

# Identity Crisis -Deconstruction of Superheroes in American Popular Culture

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**Baule, Luka**

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Preddiplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti (dvopredmetni)

**Luka Baule**

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Identity Crisis – Deconstruction of Superheroes in American Popular Culture

Završni rad

Student/ica:

Luka Baule

Mentor/ica:

Doc. Dr. sc. Marko Lukić

Zadar, 2017.



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Zadar, 20. rujan 2017.

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## 1. Introduction and the Theoretical Framework

In recent years, superheroes have become increasingly popular due to the enormous success of several movie franchises based on the graphic novels featuring such characters. As such, they form an invaluable part of popular culture on a global scale by embodying the ideals to which one should aspire. However, they have not always been depicted as symbols of perfection, as there are instances where the writers have explored the darker and more realistic aspects of superheroes which are overlooked in most of their portrayals. Such explorations allow re-evaluating what it means to be a hero or a villain. It is precisely this side of the concept of superheroes which will be analysed in this paper.

The object of analysis will be *Identity Crisis*, a seven-part limited series of graphic novels published by DC Comics, featuring well-known characters such as Superman and Batman. The analysis itself will rely primarily on *deconstruction*, a postmodernist approach to reading texts developed by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida which is used to identify meanings of a literary text which may not be immediately recognised by the reader. These meanings are meant to show the difference between the widely accepted meaning of a text and its subliminal meaning. In other words, deconstructionists seek to offer different interpretations of texts they analyse (Bressler 106).

Furthermore, an important device that will be used in the deconstruction of the text at hand is Stuart Hall's concept of *representation*. In his *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Hall offers a brief definition of representation as "the production of meaning through language" (28). Namely, he sees the representation as functioning on two distinct levels. Firstly, it occurs as an associative bond which establishes correspondence between the phenomena (both material and abstract) which exist in our world and the images in our minds which serve as a tool to interpret the world around us. Secondly,

it functions on the level of language, since the aforementioned mental images require a medium by means of which they can be exchanged among the members of a society, and that medium is a shared language (Hall 17-19).

The aforementioned concepts will be the fundamental approaches used in the analysis of not only superheroes featured in *Identity Crisis*, but of super villains which are featured as well, since the villains in graphic novels tend to serve as their obligatory counterparts.

## 2. Superhero and Super Villain – Definitions and Origin

### 2.1. General Definitions of Terms “Superhero” and “Super Villain”

In order to establish a basic knowledge of the matter at hand, basic background information on the concept of superheroes and super villains has to be provided.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term *superhero* is defined as “A benevolent fictional character with superhuman powers, such as Superman.” (“Superhero - Definition Of Superhero In English | Oxford Dictionaries”). In the context of this paper, there are two key words in this definition – “benevolent” and “superhuman”. They are used to depict the idealised nature of a superhero as a character representing not an individual, but an idea of a perfect person possessing not only virtues and moral values which facilitate the will to help others, but also the means to act on those principles. All in all, they can be said to be representations of Carl Jung’s *hero archetype*, which is presented as a figure which fights and defeats monsters, as well as successfully faces many adversities in his efforts to achieve their goals. The hero archetype serves as a psychological symbol of a one’s true potential (Luton et al., 2017). As such, they are held to a higher moral standard than ordinary people. In other words, they are obliged to uphold their values in the face of any difficult situation.

Such difficult situations in superhero fiction are almost always caused by super villains, who fulfil the roles of antagonists. Just as superheroes represent Jungian hero archetype, super villains in most cases represent the Jungian concept of the *shadow*, one of the basic archetypes which Jung developed. The shadow is a representation of all the darker aspects of an individual's personality, which are usually repressed to a lesser or a greater extent (Diamond, 2017). Just as the shadow is a repressed unconscious part of one's conscious self, the super villains are most often dark reflections of the superheroes that fight them. In other words, the super villains are what superheroes fear to become if they were to let go of their moral inhibitions.

An example of such polarity between a superhero and a super villain would be the DC Comics hero Green Arrow and his villainous counterpart, Merlyn. Both characters use bow and arrow as their weapon of choice; however, Green Arrow is against killing his opponents and avoids killing people if possible, whereas Merlyn employs his skills by working as a hired assassin. Another example of such contraposition would be another DC Comics hero, The Flash (the Barry Allen iteration) and his archenemy, the Reverse-Flash (the Eobard Thawne iteration); both possess superhuman speed and other related superpowers, but the former uses his own powers for good, while the latter uses almost identical powers for evil purposes.

