

# Batman as a Cultural Artefact

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## Batman as a Cultural Artefact

Završni rad

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Zadar, 2016.



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the late 1930s, during the Golden Age of Comic Books the popularity of comics as a form of art gave rise to various new superheroes like The Flash, Wonder Woman, Captain America, Captain Marvel (today's Shazam) and the most recognizable comic book character in popular culture along with Superman, Batman. The Dark Knight, as he is often called, was created by Bob Kane in 1939. Even those who do not have any interests in comic books know something about Batman, his origin and the principles which he stands for, fighting for good and justice and ridding Gotham City of crime. All these factors have made Batman a unique character and an important figure in popular culture which led to multiple screen adaptations like the TV Series *Batman* from 1966 starring the iconic Adam West, Tim Burton's *Batman* from 1989, *Batman: The Animated Series* from 1992, Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Trilogy* from 2005, 2008 and 2012, Zack Snyder's *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* from 2016 and many more animated movies and series. Since his creation in 1939, Batman has always had his place in the popular culture and over the years has changed and shaped according to the milieu. Some examples of these changes will be provided later in the paper.

The goal of this paper is to examine the relationship between Batman and the popular culture and the role of Batman as a cultural artefact which reflects the culture on the account of examples from comic books which are used as case studies. However, before the discussion on the relationship between Batman and popular culture, it is necessary to present comics as a form of literature which are worthy of a scholar's attention and deserve to be recognised as pieces of art. In this segment several sources are used: two articles “*Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative*” by Hillary Chute and “*Comics as Literature?*” by Aaron Meskin and a book called *Comics and Sequential Art* by American cartoonist Will Eisner. Furthermore, definitions like culture, popular culture and cultural artefact need to be explained in order to apply them accordingly by using the book *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An*

*Introduction* by John Storey as a source. Moreover, the uniqueness of Batman as a character and his seventy-seven year old canon is presented through a brief overview of Batman's history. In this chapter the fluidity of Batman's canon is emphasised and examples of its reflectiveness are given through the comic book *Detective Comics #29* and the graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns*. The following chapter deals with the foundations of Batman's character in order to determine the reasons of Batman's popularity and his durability in the popular culture by examining his origin, symbol, human side and his city, Gotham. The examples are provided from several case studies which are iconic for the Batman canon, such as Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: Year One*, Alan Moore's *Batman: The Killing Joke* and Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*. Furthermore, examples from the following comic books are used in order to depict the contemporary situation of the Batman canon: *Detective Comics #880* from the *Pre-New 52* period, three comic books from *The New 52* story arc *Batman #24*, *Detective Comics #0* and *Batgirl #13* along with a short extract from a comic book from the *DC Rebirth* story arc *Batman #3 "I Am Gotham: Chapter Three"*. Finally, Batman as a cultural icon is presented and juxtaposed with an equally recognisable character Superman. The analysis of the above mentioned graphic novels and comic books is supported by the collection of essays from the book *Riddle Me This, Batman! Essays on the Universe of the Dark Knight* by Kevin K. Durand and Mary K. Leigh.

## 2. COMICS AS A FORM OF LITERATURE

Before beginning the discussion on Batman, it is important to stress the depiction of the comic book as a form of literature. Comic book, the most famous example of sequential art, underwent great changes over the decades since its appearance in 1930s. Sequential art has only recently emerged as distinguishable discipline since such subject matter has been generally ignored by scholars due to the fact that it was considered unworthy as a form of discussion. Despite the fact that a comic book as a form of literary art is worthy of a scholar's attention, it is important to mention that not all comics are considered art, however, this paper is concerned with those that are considered to be a form of art.

At their beginning, the first comic books, around 1934, contained a random collection of short features and could be found in daily newspaper (Eisner 7). However, in the following decades, with the development of technology and the growing interest in comic books, a more extensive production had been introduced which resulted in full-colour publications, while the black-and-white printed on good paper still had a great appeal for the majority of the readers (ibid.). Furthermore, with the continuation of the growth of comics as a valid form of reading, a new more extensive form appeared the graphic novel. The term *graphic novel* was introduced as a marketing term in the 1960s due to the demand of: “. . . a vital underground publishing community that wanted works with greater impact in the medium of comics . . .” (Chute 453). With this term, the emphasis is put on the length of the story which is longer than the usual comic book. Moreover, due to the word *novel* which is the part of the term, the content of the story which can be fiction and non-fiction is brought into question. Many still disagree on the necessity of the term, thus, a broader term *graphic narrative* needs to be introduced: “In *graphic narrative*, the substantial length implied by *novel* remains intact but the term shifts to accommodate modes other than fiction. A graphic narrative is a book-length work in the medium of comics” (Chute 453). The appearance of this new form of comics brought into focus



the framework of their structure. According to Will Eisner, analysing a comic book can be perceived in the following way: “When one examines a comic book feature as a whole, the deployment of its unique elements takes on the characteristic of a language . . . Comics communicate in a ‘language’ that relies on a visual experience common to both creator and audience” (7). For the modern reader the image-word mix presents itself as a way of facilitating information, thus, comics can be called ‘reading’ in a wider sense than it is commonly referred to them. Moreover, according to Tom Wolf reading of words can be thought of as a human activity which involves symbol decoding (Eisner 8). Therefore, reading can be perceived as a form of perceptual activity. The format of a comic book thus presents a combination of word and image for which the reader requires both visual and verbal interpretative skills. In addition to this, the reading of the comic book can be considered as: “... act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit” (ibid. 8). Comics do not simply present a blend of the visual and the verbal, but it is rather the task of the reader to fill in the gaps and to merge these two components into a whole. Also, through this process the reader uses the back-and-forth reading method to search for meaning. Just like any language, the sequential art has its own grammar which is conveyed through a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. Comic book, a form previously considered unworthy of study, advanced greatly in its complexity and the fields it covers: “To explore today’s comics we need to go beyond pre-established rubrics: we have to re-examine the categories of fiction, narrative, and historicity” (Chute 452). The analysis of a comic book, in terms of referring to it as a form of literature, therefore, is quite extensive and various factors need to be taken into consideration. However, for and against arguments need to be presented in order to give a valid overview of the presentation of comics as literature.

