial positioning in Legends as fully loyal to the Empire. In *Dark Force Rising*, in response to Mara's lingering loyalty to Talon Karrde, he proclaims "'I understand your feelings.' Thrawn said,

his face hardening again. 'But they have no place here. Mixed loyalties are a luxury no officer of the Imperial Fleet can afford' (281). In contrast, in the new canon, as Vader concludes, "Thrawn's loyalties would always be split between the Empire and his own people" (*Alliances* 322). This is a key part of new canon Thrawn's character, which is developed further in the next book in the trilogy, *Thrawn: Treason*. In *Treason*, when the Chiss Admiral Ar'alani questions Thrawn's loyalties, Thrawn states of the Emperor "[h]e commands only the loyalty of my actions, not the loyalty of my heart and mind. The deepest secrets of the Chiss will always remain secrets" (116). From this we can conclude that Thrawn's actions in service to the Empire are driven by necessity, practicality, and logic as a means to serve his true goal of service to the Chiss Ascendancy. Any actions in service to the Empire and its fascistic regime are not necessarily indicative of Thrawn's beliefs and motivations, but merely a means to a more noble end. Or so the new canon would have us believe. Furthermore, in Commodore Faro's assessment of Thrawn's position within the Empire as "precarious" but "apparently where he thinks he can best serve all of us. Including the Ascendancy", Zahn attempts to position Thrawn's work within the Empire as even noble or self-sacrificing: he keeps himself away from his people, in a precarious position in a cut-throat environment in which he does not truly fit in, for the safety of the galaxy and his people (*Treason* 167). Though the epilogue to *Treason* seemingly calls this into question, with Thrawn professing his loyalty to the Emperor, this scene is filtered through the Emperor's perspective, therefore leaving Thrawn's truthfulness in question (331-333). Furthermore, Thrawn's protestations that "[m]y loyalty remains firm, [...] There is no conflict with my service to the Empire and my recent cooperation with the Chiss [...] I continue to maintain my commitment and loyalty to you and to the Empire" ambiguously sidesteps his remaining loyalty to the Chiss (*Treason* 332). Ultimately, this scene does not suggest we should not believe Thrawn's earlier claims regarding his ultimate loyalty and motivations being for the good of the Ascendancy, rather it impresses upon us the previously described precarious situation in which he must maintain a convincing loyalty to the Empire and the desires of the Emperor.

The *Ascendancy* novels develop the sympathizing of Thrawn began in the *Thrawn* trilogy even further by showing glimpses into his past, prior to his adulthood as a member of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Fleet. We get such sympathetic moments as his rescue from being kicked out of the Fleet academy under accusations of cheating, his name being cleared by the character who will become Admiral Ar'alani (*Chaos* 49-59). These vignettes into Thrawn's past give glimpses of his failings; the recurring theme throughout all of Zahn's works that while Thrawn is a military genius, he does not understand politics, is even more heavily laid here. This

expanded version of this facet of Thrawn's character that he doesn't understand politics becomes in and of itself another noble factor of this more sympathetic Thrawn. This Thrawn, we are assured in *Greater Good*, cannot possibly ever be operating from dishonorable underhanded political motivations: "You're saying, sir, that Senior Captain Thrawn isn't playing politics here because he never plays politics?" 'I'm saying,' Samakro corrected, 'that Senior Captain Thrawn never lays politics because he doesn't know *how* to play politics. [...] Bottom line. When Thrawn comes up with a plan, it's strictly military. Nothing more, nothing less" (371). This suggests not just a sense of straightforwardness to Thrawn's character, but a trustworthiness in being able to take his actions at face value. Furthermore, there is something almost endearing about Thrawn's complete failure at politics in the way that Samakro delivers this information to us: "I have never—*never*—seen anyone as utterly incompetent at politics as he is" (*Greater* 371).

