Ancient and Modern Superheroes: A Comparison of Characters and Themes in Literature and Comic Books/Graphic Novels

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Antički i moderni super heroji: Usporedba likova i tema u literaturi i stripovima/grafičkim novelama

Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Borislav Berić

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Abstract

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery; or so the old saying goes. Many stories, characters, concepts and themes in literature have been interpreted in various ways in and outside of media. These interpretations range from works inspired by other works, the treatment of the same or similar concepts and characters and character archetypes, all the way to even downright plagiarism, where artistic integrity is nowhere to be found. Every medium has seen and will continue to see that various works created in or outside of a given medium share similarities between them; whether they do so by choice or by accident. This is especially true for print media. Many novels, poetry books, dramas, comic books and graphic novels share similarities, some are obvious, others vague. In works of fantasy, humans and elves often battle evil forces, which mainly consist of orcs or undead creatures; love poems have a melancholy undertone to them, especially when they talk about the past. In comic books, the righteous hero must save the world from the threat of his arch-nemesis. Comic books also draw inspiration from the traditional works of literature. Characters are regularly inspired by mythological heroes, or they go through a story arc which pays homage to a literary classic. Oftentimes, comic book superheroes carry with them the ideas of whole literary genres, or represent the ideals of their home countries. Although they started as a medium for children, comics have evolved into a medium that is able to recreate some of the world's greatest literary achievements.

Keywords: Superman, Jesus, Hulk, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Captain America, national identity, Wonder Woman, female archetypes

Introduction

Not many people would think that comic books are able to stand up to the likes of Homer, Tolkien, King Arthur or Harry Potter. Although glanced over in the eye of the public, comic books are still able to deliver thought provoking stories, awe inspiring characters and tackle ideas and themes in a way no literary work is able to. Those who follow that medium have witnessed things not even Shakespeare would be able to recreate. Since gaining some fame and recognition in the late 1930s comic books, as well as their authors and artists, have been pushing the envelope and have kept going above and beyond our wildest imaginations. Even the stories behind their creation vary from author to author. Comic book characters are not always just an idea; they are life stories written in the most fantastical way possible, propaganda pieces made to bolster morale and move entire nations in times of crisis; they have qualities which challenge the status quo of an era and they draw inspiration from the finest works of ancient and modern literature. One thing comic books love to do most is bend the rules. *Zagor*, created by Sergio Bonelli, is famous for deconstructing the cowboy and western genre, *Wonder Woman* has been a cornerstone of feminism ever since she first appeared in 1941, the Japanese manga *Neon Genesis Evangelion* has taken everything we know about robots and religion, merged those two incomparable ideas and flipped them on their heads and *Superman*, an alien, has become the most recognizable icon of popular culture.

While comic books do create these fantastical and impossible worlds, they do not always do so out of the pure force of imagination. Every great story and character takes something from another great story or character and uses that to become better than the rest. Such instances of "borrowing" can be obvious, like Wonder Woman having a cast of Greek gods, mythical creatures and stories derived from Greek epics, while others are more obscure or rather "not quite out there", like Thaal Sinestro, the main villain from the *Green Lantern* comics, being a modern day version of Satan from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, albeit without the religious framework of the latter. When compared side by side, comic books and works of literature show resemblances one would never think possible. In order to find these resemblances, one often has to dig deeper than just using the common knowledge people have about both mediums. Once one becomes aware of these similarities, whether they were the core concept of a character, or were introduced gradually either by intent or accident, one is then able to realize why comic books have become one of the most important mediums of the early twenty-first century.

1. Superman aka Space Jesus

Superman has become the most recognizable character of our time. His name is known to all; his symbol can be seen on apparel, vehicles, buildings and, of course, comic books and the ideals he embodies drive people from all over the world to do good. Superman first appeared back in April of 1938 in *Action* Comics #1 and since then in thousands of different comic books, TV shows, cartoons and films. Even in his early years, Superman was one of the most popular fictional characters available. Back in 1940 "the air waves rang with the now legendary words: Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound! Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's SUPERMAN! (Bridwell 9). Those final three utterances have taken a life of their own, ever since they were first spoken on the Mutual Networks radio show *Adventures of Superman*" (Bridwell 10). They have become a meme even before people knew what a meme was. People spoke them more often than prayers. As time went on, Superman became more and more popular. With his newfound popularity also came new powers and expanded lore. In his first appearance, Superman could "hurdle skyscrapers, leap an eight of a mile, raise tremendous weight, run faster than a streamline train and nothing less than a bursting shell could penetrate his skin" (Action Comics #1, 2). With subsequent issues, Superman's jumping ability became flight, his speed and strength increased further and he also gained new powers like enhanced senses, heat vision, frost breath and his newest power from *Superman vol.3 #38* (2015), a solar flare-like discharge of energy. As his powers grew, so did the lore surrounding Superman. Writers explored the history of his home planet Krypton, he gained a headquarters and occasional home in the Fortress of Solitude, with the arrival of Supergirl it was revealed that he has surviving relatives, he became a founding member of the Justice League and his costume and symbol were given new meanings. As Superman's universe continued to expand, people started noticing similarities to other works of fiction and/or real life events. The comparison of Superman to Jesus, for example, first started circulating as a joke, but with time, this comparison became more and more plausible. While Jesus Christ may not be able to fly at great speeds, shoot lasers from his eyes, freeze the air with his breath or wear a distinctive, bright coloured costume, the similarities to Superman dig far deeper than one would be able to notice without taking a deeper look at the two characters.