Thus, it can be concluded that the typical black-and-white distinction between a superhero and a super villain is based on the presence or absence of such moral traits as kindness, selflessness, willingness to kill, etc. However, this paper will deal with the analysis of an instance in which one cannot draw such a fine line between good and evil so that we may see a different side of superheroes and super villains. This is in line with Derrida's deconstructionist approach, which seeks to recognise binary oppositions in the object of research, only to reverse their positions (Rolfe 275). This is the approach which will be



further utilised and developed in the main part of this paper dedicated to the character analysis in the *Identity Crisis* graphic novel.

## 2.2. Origin of Superheroes

Literary characters with powers beyond human capabilities or skills deemed to be extraordinary have existed long before the emergence of the superhero genre in the first half of the 20th century. First instances of such characters can be found in the mythologies of ancient cultures, such as Ancient Egypt, Sumer, and Ancient Greece.

However, before the correlation between ancient mythology and the superhero genre is explained, the notion of a *myth* must be clarified. According to a common definition, myth is a story containing surreal characters and aspects of the world which serve as metaphors created to explain some aspects of the world which cannot be supported by facts or evidence. Thus, there has been a correlation between mythology and religion in the ancient societies, since both mythology and religion provided answers to the questions about which humankind has been wondering since the very beginning of its own existence (Literary Devices, 2017). On the other hand, a more precise and profound analysis of what constitutes as a myth is provided by Roland Barthes. Namely, Barthes states that the purpose of a myth is to represent certain artificial social constructs as unquestionable truths manifesting in a natural way. This is done with the intent of spreading and maintaining various ideologies of the dominant groups within the society (Allen, 2004).

Consequently, it is easy to understand why some people argue that comic book superheroes have assumed the position in American culture as the national mythology. This is evident in the undeniable influence which Greek heroes have had on modern-day superheroes. Namely, Greek heroes were either demigods, which means that they had divine ancestry and were thus possessing superhuman abilities or were merely mortals who did possess ordinary

human attributes, but were equipped with special artefacts which, along with a great display of courage, helped them emerge victorious from various confrontations on numerous occasions. Moreover, Greek heroes were always visually depicted as symbols of physical perfection, which is also one of the distinctive traits of American superheroes (Dorta, 2014). Therefore, one can draw a parallel between, for instance, Greek heroes such as Heracles and Achilles, both known for their superior strength and near-invulnerability as a consequence of their divine origins, and a contemporary superhero such as Superman, who likewise possesses the same physiological attributes (as well as some other powers) due to being from another planet. Furthermore, another example of such similarities would be the resourcefulness and mental fortitude shared by both Odysseus in Greek mythology and Batman in DC comics, as well as in other media.

Furthermore, superheroes have been influenced by figures from folk tales such as Robin Hood, who is an obvious influence on DC's Green Arrow, since Green Arrow is also an archer wearing a green-coloured costume which is almost identical to that of Robin Hood, to the point that it is merely a modernised version of the same outfit. What is more, the similarities between the two do not end there. Besides the costume and the preferred weapon, Green Arrow also shares Robin Hood's compassion for the repressed classes of the society. That compassion serves as his main motivation for fighting social injustice (Drum, 2015).

### 3. Graphic Novel as the Medium for Superhero Storytelling

Since *Identity Crisis* is a graphic novel and, as such, not a typical literary text, it would seem reasonable to clarify what it is in order to gain a better understanding and full appreciation of the content found in this paper.

First of all, it is important to make a distinction between a comic book and a graphic novel. Although at first it may appear that there is no distinction between the two in terms of the medium (combining images with the words which are presented in the form of dialogue and narration or monologue) or writing style, there is difference in terms of the way of distribution, as well as the difference concerning the reader's knowledge of the continuity. To be more specific, the graphic novel is written so that it may be read as a self-contained story, without referencing events in other issues, or referencing them in such a way that a reader can comprehend their significance with regard to the plot without reading the previous issues in question. It is further distinguished from the often light-hearted and adventure-driven comic book by its more mature content, whether explicit (pertaining to straightforward depictions of violence and sexual content) or concerning the psychological and/or philosophical aspects of its characters and underlying themes (Lange, 2012).

Secondly, one has to bear in mind that, unlike typical literature, graphic novels that the images of graphic novels are as important as the written text. Due to that peculiar characteristic, some of the panels from *Identity Crisis* will be presented in the paper in order to provide a greater insight at the heart of the matter at hand.

#### 4. *Watchmen* – a turning Point in the Representation of Modern-day Superheroes and Influence on *Identity Crisis*

*Watchmen*, written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons and John Higgins, is the ground-breaking graphic novel published in 1985. It has changed the public perception of comic books as an art form by showing their potential to be regarded and analysed as high literature. Alan Moore, the writer of the graphic novel, has challenged all the preconceived notions of superheroes which had been developing ever since the rise of the superhero genre

by presenting all the classic superhero tropes only to deconstruct them and by doing so offer a flawed and realistic representation of the six main characters.

