

# Superhero deconstruction on the example of the TV series The Boys

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**Paula Smolić**

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Superhero deconstruction on the example of the TV series The Boys

Završni rad

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Zadar, 2023.



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Zadar, 21. rujna 2023.

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# 1. Introduction

When discussing superheroes, the first names that come to our minds are probably Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Captain America, etc. But how do we know that they are superheroes? What exactly makes a superhero a superhero and how do we differentiate them from antiheroes or villains? Having been recently popularized through movie franchises and TV shows, superheroes act as role models for the young: “In the last 17 years superhero culture becoming more popular since the emergence of the superhero movie and TV series adaptation. Until 2017 there is more than 70 movies and TV series adaptations, and all of these adaptations make more than 24 billion US Dollars worldwide.” (Victor Adiluhung Abednego and Yudhistya Ayu Kusumawati 971). The importance of that can be seen in research conducted by Abednego and Kusumawati in Indonesia through which they concluded that children come in contact with superheroes through media and merchandise at an early age, that is important because they also claim that children observe the world around them and tend to imitate the behaviour they see on TV or another media. In this paper, the plot and the characters of the TV show *The Boys* will be analyzed by using the method of deconstruction.

The object of analysis will be a TV show from 2019. called *The Boys*, developed by Eric Kripke, which is based on a comic book series of the same name, written by Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson. That specific show is very popular at the moment which is one of the reasons it is chosen for this analysis. Another reason it was chosen is because it depicts the powerless regular humans against the super-powerful “heroes” who abuse their power and are owned by big corporations.

## 2. Deconstruction

The analysis will rely on *deconstruction*. A term coined by Derrida who argues that “when we read a sign, meaning is not immediately clear to us... Meaning is continually moving along on a chain of signifiers, and we cannot be precise about its exact location, because it is never tied to one particular sign” (Madan Sarup 33). It is a specific approach to reading and finding out what a text means. “The function of deconstructionism was to show how a critic decoded text by questioning the non-judgmental character of dichotomies which were faced with like legitimate or illegitimate, good and bad, etc. A gesture, a book, and a text could also be decoded, with this the primary conception of text was widened” (Ahmed Marghoob 77). Deconstruction will be the main process in analyzing the regular people without powers in the TV show *The Boys* who take the role of heroes in a way and the alleged superheroes who abuse their power.

According to Charles E. Bressler, deconstruction is closely related to postmodern thinking. For Derrida and other postmodernists, there is no such thing as “objective reality.” For them, all definitions and interpretations of truth are subjective, just designs of human minds. Truth itself is not constant and depends on the nature and type of cultural and social impacts on one’s life (88). Furthermore, Christopher Butler says that the main argument for deconstruction is dependent on relativism, which suggests that the truth itself is always relative to the differing standpoints and predisposing intellectual frameworks of the subject in question (16).

“Postmodernism is concerned with non-linear expressive and separational discourses that have been marginalized and atrophied under the influence of enlightenment” (O’Donnell 6). According to Stanley J. Grenz, Enlightenment optimism along with a focus on reason accentuates human freedom. All the beliefs based on some external authorities rather than reason and experience are put into question (4).

“Deconstruction focuses on suppressed conflicts and multiple interpretations of a text in order to undermine all claims to objective truth. The number of possible interpretations of a text is endless. A deconstruction offers a purposeful selection of some of these interpretations, but it does not and cannot claim to represent the objective truth about which

interpretation is correct or what the author intended to say” (Martin 340). “Deconstruction is not a defined method or a systematic programme, but a way of reading a text that shows its influences and its slippages, little details passed over or missed out that suggest other views and possible interpretations” (O’Donnell 58). For Derrida, deconstruction is a good thing because it allows new things to be created and new meanings to be reached (O’Donnell 58).

In accordance with the explanations above, by watching *The Boys* and going beyond the surface of the plot, numerous hidden meanings appear and it can be understood that the TV show is not nearly as unserious as it seems at first glance.

## 2.1. Sign theory

Ferdinand de Saussure helped change the course of linguistics. Due to his model of linguistic sign, linguists stopped using diachronic comparative (historical) linguistics and instead started using a synchronic (ahistorical) approach to language. An important aspect of this Saussurean model is the fact that it is semiotic; in other words, it is not based on seeing the word as a name and a thing, but as a tool that makes meaning and unifies a sound image and a concept. “Ferdinand de Saussure conceptualised language as a system of signs. The linguistic sign is a tool for making meaning (or encoding concepts) that unites a sound-image and a concept. For example, the sound image [kæt] forms an integral part of the concept ‘cat’ (a mental representation of an animal of certain characteristics). The sound image is referred to as the “signifier” and the concept as the “signified”. The relationship between the signifier and signified is conventional rather than intrinsic. In other words, it is arbitrary, based on social conventions. In addition, being arbitrary, the relationship between the signifier and signified is dynamic and can change or develop over time” (Reda 91).

## 2.2. Prototype theory

“Prototype Theory concerns itself with the internal structure of such areas, demonstrating that related concept form a radially structured category in which members are considered to be more or less prototypical relative to an exemplar” (Reda 91). Rosch found that, in the category of birds, “some types of birds (e.g. robins and eagles) are considered as ‘birdier’ than other birds (e.g. ducks, peacocks, ostriches, penguins), depending on the degree of their representativity of the central characteristics of ‘birdiness’ (flying, perching in trees,



etc.). This finding suggests that the linguistic signs as groups of related words are understood against the background of a larger, or more schematic, knowledge structure” (qtd. in Reda 91-92).

