Deconstructing the superhero myth in Alan Moore's The Watchmen

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Preddiplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti (dvopredmetni)

Vanja Štrukelj

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izv.prof.dr.sc. Mario Vrbančić

Komentor:

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Zadar, 2017.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It was the year 1938 – nine years after Black Tuesday[1] – when many people were dreaming of finding a way out of the Great Depression, looking for an escape route or just a brief safe-zone, where everything is just as they imagine it to be. That's when some of the more inspired and talented young men decided to step up, take a pen, some ink and a whole lot of imagination to create a new phenomenon overnight, the comic book industry - to uplift the spirits of the people shattered by the hard times and making them, as well as us in the present days, better versions of ourselves.

During the 1930s, the common man needed a social crusader, somebody who was strong enough against the powerful forces alligned against them – a superhero. That was the time when Superman rose, came to the rescue and found his way to the audience, serving as a worldwide ambassador of social justice and moral benevolence. Followed by Batman and many more, they were the heroes which gave us a way out of the real world acted like a moral life-coach.

In this paper I will try to offer some insight into how the superhero genre was created and some representatives which conquered and had a big impact on the world during and after the World War II, only in a good way, resulting in the birth of the superhero myth. What makes the superhero much more powerful than our everyday hero? Although the superhero myth was already deconstructed in many comic books and by many other criticists as well, it was best deconstructed in Alan Moore's 1986 comic book *The Watchmen.* The aim of this paper is both to define the superhero myth and its introduction to the world, as well as to see how it is presented, or in this case deconstructed, in *The Watchmen*.

[1] Wall Street Crash of October 29, 1929, start of the Great Depression

2. WHAT DESCRIBES A SUPERHERO?

When hearing the word „superhero“, people immediately associate it with Superman, Batman, Spiderman, and many other figures with the suffix -man usually added to an animal or characteristic which defines our hero. There exist many interpretations of this term and people all over the world argue and debate to find the most correct definition for the superhero. According to Peter Coogan, mission, powers and identity are the key elements which define a superhero. Mission being the individual's actions, which need to be selfless, community-oriented and in correspondence to the moral values of the society for which he, or she, fights. The character must have superhuman abilities and powers, such as the ability to fly, super strength, super speed, improved senses and so on. A superhero must also have a second identity, which sets him apart from the ordinary society, and it's consisted of a codename and a costume, both reflecting the superhero's mission and powers. The superhero's costume can also include a mask to hide their real identity, and most of them have some sort of a symbol, mostly on the chest (Superman's „S“, Batman's bat), which emphasizes the individual's identity (Coogan 90). We might consider that it is not necessary for the superhero to have a secret identity, since it would not affect his overall performance. But he needed to keep his real persona hidden in order to keep his loved ones as far away as possible from danger, which were often used as a leverage against the superhero. Although Mr. Coogan stated that a superhero must have superhuman powers, we can make an exception in Batman, who supersedes his lack of superpowers with his acrobatic fighting skill-set and equipment, which allow him to frequently accomplish and overpower extraordinary feats and enemies.

Comic-book superheroes have their roots deep in the past, with the Antic heroes, gods and semi-gods such as Achilles, Hercules and Odysseus, fighting for fame and honour thousands of years ago and serving as a role model for the following generations since then. In more recent times, „social heroes“ were introduced to the community. Robin Hood, who gave up his life as a

nobleman and decided to use his unique skills to serve the poor, would be the best example for this type of hero. Here we also have Don Diego Vega, better known as Zorro, the masked „avenger“ serving as a vindicator of the poor and repressed California 19th century society in times of Spanish colonialization.

3. SUPERHEROES AND COMIC BOOKS

Comic books have shaped the 20th century as a persistent new art media. The birth of the media is believed to be in the end of the 19th century, although some state that the old Egyptian drawings and paintings were the first type of storytelling via pictures, but it exploded and reached its peak in the 1930s and 1940s with the superhero-based comic books. By the early 1940s, more than 90% of American boys aged 7-17 years and nearly 90% of girls were reading some sort of a comic book (Foertsch 163). The fact that during the World War II every fourth magazine sent to the battlefield was a comic book indicates how big the comic books actually were. The size was practical (equally to folding the sunday paper 2 times) and the price of 10 cents was not considered as extravagant. The thematics of the comic books were present-related, so most of these superheroes were fighting against Communism, Nazism and intolerance towards the minorities in general. In order to give people new hopes and dreams, a chance for a better life, a whole new world.