Building on this, we even see Thrawn have moments where he is not completely confident, as in a flashback to early in his relationship with Ar'alani, when he attempts to share his analysis-through-art ability by demonstrating it to her at an art gallery; when Ar'alani questions the efficacy of Thrawn's ability we get this reaction: "'I see,' Thrawn said, his voice suddenly subdued. 'I'm...I thought this would be interesting to you. I'm sorry if I wasted your time'" (*Chaos* 102). This Thrawn cares what his peer thinks, he is uncertain of the value of his talent to others, his speech is hesitant and we see him withdrawing from this self-doubt and perhaps embarrassment. It is a dramatic departure from the always confident and frequently all-knowing Grand Admiral, and it distinctly enhances the ability to sympathize with Thrawn as a character. This more complexly imperfect and sympathetic characterization of Thrawn is one that we see glimpses of in the main text of the *Ascendancy* novels, as when Syndic Thurfian reminds Thrawn of his prior failure with the Lioaoin pirates: "'I'm hardly likely to forget it, either,' Thrawn said quietly. Quietly, but Ar'alani could hear the hidden embarrassment and ache in his voice'" (*Chaos* 149). Not only does this Thrawn, now a Senior Captain, feel aching regret for his mistakes, but he does so emotively enough that Ar'alani is able to hear it in his voice. Like the less confident Thrawn that we saw in the vignette of the past, this less perfect and more emotional Thrawn is a more complexly sympathetic character than the seemingly perfect and always sure Grand Admiral that we saw in *Legends*, and even than we saw of his character in the first new canon *Thrawn* trilogy.

This more sympathetic and fully fleshed out version of Thrawn presents interesting considerations regarding our previous understanding of Thrawn's character. For example, in the first new canon *Thrawn* trilogy, Thrawn seems to take his fast-tracked promotions through the

Empire's naval hierarchy as a matter of logical course, with no emotive reaction, and seemingly no qualms about promotions based perhaps not entirely on merit. However, the *Ascendancy* novels offer us a different insight into Thrawn's potential feelings on the matter. In *Chaos Rising*, during one of the "Memories" vignettes, we see Junior Commander Thrawn promoted to senior commander - jumping the rank of mid commander, which Thrawn notes with "[a] touch of surprise" (172). When Supreme General Ba'kif describes the rationale for this: "'Two ranks,' Ba'kif gave a little snort. 'Yes, I know. But your success against the pirates has you riding high at the moment, and the Ascendancy does cherish its heroes. And of course, you're Mitth'", we get the sense that Thrawn's promotion here, much like those of his fast-tracked rise in the Empire, is partly because of political factors within the Ascendancy: a matter of image, not just of merit. Thrawn's response to this, however, is fascinatingly different to those responses we saw in earlier books: "Thrawn's face seemed to fall a little" (*Chaos* 172). It is as if Thrawn had been gratified by the honor of moving up two ranks in one promotion, taking it as a mark of his abilities and performance, and upon learning that it was also about image and politics, was disheartened. This then calls into question later Thrawn's seemingly uncaring attitude towards his promotions in the Empire. Does that Thrawn view those promotions utilitarianly as a means to an end? Does he not care because he doesn't care about his own honor within the Empire as he does within the Ascendancy? Is it because he has an emotional connection to the Ascendancy that he does not to the Empire? Or is the Thrawn we see in the Empire merely better at masking his emotions, does he feel as much as this younger Thrawn feels, but does not show it? Regardless of the answer to these in-universe questions, this is another striking sign of Zahn's increasingly emotive and sympathetic portrayal of Thrawn.

Relatedly, the *Ascendancy* books also develop our sense of Thrawn's relationships with others, as with Ar'alani who we come to see as not only his fellow Defense Fleet officer, but a close friend of Thrawn's¹⁶. This functions in a very similar capacity to the softening of Thrawn's character as a result of his relationship with Eli, but the *Ascendancy* trilogy takes this softening of Thrawn through his relationships to others distinctly further than the first new canon *Thrawn* trilogy did. In the first trilogy, Thrawn's friendship with Eli, and his caring about him, is implied through Eli's point of view, and through certain of Thrawn's actions, but is not explicitly demonstrated or stated. In the *Ascendancy* books, however, we see numerous explicit examples of Thrawn caring and feeling emotions about others. As, for example, in *Chaos Rising* when he describes the loss of his older sister:

¹⁶ This friendship can be seen clearly developed throughout the "Memories" vignettes in *Chaos Rising*, from their time together at the academy, to their continual service together in the Expansionary Defense Fleet.