1.1 How Clark Kent became Jesus

Although one would not consider Superman to be a religious character in any way, shape or form, the comparison of Superman and Jesus is one that people often make, even if they mean it only as a joke. As time went on, though, the character of Superman gradually took on several characteristics identical, or at least comparable to the story of Jesus Christ as told in the *Bible*. One of such is the earthly existence of otherwise unearthly men. Both Superman and Jesus were not of Earth, but both of them led their lives on Earth, each of them changing homes several times.

> Superman was an alien immigrant, and like a diaspora Jew, he was forced to leave his starry home (a threatened Krypton) to find a new life amongst strangers in a strange land (Earth). Later, he would again leave his home (Smallville) to live in the Arctic wilderness (ensconced inside the Fortress of Solitude). And then for a third time he would leave his Arctic home to live in a bustling urban city (Metropolis) going about his heavenly Father's (Jor-El's) work. Likewise, Jesus left his celestial home in the heavens to come to the Earth realm. Later, he left his rural home Nazareth (an ancient Smallville) to wander through desert wildernesses, followed by missionary work throughout the Roman-dominated world while doing his heavenly Father's (Yahweh's) work. (Kozlovic 2002)

Superman's second birth (coming to Earth) also bears semblance to the birth of Jesus. "After his starship crash-landed in a field, baby Kal-El emerged totally naked (symbolic of birth) from its womb-like cave within a rural setting (analogous to Jesus's humble stable manger). His small arms were outstretched in a cruciform posture, the unmistakable signature sign of Jesus Christ" (Kozlovic 2002).

Another important aspect of both characters is their relationship with their fathers, both heavenly and earthly. Their earthly fathers do separate the two characters in some ways, while Joseph is mentioned mostly in the story of Jesus' birth and early life in *Matthew* chapters one and two and *Luke* chapter two, Superman's earthly father Jonathan Kent has a more prevalent role in his life. One thing to consider about Jonathan Kent is that his role changes depending on which version of the Superman story one follows. In the very first story of Superman, his parents both died during Clark Kent's adulthood, which ultimately drove him towards becoming Superman and using his powers for good. This aspect of the story was then changed in 1986 in the mini-series *The Man of Steel*. In it, the Kent's serve as a moral guideline, instilling within Superman that which is needed to become a strong and heroic figure. Superman's and Jesus'

relationships with their fathers converge when it comes to their biological fathers. Both characters never meet their biological fathers in person, but they do communicate with them in comparable manners. When Jesus prays to God, his father, he always does so in a secluded area. The Gospel of Mark states:

> And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed" (Mark 1:35) and "after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. (Mark 6:46)

The most famous and probably most important conversation Jesus has with his Father is his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46). In a comparable manner, Superman converses with his father Jor-El in a secluded area. Although Jesus sometimes hears his father talking to him in a disembodied voice coming from the heavens, Superman sees Jor-El as a preinstalled projection. Their most notable conversations happen in the feature films *Superman* (1978) and *Man of Steel* (2013). In both films, Kal-El (Superman's Kryptonian name) and Jor-El converse inside Superman's Fortress of Solitude, a remote, desolate and private place only Superman knows of.

The most bizarre instance of Superman and Jesus sharing character traits would be that both Superman and Jesus died and were subsequently resurrected. In both cases, the number three plays a significant role. After his crucifixion and death (Matthew 27:32-56) Jesus was taken to a tomb in which he resurrected and ascended to the heavens after being dead for three days (Matthew 28 1:10). In the case of Superman, he did not die for the sins of mankind, but his death was the result of his fight against Doomsday (*Superman* vol. 2 #75). The publication of Superman comics would stop after that issue. Superman then may have not been resurrected after three days, but new Superman comics did come to the market, three months after issue #75. The new comics featured four new Supermen, all four of them impostors. The real Superman, Clark Kent, was recuperating from his battle with Doomsday inside his Fortress of Solitude. Clark Kent would then later resume his tenure as the only Superman on Earth. The four other characters would subsequently take on new roles as both superheroes and villains (*The Return of Superman*).

These are not the only similarities the two characters share. Both Jesus and Superman are kind, humble, forgiving, have high morals and find time for the common man; Superman saves a suicidal girl (*All Star Superman* vol. 2) while Jesus dines with sinners (Mark 2:13-17) and lets children come to him while other adults object to it(Luke 18:15-17).

Although not in the same manner, both Jesus and Superman have dual identities.