3.1.SUPERMAN – THE KEYSTONE OF AMERICA

This new world started back in June, 1938 with the releasing of the most important comic book of all time, Action Comics No.1, featuring the first appearance of the Man of Steel – Superman. Created by Jerome (Jerry) Siegel and Joe Shuster, 2 young Jewish boys from Cleveland, Ohio who

were living a hard life taking beatings and constant teasing from bullies, Superman was sort of their revenge to the bullies. Siegel got the idea of a superhero from his personal experience. Namely, his father was shot in a robbery for which the perps have never been caught. That's why he created Superman, the champion, a persona which could prevent such things from happening (Kantor 4-6.min). Since then he has become the most recognizable character of our time. His symbol can be seen on clothes, vehicles, buildings, television and, of course, in comic books. And the whole world was fascinated by it. Following the state in Europe in the 1940s, the creators turned Superman into a more patriotic character. Instead of the early, quick-paced, combative and agressive Superman, he turned into an experienced, mature and law-abiding „supercop“. As time went on, he became more and more popular, which contributed to him becoming more and more powerful as well. Furthermore, in his first appearance, he could „hurdle skyscrapers, leap an eight of a mile, raise tremendous weight, run gaster than a streamline train and nothing less than a bursting shell could penetrate his skin“ (Action Comics No.1 2). In later issues his strength increased remarkably, his ultimate jumping ability turned into the ability to fly, he bacame faster to the extent that he could pierce through the surface of the Earth just by spinning around his axis. He even gained new powers such as an enhanced senses and eyesight, with x-ray and heat vision included, and a breath so cold it could easily extinguish even the biggest conflagrations. He was a true representative of the superhero myth because everything he did was heroic and for the good of the nation. He was not seeking solutions and fighting battles out of personal vendetta. That is what made him the ultimate role-model of humanity because his „secret identity“ Clark Kent was only used as means for moving normally through the city in everyday life. When he was wearing his costume, he was himself, a true protector and person to look up to. There don't exist a lot of people who have never heard the famous 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).

Superman, originally called Kal-El, coming from the planet Krypton, was sent by his parents Jor-El und Lara to planet Earth in a space capsule before his homeplanet eventually explodes. On Earth, he is found by Martha and Jonathan Kent and taken into their home as their child. It did not take long until he found out that he was not like the other kids, i.e. that he had superpowers: he could jump over skyscrapers, lift incredible ammounts of weight, run faster than a train and, to top all that, his skin was impervious to bullets. But the Kents managed to hide his powers so nobody would get frightened, followed by the words: „But when the proper time comes, you must use it to assist humanity“ (Action Comics No.1 2). This statement makes the job of the hero pretty clear, to serve mandkind. Following the death of the Kents, he acknowledges that his time has finally come.

> Clark decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind. And so was created... Superman! Champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need! (Action Comics No.1 2)

Superman's first issue gave him a busy first day at the „job“. He wasn't always the ultimate good guy that he is today. Moreover, he used some types of violence and threats to justify the inocent people. While confronting the real killer, Superman was held at gunpoint, but it all ended with the gun being crushed and a threat: „Are you ready to sign a confession? Or shall I give you a teste of how that gun felt when I applied the pressure?“ (Bridwell 29). It was just a matter of seconds until he got the confession from the killer and stormed out to wake up the governor so that he can sign the release documents for the wrongly accused killer, who was just moments away from serving his death penalty. If this was not enough, his first day at the job also included a beatdown on a wife-beater, stopping a conspiracy between a senator and a weapons manufacturer and eventually making two opposed generals make peace and end the war. Upon reading the first issues, it is obvious that Superman is acting like a true everyday hero. He has no real enemy which can cause him any trouble, so we just see him completing hard tasks and rescuing people very quickly. Even

the „fights“ against the bad guys are very short. He just comes, tells them what he needs to, beats them up and flies away as he saves another day. The 4th issue is also an interesting one. There we see Superman assume a false identity and participate in a match of american football. And nothing strange happened there, only what we could already predict, when putting Superman against regular human beings. A scene from the team's practise session shows best how stronger he was:

> The entire remaining team piles onto Superman! They've got him! But the coach is fooled – for Superman continues to dash down the field, with the entire team hanging on to him! Just before Superman reaches the goal-post, he shakes off the players - - - then crosses the line. And that - - is that! Touchdown! (Action Comics No. 4 11,12)

When comparing Superman from the first comic book issues to the Superman we know now, we can see how different they are in terms of character development. On one hand, we have a superhero who sees the world in good and bad and acts out to serve humanity in the simplest ways possible. On the other hand, the Superman we know today has a more developed story, consisting of both a girlfriend, a super-family and a worthy adversary, who puts him at least into some menacing situations. But to accomplish all of the above, you have to bend the law a bit. Superman's actions were not always in the legal zone, but his illegitimate means were seen as justified because he was doing it for the good people, the majority he tried to be a part of. He was not just the hero for the Americans, he was also the hero of the immigrants, as he was also one. Blending in the community as Clark Kent, he was an ordinary guy who wanted to be part of the world, instead of an isolated alien from another planet. We can say that he was, in a way, following his American dream too. That is probably the main reason for his popularity, since all people could relate to him and he was always there in times of trouble, especially the war.