"I had an older sister," Thrawn said, his voice almost too soft for her to hear. "She was five when she disappeared. My parents would never tell me where she went."

Thalias opened her eyes again. He was still sitting there in the gloom, still looking thoughtful.

But now there was something new in his eyes. A distant, well-hidden, but lingering pain. "How old were you?" she asked.

"Three," Thrawn said. "For a long time I assumed she'd died, and that I would never see her again. It wasn't until I reached bridge officer rank that I was finally told about the sky-walkers, and realized what must have happened to her." He gave her a small smile, tinged with the same distant sadness. "And I'll *still* never see her again."
(227)

This is the most explicitly we have ever seen Thrawn show emotion. It adds a significantly complex layer to his character, not only sympathizing him to the reader, but suggesting a further layer to his emotional motivations. The Grysk threat to the Chiss Ascendancy represents a severe threat to the sky-walkers, who would, based on the Grysk treatment of those they had captured in *Thrawn: Treason*, be abused in their subjugation by the Grysk. Thrawn then not only protects his people, but perhaps is even more driven by an emotional need to protect sky-walkers, who represent the sister he was never able to see again. We see a further reinforcement of the extent to which Thrawn feels this pain, and how much a surviving part of his character it is, in *Lesser Evil* when, discussing the pain of loss with Aristocra Mitth'ras'safis (Thrass), Thrawn states "[s]ome losses run too deep to ever fully heal" (43). Thrass observes that "[w]hatever pain was lurking behind those eyes, it wasn't going away anytime soon", impressing upon us just how deeply Thrawn feels his loss (*Lesser* 43).

Thrass is perhaps one of the most significant characters in terms of offering insight into Thrawn's character. Thrass is one of the closest friendships we see Thrawn develop, even more so than Ar'alani (and certainly more so than Eli). In the "Memories" vignettes we get between Thrass and Thrawn, we see both the youngest version of Thrawn, and the most imperfectly sympathetic. It is Thrass who offers us this assessment of Thrawn: "[t]he young, socially awkward cadet fascinated by artwork. The unique ability to understand that artwork, while beneath the intellect was the quiet pain of a hidden loss. The newly commissioned officer who had already shown such a depth of tactical ability that he'd attracted allies like Junior Commander Ziara and General Ba'kif to his side" (*Lesser* 73). This Thrawn is a more fully fleshed character, not the "shiny new piece" that Thrass accuses the Stybla of seeing him as, not the perfect Grand Admiral that we've seen of him in the past, nor a cold hearted villain

(*Lesser* 72-73). He is not just a flat stock character. He is an individual who feels and cares, and not just a cold military genius. His friendship with Thrass also develops our sense of the significance of family to Thrawn; later on in *Lesser Evil*, Thrass declares Thrawn his brother, effectively designating him as such within the Chiss formal family structure (386). During a discussion between the two, we see how much it means to Thrawn, with him hesitantly questioning if Thrass did so only for “tactical advantage” in their recent conflict with another family, and showing distress at the idea that his being a lower rank than Thrass might negatively impact the other (385-386). A little later in the same conversation, Thrass asks Thrawn about the deep loss he mentioned in their first meeting:

Thrawn looked away. “You say we’re brothers. I never had any others. But I once had a sister. When I was three and she was five, she simply...disappeared.”

[...] “At any rate, the day you and I met was her starday, and her loss was weighing particularly heavily on my thoughts at the time.” (*Lesser* 388)

We see then both the significance of his relationship to Thrass as his adoptive brother, to a man who is something of an outsider to normal Chiss and who has keenly felt the loss of his other sibling, and the ongoing impact of the loss of Thrawn’s sister. As we see later, Thrawn also loses Thrass eventually, and we must consider what impact that has on Thrawn as well. Is Thrawn’s single-minded pursuit of saving the Ascendancy from outside threats at some level motivated by his inability to save his brother, compounding on the “loss” of his sister to the sky-walker program? At the very least the text raising that possibility further sympathizes us to Thrawn as a character, and calls into question the extent to which we view him as a straightforward villain.