To begin with, arguments in favour of the thesis of comics as a form of literature will be presented. Before beginning the discussion, a definition of literature is needed in order to make a clear distinction on which conditions comics can be defined as literature: “literary

discourse might be defined as discourse that is either an imitation illocutionary act or distinctly above the norm in its ratio of implicit to explicit meaning” (Meskin 226). In other words, literature is considered to be a literary text with implicit or explicit meaning. Also, another definition that is presented is the notion of literature: “(...) as highly valued writing” (ibid. 226). A problem presents itself in defining which writing is valued and which is not. One of the conditions which need to be met is the idea that comics are considered to be a linguistic medium, which means that they need to be regarded as examples of writing or texts. Nevertheless, the visual elements of comics are essential to them and should not be excluded from analysing this form of art as a whole; even though this could be the factor which prevents them from counting as literature. There is particularly no good reason to exclude comics from literature on the basis of visual or pictorial elements. There are also many forms of visual poetry in which the visual component plays a key role, however, it is still considered a part of literature. Some still deny that comics are literature, but admit that they contain literature in them (Meskin 227). In terms of trying to divide the visual and the linguistic component, no linguistic entity can be extracted from the standard comic which stands as art in its own right. Therefore, extracting the linguistic component could hardly represent the whole work of a comic: “Subtract the theatre from a work of musical theatre and you get music. But subtract the pictures from a comic book and you get nothing more than the linguistic part of a comic book” (Meskin 228).

Still, there is an important objection to comics being a form of literature which needs to be taken into consideration: “Perhaps it is the significance of the visual element in comics that precludes them from being literature. According to comics historian David Kunzle, comics involve ‘a preponderance of image over text’ ” (ibid.). If the emphasis is put more on image and less on text such considerations could be valid, however, deciding which element of a comic book will carry the narrative is a stylistic matter. According to this view, it might seem that the images in a comic are more important than other elements such as text or dialogue. Needless to

say, the text in a work of literature is always more important than any images in it. Furthermore, the layout is important and standard for comics, while it is contra-standard for literature. This means that having a layout that is aesthetically significant disqualifies something from being literature, i.e. it proves that something is not literature, in this case, comics, since an aesthetically significant layout is their typical feature. Also, a standard feature for comics and a contra-standard for works of literature is the presentation of traces of artists' actions, e.g. traces of actions that the penciller made in producing the images (Meskin 233).

There are many other related differences between comics and standard works of literature. The above mentioned differences represent the problematics of defining comics as a form of literature. The main problem seem to be the images, the typical features of comics, which seem to overshadow the most important feature of literature, the text. Thus, the best solution to resolve this impasse is by defining comics as a hybrid art form, a combination of words and pictures which create a complex whole (Meskin 234). In case of analysing comics as literature, the visual aspect of the comics should be looked upon as a rich source of additional content and a tool which extends comics as a form of art.

### 3. DEFINING POPULAR CULTURE

In order to make the connection between Batman and popular culture comprehensible, terms like culture, popular culture and cultural artefact need to be introduced. The goal of this chapter is to discuss certain terms necessary for the paper and to point out the difficulties of defining popular culture.

Culture is a broad term which can refer to many things or activities, still, Raymond Williams offers three broad definitions. Firstly, culture can be defined as: “a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development” (qtd. in Storey 1). This can refer to a cultural development of a civilisation, e.g. Ancient Greece with its great philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Secondly, culture can be concerned with: “a particular way of life, whether of a people, period or a group” (qtd. in Storey 2). This can be referred to various activities and festivities like sports, holidays etc. And thirdly, culture can be defined as: “the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity” (ibid.). The third definition represents: “the texts and practices whose principal function is to signify, to produce or to be the occasion for the production of meaning” (Storey 2). This would be the most appropriate definition to connect with the Batman’s canon. There are different ways of defining popular culture, however, in order to come close to a proper definition, Storey suggests combining the second and the third definition. In other words, popular culture could be defined as a particular way of life which is shaped by intellectual and artistic works (2). Even though there are several definitions of popular culture, due to the word *popular* it is necessary to include quantity in order to depict the factor of popularity (Storey 6). Furthermore, in regards to quality, popular culture is often juxtaposed with high culture which results in popular culture being defined as inferior culture (ibid.). This notion is based on the criterion of taste which is a complex principle that depends on class. Popular culture is also often seen as a synonym for mass-produced commercial culture, even though evidence like Charles Dickens’s work that was considered a part of the popular culture in the nineteenth century is nowadays regarded as an example of high culture (ibid.). Categorisation and division of culture in this way is thus blurry and depends on the interests of the contemporary society. Another way to explain popular culture is by using Gramsci’s term *hegemony* to explain the relation between dominant and subordinate groups in society which leads to defining popular culture: “. . . as a site of struggle between the

‘resistance’ of subordinate groups and the forces of ‘incorporation’ operating in the interests of dominant groups . . . a terrain . . . marked by resistance and incorporation” (Storey 10). Popular culture thus manages cultural artefacts for which society struggles to give more or less value. Watts explains the connection between culture and cultural artefact: “The total network of descriptive systems, or codes, will constitute the society’s *culture*, and within that culture the “material objects” can be considered as *cultural artifacts*” (19).