> ..during this time, America was a nation of immigrants. People were coming from all over the world in search of “The American Dream.” Superman, as the last survivor of the doomed planet Krypton, is the ultimate immigrant. It wasn’t uncommon for children to be

> separated from their parents during this time, either in their home country or once they got to Ellis Island. This is the feeling, of both adventure and uncertainty, that Siegel and Shuster, both the sons of European immigrants, tapped into with their strange visitor from another planet. (Petty 2)

As previously stated, his merchandise was everywhere and the famous three lines „...It's a bird! It's a plane! It's SUPERMAN!“[2] were more popular in the US than, for example, the likes of Roger Federer or CR7[3] are today. From 1940 until 1951 Superman had its own radio show called *The Adventures of Superman*. It was a 15-minute story usually aired at the time the kids were coming home from school so he had a broad audience every day. Truly amazing was the fact that it did not take long before there was more audience listening to the radio than people actually reading the comics. Ultimately, he ended up appearing in TV shows and cartoons as well, but the fact that he was so overpowered and allmighty made him become boring in time. People were no longer affraid for him because they already knew that nobody can do him any harm. At that point, something needed to be done again to keep Superman „alive“ in the community.

> In 1940, Jerry Siegel wrote a script for a story about a green meteor that arrives on earth from the planet Krypton. That story was never published. However, on the episode that aired on Thursday, 3 June, 1943, Clark Kent returned from an assignment, and discovered a green meteor in the desert. Mysteriously, it took his breath away and made him faint. (Harrington)

Kryptonite, the only thing powerful enough to beat and eventually kill the allmighty Superman. If we compare him to the ancient heroes, we can see some similarities between Superman and Achilles. They were both very strong and dominant human beings, but both of them had a weak spot. For Achilles, it was the heel, while Superman was endangered by the green Kryptonite. But

[2] See P. 7
[3] Cristiano Ronaldo, portuguese professional footballer and Real Madrid striker

there was also another big difference between Superman and the heroes of the classical and nordic mythology. In *The Myth of Superman*, Umberto Eco differentieates Superman from them, since they were already consumed in some previous actions. The mythological part, i.e. the message to the reader, was taken out from the development of their stories. On the other hand, Superman is still „alive“ and functioning as a moral teacher.

> But Superman is myth on condition of being a creature immersed in everyday life, in the present, apparently tied to our own conditions of life and death even if endowed with superior faculties. An immortal Superman would no longer be a man, but a god, and the public's identification with his double identity would fall by the wayside.
>
> Superman, then, must remain "inconsumable" and at the same time be "consumed" according to the ways of everyday life. He possesses the characteristics of timeless myth, but is accepted only because his activities take place in our human and everyday world of time. The narrative paradox that Superman's script writers must resolve somehow, even without being aware of it, demands a paradoxical solution with regard to time. (Eco 4)

This problem was solved with the addition of Krpytonite to Superman's stories. And so emerged a whole new set of comic books, where the main focus was Superman's vulnerability to Kryptonite and villains stealing it in order to fail everytime when trying to erase our main hero from existence. But just because Superman was so much stronger and more powerful than any human being, people could not really relate to him. Barely surviving these dark times of the war, the world needed a protector from the shadow, a mortal, a hero without superpowers, a dark knight.

3.2.BATMAN – FROM TRAGEDY TO HERO

After Superman had gone worldwide, more and more superheroes started to appear which resulted in about two dozen companies actively taking part in the comic book industry. The most important ones were Detective Comics, known as DC or National, and Timely Comics, whish later

became one of the most successful companies in the industry, Marvel. Another important company was Fox Publications, which was a bit derivative compared to others. They were a new generation of young, mostly immigrant, artists, who presented themselves with darker comics on cheap paper, known as „the pulps“. Probably the most famous character from the pulps was The Shadow, the most prominent and most imitated figure in both pulps and comic books. His ability to blend into the darkness and disappear without a problem seemed almost out of this world (Kantor 21.min).

In Detective Comics No. 27, from May 1939, young artists Bob Kane and Bill Finger decided to step out of the shadow and presented the world their new hero – Batman. He did not possess any superhuman powers, therefore he was not technically a „superhero“. However, he had an enviable range of fighting styles, the physique of a super athlete and the detective skills of Sherlock Holmes. Throughout the comic books, Batman was on both sides of the law line, ranging from a violent gun-freak to a hero acting by a moral code.