Robert Jewett and John Shelton describe a prototype superhero story as a situation when a community is in a peaceful heaven-like place and threatened by evil: regular corporations fail to deal with this threat: an unselfish superhero emerges to reject the temptations and finish the task of redemption: aided by destiny, his determining win reestablishes the community to its paradisaical conditions: then the superhero goes back into anonymity (308).

When we think about superhero prototypes, the first ones that probably come to our minds are Superman, Spiderman or Batman. All of them are strong men with an even stronger moral code and a no-kill policy. Superman and Spiderman have superpowers and Batman compensates the lack of them with money and gadgets. Again, when talking about superhero prototypes, we will hardly think of, for example, The Punisher because he is not superpowered and he kills people. With that in mind, heroes from the TV show *The Boys* cannot be classified as prototypes of superheroes because almost all of them kill innocent people and have no interest in helping people.

### 2.3. Myth

“Roland Barthes was a key player in the French school structuralism semiotics. He developed his approach in denotation and connotation in relation to photographic images as a system of signs, Barthes also claimed that the semiology analysis can be applied to modes other than language. According to him, the image has two layers: of what and how it is represented. He clearly describes that denotation is concrete while connotation is a more complex and abstract concept” (Emir Abd-el-Kader 1001). Also, “According to Barthes, the image is related to the aesthetic and ideological factors that are opened to readings and interpretations at the connotative level in order to explain how meaning is created through complex semiotic interaction. Thus, semiotics in media studies uses a wide variety of texts including: images, adverts, and films to provide the recipients with knowledge they need to have the ability to analyze and produce meaningful texts and designs in the future. From this perspective, Barthes suggests the death of the author /the creator of the text to witness the

birth of the recipient allowing him to interpret, read, and produce a wide range of meanings which are a form of semiotic production that is oriented to observation and analysis of media messages and discourses in order to open the senses of the semiological researcher to the complexity of semiotic interpretation and new methods of using signs within the social and cultural context in media” (1001).

“*Mythologies* is a collection of short essays on a wide range of subjects drawn from everyday French life: advertisements, national pastimes, marketing of soap-operas and detergents, the world of wrestling and many others” (Gomez 10-11). Gomez also wrote that, for Barthes, myths present the misconceptions of everyday life. He sees them as messages, practices and beliefs that we see certain parts of our life as normal without realizing that they represent the interests of the majority of social groups in power. He also sees myths as messages emptied of every context and relevant information, leaving out only the image (a concept) which is then made part of a specific ideology (11).

“The masks, uniforms, miraculous powers, and secret alter egos combine with sexual renunciation and segmentation to complete the formation of the monomythic hero... The monomythic hero is distinguished by disguised origins, pure motivations, a redemptive task and extraordinary powers” (Lawrence and Jewett 43, 47). Heroes from Vaught do not conceal their identities and do not abstain from sex. Moreover, their intentions are not pure and their tasks are not redemptive as we will see in the character deconstruction.

### **3. Brief development of the comic book industry and defining a superhero**

The comic book industry started developing in the 1930s. Paul Lopes calls the era from the mid-1930s to 1970s “The industrial age of comic books” and claims that it was a period of extreme inventiveness and risk-taking. The first modern comic book was put on sale in 1934., but it became extremely popularised in 1938. with the release of *Superman*. There was a boom in the industry in the 1940s which was characterized by a rise in sales followed by higher production rates. Lopes also writes that after the success of comic books, they started being thought of as the cause of juvenile delinquency, and censorship was introduced. Therefore, a movement against comic books was happening across the country. Comic code was introduced

in order to implement ethical regulation into comic books and it worked. After the crisis, the superhero genre was reinvented and started dominating the comic book field.

In the late 1960s, a movement emerged under the name of *underground comix*. Its goal was to make comic books a serious art form and the author's way of expressing themselves instead of just writing what was most popular at the time. Underground artists managed to find publishers, but they had to sell the comics through mail-order catalogues or alternative stores such as record stores due to the violent, sexual and drug-related content. Comic books from that movement were very often misogynistic so there were multiple women publicly criticizing it. However, it achieved great success, in 1973. The movement started crashing due to the pressure from the government censorship. Many artists, publishers, and sellers were arrested.

Following the industrial age, the period from the 1980s is called the Heroic Age of comic books, during that time, the demand for comic books was high and the market was expanding quickly. According to Paul Lopes, "The 1980s to the present has been a heroic age in comic books because artists, publishers, and fans have fought heroically against the possible disappearance of the comic book" (XV). They had to fight for the survival of the comic book industry because the comic book was given very low regard. Also, during that period, new genres were created and certain marginalized social groups started being included in comic books, such as gays, women, and minorities. Comics started being less child-friendly and more oriented towards men. All of that made comic books more respected and with more complex storylines. Furthermore, during this time, superhero comic books started massively being made into movies and TV shows and achieving great success. Fans began establishing their own clubs to preserve the history of their favorite characters. The market entered a "boom" period in the late 1980s but then was hit by a recession in the 1990s so it collapsed. Some alternative rebels appeared again trying to get more literary appreciation for comic books. In the 1990s Superheroes invaded Hollywood like never before and San Diego Comic-Con became a national media event. Also, the web turned out to have a big role in expanding the market and connecting the fans through online shops and chats.