Though it presents him as significantly more complexly sympathetic, the *Ascendancy* version of Thrawn does not suggest a reading of the character that is entirely different from the one we have gotten previously; his character still has moments of the coldly calculating nature that we have seen from Thrawn all along. The key is that the portrayal of such calculations is more nuanced, and often couched in more noble purpose, not given with no other motivation than because he is a villain. In *Chaos Rising* for example, when Ar’alani asks Thrawn if he has always seen the alien Garwians as people, rather than as “highly intelligent animals”, Thrawn answers that he sees them “[a]s possible allies. Possible enemies. Assets” (331). This is couched by a narrative description that as he answers, Ar’alani “thought she could see a hint of both thoughtfulness and sadness in his face” which suggests that Thrawn does perhaps regret that the Garwians are assets to him, or perhaps regrets what being assets to him will mean for them. This is later echoed when Thrawn describes Ar’alani’s command style: “the way she

looks at the universe,” Thrawn said with an oddly sad smile. ‘Where I see non-Chiss as assets, she sees them as people.’ [...] ‘Certainly a better commander than I’” (*Chaos* 378). The nuance of Thrawn’s regret that he sees non-Chiss people as assets is echoed here and reinforced by the intimation that he sees this as a failing in himself, factors that temper our reading of his calculating nature. Furthermore, despite the fact that he sees other peoples as “assets”, he also later states “[a]ll lives are important” (*Greater* 157). When Thrawn makes this statement, he is specifically referring to protecting the people of the Magys from committing ritual suicide, even though the tactics he takes to do so are, by Chiss protocol, questionable. Despite the arguments that captains Samakro and Lakinda present that the Magys is not Chiss, and therefore her life no business of theirs, Thrawn argues in favor of protecting non-Chiss lives. This tempers and seems to call into question all previous references to his calculating nature with respect to other beings being “assets”. Retroactively, we can even question his actions in the Empire, when, as this article discussed earlier, he told Eli that the enslaved Wookies were merely Imperial assets (*Thrawn* 296). That said, it is key to an understanding of Thrawn’s character to remember that however much he may care about non-Chiss lives, that always comes secondary to his motivations to protect the Chiss; or as Mid Captain Samakro says in response to the Magys’ claim that Thrawn wouldn’t hurt her people because he cares about non-Chiss lives “[y]ou threaten his people, and see how fast that changes” (*Lesser Evil* 469).

Thrawn’s final action in *Lesser Evil*, to engineer his demotion from the Expansionary Defense Fleet, and his exile from the Ascendancy, in order to save the careers of Ar’alani and the others who stood with him at the final battle over Sunrise, and in order to place himself in a position to seek an alliance from the Empire to help defeat the Grysks, is one that is self-sacrificingly unselfish, and demonstrative of the extent to which his sense of loyalty to his people is the key thread that underscores his character.

Seemingly, the version of Thrawn in the new canon literature is the more complexly developed characterisation that Zahn began developing in *The Hand of Thrawn* duology, and one which it could be argued is not in fact a villain at all (outside of, as stated at the beginning of this article, the fact that we must remember that regardless of his more noble motivations and more sympathetic character, he does work within the fascist regime of the Empire). But we have not yet considered the Thrawn we are presented with in *Rebels*. The *Rebels* version of Thrawn appeared before his first new canon literature appearance, with his first appearance on the show set between *Thrawn* and *Thrawn: Alliances* (or at least, the part of *Alliances* that does not take place during the Clone Wars). Unlike our perspective of Thrawn in the new canon literature, Thrawn in *Rebels* is not filtered through any kind of sympathetic perspective, and we are not