Batman is an example of a cultural artefact, since he is a product of popular culture and constantly shaped by it. Cultural artefacts are therefore said to be in constant flux: “A change in the needs of the society will create a change in one or more systems of rules and distinctive features, and any modification of one system will necessitate modifications in others” (ibid.). This opens up questions on the fluidity of Batman’s canon which is discussed in the following chapter.

#### 4. BATMAN’S CANON

Over the course of time, ever since he was created by Bob Kane in 1939, Batman has taken many shapes according to the milieu he was situated in. Trying to define Batman is a difficult task because of the extensive list of his comic book versions, some of which were also adapted for the screen. These versions of Batman represent the main medium for reaching a wider audience and popularising him. Such examples are Christian Bale, Ben Affleck, Adam

West and Michael Keaton, whose faces revealed and represented a new take on Batman, even though some elements of the films were adapted from the comic books, the greatest representatives of the Batman canon. Even the frowned upon versions of George Clooney and Val Kilmer are part of the Batman universe. It is hard to ignore that such adaptations boosted the popularity of Batman, e.g., Adam West's Batman, the television series from 1960s based on the interplay with the comics of the 1950s. Thus, the factor of popularity plays a great role in the canonical issue. Despite the fact that the Batman film versions play a great role in the Batman universe, this paper puts the emphasis on comic book versions and their representations of Batman in popular culture. A brief overview of Batman's history is to be given in order to depict the richness of the character.

At the beginning of the 1940s, during the Golden Age of Comics, Batman was introduced as a mysterious costumed detective, however, after introducing the character of Robin, in *Detective Comics #38*, the tone of the stories was changed and Batman became a cheerful father-figure who went on adventures with his young partner. Also, during this era, some of Batman's most memorable foes were introduced, such as the Joker and Catwoman.

During the Silver Age of Comics in the 1950s, Batman continued being the campy character, but the new science fiction adventures made the Batman canon more bizarre. However, the campiness achieved its culmination in the 1960s with Adam West's Batman, the television series.

After the cancellation of the Batman television series and the falling sales in the 1970s DC tried to improve the situation by rebooting the franchise and returning Batman to the basics in the role of a shadowy figure that worked alone, watched over Gotham by night and protected it by using fear as the main tool. The attempt of making Batman darker did not improve the situation until the late 1980s, more precisely, 1986, with Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, a four-part miniseries, which marks a turning point for the Batman canon which was

now oriented towards a darker and grimmer Batman, his most popular version today. With Miller's next successful series *Batman: Year One* in 1987, the dark tone of the story which presented the origins and the early days of Batman established a strong foundation for the more serious tone of the whole Batman canon. A year later, in 1988, Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* added on to Frank Miller's interpretation of the Joker as a psychotic and murderous character. This reflected on Batman in later stories with the idea that the hero is the one equally disturbed as the villains.

In the 1990s, the Batman comic books became even darker and more violent with Jeph Loeb's projects such as *The Long Halloween*, a 13-issue comic book limited series, which concentrated more on his detective roots. This was also the period of many screen adaptations, however, they were considered to be campy. Nonetheless, the animated series from 1995 achieved popularity both among children and older fans.

The contemporary period brought forth many changes like *The New 52* which relaunched and revitalised Batman along with all other on-going monthly superhero comic books. The goal was to damp down the violent and antisocial tendencies which Batman started to develop during the 1990s, thus, a clean slate was needed in order to confront Batman with the problems of the present (Huffman, "Batman: From The Campy Crusader To The Dark Knight").

The Batman universe can be referred to as a fictional canon. Batman's canon is said to be in flux. This particular characteristic represents a problem, since: "With a canon in flux, it is particularly difficult to sift through it and apply some theoretical framework to making sense of it" (Durand 81). In other words, it is difficult to determine what the authoritative Batman is and which version is his best representative. The discussion of canon is one of the most controversial topics in any scholarly discussions, since it is concerned with the best examples of a particular genre, a highly subjective criterion. Another problematic question concerns the

matter of how a certain canon is used as the authoritative standard by which all newer texts are judged (Durand 82). This can be applied to Batman through the example of the two-word title of the first movie of the revitalised Batman franchise by Christopher Nolan, *Batman Begins*, whose title: “(...) intentionally or not, (...) rejects much of the previous work that had gone before it as a failure to capture the Batman mythos” (Durand 85). Furthermore, the next movie with its title, *The Dark Knight*, serves to broaden the canon and include Frank Miller’s 1986 *The Dark Knight Returns*, a four graphic novel set. *The Dark Knight Returns* represents a reference with a particularly strong foundation to build a new version of Batman in an attempt to capture the Batman mythos, since its immense popularity served to return the character of Batman to a central role in popular culture and introduced the grim and gritty Batman, who comes hand in hand with the tone of his city, Gotham. *The Dark Knight Returns*, thus, plays a great role, because it emasculated him: “Only in the late Sixties and early Seventies did he begin to evolve into the masked Sam Spade we know today – and it was not until Miller arrived on the scene that the Dark Knight reached the peak of his masculine evolution (Fyre 95). This Batman successfully updated the character’s identity from the cartoonish Adam West version from the 1960’s Batman TV series. However, going back to the notion of popularity; Adam West’s Batman remains amazingly popular.