The character of Superman was first introduced in 1938. in Action Comics #1 and it achieved great success according to Lopes. After Superman, the superheroes that followed were Batman, Robin, Wonder Woman, Human Torch, and others. The success of those superhero comic books was so big that there were animated shows and radio programs created about them. Peter Coogan mentions Spring-Heeled Jack, Hugo Hercules, Popeye, Hugo

Danner, and The Phantom as the predecessors of modern-day superheroes. Coogan also mentions the metaphor role superheroes have in America: “Superheroes enforce their own visions of right and wrong on others, and they possess overwhelming power, especially in relation to ordinary crooks” (Coogan 231). He connects that to the usage of power that is unique to America and its position in the world during the Cold War.

In order to understand the following analysis, fundamental background information on the notion of superheroes and supervillains has to be given.

Coogan defines a superhero as “a heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers, extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero) with a prosocial and selfless mission” (31-32). Coogan also divides supervillains into five categories: the monster, the enemy commander, the mad scientist, the criminal mastermind, and the inverted superhero supervillain. The monster has some sort of a beast form or is a human without any morals and is missing a soul, for example, a vampire. The enemy commander has some political power and a state behind him, for instance, Doctor Doom. The mad scientist is usually a wizard of some kind or a pure human who uses some unorthodox methods in his work. Lex Luthor is an example of one. The criminal mastermind refers to a human without superpowers who lacks morality and consciousness and often suffers from some psychological illness. Examples of criminal masterminds are Riddler and Joker. Inverted superhero supervillains present direct opponents to superheroes because they often have superpowers and costumes (61-74). There are many of them in Marvel, such as Hawkeye, Black Widow, and Scarlet Witch who all transformed from being villains to being heroes. Some defining elements of a superhero are, according to Coogan, superpowers, a codename connected to a secret identity and a costume. At the same time, the three elements defining the genre are power, mission and identity. A superhero does not have to have all the elements in order to be declared a superhero.

## 4. The boys

### 4.1 Setting

*The Boys* takes place in a world in which superpowered people are thought of as heroes by the general public and they are under the ownership of a powerful corporation called Vought International, which markets them and makes money of them. When they are out of the public eye, most are egotistical and corrupt. The series mostly focuses on two groups: the Seven, Vought International's team of superheroes and the Boys, vigilantes who are trying to keep the so-called heroes under control. The Boys are led by Billy Butcher, who hates all superpowered people because his wife presumably committed suicide due to the harassment she endured from Homelander, the leader of The Seven while working for Vought. Other members of The Boys are Hughie, whose girlfriend has been ran over by a member of the Seven, MM (Mother's Milk) and Frenchie who is an expert at killing supes. Along with Homelander, The Seven consists of The Deep, A-train, Translucent, Black Noir, Queen Maeve, and Starlight who is the easiest character to root for: "Unlike the other superheroes she works with who are only good and inspirational when the cameras are on them, Starlight wants to be a hero to the public" (Colin McCormick).

### 3.2. Plot overview

In season 1, Hughie Campbell joins the vigilante team, the Boys to get revenge against the Seven after his girlfriend gets accidentally murdered by A-Train. Meanwhile, Starlight joins the Seven without being aware of their true nature. Mysterious <sup>1</sup>supe Kimiko joins the Boys as they attempt to stop Vought from getting government support for their superheroes by bringing the company's secrets to light. Homelander finds out that he has a son with Butcher's wife Becca. Hughie and Annie eventually begin a romantic relationship. At the end of the season, Butcher is framed for the murder of Madelyn Stillwill, the boss of The Seven, by Homelander and the boys escape prison.

In season 2, while hiding, Hughie, Frenchie, Mother's Milk, and Kimiko try to adapt to a new situation (being wanted fugitives) while having no idea about the Butcher's whereabouts.

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<sup>1</sup> Supe: Short for superhumans or "super-abled" in the "The Boys" comics & TV series; most of whom were created using a substance known as Compound-V ("Urban Dictionary").

Meanwhile, Starlight must navigate her spot in The Seven as Homelander wants to completely take control of the team. She also starts helping The Boys. Homelanders' power is threatened with the arrival of Stormfront, a new member of The Seven, who has an agenda of her own. On top of that, the Supervillain threat becomes the centre of attention as Vought tries to capitalize on the nation's fear.

In season 3, everything seems to be calmer. Homelander is subdued. Billy Butcher is working for the government on subduing rouge heroes and is supervised by Hughie. But both men can barely wait to return to fighting against superheroes. Later, when The Boys learn about a mysterious Anti-Supe weapon, it sends them chasing the legendary story of the first Superhero: Soldier Boy in hopes that the weapon that killed him, will be able to kill Homelander. Both Starlight and Queen Maeve help them. Season three ends with Butcher on death's door due to his usage of compound V, Maeve without her powers and Soldier Boy in federal custody.