given any sense of his internal feelings or motivations. He is, overall, a dramatically flatter character. When Thrawn enters the scene in “Steps Into Shadow: Part One”, he is a newly promoted Grand Admiral, following the events on Batonn that take place at the end of *Thrawn*. We get very little from Thrawn in these first two episodes, other than the reintroduction of his character into the new canon. But there isn’t anything he says or does that contributes to a sense of him as a character, other than that he is, as we last saw him in Legends, a Grand Admiral in the Imperial Navy. Abstracted from the insights into Thrawn’s character that we get from the new canon literature, Thrawn at first introduction seems very much the coldly calculating Grand Admiral that we last saw in Legends. Perhaps even more so, as early on in his third appearance we see him physically grab a Lieutenant and snarl at him when the Lieutenant seems to question Thrawn (*Rebels*, “Hera’s Heroes”). We do get a small flash of the idiosyncrasies of his character that speak to an internal sense of honor, when he allows the rebels to escape, stating “hold your fire. They’ve earned their victory today” (*Rebels*, “Hera’s Heroes”). But this seems to be an abnormality in what is otherwise a cartoonishly villainous characterisation. In another instance of the quiet ruthlessness of this Thrawn, we see him order what he believes to be an imperial mechanic to test the engine on a speeder bike that he knows to be faulty (*Rebels*, “An Inside Man”). Even though he can see that the speeder’s engine is going to explode, he orders the man to stay on the bike until it explodes (*Rebels*, “An Inside Man”). This goes beyond the cold logic that we see from Thrawn in Legends, it is needlessly violent and cruel as a form of punishment, and is even more illogically needlessly cruel than what we saw from Thrawn in his first iteration in *Heir to the Empire*. This Thrawn seems more inclined to ruthlessness over strategy; as for example, when Tarkin says he wants them to take the rebels prisoners, Thrawn states that it may not be capable to leave them alive in the offensive, acquiescing only when Tarkin presses him as to the strategic advantage of having them prisoner (*Rebels*, “Zero Hour: Part One”). Once again, this is the kind of attitude we might have expected from *Heir to the Empire* Thrawn, but is at odds with the more thoughtful and less reactive Thrawn we see in the new canon literature. *Rebels* Thrawn also proves as vindictive as *Heir to the Empire* Thrawn, telling Hera “I’m not accepting surrenders at this time. I want you to know failure, utter defeat, and that it is I who delivers it crushing down upon you” (*Rebels*, “Zero Hour: Part One”).

In perhaps the most jarring dissonance to the understanding of Thrawn’s character that we gain in the *Ascendancy* novels, *Rebels* Thrawn sneers mockingly at Hera while he speculates that one of the symbols on her Kalikori represents a brother who died young, what he imagines contemptuously “is a bittersweet memory for you” (*Rebels*, “Jedi Night”). It seems

completely counter to the Thrawn who lost his sister at an extremely young age, and his adopted brother Thrass later on in life, and who we have seen empathize with others who have experienced such loss, to use the loss of a brother to inflict emotional pain on another in such a casually heartless way. Yes, it was done in the service of his emotional torture of Hera, as part of her interrogation, but nonetheless there is clear dissonance to the characterization of Thrawn in the novels. Likewise jarringly, while all other versions of Thrawn use analysis of the artwork of species in order to better understand them to make strategic and tactical plans, *Rebels* Thrawn claims he collects art merely as “trophy” or “symbols” that represent some of his greatest adversaries (*Rebels*, “Jedi Night”). This completely undercuts what was a significant facet of Thrawn’s abilities as a tactical and strategic commander, and had been shown as a respect for the culture of other species, and makes it a petty and villainous quirk. This simplification and twisting of these facets of Thrawn into shallowly villainous characterizations underscores the dramatic extent to which *Rebels* Thrawn is at odds with the in some respects heroic character that he has been developed into in the new canon literature. *Rebels* Thrawn is a continuation of the straightforward villain we see in *Heir to the Empire*, without even the slight development or nuance that we see in *The Last Command* or *The Hand of Thrawn* duology. He is jarringly different from the Thrawn of either new canon literature trilogy, and most particularly that of the *Ascendancy* trilogy.

To return to my conversation with my partner, regarding the extent to which my memory of Thrawn’s character had been colored by the new canon Thrawn, it is evident that in some respects it had been. Thrawn was, as Joshua posited, a straightforwardly villainous character in his initial portrayal in *Heir to the Empire*. However, Zahn began adding complexities to that characterization within that trilogy, particularly in *The Last Command*, and by *The Hand of Thrawn* we see clear attempts at building out a more nobly motivated character with respects to his ultimate desire to save the Chiss people from a greater threat than that posed by the fascistic regime of the Empire.¹⁷ This raises a potential issue both for future new canon texts and for the assumed upcoming inclusion of Thrawn in future live action Disney+ series such as