> As gentle Jesus was the powerful messianic Christ, so mild-mannered Clark Kent was the quasi-omnipotent Man of Steel. As Clark was the mask of the Man of Steel, Jesus was the mask of God. Clark needed to protect his true identity as Superman, just like Jesus who tasked his disciples not to reveal his true identity as the Christ (Mark 8:30). Why? Because Superman's crime-fighting ability would be severely impaired if his secret identity was known and loved ones threatened (e.g., the still surviving Ma Kent and Daily Planet coworkers). Conversely, according "to scholars, a similar "messianic secret" lies at the heart of the Gospel of Mark."One imagines Jesus's earthly mission being in peril from both Romans and Jews before he was ready to reveal himself to a hostile world. (Kozlovic 2002)

The similarities between the two characters continue on, and one could go for long lengths trying to list and explain them all. Whether or not Shuster and Siegel had the intention of creating a messiah like character in Superman is irrelevant. What one should take into consideration when observing the two is that over time similar character and lore points have emerged from Superman’s stories, be it on purpose or by accident. Some more religious individuals might dismiss accepting these similarities as being blasphemous, but the fact still stands that these and many other similarities do exist. As mentioned, whether they came to be by accident or by design remains irrelevant. While Superman cannot claim to be directly inspired by Jesus Christ, there is a character who derives inspiration from a one person duo from English literature. That character is Bruce Banner aka The Incredible Hulk.

2. The Hulk: ‘‘The Jekyll and Hyde of the Atomic Age’’

2.1 History of monster protagonists

Japanese manga artist Kouta Hirano wrote in his work *Hellsing*: “When a human’s tears finally dry up forever, they transform into a monster” (*Hellsing* vol. 9).

Throughout history, monsters have been regarded as evil beings that exist only to harm humanity and must, therefore, be destroyed. Stories about monsters and story segments that involve monsters always led to only one conclusion; the hero defeats the monster, usually by killing it. Heracles/Hercules slayed the Hydra, St. George killed a dragon and Ellen Ripley fought off the Aliens, multiple times. It is hard to recall stories, whether in literature, film or video games, in which monsters play a completely positive role. Even stories which feature monsters as protagonists, like the story of Dr. Frankenstein and his monster show the monster to be evil in some way, shape or form. The Japanese have made an attempt at creating a favourable monster protagonist in Godzilla, locally referred to as *Gojira*, but even in the films surrounding Godzilla mankind always sees the monster as a threat that must be eliminated, even after Godzilla saved Japan from other monsters multiple times. While the *kaiju* (monster) movies were a success in Japan, they failed to catch on in the western world only until recent times. Even before the appearance of Godzilla, the west also made an attempt at creating a favourable monster protagonist. In 1933 the first King Kong motion picture premiered (IMDb). Although it featured the titular monster as a main protagonist and made audiences sympathize with the giant ape, the narrative still showed King Kong as an antagonist in the mind of the in film humans. As mentioned, this trend in film of humankind viewing the monster as a threat continued in subsequent monster films, like the aforementioned Godzilla films. Comic book writer Stan Lee was one of the first to create a monstrous protagonist that had the sympathies of both real life humans, as well the humans who appeared in story. That monster was *Fantastic Four* member The Thing. Appearing first in *Fantastic Four* #1 in November 1961, the Fantastic Four’s monster The Thing, formerly known as Benjamin Grimm, was, along with his superhero companions, immediately well received. “The Fantastic Four were a smash, and it didn’t take Stan and crew long to capitalize on their success” (Petty 7). In May of 1962, Stan Lee premiered a new superhero, another one who would fully embrace the monster persona and feature stories

where people would view him both as a threat and a saviour. That superhero was Bruce Banner aka The Incredible Hulk. Lee stated about the creation of the character:

> It was patently apparent that [the monstrous character the] Thing was the most popular character in [Marvel's recently created superhero team the] Fantastic Four.... For a long time I'd been aware of the fact that people were more likely to favor someone who was less than perfect.... [...] I've always had a soft spot in my heart for the Frankenstein monster. No one could ever convince me that he was the bad guy.... He never wanted to hurt anyone; he merely groped his torturous way through a second life trying to defend himself, trying to come to terms with those who sought to destroy him. ... I decided I might as well borrow from Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde as well — our protagonist would constantly change from his normal identity to his superhuman alter ego and back again. (Lee 75)

The similarities to the monster of Dr. Frankenstein could be seen only in the first few issues. In his initial appearance, the Hulk had grey skin (*The Incredible Hulk* #1), but by issue #2, his skin had been changed to green and has remained so to this day. Other than the initial appearance and semi comparable origin between the two, the similarities to Frankenstein and his monster end here. From here on, the Hulk shows character and lore traits that are more comparable to *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

2.2 Two men, four minds

As Lee himself said, he decided to borrow several features from Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The most obvious of those would be the split personalities the characters share. As seen in chapter 9 of the book, Mr. Hyde drinks a potion which, after a gruelling and painful transformation sequence, changes him into Dr. Jekyll (Stevenson 47). This transformation changes not only Dr. Jekyll's body, but also his mind. Mr. Hyde is described as being "pale and dwarfish, he gave an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation, he had a displeasing smile, he had borne himself to the lawyer with a sort of murderous mixture of timidity and boldness, and he spoke with a husky, whispering and somewhat broken voice" (Stevenson 11-12). The author then says that "all these were points against him, but not all of these together could explain the hitherto unknown disgust, loathing and fear with which Mr. Utterson regarded him" (12). Other descriptions of Mr. Hyde rarely