For instance, one of the usual tropes is the idea that the possession of superpowers influences an individual to use them for the benefit of society, in a way that will earn them the admiration from the society whose safety they protect and uphold. A character in *Watchmen* who serves as an inversion of this trope when put under the lens of deconstructionist approach is Doctor Manhattan, a man who obtained extraordinary powers by accident and became essentially an near-omnipotent being. However, instead of using those powers for the protection of the general population, he is used by the government as a weapon for warfare and becomes feared by the general public because of that. What is more, his powers have caused him to become emotionally estranged from the humanity over time. Thus, he is a hero with whom the other characters, as well as the reader, cannot identify (Rapp 4-7). This is only one of the many examples of how *Watchmen* subverts the groundwork for the superhero comic books.

It is in fact this very graphic novel which has inspired *Identity Crisis* and other similar storylines in terms of tone and approach. *Identity Crisis* was intended to be a gritty, realistic storyline which would shed a different light on the superheroes which are part of DC Comics' traditional roster. Much like *Watchmen*, the focus of *Identity Crisis* is on both the plot and the characters in equal measure, since both graphic novels show events which, although having an influence on the grand scheme of things, ultimately depict the intimate struggles and interpersonal relationships among the novel's characters.

## 5. *Identity Crisis*

### 5.1. Plot Overview

Before moving on to the deconstruction of the superheroes and super villains in *Identity Crisis*, a brief overview of its plot will be presented in order to give a general insight into the topics which the graphic novel explores.

The plot starts with the murder of Sue Dibny, the wife of Ralph Dibny, who is also known as the superhero The Elongated Man and is a member of the Justice League, a team of superheroes. Severely shocked and horrified by the murder, all members of the Justice League carry out an investigation in order to identify and apprehend Sue's killer, while at the same time there are death threats being sent to the loved ones of other superheroes, as well as making attempts on the lives of some of them with varying degrees of success. In the end, it is revealed that the person responsible for Sue's murder and all other events that followed it was Jean Loring, the ex-wife of the superhero Atom. Jean wanted to reconnect with her estranged ex-husband and became increasingly mentally unsound. Her wish and growing insanity led her to devise an overtly elaborate and irrational scheme which accidentally led to the murder of Sue Dibny, while the death threats and other murder attempts were designed by her in order to avoid suspicion and throw the Justice League off her trail. The graphic novel ends with Jean Loring being incarcerated at Arkham Asylum in Gotham City and the Justice League members trying to move on with their lives.

### 5.2. Deconstruction of *Identity Crisis*

However, what makes this graphic novel an appealing subject to the deconstructionist analysis are the subplots and episodes which revolve around certain superheroes and super villains and show the grey area between a hero and a villain to which both sides belong. This

is precisely what deconstruction aims to reveal – although at first it may seem that there are two sides of the same coin at work for binary oppositions that are considered to be natural (for example, the superhero/super villain opposition), such distinctions are artificial constructs.

First of all, I will explain the method that deconstructionists use in analysing texts. Derrida argues that the first step in deconstructing a text is the identification of binary oppositions which are ingrained in the minds of the general population as “natural”. A defining characteristic of such binary oppositions is that one of the components is deemed to be superior to its counterpart, and as such enjoys the privilege of social approval (Bressler 112). The next step is to reverse the positions of the two opposed phenomena with the aim of exposing the fragility of their interrelation. This fragile nature of the association between the antithetical components which is a trait of all binary oppositions is what Derrida refers to as *supplementation* (Bressler 114).

Another term coined by Derrida that is essential for the appliance and comprehension of deconstruction is *différance*, which represents the notion that there are no absolute truths and the idea that, when the hierarchy in binary oppositions is inverted, our knowledge of a phenomenon is defined by its distinction from other phenomena, and not by measuring the phenomenon in question to a set standard which is considered to be an absolute. In other words, *différance* has the purpose of allowing multiple interpretations of a text, all of which may be regarded as being relevant, as opposed to the “authorial” or a “correct” interpretation imposed by the author himself or the society at large via educational systems or media (Bressler 114-115).

After having established the possibility of multiple meanings of a text and the rigidity of binary oppositions found in it, the aforementioned reversal of the hierarchy that forms the basis for the binary oppositions offers different interpretations of a text, which tend to be

vastly different, and usually rather contrary, to the “authorial” or the “correct” interpretation of the text in question. The aim of this approach is to re-evaluate the traditional ideologies regarding concepts such as power and authority present in traditional approaches to literary texts.