### 3.3. Deconstruction of The Boys

As written by Martin, one method of deconstruction is finding a dichotomy and proving it to be a false distinction. So, categories that appeared to be mutually exclusive opposites are uncovered to be extremely interconnected (342). In this case, those two categories are definitions of a hero and a villain. Lines between antagonists and protagonists in *The Boys* are very blurred and not a single character is strictly a hero nor a villain.

Nothing is as it seems in this TV show. Superheroes are actually villains and vigilantes are the heroes. Although, not one character can be precisely put into either one of the categories. The show plays with the viewer's perception of good and bad and the definition of a hero and a villain. Each character has some major flaws and troubled past events that act as triggers for their behaviour. The show is relatively fresh and different from other TV shows and movies in terms of having no censure. All the consequences of using their powers are shown. Many of the major problems present in today's world are present in the TV show. Sexual abuse as seen with The Deep and Starlight, Xenophobia, Racism, white superiority and American nationalism with Stormfront, white supremacy (in the Vought company), substance abuse seen with A-Train in everyday life and in sports competitions, sexualization of women, body dysmorphia (The Deep's gills), misrepresentation in the media

(Queen Maeve), PTSD (Butcher), Toxic masculinity (Homelander). A lot of greed and hunger for money are portrayed in the show which can be connected to present-day capitalism. Thirdly, the show highlights the danger of holding someone as a hero, especially celebrities who are often engaged in politics.

The TV show *The Boys* uses a new approach to the superhero genre. It gives voice to “normal” people who have lost their loved ones to collateral damage. Mundane and powerless people are the ones in search of justice against superpowered individuals who have no empathy for casualties or any other people.

*The Boys* shows various creative ways of using different powers. For instance, there has been a widespread fan theory about the death of Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity War*. Fans pointed out the possibility of Ant-Man shrinking down and entering Thanos’ rectum after which Ant-Man would grow big inside Thanos while instantly killing him. Of course, that did not happen in the movie, instead, Thanos was killed when Iron Man used the infinity gauntlet after a lot of fighting. On the other hand, the scenario with Ant-Man shrinking down was used in *The Boys*. A character known as Termite shrank down and went inside his lover, where he unintentionally enlarged which made his lover explode.

*The Boys* mostly depicts one option of what could happen if superheroes existed in today's world. They might be owned by big corporations and made into celebrities. One can never know the true intentions of someone by just seeing them on screen. Therefore, heroes in the show are worshipped by everyone despite their true evil nature because, on screen, they are ideal, kind and well-intentioned individuals. A parallel can be drawn with real life in the form of celebrities. Most famous actors, singers, influences and public figures are today acting as role models for young people, but we only see a fraction of their lives. The one that they show in the media. They have to be perfect and presentable in every public appearance and social media post which makes it impossible to know their real personalities. There are multiple examples of A-list celebrities being exposed as, for example, abusers, like Armie Hammer, Amber Heard, Chris Brown, Emma Roberts etc. All of them once served, or are still serving as role models for young people. For that matter, *The Boys* acts as an exaggerated example of what might be happening behind the scenes of supposedly perfect celebrity lives.

### 3.4. Deconstruction of superheroes in *The Boys*

To start with, Homelander is the leader of the Seven as previously mentioned. He is also the strongest supe in the show's universe. He was raised in a lab and was exposed to numerous harsh experiments done with the purpose of testing his powers. Homelander brings the self-centeredness and materialism of the modern world to life, giving praise to competitiveness, pure individualism and dominance. He is socially extroverted and often the first to step in front of the camera or give statements about his undeniable commitment to justice. Although he seems to be a worthy superhero on the outside, in reality, he is the exact opposite and acts as the main villain in this series. His villainous character comes through killing innocent people and feeling no remorse. He opposes the superhero prototype by killing Madelyne Stillwell because she lied to him about the whereabouts of Becca Butcher and her child. He even killed Black Noir because he kept the truth about his father's identity from him. He also killed the passengers of the Flight 37 due to him messing up and destroying the plane controls. Next, he killed supes called Blindspot and Supersonic who both had done nothing wrong but tried to become members of The Seven. Along with them, he killed many other people, most of whom were innocent, which caused him to not be regarded as a superhero, but a villain. His intentions are not to save the world or even certain people but to be worshipped and loved by them. Furthermore, he put his own son in danger by throwing him off of the roof while trying to expose his superpowers. That shows a complete lack of care and responsibility which are character traits that every superhero should possess. Moreover, he also blackmailed Starlight, physically abused Queen Maeve, forced himself onto Becca and abandoned his son. The lines between a hero and a villain are not so blurred in his case, he is a definite villain. Finally, he created supe-terrorists around the globe which allowed America to provide money, guns, and other kinds of support into "enemy" countries with the goal of influencing regime changes in American favour. Through Homelander, *The Boys* depicts the darker side of American patriotism, the one driven not by the need for liberty, but by the need to be the most dominant nation. Stephen Nathanson defined patriotism as consisting of:

1. "Special affection for one's own country
2. A sense of personal identification with the country
3. Special concern for the well-being of the country
4. Willingness to sacrifice to promote the country's good" (34-35).