Keeping all this in mind, it is important to stress out that the canon of the Batman is not closed. Moreover, it is not limited to Nolan’s or even Miller’s vision and representation. These versions, like all the others: “. . . are the product of society from which they sprang . . . Batman has become an archetypal template for which a vision for and an experience of the world provides content” (Durand 92). In other words, Batman is a product of the milieu which means that his representation or his version takes shapes according to the contemporary society in which he is created. He reflects the culture, time, essence and problems of the moment into which he is embodied. Due to extensive material of the canon with the span of over seventy-



five years, some examples will be given regarding important years and events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for the United States.

The first year of Batman is the same year the Second World War began. The United States joined the war and the themes were particularly concerned with this matter. In 1939, before the introduction of his greatest enemy to be Joker, Batman did not have any great opponents. The detective aspect was emphasised, thus, he solved crime and fought against mad scientists like Karl Helfern also known as Doctor Death and his giant Indian servant Jabah (Detective Comics #29). The origin of the mad scientist's name is clearly German, therefore, the depiction of the enemy is clear. Furthermore, the stereotype of the Indian as a servant is also present. The first screen adaptation of the Caped Crusader who was played by Lewis Wilson was in 1943: "It consisted of fifteen screen episodes of low-budget camp and wartime angst" (Durand 88). One of the stories depicts the concerns of a nation at war: "[Batman] must try to foil the plot of a Japanese superspy who has hatched a plot to turn every scientist in America into a zombie" (ibid.). The war propaganda played a great role for military recruitment and it also made its way into the popular culture.

Another example in which Batman's reflectiveness started to increase is the period of the 1980s with the already mentioned Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, an older version of Batman which succeeded in perfectly capturing the zeitgeist:

Deep into roughly forty years of Cold War, having the experience of Vietnam, economic crises, outlandish inflation and high unemployment, the Iranian hostage affair, and with a sort of world-weariness pervading the public, Miller's Batman reflects much of the emotional tenor of the American populace (Durand 90).

The problems and concerns of common people reflected on Batman which turned Batman's idealism into realism. This strong depiction enabled *The Dark Knight Returns* to become iconic and influence the image of the authoritative Batman and future Batman incarnations ever since.

In the frame of fluidity of Batman's canon, *The Dark Knight Returns* represents the strong current which from 1986 directed other Batman incarnations.

The fluidity of Batman's canon introduces the notion of hybridity, since all versions, in a way, influence each other: “. . . each incarnation is an artifact of its culture, but it is also an artifact in which each successive incarnation of Batman is in conversation with the others” (Durand 92). Batman of *The Dark Knight Returns* is an example which is in direct conversation with the future Batman incarnations, since it strongly imprinted an image of a grim and gritty Batman. Another example of this conversation is the reboot of Doctor Death in the New 52 story arc, more precisely in *Batman: Zero Year*. The conversation revolves around the fact that Doctor Death was one of the first supervillains Batman encountered in 1939 which was honoured seventy-five years later in the New 52 story arc.

## 5. FOUNDATIONS OF BATMAN'S CHARACTER

After the discussion on Batman's canon and mentioning the popularity factor there are several questions which need to be asked. What makes Batman so popular? How did he endure? How did he succeed in being a great part of the popular culture for over seventy-five years? In order to answer these questions and untangle the complex web of Batman's relation to popular culture, the foundations of Batman's character need to be presented.

### 5.1. BATMAN'S ORIGIN

To begin with, a good starting point of this discussion would be Batman's origin and what he later stands for and represents to the citizens of Gotham. As a young boy, when Bruce Wayne was eight years old, he went to see a screening of a Zorro movie with his parents, the physician Dr. Thomas Wayne and his wife Martha, whose mention of occupation is small. He

watched his parents get brutally murdered by a mugger with a gun. This event is used in numerous interpretations as a key factor in constructing Batman's identity. In the New 52, Detective Comics #0 (November 2012), ten years after the death of his parents and during Bruce's training in the Himalayas, Shihan Matsuda, the legendary martial artist stresses out the importance of that event:

Affection and grief are human. Who you wish to become will have no need for them.

The death of your parents is the best thing that could have happened to you. It freed you from the constraints of mortality. You are destined to be more than human...you are destined to soar like a god (10).

This event gave Bruce Wayne a push and the necessary motivation to become Batman. As a result, he could become a symbol, something mythological, and even exalt to the level of godlikeness. Only after being freed from the constraints of mortality, i.e., having people he cared about murdered and experiencing deep psychological trauma, could he become Batman. In this context it is appropriate to introduce the term "Gothic Oedipus": "Mark Fisher argues that Batman is "a thoroughly Oedipal figure", because the way the young Bruce Wayne feels responsible for his father's (and mother's) death (...)" (Bundrick 26). Thus, the young Gothic Oedipus was defined by this event, which is why he is later, in his Batman period, prone to being emotionally distant and instead relies on logic, his deductive and combat skills in an effort to be a polymath, i.e., a person with highly developed expertise and abilities in all domains of life, which are great assets in his crime-fighting agenda of cleansing Gotham of crime and making certain that nobody relives his traumatic experience.