In the 7th feature, the origin of Batman was introduced to the people. Born as Bruce Wayne, the son of Thomas and Martha Wayne, a wealthy married couple living in Gotham City, he had all the predispositions to be successful heir to the Wayne Enterprises company and their immense fortune. At the time Bruce was still young, while returning home from a visit to the theatre, the Wayne family got involved in a robbery. Unfortunately for little Bruce, both Thomas and Martha passed away in front of his innocent eyes that night. This tragic experience changed his perspectives of the world and from then on he had sworn to protect the innocent and declared war on all criminals: „And I swear by the spirit of my parents to avenge their deaths by spending the rest of my life warring on all criminals“ (Detective Comics No. 33 4). After training his body into perfect shape, becoming a master scientist and martial arts expert, the only thing missing his start in fighting crime was a costume: „Criminals are a superstitious cowardly lot, so my disguise must be able to strike terror into their hearts. I must be a creature of the night, black, terrible .. a.. a“ (Detective Comics No. 33 4). As Bruce Wayne sits in his chair, thinking about his costume and symbol of

the night, a huge bat flies through his open window and he sees it as a sign, as some kind of omen which made him the tragic hero he is today – Batman. When saying tragic hero, it must be known that his leitmotiv is vengeance, as he is being guided by his feelings when making decisions.

His tragic origin story was the inspiration for many superhero origin stories to come, because the death of a beloved person makes our heroes more motivated in seeking justice and giving the criminals what they deserve. For The Flash it was the death of his mother and the false incrimination of his father. Before becoming Spiderman, Peter Parker was the school nerd with both of his parents dead. To top that off, since he could have stopped the bank robber, we can also state that he is, in a way, responsible for the death of his uncle and everyone he seems to care about always find their way to trouble. Rorschach, the son of a prostitute, had also a tragic story in his origin which made him the man he was. However, the tragic part was just briefly applied to him. It was the story of a little girl, who was raped, killed and later fed to the dogs. After realizing that, he kills the dogs and eventually burns the rapist alive, leading to the „birth“ of Rorschach.

The different types of Batman mentioned previously can be best highlighted when comparing the latest Batman movies. For one instance, we have Cristopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* Trilogy, where Christian Bale portrays how Bruce Wayne became the Batman, his struggles and early days of fighting crime. Nolan's Batman was never crossing the law line, as he was living by the „superhero code“, which said that they shall not intend to kill anyone who does not deserve it or ask for it by attacking. On the other hand, Ben Affleck portrayed a different type of Batman in Zack Snyder's *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. As he is also physically bigger than Bale (1,92m v 1,83m) and his Batman is a more experienced crime fighter in a completely different setting, he tends to be more aggressive and direct in combat than his predecesor. He does not have any problems with using weapons as well. But both of them share the same thing. Namely, they have no superpowers, but they compansate this deficiency with their perfect physical condition, their extraordinary mind

and high tech gadgets. Their motivation is to seek vengeance and fight crime and they both have a secret, cool hideout, the Batcave, home of the famous Batmobile and many more.

So in the time span of 2 years, we had two completely opposed superheroes. On one side there was the allmighty Superman with his superpowers, supervision, superspeed and almost no vulnerable spot, unless he is faced against a weapon made of Kryptonite. With his colouful suit, painted in bits of red, blue and yellow, Superman was a symbol of the American Dream, standing out for the immigrants and showing them that there is hope for a better life, being their guiding light. On the other side, there is Batman, a mortal hero without any superpowers, representing the dark sides of that same dream. In contrast to Superman's, his black-grey-yellow costume was seen as a threat by every culprit in Gotham City.

With Batman becoming more and more popular, he needed a worthy adversary, an opponent which is crazy enough to set his face against him. That's when Jerry Robinson, Bob Kane's assistant, came up with the first super villain in comics. And so The Joker, a fearless clown, took the role of the local maniac with a strange sense of humour. His job was always to intimidate Batman, and he was so crazy that he would have no problem in dying, as long as it is by the hands of the „bat“. He got so under Bruce's skin, that he would not kill him under any circumstances, because the fact that he would break his moral code over some maniac clown would haunt him forever. Also the idea of Batman killing somebody would destroy the superhero myth which he represented throughout the years.

4. POST-WAR SUPERHEROES

In the spring of 1941, nine months before the United States entered World War II, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, two Jewish boys, created the ultimate patriotic superhero – Captain America.

> 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)

A patriotic, young American, named Steve Rogers volunteers for a dangerous army experiment. All he wanted was to join the army, but unfortunately for him, he was too skinny. Getting injected with a strange liquid made him turn into a real soldier. He grew in height, muscle mass and strength and America's newest super-soldier was born. However, the ultimate hit-breaker was the cover of the first issue of *Captain America Comics*. On it, the super-soldier is portrayed throwing a hard right hook directly into the face of Hitler, the super-villain in the real world at that time. The artist Jack Kirby had a very broad imagination and they were using a technique called "heavy brush", creating a lot of movement and unmatched action, and, practically, blowing up the pages with flying figures (Kantor 37.min).

After the war had finally come to an end, the real heroes returned home and the need for patriotic superheroes decreased. Captain America had served his time and was ready for military pension. As a result, superheroes started to scale down on the popularity list and the Golden Age of comic books was coming to an end.