state specifics about his appearance, but the characters often state that he appears evil, he "must have secrets of his own; black secrets, by the look of him; secrets compared to which poor Jekyll's worst would be like sunshine" (13). Also, Mr. Hyde's personality seems to overpower that of Dr. Jekyll as he states that he can transform even without the potion and that he has problems turning back (62). Unlike Dr. Jekyll, Dr. Bruce Banner did not initially transform into the Hulk on his own accord. Banner was testing a new bomb he had created for the military, but just as it was about to go off, he noticed a teenage boy in the blast area. He raced out to save him and just as he was about to jump into a trench himself, the bomb went off and Banner was caught in the blast. Later on, due to his exposure to gamma radiation, he transforms into the Hulk and runs away (*The Incredible Hulk* vol.1 #1). In this instance, the Hulk is shown as a giant muscular man with grey skin. In issue #2, the Hulk has green skin. It is explained that the Hulk is grey only during the night, but this idea was abandoned in the following issue of the comic book.

While Mr. Hyde is described as a being of pure evil, the Hulk is mostly depicted as a being of anger and/or instincts. The way the Hulk behaves changes depending on the storyline. In some instances, the Hulk can control his rage and even hold conversations with others (*Avengers* vol.1 #1), while in other storylines, as soon as the transformation is complete, the Hulk destroys everything around him and attacks anyone he sees (*Hulk/Wolverine* vol.1). While their mannerisms might be different, the Hulk fights bad guys while Mr. Hyde murders people, both characters are seen as destructive beings. Mr. Hyde is universally feared and hated, but the Hulk sometimes manages to redeem himself and his destructive ways, usually in *The Avengers* storylines.

Another thing that sets the two monsters apart is the way the original body owners, Bruce Banner and Dr. Jekyll, transform back into themselves. Dr. Jekyll is forced to drink a potion (Stevenson 47), while Banner must rid himself of his rage. To do this, he either forces the Hulk to go to a solitary place, or he uses a catalyst which calms him down, most recently his fellow Avenger Black Widow (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*).

Although, when women are in question, the monstrous sides of the two characters, those being Mr. Hyde and the Hulk, show different mannerisms. Stevenson has been criticized for not including women in the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde as "an early reviewer set the tone for subsequent criticism by blandly claiming that 'no women appear in the tale'; but, in fact, women are strikingly present as inhabitants of the city outside of the bachelor interiors of the male characters" (Campbell 2). Campbell further states how women "define the cityscape, inhabit the

city's streets and receive all the violence of Hyde either as direct victims or shocked witnesses—the little girl, the angry women who accuse Hyde of hurting the girl, the housekeeper, the match girl and the maidservant at the window" (2). In the story, women serve as world builders, even if they remain in the background, and as victims. The first draft of the story featured multiple sexual scenes involving the titular "heroes" and women, but after a protest from Stevenson's wife Fanny, the draft was burned and the story rewritten. One major complaint was that the people of the Victorian era could not deal with material of such a sexual nature (2-3). One of the reasons Dr. Jekyll gives, as to why he decided to initially turn into Mr. Hyde, was to indulge himself in his more primal desires. He found out that all men are both good and evil and since he was the good one, he wanted to become evil. This triggered the creation of the potion. Dr. Jekyll later regretted his decision, when his pleasures started to become more undignified. Another problematic factor was the fact that his newfound evil side slowly became the more dominant one and started triggering the transformation into Mr. Hyde even without Jekyll drinking the required potion (Stevenson 49-64).

In contrast to that, the stories that feature the Hulk use women to fill in more commendable roles. Still, these roles often involve those women being love interests to either Bruce Banner or the Hulk. While one could view this to be just another usage of women as just sexual partners, unlike Mr. Hyde, Banner/Hulk does not just use those women to fulfil his primal desires, but instead forms meaningful relationships with them. Bruce Banners most enduring love interest is Betty Ross, who appeared in the first issue of the comic in 1962. More interestingly, even though he represents the primal side of the character, the Hulk has also formed multiple relationships with women. One of the most notable ones would be that with the queen of a sub-atomic kingdom named Jarella (*The Incredible Hulk* #140). While Betty Ross fell in love with Bruce Banner and treated the Hulk as a cancer-like illness, Jarella actually fell in love with the monstrous green giant. While Betty Ross remains to this day, Jarella was killed in issue #205. After Jarella, the Hulk, not Bruce Banner, would later on have relationships with characters such as Bereet (*The Incredible Hulk* #269) and Caiera (*The Incredible Hulk* vol. 2 #92), who even bore him twin sons. All three of the aforementioned women were not human, although the Hulk did romance one in the form of Marlo Chandler (*The Incredible Hulk* #347). With these relationships, the Hulk shows a vast deviation in comparison to his monstrous predecessor Mr. Hyde. While both may represent the primal side of humanity, the Hulk is actually able to form lasting and meaningful relationships with women, while Mr. Hyde just uses and abuses them. It is, however, important to note that all of those stories featured the more

humane version of the Hulk. If the writers had decided to approach the character differently, none of those instances would have happened.