In fact, Batman is defined by the struggle to overcome his human failings. However, his earlier traumatic experience opens the doors for the readers to identify with Batman more easily, since he managed to channel his tragedy into a greater good which is crime-fighting.

## 5.2. THE SYMBOL OF THE BAT

The notion of the masked vigilante made a strong imprint on Bruce Wayne on the night his parents died, the night they went to see the screening of the Zorro movie, *The Mask of Zorro*. This intertextual element plays a great role for his future vigilantism. From that night on, the thought of the masked vigilante remained hidden inside of his mind. However, in *Batman: Year One #1*, eighteen years after the death of his parents and after receiving various forms of physical and mental training, Bruce Wayne attempts to become a vigilante and fails to do so due to lack of patience and lack of a symbol which would strike fear into his enemies. Thus, in a combination of the reminiscence of the night his parents died and in search of a message from his late father, Bruce Wayne experiences the following event: “Without warning, it comes...crashing through the window of your study...and mine...I have seen it before...somewhere...it frightened me...as a boy...frightened me...yes. Father. I shall become a bat” (February 1987: 22). As a result, Bruce Wayne combined the notion of the masked vigilante and the image of the bat to induce fear in his enemies. He used his own fear as a weapon, a tool which would help him in crime-fighting. In the *Dark Knight Returns* the mark of the bat stayed with him since he was six years old, when he fell through a hole in the ground near the Wayne Manor and saw the future Batcave for the first time:

Then ... something shuffles. Out of sight ... Something sucks the stale air ... and hisses. Gliding with ancient grace ... unwilling to retreat as his brothers did ... eyes gleaming, untouched by love or joy or sorrow ... breath hot with the taste of fallen foes ... the stench of dead things, damned things, surely the fiercest survivor - the purest warrior ... glaring, hating ... claiming me as his own (The Dark Knight Returns, February 1986: 1.18-19).

The alpha bat that he encountered presents the image he strives to achieve with Batman by trying to establish dominance in the wilderness of Gotham City.

Bruce Wayne took the symbol of the bat to become something which represented for him fear itself. He conquered his childhood fear of bats by becoming what he fears. Fear, the purest primal feeling, represents power. He uses it to maintain the alpha dominance in his role of Gotham's guardian. His father's admiration for Zorro and vigilantes as such made a strong impression on Bruce and his shaping into Batman. The role of Zorro represents strong evidence of the influence which popular culture had in creating Batman. The conversation between Batman and popular culture that began at the starting point of Batman enabled him to endure over seventy-five years.

### 5.3. UNMASKING BATMAN

To present the relationship between Batman and Bruce Wayne as personalities of the same person one needs to question the identity as a whole. Is Batman Bruce Wayne's alter ego or is it the other way around? In this segment of representing Batman's character it is best to reflect on Grant Morrison's attempt to rebuild him as a hero through construction and deconstruction of Batman in the pre-new 52 story arc.

In order to rebuild the hero, Morrison first needed to break Batman down with the help of his character Dr. Hurt who is, in a way, Batman's psychiatrist through this process. Dr. Hurt is here to destroy Batman's self-image of the manly crime-fighter by bringing back the lost space oddities of the 1950s and 60s, the cartoonish and silly side of Batman, which brings into question the sanity of the character and the seriousness of his whole identity which he with years of training and crime-fighting forcefully tried to establish. However, since Batman has a way out of every situation, even in the state of going mad and losing his identity, he prepared a type of backup identity based on the last words of his father, Dr. Thomas Wayne, the phrase "Zorro in Arkham". Bruce didn't quite understand his father's last words and it remained in the

back of his mind and resurged as the phrase “Zur En Arrh”. The phrase triggers his wild alter-ego which is based on the raw emotional pain Bruce experienced as a young boy. In other words: “Morrison’s overall project entails the creation of a holistic Batman capable of embracing the entirety of his seventy-year publication history as well as the emotional baggage that accompanies it” (Frye 102). So, Morrison’s goal was to confront Batman with himself and his self-image which had taken different shapes over the course of time and finally to question his sanity through the whole process. Nevertheless, all these fragments that Morrison stresses out represent the complexity of Batman’s identity.

An important part of the Batman persona which also needs to be discussed is the billionaire playboy Bruce Wayne who is, in fact, Batman’s secret identity. That being said, it is more likely that Batman is the secret identity of Bruce Wayne which Grant Morrison points out in the graphic novel *Batman: Arkham Asylum*. After luring Batman into Arkham Asylum, the psychiatric hospital for the criminally insane, in a conversation between the villains Black Mask and Joker, Black Mask wants to take off Batman’s mask and see his face, after which Joker replies: “Oh, don’t be so predictable, for Christ’s sake! That is his real face” (*Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*, 1989: 40). Thus, Bruce is the performance, he puts on his suit, his sophisticated demeanour, his sarcasm and a touch of naivety in order to blend into society and keep his real persona hidden. This type of presentation to the world is a performance: when he is in the Batcave and allowed to take off the mask of the billionaire Bruce Wayne which he presents to the world that is who he really is. Furthermore, Scott Snyder points out in the New 52 story arc that the citizens of Gotham do not even want to make a connection between Bruce Wayne and Batman. Alfred, Bruce Wayne’s butler, makes a comparison of Batman’s crime-fighting with his time in theatre while he was a young man:

I remember being very concerned with the verisimilitude of every character I played. Was I using the correct dialect? Was my costume accurate? . . . They want to believe in you up there,

Bruce. The audience wants to forget who's under the mask. But they don't want to forget because of obfuscation...no, they want to forget it's you by virtue of the passion of your performance. They want to be transported, Bruce (Batman #24, December 2013: 46-47).