Now that the basics of the deconstructionist strategy to the reading of a text have been explained, the strategy in question will be utilised as a critical device in discussing *Identity Crisis*. The examples concerning various characters and their decisions and behaviour will be displayed and deconstructed in order to provide a different perspective on the graphic novel. The basis for the deconstruction of the characters in *Identity Crisis* will be the binary opposition of “superhero” versus “super villain” which was mentioned previously in the introductory part of this paper. In this opposition, the ideologically reinforced and thus privileged component is the concept of the superhero, with the notion of the super villain being the inferior component which exists only to validate the existence of superheroes. In other words, the traditional purpose of a super villain is to provide a counterpart to the superhero as “the other” to which the superhero is different, and therefore by whom the superhero is defined by. This is most aptly described in Frank Verrano’s essay *Superheroes Need Supervillains*” in the book *What Is a Superhero?* edited by Robin Rosenberg and Peter Coogan:

Most obviously, the supervillain is there to make the hero look good. It is often said that a hero is defined by his villains, and it is abundantly clear that a strong villain makes for an even stronger superhero. Supervillains that represent broad, base evils are a standard conceit of the superhero genre; when a figure that represents absolute evil is defeated, the absolute good of the superhero is glorified and his or her role in society is justified. Many superhero comics feature an archenemy, that villain who acts

as the hero's doppelgänger – his or her mirror opposite. Where would Batman be without the Joker, or Professor X without Magneto? (Rosenberg and Coogan 83)

This is an example of the notion of *différance* in practice – the idea that for a superhero to have “credibility” in the eyes of the readers and the society in general, he must have a “rogues’ gallery”, that is, a group of adversaries who constantly provide dramatic conflict for the superhero. This general perception of superheroes and super villains is in line with what Stuart Hall calls “the constructivist or constructionist approach to meaning in representation”; that is, one of the theoretical approaches in the analysis of culture. Namely, the constructionist approach seeks to analyse how people construct meaning through concepts and representation in order to communicate with one another and avoid misunderstanding while doing so (Hall 25-26). Thus, shared concepts (such as the shared concept of what the signs “superhero” and “super villain” stand for) reinforce the cultural identity as the bond that unites all the members of a culture. It is precisely this generally accepted view of superheroes and super villains that will be taken apart in the context of the *Identity Crisis* storyline by exposing the instances of ethically unsound behaviour and reasoning on the behalf of some of the superhero characters, while at the same time revealing the sympathetic and redeemable side of super villains who appear in the story, and by doing so point out the logical fallacy of strict separation of the “superhero/super villain” binary opposition.

### 5.3. Deconstruction of Superheroes in *Identity Crisis*

First of all, the most notable instance in *Identity Crisis* where superheroes show their darker side and let go of moral inhibitions which construct their identity is found in the second issue of the mini-series where, in a flashback to the event set prior to the time when the storyline takes place, a small group of Justice League members accept Hawkman's proposal to not only wipe the memory of the super villain Doctor Light, but also to drastically



alter his personality in order to make him harmless (Meltzer, Issue #2). The heroes involved - Green Arrow, Black Canary, Zatanna, Hawkman, Green Lantern (Hal Jordan), the Flash (Barry Allen) - are all aware that what they are doing is a rather unethical decision and act accordingly in order to conceal it from the rest of the Justice League. It is this willingness to keep such a close-guarded secret that motivates them to even forcibly erase Batman's memory of them altering Doctor Light's personality, and by doing so cement the immoral nature of their conduct concerning that situation (Meltzer, Issue #6). What is more, later in the second issue, Green Arrow admits to the current Flash (Wally West) and Green Lantern (Kyle Gardner) that it was not the only occasion on which they have acted that way in order to protect themselves and their loved ones from the villains who found out their secret identities (Meltzer, Issue #2). This fascist approach to dealing with super villains and the secrecy surrounding it is by far the most radical departure from the principles, such as mercy and the sense of transparent and idealistic defence of justice, which people generally tend to associate with superheroes. In other words, such punishment of super villains is a complete violation of almost all basic human rights, and it is suggested and executed by a group of superheroes, those who should be the ones protecting said human rights.