The Hulk may have started off as a modernised version of the Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde character, where a brilliant scientist transforms into a monstrous creature, but has evolved into its own identity. While the core characteristics of the Victorian duo will forever be engraved in the character, writers are still able to evolve the character beyond them and help keep it interesting. That makes it possible for readers to enjoy a forever evolving take on a well-established character concept, while the stories still remain true to the initial idea Stan Lee had in the sixties. That even makes it possible for the *Hulk* comics to portray meaningful female characters. An idea of fully fleshed female characters who could take on roles reserved for men, instead of just being used as various types of support, was rarely realised in literature. Some characters like Ibsen's Nora did challenge certain female stereotypes, but all of them remained one and done characters who do not appear in multiple stories. That was the status quo for female characters for a long time, until a certain Amazon princess decided to change the world's view on women.

3. Wonder Woman: A challenge to female stereotypes

3.1 The portrayal of women in literature

Female characters in literature served a limited number of roles. They were the damsels in distress, the queens and princesses whose love the male lead must win, or the poor children in fairy tales who happen upon love or beauty. There were, of course, strong female characters as well. Many of them were prevalent in Greek mythology and drama. Antigone openly defied her uncle King Creon in order to uphold the law of the gods. The three Gorgon sisters were feared throughout Greece, while the Fates were revered, for they held the destinies of men in their hands. The goddess Hera may have become legendary for her jealousy, but one cannot refute the fact that all of those acts were done to preserve her shallow and ever crumbling marriage to Zeus. Many other Greek women like Electra, Atalanta, Clytemnestra and Danae also became famous for going above and beyond, but it is important to notice that many of the stories about women in Greek literature ended tragically.

During medieval times, the role of women in literature depends upon which part of Europe one decides to analyse. Up in the Scandinavian north, women were most prominently featured as shieldmaidens and Valkyries. Whether shieldmaidens also existed outside of folklore yet remains to be answered. Although it "is likely that there were occasions when women had to defend themselves and their families as best they could, with whatever weapons were to hand. But there is absolutely no hard evidence that women trained or served as regular warriors in the Viking Age" (Jesch). Shieldmaidens may have not translated into real life of the period, but they were still prominent figures in many legends and myths. Most notable of them is Brynhildr from the *Völsunga saga*. In it, after slaying the dragon, the hero Sigurd meets Brynhildr in "a shield hung castle" (Chapter 20) where she fell asleep after Odin stabbed her with a sleeping thorn. Although she is referred to as being wise and even teaches Sigurd in "the lore of mighty matters" (Chapter 20), she is later on married through trickery (Chapter 27), murders a child (Chapter 32) and in the end throws herself into Sigurd's funeral pyre (Chapter 32). Brynhildr is also featured in the Germanic *Nibelungenlied* where her name is spelled Brunhild. In the *Nibelungenlied*, Brunhild is the queen of Iceland (Adventure 6) and the hero Gunther wishes to marry her. In order to do so, he must overpower her in three warlike contests (Adventure 7). In the chapter translated as Adventure, Brunhild throws a spear at Gunther that three men usually need to lift. Secondly, she throws a boulder, which requires the strength of twelve men, a distance of twelve

fathoms. That would correlate to almost twenty two meters of distance. Finally, she then jumps over the boulder, showing her vast dexterity alongside her immense strength. In the end though, Brunhild loses in all three of those contests due to Gunther's cheating. In all three contests, the main hero Siegfried actually performed the deeds while being hidden behind his invisibility cloak (Adventure 7). Therefore, the only reason Brunhld lost was due to cheating from her adversary. Because she lost, Brunhild agreed to marry Gunther. To add insult to insult, Brunhild was then humiliated by Kriemlind, wife of Siegfried. Brunhild claimed that Siegfried is only a vassal to Gunther, but Kriemlind revealed the truth behind the prior contests and thus, publicly humiliated Brunhild (Adventure 13-14). Unlike the *Vöslunga* saga, *Nibelungenlied* does not reveal Brunhild's fate. Still, it is just another example of a strong and praiseworthy female character ending badly; in this case, not in death, but in public disgrace.

As time went on, female characters in literature did not fare much better. Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* ends with the main heroine's death; Nora from Ibsen's *A Doll's House* does emancipate herself from her husband, but leaves her children behind; Flaubert's Emma Bovary is forced to kill herself after realising that her ideal world of romance is only an illusion. It is important to note that all of these female leads came forth from the pen of a male author. As one might expect from this observation, female authors had more success in portraying fully fleshed out female characters who, in the end, do not end in tragedy of any sort. Elizabeth Bennet from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Denver from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and even Hermione Granger from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* franchise are just some of the many positively received female characters who were envisioned by women writers. One would think that men do not have the capacity to write a female lead without her ending in tragedy, but very early during the Golden Age of Comics, a character came who would later set the standard for women in all of the art forms.