In the 1950s, Detective Comics started to publish re-examined editions of their 1940s superhero characters. The Flash, known as the fastest man on earth, was one of them. In the following decade it was Marvel who stepped up with their new set characters, introducing the likes of Spider-Man, the Hulk, Thor, Iron Man and the famous team of mutants, the X-Men. These comic books were not just fast-paced-action-fighting stories, the new set of superheroes had more complex personalities, which were exhibited throughout the stories in the Silver Age of comic books.

The 1970s turned comic books towards a more politically oriented stories and superheroes were dealing with social issues like drugs, poverty or racism. These story subjects were replaced by titles driven by more sophisticated characters with discerning moral standards, such as Marvel's *The Uncanny X-Men* (Chris Claremont, John Byrne) and DC's *The New Teen Titans* (Marv Wolfman, George Pérez). Another popular aspect of the Bronze Age of comic books is the rise of the anti-hero. The appearances of the Punisher, Ghost Rider and, in 1982, Daredevil made the term anti-hero, who uses his own personal interests instead of morality to act. But because he is the (anti)hero of the story, although for the wrong reasons, he ends up doing the right thing.

The 1980s, also known as the Dark Age of comics, got his name not because the comic book genre disappeared, but because the comics started to approach more serious subjects and content. One notable instance of these darker, deconstructive works is *The Dark Knight Returns*, written by Frank Miller in 1986. It tells the story of Bruce Wayne, who at the age of 55 returns from retirement to fight crime. "This has definitely been a period of booms and busts for comics. Black and white comics were on fire in the early 1980s, led by the unlikely success of such garage-projects as TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES" (Petty 8). British artist came to America during that time to make their mark in the comic book history. The writer Alan Moore, with the help of the artist Dave Gibbons and colourist John Higgins, created a comic book that was both popularly and critically acclaimed, which deconstructed the superhero myth and brought new characters into the light, one of the most revolutionary works of the decade – the Watchmen.

5. WATCHMEN – A DECONSTRUCTING SATIRE OF THE SUPERHERO GENRE

Previously we learned that the superhero genre is known for dealing with issues of morality, social justice and characters, who serve as role-models to the society. On the other hand, „Alan Moore's *Watchmen* series challenged the idea of traditional superhero stereotypes through its deep

literary narrative, morally conflicted characters, and reoccurring symbols“ (Rapp 1). Set in an alternate reality, when the the United States and the Soviet Union are on the verge of World War III, the Watchmen are a group of retired vigilantes and crime-fighters, who are set against a new challenge when one of them, Edward Blake aka The Comedian, was killed. The story was published in 12 issues and follows the second generation of the *Minutemen* superhero-vigilante team. Apart from the Comedian, whose faith we already know, the team consists of Dr. Manhattan, Ozymandias, Nite Owl, Silk Spectre and Rorschach, the latter being the narrator of the story depicted as his journal.

As the body of Edward Blake was found, the police investigate the crime without success. Knowing that all the Watchmen except Rorschach are either retired or working for the government controlled by the Keene Act, which made any form of vigilante activity, unless issued by the government, by costumed adventurers illegal, they do not want to spread the word of a suspicious murder case. „He's crazier than a snake's armpit and wanted on two counts murder one. We got a cozy little homicide here. If he gets involved, we'll be up to our butts in corpses..“ (Moore No. 1 4).

Being an excellent detective, Rorschach figured out that Edward Blake was actually The Comedian and went on to warn his colleagues that somebody or someone is targeting masked vigilantes. After Dr. Manhattan was accused of being the cause for cancer to many people and his relationship with Laurie Juspeczyk, the Silk Spectre, came to an end, he decided to exile himself from planet Earth because he possesses all the powers that anyone can imagine, yet in Silk Spectre he lost his last connection to humanity. But because he was the best weapon of the United States against the Soviet Union, things started to get tense between the two warring sides since Dr. Manhattan's departure. Nite Owl and Rorschach are doing detective work in uncovering the murder of The Comedian and the accusation which led to the exiling of Dr. Manhattan. They find out that Ozymandias might be the brains behind all of that. They confront him and he admits to everything,

stating that he killed The Comedian in order to stop him from interfering in his big plan, which was to unite the world. But by doing this, he planned to wipe out half of New York City and make it seem like Dr. Manhattan did it. Since he was on Mars, people would find it easy to believe that there is a greater force, a bigger power, a god-like creature which actually exist that can destroy them. Unlike our God, Dr. Manhattan and his powers are know to the public, and Ozymandias planned to use their fear of the possibilities that Dr. Manhattan has to eventually successfully carry out his plan – to unite the United States and Soviet Union against a common enemy. Seing that the world is actually getting better, all of the remaining *Watchmen*, except Rorschach, agree to cover up Ozymandias' truth to keep the world at peace. Rorschach wanted to expose Veidt (Ozymandias) to the public, but Dr. Manhattan went on to stop him, resulting in Rorschach getting erased from existence. As they return to the devastated New York City, our heroes adjust to a new lifestyle. The comic book ends with an editor searching for materials for a coulmn about Russia due to their new „political friendship“ with the United States. This leads to the editor's assistant going through the „crank file“, a collection of rejected submissions yet to be reviewed, and finding Rorschach's journal. The comic book ends just in the way it begins – a smiley face with a red strain on it. However, at the beginning it was the blood of the Comedian on his smiley badge, while at the end it was just ketchup which fell from a burger onto the T-shirt of the young assisstant, which also had a smiley face on it (Moore issues 1-12).