Secondly, throughout the graphic novel the reader gains an insight into the life of the 16-year-old Tim Drake, who acts as Batman's sidekick Robin; namely, the way in which he struggles to find a balance between his costumed persona and his private life. Tim lives with his father, who knows that he is Robin, and is therefore constantly worried about his son's safety. After Sue Dibny's murder, as well as the attempts on the lives of other Justice League members' loved ones, Tim tries to reassure his father that he has nothing to concern himself with. However, the issue here which is contrary to the superhero values is not Tim's fault; it is the fault of Batman. To be more specific, Batman is an experienced superhero and an adult who, on one hand, feels responsible for keeping Gotham City safe. On the other hand, in order

to be responsible according to his own moral code and protect Gotham, he enlists a teenager and trains him as a soldier in his personal war against crime, endangering not only the boy's safety, but the safety of anyone close to him. This point is substantiated by the fact that Jack Drake is killed in his own home by the villain Captain Boomerang simply because he is a family member of a superhero (Meltzer, Issue #5). This example shows Batman's unhinged sense of responsibility, one of the values which every superhero is expected to espouse to their fullest extent possible.

Thirdly, the Justice League members in *Identity Crisis* go to extreme lengths in their search for the killer of Sue Dibny. Since they were all either close to Sue, or, at the very least, on friendly terms with her, superheroes apprehend all the villainous suspects and interrogate them in a rather violent manner, which is a testament to the heroes' thirst for retribution – a characteristic rarely associated with superheroes. By far the most explicit instance of this type of ruthless interrogation in *Identity Crisis* is when the superheroes Wonder Woman and Green Arrow visit the prison where the super villain Slipknot is held in order to find out whether he was the one who tried to kill Jean Loring, the superhero Atom's ex-wife and whether he is in any way involved in the murder of Sue Dibny. Wonder Woman interrogates Slipknot using the Lasso of Truth, which is, in essence, a lie detector. Green Arrow later tells Superman that Wonder Woman interrogated Slipknot for almost an hour, inadvertently causing him to reveal all his private secrets and psychological issues (Meltzer, Issue #4). It is obvious that such type of suspect examination is based on pure coercion and psychological torture, and is, as such, a highly inadmissible method of questioning. Moreover, the interrogation of Slipknot takes place in a prison, which implies that the prison staff supports such conduct, which is a type of conduct generally unbecoming of a superhero; however, it is used here liberally by the superhero community, since in another issue, the super villain Mirror Master tells his fellow

villains that he heard about the interrogation of another villain, Doctor Phosphorus, during which the villain's arm was brutally broken by the superhero Wildcat (Meltzer, Issue #4).

The instance in which Owen Mercer, the son of a super villain Captain Boomerang, visits the crime scene where his father and Jack Drake killed each other shows how the police, a social institution whose functions include law enforcement, cooperate with superheroes, who usually operate outside the law. Namely, Mercer is not allowed to see the body of his father. The detective who refuses to let him see the body of Captain Boomerang based on his previous experiences with the people who have resurrected super villains using various means when getting near the body of a dead super villain. What is more, when Mercer sees Batman walking freely at the crime scene and looking for clues, he angrily asks the detective why Batman, a well-known vigilante, is allowed to enter the apartment, and he, a man who is merely wishing to see his father's body, is not allowed such a favour (Meltzer, Issue #6). This implies that the police not only condone the type of fascist behaviour displayed by superheroes in *Identity Crisis* as presented in this paragraph and the preceding one, but also encourage such behaviour by openly cooperating with them. This is evident in the sixth issue, where Owen Mercer sees Batman in the apartment where Captain Boomerang was killed and into which he has been denied access by the police. The detective to whom Mercer is talking refuses to acknowledge Batman's presence, thus silently implying that Batman is an associate of the police in the current investigation. The detective then persuade Mercer to leave, advising him not to get into a confrontation with the system (and Batman). This is shown on the page of the sixth issue presented here:



(Retrieved from: <http://readcomiconline.to/Comic/Identity-Crisis/Issue-6?id=37173#7>)

Arguably the most fascinating aspect of what is shown on these few panels is the cool demeanour of the detective who behaves as if Batman was not present at the crime scene and standing merely a few steps from him and is lying directly to Mercer in such an obvious manner. Taking this into consideration, it would only seem reasonable that such behaviour on the behalf of the detective (along with Captain Boomerang's death, of course) would drive Mercer into donning the mantle of Captain Boomerang himself, in order to honour the memory of his late father (Meltzer, Issue #6).