If we compare him to Captain America and Superman from whom inspiration is drawn for Homelander's character, Homelander has the same powers as Superman. Those include heat vision, invulnerability, flying, super strength and speed and x-ray vision. Superman is an alien with adopted parents who raised him. On the other side, Homelander was raised in a lab with lead scientist Jonah Vogelbaum as his paternal figure. Therefore, they are both orphans in a way. The main difference between them is in their character. Superman is caring, noble and kind-hearted, whereas Homelander is selfish, cruel and vengeful. Those differences can be observed through their actions where Superman acts towards saving people and Homelander towards his own goals without caring for casualties made along the way. Homelander's cape resembles the first costume of Captain America. Both heroes are American icons, fighting in the name of patriotism and justice. However, Homelander twists the idealistic values that Captain America symbolizes. Instead of saving innocent lives and fighting for the good of the country, Homelander opposes all of those values and commits numerous crimes to support his pro-American brand. Homelander is not just a satire of Captain America or Superman. Since the start, and especially in season 2, he is a literal embodiment of an egocentric nation that obsesses over military power.

Next, The Deep is strangely similar to DC's Aquaman. He craves to be essential and therefore strives to be Homelander's right hand. Unfortunately, he is often seen as unimportant by his teammates and made fun of. Also, he experiences body dysmorphia because of his gills. The dichotomy between a hero and a villain is especially highlighted in his case. Despite his pure soul and desire to do good, the lack of respect others hold towards him pushes him into becoming arrogant and uncaring to the measure that he sexually abuses Starlight and multiple other women. Those cases are not the only things that make him a deconstructed superhero. He also accidentally gets a whale killed by using it to scare away The Boys. Furthermore, he kills Lamar Bishop by drowning him on Homelander's orders. Therefore, putting innocent animals' lives at risk and killing an innocent human pushes him away from the typical superhero and drag him more into the villain category. Even though he becomes heartless in a way after reaching fame, we can still see a part of him that is good, for example through him trying to save a dolphin, even though he does not succeed and deeply cares for the sea creatures in general. In conclusion, he acts as a hero in the public eye, and strives to be an actual hero, but is corrupted by the industry which leads him to be somewhere between a villain with a hidden desire to do good and a hero who cannot seem to get on the right path. Comparing him to DC's Aquaman, they both have the ability to communicate with all sea creatures and they both can

breathe underwater. Next, they both have enhanced swimming skills and physical durability. They are both strong, although Aquaman is stronger. Their costumes also consist of mainly the colour green and yellow. One of the differences is that Aquaman is part of an underwater community, whereas The Deep is the only man with abilities like his. Another difference is that Aquaman is useful to his group, Justice League, but The Deep is only used for photo ops by Vought and has no great role in The Seven. Finally, the main difference between the two is their personality. The Deep is immoral, a pathological liar, a sexual abuser and a killer. On the other hand, Aquaman is a compassionate man with a no-kill policy.

A-Train is a speedster and a former member of the superhero team known as the Teenage Kix and is a current member of The Seven. He grew up poor which is probably the cause of his fears of being kicked out of The Seven. Those fears are the reason he starts using Compound V to stay the fastest man alive which leads him to become addicted. Those actions lead him to self-destructive and careless behaviour. He also does not strictly belong to the hero or villain category, but due to his actions, probably fits more into the villain category. Actions that distance him from a superhero prototype are that he killed Robin Ward, who was a girlfriend of Hughie Campbell at the beginning of the show, by running through her while high on Compound V. He felt no remorse after that because he kept laughing at it throughout the show. He also killed his girlfriend, a supe called Popclaw because she revealed some information about him and compound V. Next, he killed Blue Hawk by dragging him by his ankles along the road because Blue Hawk crippled his brother. Other than the murders, he gave Supersonic up to Homelander for conspiring with Starlight, knowing that Homelander would kill Supersonic. He is also addicted to compound V which affects his doings. Murdering people, feeling no remorse, being an addict and not caring for the consequences of his acts definitely do not fit the superhero prototype. A-Train has many similarities and differences with DC's The Flash and Marvel's Quicksilver. To start with the Flash, they both have superhuman speed and abnormally fast metabolism. Next, they can both regenerate quickly after an injury. The first difference is related to what makes them fast. A-Train is fast thanks to a drug called Compound V, while The Flash is fast thanks to the Speed Force which he accessed after being struck by lightning. Furthermore, while most of the other heroes from The Seven mimic Marvel and DC's heroes through costumes, that is not the case with A-Train. He wears a blue suit with glasses, while The Flash uses a red suit with a mask covering his whole face. The Flash has a few more powers than A-Train, including passing through

solid objects while vibrating and vibrating so quickly that he is perceived as invisible. Perhaps the biggest difference between the two is that The Flash is heroic, whereas A-Train is villainous. A-Train is a killer who feels no remorse and even finds some of his killings funny. The Flash, unsurprisingly, saves lives. Unable to time travel and phase through solid objects, A-Train seems to have standard superspeed powers that are much closer to Quicksilver than The Flash.

Translucent is The Seven's invisible superhero who is also bulletproof. He is egotistical and abuses his powers and abilities. He is one of the antagonists of the show and likes to use his invisibility to look at women showering and using the bathroom which is not a personality trait suitable for a superhero. Moreover, when The Boys finally figure out a way to kill him, he stops being arrogant and he becomes very cowardly, willing to give up any information about The Seven or Vought if it saves him, regardless of the consequences. That shows that he lacks loyalty and is capable of betraying his superhero team and his friends for his own benefit, which is again not a very "superhero" thing to do. Hughie did eventually kill him in season 1. Due to his power abuse, he can only be seen as a villain. It is possible that he is a parody of Marvel's Susan Storm since they both have the same invisibility powers. The difference is that she does not abuse her powers.