Keeping in mind what we previously stated about what being a superhero means, we can see that the only one who possessed any superhuman powers was in fact Dr. Manhattan. To analyze the characters, we will use the method of deconstruction, which was introduced by Jacques Derrida.

> In *Of Grammatology*, he argues that all texts (whether in written language or in other signifying forms) if read carefully enough can be shown to provide, often unwittingly, the resources for their own critique (Payne, 4).

As our language is structured as a differential system, he started with De Saussure's structural linguistics, which gives a lexical item, the sign, a meaning by its difference to other signs. Derrida applied this to the structure of binary opposites so, when comparing, e.g. black and white, we say that black is black because it is not white. In general, a topic is described using contrary terms (Payne 75). Essentially, deconstruction is the analytical approach to a text by breaking it down to pieces in order to discover its true meaning and significance, which is hardly detectable on first sight.

We can apply the deconstruction method to *The Watchmen* by analizing the characters, because by giving every of our masked vigilantes certain powers and abilities, Moore also gave critique to the whole genre of superheroes and the superhero myth. But, what is a myth? In the dictionary, myth is described as „a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events“ (Oxford). When talking about myths, most of us would share the first thought that comes to mind, which would probably be the myths of the Greek and Roman times. They also told stories about men and women with superhuman powers, battling evil creatures to save lives, or sometimes just to test their power, the ultimate key being in the moral lessons to the readers. According to Barthes, myth is a type of speech. This means that it is not just a type of story genre, but it is concerned with saying something, a system of communication, a message. The myth presents an ideology, a set of values by expressing the intentions of the teller rather than describing the natural state of the world. It is based on human history and its message depends on the context where it exists. Its function is to deviate the ideology from reality by naturalizing a belief and particular worldviews. Barthes said that anything can become a myth, thus superhero stories are so as well because they teach us laws, morality, important values and rights in our society (Barthes 217). So, how is the superhero myth destroyed in *The Watchmen*? To answer this question, we must first analyze our heroes.

By deconstructing Dr. Manhattan (Jon Osterman), we get a a binary opposition between human and God. Although he had all the powers in the world, although he could see the past, present and the future at the same time (so he must have known about Ozymandias' secret plan), he did nothing to stop the killings. Maybe he thought it was a justifiable way of preserving world peace after all. His power was so immense he stopped caring about humanity. This can be seen in a conversation with Rorschach about the murder of The Comedian, where Dr. Manhattan shows that he is already retracting from humanity:

> A live body and a dead body contain the same number of particles. Structurally, there's no discernible difference. Life and death are unquantifiable abstracts. Why should I be concerned? (Moore No.1 21).

With his set of abilities, he may be seen as deconstructing Superman, but the fact that his powers alienate and isolate him from humanity make him unlike any stereotypical superhero character.

Also with the power to help people, starting as a superhero and ending as a super-villain, Ozymandias (Adrian Veidt) uses brutal methods to achieve world peace. He is the smartest man in the world who, after the Keene Act, had stopped being a superhero and gone public as a successful businessperson. He concieved a murederous plan to kill millions of people for the ultimate world peace. The trick was to make the two opposing forces, the United States and the Soviet Union, come to peace by uniting them against a common enemy. He killed or framed other superheroes so they could not intervene with his plan and used the fact that Dr. Manhattan had exiled himself to Mars to turn him into the common enemy, a force which can destroy everything in a second. That is the thing that made his plan „successful". The warring nations made peace because they figured out that there was no need to fight amongs eachother because everything can be wiped off in a second, so it would be best to enjoy and use our life's advantages to its fullest.

He thought that just because he was smarter than everyone, he had the right to change the society in a way he wanted it to be.

The most beloved charater by the audience, yet not so popular in his gang and universe as well, is definitely Rorschach. Known as Walter Kovacs, he suffers a tragic backstory which made him turn into a vigilante he is known as today. Although the story itself is not similar, the fact that a tragic backstory turned him into a crime fighter makes him similar to Bruce Wayne, excluding the wealth and fancy equipment of course. Despite being unlikeable on first sight, conservative and paranoid, he is the most relatable and most developed character in the series. He sees the world as it really is, but in a black-and-white sense, differentiating only main binary oppositions, the good and evil. His moral sense and the fact that he sees everything in black and white, good and bad, is best described in his inner monologue about the murder of The Comedian