¹⁷ Interestingly, as this article quoted previously, in *Vision of the Future*, Thrawn is referred to by one of the Chiss as a “Syndic”, a title, we learn later in the *Ascendancy* books, that is a part of the ruling families structure of the Chiss Aristocracy, and while not a title that new canon Thrawn holds, this early reference points to Zahn plotting out a greater background to Thrawn and his people than we were ever given in *Legends* (429). We see evidence of Zahn’s continued work on the mechanics of the world of the Chiss in *Outbound Flight* where Thrawn’s ship has the same name as his ship in the *Ascendancy* trilogy, the Chiss ruling structure of the “Nine Ruling Families” is referred to along with details of that structure that are similar to what we see in the *Ascendancy* books, and we are introduced to Ar’alani and Thrass (though characterized in *Outbound Flight* notably differently than they are later more fully developed and presented in the *Ascendancy* books) (*Outbound* 19, 55, 152-153, 156, 292-293, 407).

Ahsoka:¹⁸ how can Zahn write any books post *Rebels* without dealing with the characterization of Thrawn as a stock villain, and will the version of Thrawn that we get in live action be as blatantly and statically villainous as he was in *Rebels*, or will he be a more nuanced and complexly characterized version as he has been in the new canon literature thus far? To the first question, we have something of an answer in Zahn's portrayal of Thrawn in both *Thrawn: Alliances* and *Thrawn: Treason* which are set post Thrawn's introduction in *Rebels*. Yes, all versions of Thrawn in the new canon were published after his reintroduction in *Rebels*. But the *Ascendancy* novels could be explained away by taking place prior to his service in the Empire, as could the first *Thrawn* novel as the leadup to where we find him in *Rebels*. However, both *Alliances* and *Treason* are set post his introduction in *Rebels* and yet continue to portray Thrawn as a nuanced character, with honor, who is neither completely loyal to the Empire, nor a mustache twirling cartoonish characterization of a villain. Seemingly, other than referencing facts about Thrawn's history that we are given in *Rebels* (such as his actions at Batonn), Zahn has completely disregarded *Rebels*' return to his initial version of Thrawn as a straightforward stock villain. It seems likely then, that regardless of how Thrawn is portrayed in live action, we may get a subsequent book that either explains away his actions and/or adds layers of complexities to his motivations, either way maintaining our sense of his character as a self-sacrificing genius driven only by a desire to protect his people. The answer to the second question, which version of Thrawn will we see in live action, is less knowable. Historically, live action versions of *Star Wars* have disregarded literature whenever it serves to do so. However, we have seen a greater attempt in the new canon era to honor multimodal narratives. That said, with *Rebels* Thrawn already at odds with new canon literature Thrawn, there is going to be some level of disjointure regardless of which version is honored. Perhaps the way forward lies in a middle ground, in which we see a more villainous Thrawn who claims to have more honorable motivations, even if the other characters (and perhaps even we the audience) are incapable of understanding them. Only time, and further analysis of his character as he continues to be developed and appear in both future literature and televised media, will tell.

¹⁸ The assumption of which follows Ahsoka's question "[w]here is Grand Admiral Thrawn?" during her appearance in *The Mandalorian*, Season 2, Episode 13, "The Jedi".

Works Cited

Star Wars: Rebels. Lucasfilm Ltd., 2014-2020.

"The Jedi." *Star Wars: The Mandalorian*. Lucasfilm Ltd., 2019.

Zahn, Timothy. *Dark Force Rising*. 1992. Bantam, 1993.

---. *Heir to the Empire*. 1991. Bantam, 1992.

---. *Outbound Flight*. Del Rey, 2006.

---. *Specter of the Past*. 1997. Bantam, 1998.

---. *The Last Command*. 1993. Bantam, 1994.

---. *Thrawn*. Del Rey, 2017.

---. *Thrawn: Alliances*. Del Rey, 2018.

---. *Thrawn: Ascendancy: Chaos Rising*. Del Rey, 2020.

---. *Thrawn: Ascendancy: Greater Good*. Del Rey, 2021.

---. *Thrawn: Ascendancy: Lesser Evil*. Del Rey, 2021.

---. *Thrawn: Treason*. Penguin Random House, 2019.

---. *Vision of the Future*. 1998. Bantam, 1999.