Queen Maeve, inspired by the DC's Wonder Woman, is the second strongest superhero of The Seven. She also has a kind heart as she aspired to be a hero that people would look up to, but was corrupted by Vought. Regarding her relationships, she was involved with Homelander in season 1 but later reconnected with her ex-girlfriend Elena. Out of the main characters, she is the only one who is a part of the LGBT+ community. With some help from Starlight, Queen Maeve starts caring again for people and working closely with The Boys in order to stop Soldier Boy and later to stop Homelander. Although she is a part of the leading antagonist group in the show, The Seven, it can be seen that she manages to redeem her past actions by working with The Boys. Some aspects that set her apart from the stereotypical superhero are the fact that she is an alcoholic and, along with Homelander, she failed to save the passengers of Flight 37. Those things make her depart from the idealistic image of superheroes people usually tend to have about them. Also, although unknowingly, she provided compound V to Butcher which led him to get very sick. Even though she does not entirely fit into the superhero prototype, she does sacrifice herself at the end of season 3 by grabbing Soldier Boy and jumping out of the window with him while he explodes. The character of Queen Maeve is quite clearly modelled after DC's Wonder Woman. They both have

superhuman strength and they are both second strongest heroes in their superhero teams. Next, even though they cannot outrun The Flash and A-Train, they are much faster than regular people. Wonder Woman can fly, unlike Queen Maeve. Both of them wear tiaras and wear sleeveless leather costumes that have breastplates, and short skirts that are held in place by big belts and knee-high combat boots. Some differences can be found in their sexual orientation. Wonder Woman is heterosexual, while Queen Maeve is bisexual. Wonder Woman is also much older and fights for the betterment of society, while Queen Maeve is younger, corrupt and an alcoholic. Also, their origin stories are different. Wonder Woman is an actual daughter of Zeus, while Queen Maeve acquired her powers with Compound V.

Black Noir is a mute superhero in a dark costume and a member of The Seven. He has extraordinary strength and heightened senses and is proficient in martial arts. There is not much information known about him. Even his face is revealed in season 3 for the first time. He is very cruel when it comes to eliminating his targets and potential witnesses, but also displays high levels of sensitivity and care for animals and innocent lives. Black Noir is socially distant and the most loyal member of the Seven to the Vought, he does everything he is asked for. He is the only one that is close to Homelander and Homelander actually seems to care for him. He cannot be considered a superhero because he is practically an assassin for The Vought. His covert identity and costume are the only stereotypical superhero traits he has. He killed Kimiko by stabbing her multiple times before knowing she had regenerative powers. He also killed Naqib, a supe-terrorist by decapitating him. While searching for him, he went on a killing spree, murdering everyone on his path. Furthermore, he almost killed Starlight by choking her, Queen Maeve stopped him. His lack of a no-kill policy, brutal personality and tendency for gory murders make him a villain rather than a superhero. His character has some connections to the DC's Batman, although he is not so evidently a "dark version" of Batman nor any other famous hero, as were previously mentioned Vought heroes. A few features that Black Noir and Batman have in common are black suit, great detective skills, a mask that covers half of their faces and thorough knowledge of hand-to-hand combat. There is one more similarity between the two. Black noir talks to cartoon characters in his head, while Batman talks with Joker in his head (at least in the video game and TV show *Titans*).

Stormfront joined the Seven after Translucent's death became public to replace him. She was born in Berlin in 1919. and was known as Liberty. In Germany, she met her husband,

gave birth to their daughter and took the injection of Compound V. That made her the first supe in the world. When they first met, she and Homelander did not get along, but later they became lovers. She also became a big public figure and promoted white supremacy through her speeches. She is careless, violent and ruthless. Furthermore, she is a big racist. While chasing a supe-terrorist through a housing complex occupied by African-American residents, she took the chance and executed them all on the spot and later called them collateral damage. Apart from that, she is responsible for the death of Becca Butcher and Kimiko's younger brother Kenji. During her appearance in the show, she only shows a hint of empathy towards her deceased husband and daughter. Other than that, her murderous and racist personality make her a straight-up villain. She can be seen as an embodied racism, which is "reinforced by all Americans" (Steven Roberts and Michael Rizzo 2) and is highly present in the USA through the years. Roberts and Rizzo also claim that just as people in capitalistic societies support capitalism, no matter if they identify as capitalist or not, and if they want to or not, citizens of racist societies reinforce racism, no matter if they identify as racist or not, and if they want to or not (2). Regarding Stormfront's connection to some famous superheroes, she is a parody hero of Marvel's Storm and Thor as they all have electricity-generating powers. She is connected to Thor by their Norse heritage and powers. Even though they have extremely similar powers in the form of bolts of lightning, they do differentiate in a way in which Thor literally calls on the lightning, while Stormfront uses supercharged plasma to create it. Moreover, Thor is much stronger than Stormfront. He endured a neutron star beaming on his back for a while, and Ryan lasered Stormfront's arms, legs, and half of her face off in a split second. Storm is also stronger than Stormfront with her ability to control the weather.