> On Friday night, a comedian died in New York. Someone threw him out of a window and when he hit the sidewalk his head was driven up into his stomach. Nobody cares. Nobody cares but me. Are they right? Is it futile? Soon there will be war. Millions will perish in sickness and misery. Why does one death matter against so many? Because there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished. Even in the face of armageddon I shall not compromise in this. But there are so many deserving of retribution.. and there is so little time. (Moore No. 1 24)

However, most of us would question his „good“, as he uses brutal methods to achieve and fight for it. He is deconstructing the superhero genre because he uses physical violence to implement the „law“ while, at the same time, being wanted by the law enforcers. Because of that, he is seen as disturbing and psychotic, unliked by the community and not our typical superhero role-model of a society. He did not want to put up with Ozymandias' plan, in fact he wanted to expose it. But

because this could harm the international peace created, we can imply that his strong sense of morality eventually cost him his life.

The comic book genre, especially the superhero genre, uses the superhero myth to convey secret messages, moral rights and values hidden in the form of the plot. Probably the best example for that would be Superman, whose origin story (father sends his only son to planet Earth, he was taken up by a kindly family, blessed with abilities and powers, grows up to be a role-model for humanity) almost sounds like an ancient myth. While Superman represents the ideal image of mankind, Batman's approach to the audience lies in his human side. Moreover, although he does not possess superhuman powers, his abilities and accomplishments send us a message that nothing is impossible, even for a human being. Superheroes, who represent virtue, courage, intelligence, morality, the greater good and all the best in humanity, are set against the villain, the representative of the category bad, worse, and ugly. And that is the main leitmotiv through which the superhero myth is presented to the audience. In the ultimate final battle the good always struggles, but manages to overpower the evil. The reader absorbs the victory of the good as a guide to life, because the good always wins and if we want to be successful, we have to achieve it by ourselves by doing good and avoiding the dark side. Moore broke the myth and deconstructed the hero by creating a story without a real supervillain, or in this case, a villain. According to Richard Reynolds, because there is no real supervillain, the Watchmen have to confront „more intangible social and moral concerns“ (Reynolds 115), which removes the superhero concept from what we normally expect of the genre, which is a clash of good and evil. As mentioned before, superheroes tend to have dual identities or secret identies. For Bruce Wayne it was Batman, Superman, or Jor-El, was disguised as Clark Kent, Peter Parker is Spiderman, and so on. Rorschach was following that „rule“ to the point that he did not recognize himself as Walter Kovacs anymore. In fact, Walter Kovacs was, accoring to him, Rorschachs disguise in the real world. Reaching to his clothes,

Rorschach states: „Putting them on, I abandoned my disguise and became myself, free from fear or weakness or lust. My coat, my shoes, my spot-less gloves. My face.“ (Moore No.5 18).

Moore deconstructs the superhero identity and costume by making Rorschach adopt the vigilante persona as his true self and only function normally when he puts on his clothes and the black-and-white mask, inspired by the Rorschach test[4], to embrace the black-and-white world – just the way he likes it. By taking his sense of morality combined with detective and fighting skills, minus the violence and judgment of the law enforcement, and adding the money, technology, gadgets and the secret lair of Nite Owl, it becomes obvious to which superhero archetype I am referencing. Moore practically took Batman and split him into two separate characters, with one being his calmer, human version (Bruce Wayne) in the form of Nite Owl, and the other representing the brutal version of the master detective (Batman) without his one rule, which is not to kill, in the form of Rorschach.

[4] The Rorschach test, named after its creator Hermann Rorschach, is a psychological test in which subjects' perceptions of inkblots are recorded and analyzed to examine their emotional state and personality characteristics.

6. CONCLUSION

Since the release of *Action Comics No.1* in June 1938, superheroes offered comfort to the people and an escape from the terrors happening around them. But what defines a superhero? Apart from great physical shape, courage, strength and immense power, a superhero must hide his true self to protect the people he cares about with a secret identity, a costume matching his personality or abilities and top it off with either a cape or a mask, or both. The most popular was, of course, Superman, who embodies the values, hopes and dreames of humanity, although being an alien with superpowers from another planet. One year later, a superhero without superpowers emerged from the dark, Batman. Suffering from a tragic backstory, he got the simpathy of the more emotional readers almost from the start, and owning all these gadgets, cars and cool equipment made him a hit to the „nerd community". At first, Batman was portrayed, like Superman, in a very simple way, emphasizing the contrast between black and white, i.e. evil and good. He was a violent superhero who even carried a gun, but later the creators turned him into a more exemplary character by removing his gun and decreasing his level of aggression. Combining all of the above with the fact that he did not possess any supernatural powers made him more relatable to the community because, in contrast to Superman, he was a regular human being of flesh and bone, which earned him compassion from the audience. Also, by taking away his gun, the creators made Batman more vulnerable than the Man of Steel, resulting in an even bigger rise in popularity, i.e. as the audience expanded, so did the superhero myth. Since then, the comic book industry was booming and more and more superheroes stormed the world in no time.