Finally, by the very end of the graphic novel, there is a conversation between Green Arrow and the Flash about several Justice League members wiping Batman's mind in order to conceal the mind-wipe and the alteration of personality of the villain Doctor Light, who underwent such punishment for having raped Sue Dibny and threatening to rape the wives of other superheroes. Green Arrow adamantly defends his and his fellow superheroes' decision of having made Batman forget about the punishment of Doctor Light, saying that it was the right choice. According to him, the Justice League must survive all the trials and tribulations, even if it means that some of its members are forced to secretly undertake actions which fall into the ethical grey area and thus are not in line with the moral code superheroes are obliged to uphold in order to preserve the safety of their loved ones (Meltzer, Issue #7). Ultimately, this was the goal of the graphic novel's writer, Brad Meltzer, who wanted to provide a more realistic and adult-oriented portrayal of the iconic characters we have come to know as the apex of human ideals. Instead, the reader is provided with characters that are stripped of some of their perfections. This leads to superheroes not always acting in accordance with the values they are supposed to represent, such as tempering with the mind not only of their enemy, but of their trusted ally as well.

#### 5.4. Deconstruction of Super Villains in *Identity Crisis*

Unlike the superheroes, most of the super villains in *Identity Crisis* are portrayed in such a way that humanises their characters. In this part of the paper, such instances will be provided.

Firstly, Doctor Light is a villain who raped Sue Dibny; as a consequence, he is punished by memory erasure and the alteration of his personality which he has suffered at the hands of the superhero Zatanna at the behest of Hawkman, her fellow Justice League member. Furthermore, he is wrongfully suspected to be the one responsible for the murder of Sue Dibny murder and therefore desperately seeks protection from one of the super villains who work as mercenaries (Meltzer, Issue #2). All in all, in the context of *Identity Crisis* as a storyline, he serves no other purpose than to be a misleading plot-point, rather than having any relevance for the case of Sue Dibny's murder and the search for her killer. He is clearly a victim in this context, since he is forced to run away from the Justice League's retribution, even though he doesn't know why he is running away. Therefore, it seems perfectly logical that, when he regains his memories, he immediately becomes enraged at the superheroes that have taken away his memory and also changed his persona (Meltzer, Issue #3).

Secondly, most of the super villains who appear in the storyline are mercenaries and assassins, who are presented as having a more professional approach to their line of work.



(Retrieved from: <http://readcomiconline.to/Comic/Identity-Crisis/Issue-2?id=37169#21>)

As it can be seen in the panels from the second issue of *Identity Crisis*, assassins gather at an abandoned satellite in Earth's orbit in order to search for useful information regarding job opportunities, competition, etc. This seems like a deviation from the usual motives of super

villains to commit various unlawful deeds, such as lust for power and global domination, as well as lunacy or an inherently evil nature. Their primary interest is money, which does not make them much different from an average adult person who is a freelance worker whose only goal is to earn a pay check and build a reputation in their chosen line of work and thus attract potential clients more easily. Even Merlyn, one of the assassins in question, says: “The only way to run a business is with the most up-to-date information” (Meltzer, Issue #2, page 20). Their eagerness to work in return for money is shown when a terrified Doctor Light arrives seeking protection in exchange for money, which attracts the attention of every villain present in the room, and it is later shown that Deathstroke the Terminator is the one who accepts his offer (Meltzer, Issue #2). The only real difference from the mentality of an average working class citizen is the fact that these super villains have no moral inhibitions in terms of taking a life. As for the visual aspect of the panels showing their interaction on the abandoned satellite, what is especially interesting in terms of deconstructing the notion of super villains is their relaxed attitude and seemingly almost friendly conversations. The ways in which they interact with one another give an impression of a casual ambiance typically associated with social encounters at barrooms. All of this creates a humanising effect in terms of the perception of these super villains in *Identity Crisis*, thus making them more relatable to the reader, especially when contrasted with the stern and morose nature of most of the superheroes appearing in the storyline.

Furthermore, a villain who prides himself on the professional aspect of his villainy other than the ones presented in the paragraph above is Noah Kuttler, also known under the alias “the Calculator”, who made a career in supplying useful information to super villains in exchange for payment (Meltzer, Issue #1). The businessman-like approach to villainy described in the previous paragraph is even more present in his character, since he does not kill or even harm anyone, at least not directly. He is merely a person who collects and



supplies super villains with information and also serves as an agent who receives job offers and afterwards distributes them to the super villains whom he deems appropriate for the job at hand. What is more, he even organises bets for super villains, as evidenced by his telephone conversation with Merlyn, where they comment the outcome of the battle between Deathstroke and the graphic novel's protagonists (Meltzer, Issue #3).

As for the humanising aspect of super villains, Merlyn serves as an excellent example of a relatable villain who has qualities and habits that make him a rather relatable character. In the previously mentioned conversation between him and the Calculator, Merlyn is shown painting soldier figurines, which is obviously his pastime. This shows that, although a villain, he is someone who has a hobby, like an ordinary human being, which in turn makes him more fully developed as a character. Another example of his human side is an episode in which several fellow villains are at his apartment, watching the news, playing the popular board game Risk, and chatting about the current situation in the superhero community (Meltzer, Issue #4). The very idea that a villain is willing to let others, especially other villains whom he considers his professional rivals, into his apartment and play a board game with them seems absurd to the reader used to the black-and-white representation of heroes and villains.