Soldier Boy is known to be the strongest man alive. He was America's first and strongest superhero before Homelander. For decades, he has been kept as a lab rat in a Russian laboratory where he endured numerous atrocious experiments. The Boys accidentally rescued him and he agreed to help them kill Homelander if they gave him information about his former team. To the public, he is known as a patriotic hero who was serving his country and who sacrificed his life to save America in 1984. The reality is completely different. He used Black Noir, Gunpowder and other children as his punching bags, which makes him also a child abuser because they were teenagers at the time. Along with his abusive history, he has killed many people and some supes. Some of his victims are unnamed Russian soldiers, MM's father and uncle, Crimson Countess, TNT twins and Mindstorm. The deconstruction of a superhero through his character is shown through his heartless murders and child abuse.

Despite his actions in favour of killing Homelander, due to his killings and abuses, he is an antagonist of the series and is considered a villain. That parody could be interpreted as Soldier Boy is quite an obvious parody of Marvel's Captain America. Both were young men injected with drugs in World War II and as a result, they gained superpowers to fight against the Nazis. They are both patriots and use a shield in battle. Furthermore, they both resurface in the modern day after being asleep. One on the ice other in a laboratory. Their image of a patriotic American defender can be associated with American patriotism which is "commonly tinged with political ideology in the United States" (Leonie Huddy and Nadia Khatib 63). Furthermore, the public image of all the Vaught heroes and their work relationship with Vaught can be analyzed through the Marxist theory of capitalism. Following Robert Zevin, in Marxist theory, "capitalists exploit their position as the owners of the means of production to extract a surplus value above and beyond the stored and direct work content of the goods and services which are produced in a capitalist economy" (334). In this case, the capitalists are the owners of Vaught.

Starlight can emit blinding light from her hands and is able to fly. She is the only well-intentioned and innocent hero from The Seven. Therefore, she is the only member who is actually thought of as a hero and not a villain. She also cares little for publicity because she is uncomfortable with the amount of attention she gets from the media as well as being coerced to change her costume in order to be an over-sexualized role model for young girls. During her time at the Vought Tower, she is mistreated and sexually harassed by The Deep. Starlight and Hughie begin a relationship shortly after his girlfriend's death. In season 2, she begins to work with The Boys to help them bring down Vought and expose the fact that heroes are not born, but made. Again, although she is good and caring, she too has her moments of violence. Even though mostly in order to protect someone, those acts make her a very faulty superhero. For example, when she kills an innocent man on the road to protect Butcher and Hughie. Starlight too, is a parody of another hero, actually heroes. Starlight is based on a pair of DC female superheroes: Her appearance, especially her costume, is based on Mary Marvel (Lady Shazam), and her abilities to emit light are based on Stargirl.

Billy Butcher is the leader of The Boys, a team of vigilantes with the goal of taking down The Seven and Vought. He is a former member of the British special forces. Regarding

his personality, he is extremely charming and persuasive. He can talk anyone into almost anything. He holds a lot of hatred against all superheroes, especially Homelander because he raped Butcher's wife Becca after which she committed suicide, but we later find out that she is alive and raising her and Homelander's son. Butcher achieves everything he puts his mind to even if he needs to use violence to complete it. Although he is sometimes violent and ruthless, he cares about his family, friends and innocent people. He would even sacrifice his own life for them. Even though he is a protagonist in this TV show, he cannot be considered a typical hero due to his frequent violent outbursts and lack of costume, code-name and superpowers. He is a typical antihero. An antihero is a "protagonist or notable figure who is conspicuously lacking in heroic qualities" ("Merriam-Webster dictionary").

Hughie Campbell is the main protagonist of the series alongside Billy Butcher. He led a pretty normal life before his girlfriend Robin became a casualty of A-Trains' running spree while high on compound V. After the accident, Butcher recruited Hughie into The Boys. Hughie was a kind, compassionate, and smart man, but after Robin's death, he became led by a desire for revenge and more hostile. He was still a good person, but he let his anger blind him and do things he would not do while clear-minded. For instance, when he used Starlight to get to Ezekiel without her knowledge or when he killed Translucent. Those outbursts of anger would not last long because his remorseful nature would soon kick in. Although being intelligent and capable, he often feels incapable of protecting himself so, for a short period of time, he becomes addicted to compound V because it gave him abilities so he can defend himself. He too can be described as an antihero because even though he is kind-hearted and compassionate, he does some very non-heroic things when blinded by rage.

Frenchie is also a member of The Boys whose skillset comes to be extremely useful to the vigilante team because he used to be a thief, killer-for-hire and an arms and drug dealer. Before working with The Boys, he worked for the CIA. He feels responsible for the deaths of Mallory's grandchildren because Lamplighter killed them after Frenchie stopped following him to go help a friend who overdosed. His troubled past and the traumas he got from it do not stop him from being emphatic and caring deeply for his colleagues. The events from his past leave him feeling soulless, but meeting Kimiko returns his humanity. He turns out to be the only one from The Boys able to connect with her. Again, he is not a hero, nor a villain despite having characteristics of both. Therefore, he can be observed as an antihero as well.