Batman, thus, needs to be an idea and not a person. He has to be a symbol and free himself from the constraints of the world in order to perform and to transport his audience and give them hope of a better world. Bruce Wayne is a necessary part of that performance and the symbiotic relationship between these two sides of the same coin allows Batman to function as a character and keep his mythos alive.

The process which Bruce Wayne had to go through to become Batman is admirable. With a lot of effort, a powerful will and undeniable excessive resources he was able to make a myth out of himself, yet underneath the suit he is just a human being. This fact captivates the readers and allows them to be closer to the character.

#### 5.4. BATMAN AND GOTHAM

Batman's agenda is not only shaped by his traumatic experience, but also by the city he was raised in and which is responsible for producing criminals which, to begin with, caused his traumatic experience. Thus, Batman and Gotham City are inseparable concepts and one does not exist without the other. It is essential to the Batman mythos.

The name *Gotham* with its similarity to the word *gothic* gives us the insight into the gothic and grim atmosphere of the city. In the first few appearances the city Batman protected was identified as New York, however: "Bob Kane envisioned his version of New York as a maze of concrete canyons where the full moon cast black shadows behind a man with a cloak (Daniels DC 39)" (Duncan 148). Thus, Gotham was born in order to introduce the darker atmosphere. Both Gotham City and Batman were created in the epoch of fear in 1939, when the country was still coming out of the Depression. The increasing urbanization in America's cities was creating more slums, gang violence and political corruption. This reality was

reflected in Batman's stories and Gotham which was shaped by the mentioned situation into a gothic and threatening city (ibid.). Still, the atmosphere was lightened with the introduction of Batman's sidekick, Robin, the Boy Wonder, in *Detective Comics #38* in April, 1940. The real grim and gothic atmosphere of Gotham was reintroduced more than forty years later, more accurately in 1986, with Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. In the course of time, as it developed, Gotham seemed to extend its function from a setting to a character, a living organism, which has its own personality. In the *Detective Comics #880* (September 2011) Commissioner Gordon, in a conversation with Dick Grayson, points out this notion: ". . . I'm talking about the bricks. The stone. The damn bedrock. There are times I feel a dark heart down there, Dick. A dark, malformed heart. Beating and beating" (September 2011: 6). As a living organism, Gotham produces the criminals and madmen in the same way it gave birth to Batman. In a way, Gotham keeps Batman in the crime-fighting business due to the fact that it is a dark and vicious place, perfect for raising criminals. Furthermore, in the same issue, Joker gives an insight into the etymology of the name Gotham: "Do you even know what Gotham means, little bird? Do you?! It means a safe place for goats! And do you know what preys on goats? Bats..." (ibid.). Gotham is a place where Batman preys on common criminals and villains. This analogy extends the thesis that Batman depends on Gotham which keeps his mythos alive. However, there is evidence that Batman makes Gotham the way it is, even though Gotham is famous for its dark history even before the appearance of the Dark Knight. The presence of Batman is responsible for producing madmen in Gotham City which can be proved on Miller's introduction of the character Dr. Wolper in *The Dark Knight Returns* who attempts to analyse Batman on a psychological level:

Batman's psychotic sublimate/psycho-erotic behaviour pattern is like a net. Weak-egoed neurotics, like Harvey, are drawn into corresponding intersecting (sic) patterns.



You might say Batman commits the crimes...using his so-called villains as narcissistic proxies . . .” (The Dark Knight Returns, February 1986: 1.47).

In other words, Batman is responsible for the dark and gloomy atmosphere that surrounds Gotham City, because he acts like a magnet which attracts mentally ill and dangerous people and triggers or even amplifies the full effect of their illness. Moreover, the famous Arkham Asylum which is situated at the outskirts of Gotham City also plays a great part, since that is the place where all Batman’s foes are confined, after he catches them. In the *Arkham Asylum* graphic novel Joker makes Batman discover the thin line which divides him from his foes: “I’m afraid that the Joker may be right about me. Sometimes I...question the rationality of my actions. And I’m afraid when I walk through those asylum gates...when I walk into Arkham and the doors close behind me...it’ll be just like home” (Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth, 1989: 19). Batman seems to notice the deep connection and illness which are embodied in Gotham and burden its citizens. Even Batman is not immune to the effects which Gotham has on all of its citizens. In the *Batgirl #13* the writer Gail Simone goes even a step further when her newly created character, Knightfall, in a fight with Batgirl makes a comment about the connection between the Arkham Asylum and Gotham: „Arkham isn't behind a walled fortress anymore. It's spilled out. It's out there“ (Batgirl #13, 2012: 9). In other words, the madness is present even in Gotham City and it makes an essential part of it. No citizen seems to be able to outrun its effect. Still, in these conditions and with the constant threat of a breakout from the Arkham Asylum, the citizens of Gotham will not leave the city and embrace it as a part of them, which Hugo Strange stresses out:

When you grow up in Gotham. When you’re born into the dying of it all. Something...happens to you. This whole city. Its fetid walls always falling. Its soiled mold always spreading. Its people, forever longing for its sky, forever sinking into its

graves. Somehow, you see all of that decay as part of yourself. As if its fate is your fate.

As if its pain is your pain (Batman #3, 2016: 14-15).