However, by far the most sympathetic super villain in *Identity Crisis* is George "Digger" Harkness, better known as Captain Boomerang. When compared, his depiction and the depiction of the superhero the Elongated Man, Ralph Dibny, are in fact very similar in terms of how much emotional impact they have on the reader, thus blurring the line between a hero and a villain in terms of how presenting a character's emotional state makes them more deserving of compassion on the behalf of the reader. Namely, Ralph Dibny is devastated by the murder of his wife who was discovered to be pregnant with their child at the time of her demise, and thus is focused solely on finding her killer, as well as trying to move on with his

life while grieving from the loss of the love of his life (Meltzer, Issue #1-7). In a similar fashion, although on a distinctly smaller scale, the reader follows Captain Boomerang's reunion with the son whom he had abandoned after his birth and his subsequent and ultimately tragic attempt at redemption (Melzer, Issue #2-6). Namely, he has recently discovered that he has an illegitimate son, Owen Mercer, who is a young adult by the time Captain Boomerang becomes aware of his existence. They bond immediately, since Owen shares his father's talent for throwing boomerangs. Their first encounter is presented in an endearingly awkward way. The panels that show Captain Boomerang sitting in his car and desperately trying to calm himself in order to meet his son in the most collected manner possible show how emotionally fragile he really is. Moreover, while waiting for his son, Captain Boomerang is talking to the Calculator, who has provided him with the information about Owen's whereabouts. Calculator is trying to comfort Captain Boomerang and help him to muster up the courage to talk to Owen, while at the same time refusing Boomerang's pleas to find him a job, due to Boomerang being past his prime (Meltzer, Issue #4). This serves as a rather sympathetic portrayal of a man who made some regrettable decisions and is trying to repair the damage he has done, while simultaneously trying to prove his worth as a professional. Moreover, he has Calculator for a long-time friend who seems to genuinely care for him, despite the mostly professional nature of their relationship. As a result, this portrayal of Captain Boomerang is in complete contradiction with the usual depictions of villains' personalities and behaviour, characterised by attributes such as over-confidence and other one-dimensional traits. Later on, Boomerang teaches Owen how to throw boomerangs, since it appears that Owen shares his father's talent for throwing them. Owen even almost kills him by accident, but manages to save him from being impaled by a flying boomerang (Meltzer, Issue #5). The few panels showing them engaging in such a bonding activity with one another for the first and the last time before Boomerang's untimely death come across as rather heart-

warming. It shows to what extent Boomerang is willing to allow another person into his own life. He even takes up a job offer by Calculator to kill Jack Drake, the father of the current Robin, in order to regain his reputation and in turn make Owen proud of him. He succeeds in killing Jack Drake; however, he is shot by Drake in the process, since Drake was informed of his arrival in advance (Meltzer, Issue #5). Consequently, his death makes what little precious time he spent with his son, as well as his general portrayal in *Identity Crisis*, all the more tragic. At the very least, he inspires his son to become his successor as the new Captain Boomerang in order to continue and honour his legacy. All in all, George “Digger” Harkness is presented as one of the most sympathetic characters in the storyline, regardless of their affiliation. Thus, he is easily the most relatable among the villains in *Identity Crisis*, purely because of how grounded the circumstances in which he is presented for the most part of the novel are, and due to the fact that he arguably has by far the most immersing subplot in the graphic novel.

Another fascinating aspect of Captain Boomerang’s story arc is that it shows the bond among the super villains who form the group of the superhero Flash’s enemies, called the Rogues. Namely, when he finds out on the news that Captain Boomerang has died, his fellow Rogue, Leonard Snart, better known under the alias Captain Cold, calls other Rogues with the intention to comment on his death and ask about the funeral arrangements, and is subsequently surprised by the newly acquired information that Captain Boomerang has a son (Meltzer, Issue #6). This instance shows the close-knit type of relationship among the Flash’s super villains which seems rather genuine, instead of usual depictions of super villain associations whose members constantly bicker among themselves and try to deceive one another in every imaginable way.