3.2 The good and bad of Diana Prince

Wonder Woman made her debut appearance in *All Star Comics* #8 in December of 1941. She was created by William Moulton Marston. "Marston's previous claim to fame was developing one of the first polygraphs (lie-detector machines)" (Wilmore 15). Marston was initially hired as an advisor for the *Superman* comic books. "Marston had been a supporter of women's rights since his college days. 'The only hope for civilization is the greater freedom, development and equality of women in all fields of human activity', he wrote in 1942, when he

revealed himself as Wonder Woman's author" (15). In her first story, Wonder Woman, known only as Diana from Paradise Island, proves herself as the most worthy of the Amazon warriors and is chosen to aid the American army in the fight against the Nazis (*All Star Comics* #8). When creating and writing Wonder Woman, Marston had a specific goal.

> Marston said his goal was 'to set up a standard among children and young people of strong, free, courageous womanhood; and to combat the idea that women are inferior to men, and to inspire girls to self-confidence and achievement in athletics, occupations, and professions monopolized by men'. Those ideals may not seem unusual today, but they were far from common at the time. (Wilmore 16)

Even though Marston had a progressive idea with Wonder Woman, him and other writers often did not know how to make proper use of the character. In many stories throughout the years, Wonder Woman often either succumbs to traditional female roles, or in other ways parallels her contemporaries from times past. In issue #3 of the *Wonder Woman* comic from 1942, Marston wrote a story in which women should become sexual slaves in order to pave the path to a matriarchal society. In one thought balloon, Wonder Woman says: "If girls want to be slaves there's no harm in that. The bad thing for them is submitting to a master or to an evil mistress like Paula! A good mistress could do wonders with them!" (*Wonder Woman* #3). The only message this issue would give, is that women should be viewed exclusively as sexual objects.

Even when the Justice League (then called Justice Society) finally decided to take Wonder Woman as a member, she was still reduced to a stereotypical female role. The only reason she was called in was to become the Society's secretary. When the other members, all male, of the Society go to fight the bad guys, Wonder Woman stays behind saying: "Good luck boys - and I wish I could be going with you" (*All-Star Comics* #12). A more recent absurd usage of the character came in 1993. In *Wonder Woman* vol.2 #73 Wonder Woman becomes an employee at a fast food taco restaurant and becomes obsessed with money: "I am supposed to help the poor, the powerless, to show women how to be strong without violence. But now all I can think about is money, money, money, and how to get a job" (*Wonder Woman* vol.2 #73).

Fortunately for Wonder Woman, there were writers who knew how to utilise the full potential of the character, instead of doing the opposite of what her creator intended for her. In the story *JLA: A League of One* Wonder Woman is faced with an ancient prophecy which tells of the destruction of the Justice League. When an ancient dragon named Karfang awakens from his

slumber, Diana realises that the prophecy is coming true. In order to save the other members of the League, Wonder Woman incapacitates them and faces the dragon alone. After a gruelling fight, Diana manages to defeat the dragon on her own. The Justice League later berates Wonder Woman, but also praises her for her efforts (*A League of One*).

From her very first appearance, Wonder Woman has had strong ties to Greek mythology. She is an Amazon warrior and, like the other Amazon's, worships the Greek goddesses. One of her main adversaries is the Greek god of war Ares. Apart from her heritage and occasional story involving Ares, her Greek mythology roots were seldom used. In issue #3 of *Wonder Woman* vol.4 from 2011, the birth of Diana is revisited. In her original backstory, Diana was formed from clay and given life by the Greek goddess Hera. This made her the perfect amazon and woman since she was born without involvement of men. In her new backstory, Diana is the daughter of Zeus, making her a demigod. This made it possible to infuse the Greek pantheon in her stories and make them more essential to them. In this version of the character, Ares serves as a wise uncle instead of a villain. In the story called *War*, Diana must defeat the firstborn son of Zeus who was cast away because he was born from adultery and not by Hera. During the course of the story, Ares loses his life and Wonder Woman is named the new god of war (*Wonder Woman: War*). She continues to fill this position to this very day. Her new role as goddess of war, as well as the intricacies of the Greek pantheon, play a major role in contemporary stories of Wonder Woman. They give her character several new dynamics, as well as fortify her as a character of Greek heritage, a fact that was usually ignored in previous versions of the character.

A major aspect of Wonder Woman's character is her signature costume. She wears a costume in the colours of the USA, the country she was sent to protect, bracers that can reflect bullets, a golden tiara that can be used as a boomerang and her famous Lasso of Truth. This costume made her instantly recognizable. More recently, her costume was changed and now resembles a knight's armour, which makes it far more practical for combat. This costume was introduced in *Wonder Woman* vol.4 #41. This may have taken away her signature appearance, but has given the character a feature which it lacked from her inception, practicality. It is interesting to note that this change was created by writer Meredith Finch. Just like the female characters from literature, Wonder Woman was elevated by a woman writer. Although writer Brian Azzarello gave the character new life in 2011 and skyrocketed her popularity with not only the revision of her backstory, but also with an accompanying story which showed Wonder Woman at her best, up until the reveal of her new costume and the accompanying story, interest for Wonder Woman began fading once more. Through the years, bad storylines in *Wonder*

Woman comics were far quicker to produce bad sales than bad storylines in similar male driven comic books. Whether Wonder Woman being a female character had something to do with that and if so, what that could imply about female characters in comic books, remains to be seen.