Gotham shapes its citizens into what they are and it drags them along into its darkness. It is an inevitable process for the Gothamites, the citizens of Gotham. Thus, they are like goats that follow the instructions of their goatherd, Gotham, and do as it commands. However, Batman, as a Gothamite, refuses to be like every other citizen of Gotham, a goat; thus, he wages war against crime in an effort to change it. Despite that, Joker points out an interesting fact during their final confrontation in *The Killing Joke*: “You had a bad day, and it drove you as crazy as everybody else ... only you won’t admit it! You have to keep pretending that life makes sense, that there’s some point to all this struggling!” (Moore *Killing*) (Duncan 153). Batman is like every other citizen, in other words, a part of Gotham.

He cannot function without Gotham and vice-versa. Batman was always iconic, even during the brief New York period, but he needed a place with a soul that would make him into a fully intellectualised icon and this was done through the introduction of Gotham. It defined him in the same way as he defined it. In his never-ending battle against crime, he accepts the role of Sisyphus, a patron of Gotham who is always vigilant in its shadow (*ibid.*). Furthermore, by creating and using a new fictional city, the charisma and problems of a real city like New York were excluded. In this way, a lot of space is left for different interpretations which enable the fluidity of the canon. The fluidity, in addition, allows Gotham to function as a mirror, to reflect the popular culture and to be adaptable to the problems of the contemporary society: “As culture produces a Batman that reflects both its hopes and dreams but also its suspicions, fears, and, at times, cynicism, so too, the culture of Gotham creates the Batman” (Durand 91). In other words, Gotham is the spring that spouts the changes into the fiction and makes Batman change accordingly.

## 6. BATMAN AS A CULTURAL ICON

After going into depth and presenting the foundations of the character, it is important to discuss the factors which made Batman into the cultural icon that he is today. There are various factors, and as it was already mentioned, the idea of Batman was iconic from the beginning and it intrigued people. But how did he manage to endure and become such a great part of the popular culture? In order to answer these questions one needs to take into consideration the foundations of Batman's character along with some external factors.

To begin with, the human factor makes a good starting point. For this analysis a comparison between Batman and another famous fictional character from the comic book world, Superman, needs to be drawn. The fact that Batman is just a human who does not have any superpowers is what makes him so popular, more accessible, and easier to relate to. He only uses his human mind and body and pushes them way beyond limits in order to compensate lacking said superpowers. Superman, on the other hand, is not human: "He looks human. He

can pass for human. But he is not human; and his alienness alienates him from the possibility of even being considered a proper sort of role model for human behaviour” (Durand 86). It is true that Superman is an alien who is considered to be an immigrant and he represents the image of America as a nation of immigrants. The human qualities which he embodies are admirable and the fact that he is just as recognisable as Batman is unquestionable. The emphasis is here put on the biological aspect of human beings and their limitation, while Superman, on the other hand, almost does not seem to have any. In other words, his limitation as a being is on a whole other level. Superman does not know the limitations of a human being. To consider a fictional character as a serious role model is a strange thing to do, however, people always seem to involve themselves into fiction and try to imagine their actions and decisions in the fictional world. The superhero of the comic book world seems to represent an even deeper connection with the readers, considering the fact that their comic book hero has been present in their life since their childhood and embodied their perfect role model. Thus, with a more than seventy-five year old tradition, both Superman and Batman had time to build themselves up as role models. But the human factor plays a great role in it, and since Superman’s: “(...) experience of the world is so unlike any human’s experience could even *possibly* be that it makes it impossible to identify with the Man of Steel” (Durand 86). Batman’s humanness gives him the edge over Superman, since: “(...) he is a human character capable of pain, bleeding, and death in the same ways any human is” (ibid.). That is why it is easier to identify with Batman than with Superman. Trying to push beyond one’s limits, striving to become a better person and doing more good acts are admirable human qualities which any human can recognise.

Furthermore, Superman plays another role which Batman does not, and that is the role of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *uberman*, or as it is sometimes translated “over-man” (Durand 87). Superman represents the transcendence from the human conditions by exercising his superpowers to show his dominance over the human race. He is not bound by morality and the

structures of a society, since he is not a human being, but an alien from a planet called Krypton. The Nietzschean Superman does not abide by the law, since he: “(...) lives as a law unto himself. His actions are deeply self-interested, and he promotes his own well-being as the highest good, expecting others to do the same, and finding them lesser when they cannot” (ibid.). However, the Superman of Clark Kent tries to abide by the law and uses his power to protect the weak, stand for truth and justice, in other words, to live the American way. Thus, Superman cannot be equated with the definition of *uberman*.

On the other hand, Batman does not have a clear-cut philosophical foil. While it is easy to imagine Superman atop of a building, sun shining behind him, and the wind whipping his cape, the image of Batman is placed in the dark alleyways with him lurking in the shadows, fighting the good fight, and later treating his wounds from those numerous fights, in the Batcave. Batman can be seen as a vigilante who is in a never-ending war for justice in which he employs the memory of his parents as a tool of vengeance, a foible quality which puts emphasis on his humanity. Thus, with enough resources to establish an empire in order to finance one's crime-fighting, a powerful will, and a butler, one can easily imagine being the Batman. However, being Superman, an alien from another planet with extraordinary superpowers, can be seen as a farfetched scenario (Durand 88).