Finally, even Bolt, a super villain with teleporting powers who is fairly insignificant for the storyline of *Identity Crisis*, serves as an example of the more vulnerable and human side of super villains who appear in the graphic novel. While trying to go through with a business deal (by stealing a package from two young and inexperienced criminals instead of paying for it, as arranged), he is shown to be sitting in his car nervously and talking to Calculator about the possibility of superheroes being present, as well as about whether the two delinquents are armed (Meltzer, Issue #1). He is afraid of either getting caught or killed by superheroes or of being shot by the delinquents. It is an unusual insight into the fears and the anxieties which trouble a super villain, such as the lack of confidence. Although his intentions are obviously treacherous, his emotional state is rather revealing of his true personality and thus rather relatable. Eventually, when he finally decides to steal the package, he is brutally shot by the criminals. He pleads for help from one of the criminals, who stands visibly petrified by the experience (unlike his friend who ran away), to call an ambulance. Horrified of what he has done, the young man immediately calls for ambulance using his mobile phone and stays by Bolt's side, comforting him in the process (Meltzer, Issue #1). This shows that even the minor villainous characters in *Identity Crisis* are represented as possessing typical human reactions and emotions, as well as acting on them. In this instance, Trey Williams, the young criminal who helps Bolt, shows sympathy, as well as regret, which are two basic human emotions which are almost never associated with villainous characters in any genre and medium.

## 6. Conclusion

To summarise, this paper has used the method of deconstruction to show how blurred the lines which separate a superhero from a super villain can be. The medium which served as an object of this analysis is the graphic novel *Identity Crisis*. However, before deconstructing

the characters in the graphic novel, the paper offers a typical representation of superheroes and super villains, as well as offering a brief presentation of the graphic novel as the medium responsible for the rise and development of the superhero genre. Jungian concepts - namely the *hero archetype* and the *shadow* – and Stuart Hall’s theory of representation were utilised to explain the standard tropes and ideas which are usually associated with the terms “superhero” and “super villain”, respectively. Another tool used to establish what superheroes represent in the popular culture was the explanation of their roots in the mythologies of ancient cultures, as well as in folklore. By explaining this, it was established that superhero stories fulfil the role of mythology in contemporary culture. Once the common representation of both superheroes and super villains was provided, it was dismantled by using the approach of deconstruction in the analysis of the superheroes and super villains in *Identity Crisis*. According to the deconstructionist approach, a binary opposition “superhero/super villain” was established, with “superhero” being recognised as the privileged notion to its counterpart. The next step was the reversal of the two opposites, which in turn allowed for a new interpretation of *Identity Crisis* – one in which one becomes aware of the negative aspects and rather questionable acts by superheroes, as well as the humanising and relatable aspects of super villains, while examining the examples extracted from the graphic novel and presented in the paper. The examples provided showed the instances where both superheroes and super villains were presented as acting “out of character”, thus presenting the superheroes featured in the novel as an oppressive fascist force and the villains as the underdogs of the society who are victimised by superheroes. In other words, the deconstructionist analysis shows that each of the both sides possesses the traits of the opposing side, and the only real difference is in the way they choose to act.

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## IDENTITY CRISIS – DECONSTRUCTION OF SUPERHEROES IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

### SUMMARY

Superheroes have become an integral part of American, as well as global, popular culture. It can be said that they constitute the modern-day mythology.

In this paper, the traditional concept of a superhero is brought into question by means of deconstructionist analysis of superheroes and super villains featured in the graphic novel *Identity Crisis*. In line with that, the superheroes are examined in relation to super villains with regard to the way they are represented in the graphic novel on the basis of numerous examples provided in the paper.

Besides deconstruction, the analysis also employs Stuart Hall's representation and Roland Barthes' myth in order to show how the line between a superhero and a super villain is blurred.

### KEY WORDS

Deconstruction, superhero, super villain, representation, myth, graphic novel, binary opposition, différence



## IDENTITY CRISIS – DEKONSTRUKCIJA SUPERJUNAKA U AMERIČKOJ POPULARNOJ KULTURI

### SAŽETAK

Superjunaci su postali neizostavan dio američke, a i svjetske, popularne kulture. Može se reći da oni sačinjavaju mitologiju današnjice.

U ovom radu, tradicionalni se koncept superjunaka dovodi u pitanje pomoću dekonstrukcijske analize superjunaka i super-zlikovaca koji se pojavljuju u grafičkom romanu Identity Crisis. U skladu s time, superjunake se proučava u odnosu na super-zlikovce na način na koji su predstavljeni u grafičkom romanu na osnovi brojnih primjera prikazanih u ovom radu.

Osim dekonstrukcije, u analizi su također korišteni reprezentacija Stuarta Halla i mit Rolanda Barthesa da bi se pokazalo kako se ne može definirati jasna granica između superjunaka i super-zlikovca.

### KLJUČNE RIJEČI

Dekonstrukcija, superjunak, super-zlikovac, reprezentacija, mit, grafički roman, binarna opozicija, différance