Even if initially used as a propaganda piece, that part of Wonder Woman's history never became a major part of the character. Instead, her role was to be a role model for women and to show that women can compete with men and transcend their traditional roles. She would be successful in this feat, even though many writers did not know how to use the character, which sometimes led to Wonder Woman almost becoming a forgotten character. For more than seventy years her costume entailed features of the American flag. Still, Wonder Woman was never seen as an All-American character or a similar equivalent. Her status as the greatest female superhero made her an important figure for women around the world. The American-like appearance of her costume was never a feature that was taken into consideration, at least not in a nationalistic way. During the comics first run, there was another character who would later on become the embodiment of a whole nation, much like the heroes of national epics.

4. Captain America: The modern national epic

4.1 How epics shaped nations

National identity is defined as "a sense of a nation as a cohesive whole, as represented by distinctive traditions, culture, and language" (oxforddictionaries.com). National identity and in accordance with it, nationality, is just one of the ways humans use to distinguish from one another. More importantly, national identity is a source of pride for many people, as with it come all the virtues that nation possesses. Those same virtues are also the main ideas that often stand behind national epics, stories written in ages past about heroes who, in their adventures, represent the whole nation and throughout which nations derive the virtues that they attribute to themselves. Most national epics are so old that their authors are unknown. It is believed that those stories stem from oral legends passed down through the generations before someone decided to write them down and thus preserve them for the future. Such epics include the Old English *Beowulf* and the Germanic *Nibelungenlied*. Not all national epics are authorless. The most well-known and studied epics of the world are the Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey* written by Homer.

> Epics usually rank very high among literary and traditional genres. They are great narratives or superstories that excel in length, power of expression, and weight of content compared with other narratives. Their value, however, derives less from their literal content than from their cultural context and function: they are seen in relation to something beyond their text, such as people's perception of group identity, core values of the society in question, models of heroic conduct and human endeavor, symbolic structures of history and mythology. This means that a rather tedious and repetitive narrative may also attain greatness in the consciousness of the particular group that identifies itself with the personages and events of the epic. Thus the reception of epics is part and parcel of their existence. Without social approval and even enthusiasm registered by at least some group, it becomes difficult to place a narrative in the category of epic. (Honko 21-22)

National epics and stories may not always be quality texts, but their importance is primarily derived from their status as cultural heritage. Some epics are created in order to preserve the heritage and identity of a nation due to external circumstances. For instance, the

national epics of Croatia such as *Judita* by Marko Marulić and *Osman* by Ivan Gundulić were written at the height of the Ottoman invasion of Croatia. One could argue that the primary intent behind those epics was not to instil a notion of nationality or to bolster the waning Croatian morale, but to preserve heritage, so that it may not fade away if the Ottomans would have conquered and held the territory of today's Croatia.

From this, one can conclude that national epics and national identity are concepts that are created in either the early years of a nation, or when a certain nation faces peril and/or possible extinction. Therefore, if a nation is well established, with multiple accounts that deal with that nation's identity, it is safe to assume that in that nation, no more national epics are being written. Because of this, the only way one deals with national identity in literary form is through other types of fictional work.

4.2 From unknown soldier to one man nation

The virtues of the USA are well known throughout the world: hard work, perseverance, patriotism, justice and many others. But, ever since its inception, the US has also been a much divided nation. "As Alexis de Tocqueville noted more than a century and a half ago, America is the most sectarian of all modern societies. Its deep divisions are unlikely to be healed any time soon" (Gray, 35). There was a time though, when the whole of the US came together to face one foe, World War II.

> It is the spring of 1941. 'The ruthless war-mongers of Europe' have cast their sights on 'a peace-loving America,' and 'the youth of our country' heed 'the call to arm for defense.' As foreign agents carry out 'a wave of sabotage and treason' against the United States, the president authorizes a top-secret plan. A patriotic young American named Steve Rogers, too sickly and weak to qualify for standard enlistment, volunteers for a dangerous scientific experiment conducted by the nation's top scientist, Professor Reinstein. Injected with a strange, seething liquid, Rogers undergoes a startling transformation. Growing in height and mass, Rogers's muscles expand and tighten to the peak of human perfection. No longer a frail patriot, he now has a massive physique, a proud new name, and a bold mission. The nation's newest 'super-soldier,' Captain America, is born. (Wright, 30)

Unlike the heroes of old national epics who go on adventure to seek fame or fortune, the "creation" of Captain America was an act of pure patriotism. Stan Lee himself said that Captain America represents only the best qualities of America: courage and honesty. "A product of his times, however, Captain America's image and origin mirror the American identity/dream of 1941. Blonde-haired, blue-eyed Steve Rogers (with his almost obsessively Anglo-American name) overcomes his own physical weakness to become a proud soldier for his country" (Dittmer, 629). What also makes Captain America a product of his time is the cover of the first issue of *Captain America Comics*. On it, the Captain is depicted punching Adolf Hitler, the main villain of World War II. Interesting to note is that the first issue appeared "nine months before Pearl Harbor and the American entry into WWII" (631). Since then, Captain America has been fighting bad guys in the name of red white and blue and the Star Spangled Banner. Although starting for different reasons, Captain America embodies and represents his country as the heroes of old have represented theirs in national epics, even if some of them had not been formed yet.