Due to the sort of accessibility and the fact that Bruce Wayne is an example of a quintessential human, readers and viewers can identify with him. This identification represents one of the key features which makes the Batman canon unique. Another feature that plays a great role in the long-lasting tradition of the Batman canon is its adaptability which is manifested through the reflectiveness of the Batman universe of the society and the milieu in which it is situated. The reflectiveness is presented through the stories and the problems in them which Batman confronts. This allows him to relate to the problems of society in every era. Furthermore, the adaptability provides writers with an opportunity to take a new approach on

Batman's origin story or even to add something completely new which enriches the character. Thus, Batman is a product of the popular culture and constantly shaped by it which enabled him to survive more than seventy-five years.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Batman's canon has been developing for over seventy-five years. During that period Batman took many forms and shapes, the process which transformed him from the Caped Crusader to the Dark Knight. Nonetheless, Batman, since his creation in 1939 by Bob Kane, has been considered an iconic figure not only for DC Comics, but for comic books in general. This occurred due to several factors, the two most important being the factors of popularity and adaptability.

The emphasis in this paper was put on Batman's canon and the foundations of his character through evidence from significant comic books and graphic novels which shaped him in the eyes of the popular culture like *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Batman: Year One*, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* etc. in order to depict Batman as a cultural artefact which is in a constant state of flux. This allows him to be reflective of the society and open to change. However, before plunging into the depth of the character, an analysis of comic books as a form of literature was necessary. In that segment, for and against arguments of comics as a form of literature were presented in order to depict the problematics

of defining or categorising comic books as literature. Furthermore, comics as an image-word mix represent a hybrid art form and its visual aspect should be considered a rich source of additional content. The chapter on defining popular culture was necessary for establishing a theoretical framework which contains definitions of culture, popular culture and cultural artefact. In the discussion on Batman's canon, the connection between comics and screen adaptations was touched upon to show the broadness of the character, his admirable quality of adapting and the fluidity of the canon itself. The foundations of Batman's character were used as a tool for untangling the web of Batman and the popular culture and to resolve the matter of Batman's popularity and durability. Also, this segment allowed going into the depth of the character which includes exploring Batman's and Bruce Wayne's origin, representation of the symbol of the bat, analysing the human side of Batman and its importance, stressing the significance of the setting, i.e. Batman's city, Gotham, and their interconnected relationship in which one cannot function without the other. Thus, Batman became a fully realised character once he had got an appropriate setting. Furthermore, Gotham enables a contact between Batman and reality by manifesting problems and concerns of the contemporary society. Lastly, Batman as a cultural icon was presented with great emphasis on the human factor which was introduced through juxtaposition with another famous comic book character, Superman. This factor allows the readers to identify with Batman more easily which is the reason why Batman is such a beloved and popular character.

This is a broad topic for research and it contains a large fictional world; however, insufficient attention is paid which results in literature on this topic to be scarce. The literary aspect of Batman is even neglected to a greater extent. The paucity of literature, thus, makes finding adequate sources a difficult task, but it gives a lot of space for future research due to the broadness and richness of the topic.

To sum up, with his long-lasting tradition, Batman plays a crucial role in the popular culture. With time, his popularity seems to be constantly rising as he takes on different shapes and forms according to the milieu. Bruce Wayne represents a quintessential human, a role model which all people who try to better themselves strive to be. Due to factors like his humanness, accessibility, adaptability and reflectiveness of the society, Batman succeeded in becoming a unique character and an essential part of the popular culture. Batman, thus, is not just part of comic books, but has succeeded in crossing to the realm of literature, as a topic worthy of study.

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## BATMAN AS A CULTURAL ARTEFACT

### SUMMARY

Since his first appearance in 1939, Batman has played a great role in the popular culture as an iconic figure. During the period of over seventy-five years Batman followed the social and political changes and managed to reflect the problems and concerns of the society in his comic books.

This paper deals with the question of defining comic books as a form of literature. Furthermore, it examines the factors that allowed Batman to be such a great part of the popular culture through examples taken from iconic comic books and graphic novels of the Batman canon, such as Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: Year One*, Alan Moore's *Batman: The Killing Joke* and Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*. The provided examples serve to present Batman as a cultural artefact and to manifest the fluidity of Batman's canon.

With his increasing popularity Batman continues to be an essential part of the popular culture and a unique character in the world of comics which makes him an interesting topic and worthy of study.

### KEY WORDS

Batman, cultural artefact, popular culture, canon, comic books

## BATMAN KAO KULTURNI ARTEFAKT

### SAŽETAK

Od svoje prve pojave 1939. godine Batman je kao ikonski lik igrao veliku ulogu u popularnoj kulturi. U razdoblju od preko sedamdeset i pet godina Batman je pratio društvene i političke promjene te uspjevao odraziti probleme i brige društva u svojim stripovima.

Ovaj se rad bavi definiranjem stripova kao oblik književnosti. Također se ispituju čimbenici koji su omogućili Batmanu da postane tako važan dio popularne culture kroz primjere iz ikonskih stripova i grafičkih romana kao što su Frank Millerov *The Dark Knight Returns* i *Batman: Year One*, Alan Mooreov *Batman: The Killing Joke* i Grant Morrisonov *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*. Dani primjeri služe kako bi predstavili Batmana kao kulturni artefact te predočili fluidnost Batmanovog *canona*.

Sa svojom rastućom popularnošću Batman nastavlja biti ključan dio popularne kulture i jedinstven lik u svijetu stripova što ga čini zanimljivom temom te vrijednim proučavanja.

### KLJUČNE RIJEČI

Batman, kulturni artefact, popularna kultura, canon, stripovi