MM or Mother's Milk is the most compassionate member of The Boys, he is characterized by his wisdom with which he helps to set The Boys onto the right path. Having his grandfather killed by a supe and his father dying because of that, he developed an obsessive-compulsive disorder. He cleans his stove 3 times every night believing that Soldier Boy will return and kill the rest of his family if he does not. His compassion comes through the most when he befriends Kimiko and Starlight even though he hates all the supes due to the past events. Out of all the members of The Boys, he is the closest one to the description of a hero. In support of that, he is the only member of The Boys that has not killed anyone. His character was partially inspired by the 'crack babies of the 80s'. "During the 80s and 90s, the nation's health specialists panicked over the growing number of so-called "crack babies", children exposed to crack cocaine in utero. These children were said to be doomed to lives of physical and mental disability" ("NPR"). M.M. was born with Compound V in his system since his mother was exposed to it while working at a Vought Factory and that made him addicted to his mother's breast milk.

Kimiko was found in a basement under high security by The Boys. At first, they thought she was a victim, but it turned out she was experimented on with Compound V and was chosen to make a supervillain out of her. On account of the torture and abuse she underwent, she became mute, violent, unpredictable and brutal. Frenchie is the only one from The Boys who got close to her and made a connection with her. With time, she became a member of The Boys and started caring for other members as well, besides Frenchie. Despite her "membership" at The Boys and desire to do good, she exposes her tendency to violence and murder when taking a job as a hitwoman for the Albanian Mob. Therefore, she is not a hero, nor a complete villain. Kimiko shares many characteristics with Marvel's Wolverine. They both have powerful self-healing abilities and they are excellent fighters with traumatic past that keeps them from emotionally connecting with others. Kimiko is also an Asian woman who is mute which can contribute to some opinions that she was made mute to be presented as exotic. Those theories align with Orientalism. "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident"...Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Edward Said 2-3). Orientalism is also seen in the representation of the super-terrorists and regular terrorists who were all represented as Arab.



To conclude character analysis, there is no clear line between heroes and villains. Almost all of the characters could be considered both depending on the episode. The show explores the notion of good and evil by testing the lengths people are willing to go to achieve something they want. Is a good deed still good if several bad things were done to complete it? When you think you have fallen in love with a certain character, he almost immediately does something atrocious and inexplicable which makes you hate him. Characters are realistic in terms of that not one of them is perfect and not one of them is completely evil without reason. They have all experienced injustices and mistreatments that caused them to be as they are.

## 5. Conclusion

To summarize, this paper used a method of deconstruction to present how characters from the TV show *The Boys* deconstruct superhero prototypes. Also, how the lines between good and evil/superhero and villain get easily blurred throughout the show. Concepts of myth, sign and prototype were used in order to help with the deconstruction. By briefly showing the historical overview of comic books and the rise of the superhero genre, we have seen how the superhero genre became popular and how movie and TV show adaptations started being made. Coogan's definitions of superhero and villain were provided and were used to see if the characters from *The Boys* fit into those definitions for the purpose of deconstruction. The main means of deconstruction was the binary opposition of superhero/villain. In the show, two opposing groups are the superheroes and vigilantes. When the roles are reversed and the superheroes start being seen as villains and vigilantes as superheroes, some very questionable actions emerge which make the distinctions between them blurred. While examining examples from the show, all the characters had their moments in which they acted the opposite of what would be expected from them. That analysis presents superheroes featured in the TV show as murderous, cruel and abusive racists, while the vigilantes turned out to be their victims fighting for justice. Put differently, the deconstructionist analysis points to the fact that all members of both opposed sides possess the traits of both sides, Therefore, none of them is distinctively a superhero or a villain, their status depends on their actions.

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## 7. Abstract

Superhero deconstruction on the example of the TV series *The Boys*

With superhero narratives becoming more and more popular recently, stories that deconstruct those heroes have started appearing. For that matter, this paper explores the phenomenon of superhero deconstruction within the realm of contemporary popular culture, with a specific focus on the currently popular television series *The Boys*, which is based on a comic book of the same name. That series challenges traditional superhero stories, exposing the darker side of heroism and exploring the ethical dilemmas present in the superhero prototype. *The Boys* offer a gory and direct deconstruction of the superhero myth. All the typical characteristics of superheroes and villains are deconstructed in *The Boys*, with corrupted heroes on one side and vengeful, but fair-minded ordinary people on the other side.

Keywords: *superheroes, villains, The Boys, deconstruction, superhero prototype*

## 8. Sažetak

Dekonstrukcija superheroja na primjeru serije *The Boys*

U zadnje vrijeme, superherojski narativi su postali sve popularniji I stoga su se pojavile priče u kojima se ti heroji dekonstruiraju. Zbog toga, ovaj rad istražuje fenomen dekonstrukcije superheroja u kontekstu suvremene popularne kulture, sa specifičnim fokusom na TV seriju *The Boys* koja je temeljena na istoimenom stripu. Ta serija izaziva tradicionalne priče o superherojima, izvlači na vidjelo tamne strane herojstva i istražuje etičke dileme prisutne u prototipu superheroja. Serija *The Boys* nudi krvavu i izravnu dekonstrukciju mita o superherojima. Sve tipične karakteristike superheroja i zločinaca su dekonstruirane u seriji *The Boys*, sa korumpiranim superherojima na jednoj strani i osvetoljubivim, ali poštenim običnim ljudima na drugoj.

Ključne riječi: *superheroji, zločinci, The Boys, dekonstrukcija, prototip superheroja*