4.3 Captain anti-America: the adaptable rebel

Unlike his epic predecessors, Captain America does not always represent only the positive aspects of his nation. While old heroes such as Siegfried and Beowulf show the courage and heroism of Germany and England, they never give any critique. In their epic stories, the only things that show are virtues. The "bad guys" are always the people of other countries and nations. The character of Captain America, on the other hand, is often used to show and critique all the bad that the US has done throughout the years. "While it is impossible to measure the impact of comic books and similar media on the political attitudes of children and youths, they nonetheless do participate in a recursive relationship between elites advocating particular geopolitical narratives and the popular geo-graphs distributed by media to be consumed by the public" (Dittmer 628). Because of this, Captain America has often been called either anti- or un-American. Most recently, such criticism has been given to the film *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. One of the film's directors, Joe Russo, even confirmed that they wanted to make a political thriller and comment on America's current international affairs and how they are handled (Mother Jones). As mentioned, Captain America's primary sources, the comics, have also critiqued the US multiple times.

> In a story from the early Eighties, Captain America uses his amazing powers to destroy a renegade American intelligence agency that is plotting an attack on the Soviet Union in

> order to make the United States the last remaining superpower. Confronting the plotters, the comic-book hero makes one of many declarations of faith that resound throughout his more than 70-year-long career as a fighter against evil: "I represent the American dream! A dream that has precious little to do with borders, boundaries, and the kind of blind hatred your ilk espouses! (Gray 30)

In a similar story from 2014, Captain America confronts a renegade soldier called Nuke who is destroying towns in a fictional Eastern European country and posting American flag wherever he can (*Captain America Volume 3: Loose Nuke*). Although never explicitly stated, this storyline was a direct critique of the American army and America's "world police" mentality. While on his rampage, Nuke often criticizes the citizens of Nrosvekistan for not appreciating the uninvited coming of US troops and how they brought them freedom and democracy. This is an identical parallel to the US invasions of Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. Also similar to Vietnam, the US invasion of Nrosvekistan ended in failure.

Similar to criticizing his nation, Captain America is able to do one more thing his epic predecessors are unable to and that is adapt or change.

> Since Captain America is so clearly a symbol of America, he provides an opportunity to analyze the changing meaning and symbolic shape of America as the region is continually (re)constructed. If identity is a performance, then American identity has been performed monthly since 1964 in Captain America comic books. [...] In fact, a 1990s storyline had Captain America lose the super-soldier serum, ostensibly because it was overloading his body; in reality, it was explained in the editor's column that the creative team made the decision because of the unseemly image of the American ideal being hooked on a performance-enhancing drug. (Dittmer 629- 630)

This storyline continued with the criticism of America, when needed, but also showed that the criticism can be that of a contemporary problem. As the problems and virtues of America continued to change, so did its people.

As mentioned, Steve Rogers was at the time of his creation the epitome of human perfection: tall, strong, blue eyes, golden hair and, most importantly, white. A lot has changed in the US since 1941, especially when it comes to the ethnicity of its people. In those days, being a white man in America was one of the most American things possible. In today's America however, white people are slowly becoming the minority, being overtaken by black, Asian and

Latino people. In order to recognize these changes, Captain America also changed. As of November 2014, Steve Rogers is no longer Captain America. In a prior storyline, Rogers has been drained of the super-soldier serum that turned him into Captain America. Because of the worldwide importance Captain America carries, a new person has taken the red, white and blue suit and shield of the Cap. That person is Sam Wilson, formerly known as Falcon, an African-American. Just as modern America is no longer the country of the white man, so is Captain America no more a white man. The new Captain America also does not have the super-soldier serum in him which made the original Captain close to Nietzsche's idea of 'übermensch'. While Sam Wilson might not have the abilities of Steve Rogers, this fact actually favours the new Captain America, as it makes him more relatable to the common man. While this might deviate from his epic predecessors, all of whom were described as being greater than any other man, one of Captain America's main traits has always been that, when compared to other Marvel heroes, he is the one that can mostly relate to the common public.

Conclusion

Comic books have started their life as short comedic stories aimed at children, mostly published in special sections of daily newspapers. As time went on, they have slowly evolved into a multifaceted and adaptable art form. Though many still view them as childish fiction, comic books have proven multiple times that they are capable of feats equal to or greater than any other form of art. They can criticize our world and the problems our world faces; they can be forerunners in human rights and diversity issues; they can be representatives of whole nations and they can also provide a form of escapism to their readers. Comic book characters have been and continue to be an inspiration for millions of people around the world. Comic books and the themes of their storylines have often mimicked those seen in literary works of years past. As shown, Superman is the modern day Jesus Christ even if people do not worship him in churches. The Hulk is the Jekyll and Hyde of our time, warning us of the dangers atomic weaponry and the monstrous side of men can pose, but also how to overcome them and better ourselves as people. Ever since her first appearance, Wonder Woman has been an inspiration to women around the world, while Captain America is the modern hero of national epics, but one who is also able to recognize and critique the bad of his nation. The four characters explored in this paper provide more than enough material for even further analysis, analysis which can show even more, how cartoonish looking characters are far more than just scribbles intended for the entertainment of children.

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