This popular entertainment media was used to promote the greater good. Here we come across the term Superhero myth. According to Barthes, a myth is a type of speech, which is not only concerned with the story, but highlights the message hidden behind it. Although myths are nowadays considered as stories that are believed to have happened in the past, superhero comic books, and especially the current DC and Marvel movies, tend to attract the younger generations

much more than old books, and because they teach us laws, values and morality, we can consider them a myth.

In September 1986, to deconstruct this statement, Alan Moore, with the help of Dave Gibbons and John Higgins, introduced *The Watchmen* to the public, a comic book published in 12 issues. Looking back on what superheroes represented until the group of retired vigilantes came out, it is clear that Moore deconstructs the ideology of the perfect supehero by presenting us regular people with no exceptional powers, except Dr. Manhattan who gained his by the aftermath of an accident, who were once vigilantes and crime fighters. The comic shows that heroes are just people with the same flaws most of us have. Taking the city under their guard, they used brutal methods to fight for what they believe is right. But this opens up some questions like „Who decides where the line of morality is? What would happen if they got out of control? Who would protect the people from them? Who watches the Watchmen?“ and so on.

To sum up, *The Watchmen* is a comic book which got as close to reality as possible. It shows how regular superheroes function among the society and opens up more questions than it provides anwers. After the analysis of the comic book and researches, my opinion would be that it is both a superhero myth and a deconstruction of it. Using the deconstruction method to characterize Dr. Manhattan, Ozymandias and Rorschach it is clear that they are nothing like the typical characters in the superhero universe and, since there is no real villain, they do not have the same roles in society. But although they are not perfect archetype superheroes, in fact they are not even considered „super“ because of their lack of powers, the plot opens up an intriguing question when it comes to morality and humanity. If you knew something terrible was about to happen, would you sacrifice millions to save billions? And that's the most important feature of this – to critique and deconstruct the superhero myth and perfectionism of superheroes in comic books in the form of a comic book.

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7. ABSTRACT

Deconstructing the superhero myth in Alan Moore's The Watchmen

During the times of the Great Depression, especially with the start of World War II, the comic book industry experienced a big rise in popularity. Serving as a way out from all the disasters happening in the world, comic books offered comfort and hope to mankind in times of trouble. Because of their vast popularity, the superhero myth was created in order to make some general use of this new media rather than just see it as an entertainment form. Action-packed and interesting stories at first, moral coaches on second glance. Two major superheroes can be put in contrast when talking about the superhero myth. On one side there is Superman, who embodies the ideals of humanity, possesses superhuman powers and teaches us moral values. On the other side there is Batman, a regular, powerless human being, who uses his inner and outer strength to overpower astonishing tasks in order to show us that with enough willpower and dedication, we are also capable of exceeding our limits. All these characteristics of the superhero myth were best deconstructed, or broken down in pieces, in Alan Moore's *The Watchmen*. By using regular people as hero-protagonists, omitting the main supervillain and placing the plot in the real world, Moore managed to make a comic book which both follows and critiques the guidelines of the superhero myth at the same time.

Key words: *superhero myth, Superman, Batman, The Watchmen, deconstruction*

8. SAŽETAK

Dekonstrukcija mita o superheroju u djelu Alana Moorea The Watchmen

Za vrijeme trajanja Velike depresije, doživjevši vrhunac u Drugom svjetskom ratu, industrija stripova doživjela je veliki rast popularnosti. Služeći kao svojevrsni izlaz iz katastrofa koje se događaju u svijetu, stripovi su ponudili utjehu i nadu čovječanstvu u teškim vremenima. Umjesto da se stripovi smatraju samo kao štivo za zabavu i razonodu, iskoristila se njihova iznimna popularnost i nastao je mit o superheroju. Na prvi pogled to su zanimljive priče pune akcije, no na drugi pogled postaju moralni treneri. Kada pričamo o mitu o superheroju, možemo usporediti dva glavna heroja. S jedne strane imamo Supermana, koji predstavlja ideale čovječanstva, posjeduje nadljudske moći i uči nas moralnim vrijednostima. Na drugoj strani je Batman, običan čovjek bez nadljudskih sposobnosti, koji koristi svoju unutarnju i vanjsku snagu da savlada nevjerojatne zadatke da bi nam ukazao da smo i mi, uz dovoljno volje i ustrajnosti, u mogućnosti nadmašiti svoje vlastite mogućnosti. Sve te odlike mita o superheroju najbolje je dekonstruirao, tj. rastavio na proste dijelove, Alan Moore u svom stripu The Watchmen. Koristio je obične ljude kao heroje-protagoniste, izbacio klasičnog antagonista i postavio radnju u stvaran svijet. Time je uspio napraviti strip koji istovremeno prati i kritizira smjernice mita o superheroju.

Ključne riječi: *mit o superheroju, Superman, Batman, The Watchmen, dekonstrukcija*