

# Blindness and Superheroes

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Blindness and Superheroes

Diplomski rad

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Human kind may be accused of many things, but lacking imagination is not one of them. It can be said that the most evident and lasting monument to human imagination is art and artistic expression. From the simplest cave drawings depicting scenes seen in everyday life to mindboggling installations depicting the artist's view of the world, art has followed humans through every step of their progress and development. It must be noted that art itself does not come in only one form and it is not limited by a certain technique but rather, it can be seen, heard, touched, and smelt, even tasted. In other words, it can be experienced through all the senses. Also, it is highly personal in the sense that a piece of art that resonates with someone, to somebody else might be utter nonsense.

As previously stated, art can be experienced through all human senses (sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste), but what happens when one or more sense is damaged? It is known that sight is the most important human sense and that the eyes are the most important sense organ. This is because human beings take in up to 80% of information about their surroundings through sight/vision. Following the so far established train of thought, one may wonder about how blind people or people with impaired vision can experience art. Imagination has provided the solution for this problem as well. In the minds of artists' who are aware or who are blind/visually impaired themselves, sparked an idea and thus tactile art was created. The blind and visually impaired people are one part of a larger group that includes people with other physical or mental disabilities. That group is widely known as people with disabilities or disabled people.

Whether through imagination, sheer will or something else, humans have adapted and learned to live with disability, as well as participate in everyday life along their peers. For this each of them must be respected. For example, Loise Braille, who lost his vision himself, devised a tactile script in order to allow himself to read. His script was published, and it

subsequently became the means that allowed blind people across the world to read. Today, his creation is known worldwide as the Braille script.

What is more, there is a language used within the community of disabled people that is unique to the group. There are certain phrases used only by the members of the group to describe everyday life. For example, a visually impaired or blind person may refer to a friend as their *seeing* friend, their pets, usually dogs, are considered to be service animals and are referred to as *guide* or *seeing* dogs. A disabled person, when referring to someone without a disability, may use the term *able-bodied* or *non-disabled*. These are only a few simple and quite possibly irrelevant examples, but they provide a glimpse into the everyday life of a person who finds him or herself in need of such terms. Simply living life in a world that was not and still is not designed to fit the needs of a disabled person can be seen as artful living.

Everything stated so far serves a purpose and that is to introduce one of the key topics of this thesis paper. That topic is disability culture. It is a deceptively simple concept under whose umbrella a group's shared history, trauma and language coexist.

As was stated before, the world humans have created for themselves is often not adapted to meet the needs of disabled people. For example, a person who uses a wheelchair will find it difficult or even impossible to access a building if there is no access ramp. A person who is blind, in need of shampoo and without someone to help him or her, will find themselves in a conundrum if there are no Braille markings on the packaging. Mentioned examples may seem trivial to someone who has never experienced the frustration of not being able to do something not because one does not want to but, because one literally cannot. People without disabilities never have to think about such things but for people who live with disability such simple tasks truly pose a challenge. The sad truth is the challenges do not stop at the trivial level, but they grow and progress into underestimation, prejudice, and judgement.

Considering the stated, it might become apparent that disability, while primarily a medical concept, can be interpreted as both a social and cultural construct.

Overcoming everything that was mentioned and building a successful life with disability is the reason disabled people are often referred to as real-life superheroes.

This brings the existing introductory discussion to another point and that is the issue of representation. It can be said that the figure of a thriving disabled person is rarely seen in popular culture creations. A disabled main character is arguably even rarer. Typically, supportive roles are reserved for them. Disability is often portrayed as the ultimate punishment or as the means of getting rid of a character that no longer serves the plot or deserves to be a part of the unfolding story.

However, through imagination, a medium in which no rules apply, stereotypes may be challenged and broken, stories may span over fictional universes and real-life decades was created. The medium in question is sequential art, graphic novel or simply, a comic book. Possibly the most notable figure to come out of a comic book is the figure of a superhero. He or she may be a superpowered alien or soldier, a genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist with or without an obsession with bats, a mythological, warrior princess or a boy who acquires arachnid superpowers after a radioactive member of the class bites him. A question may arise in one's mind at this point. How does this topic relate to the already established discussion? The answer can be found in the figure of a disabled superhero.

He or she may be seen as the representative of both popular culture and disability culture. The existence of such a figure simultaneously subverts every single well-established idea, or prejudice, about disabled people and superheroes alike.

Keeping in mind the existing diversity within the community of disabled people, this thesis paper will focus on blindness thus making the blind superhero its main character. The figure of a blind superhero provides a unique opportunity to explore assumptions and



prejudice about blindness and, by extension, disability itself, as well as analyse their subversion. For the purpose of the research contained within this paper the following blind superheroes and their narratives were selected: Daredevil from the same-named series, Madame Web and Julia Carpenter from the Spider-Man series, Destiny and Blindfold from the X-Men series. All of them belong to the Marvel universe. The goals of the research are as follows: explain the terms disability and disability culture, explain the term blindness, its lore and cultural significance, analyse the mentioned characters from the Marvel universe and explain the role blindness plays in their respective narratives. The methods chosen to deal with the established goals are the case study and literary analysis.

The thesis paper itself is divided into several chapters. Chapter one provides the introduction to the paper. Disability culture is presented and explained in the second chapter. The third chapter focuses on blindness. The fourth chapter deals with the mentioned superheroes and their narratives. Finally, the fifth and final chapter serves as the conclusion of the entire thesis paper.

## 2. DISCUSSING DISABILITY AS A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCT

To start with and in order to ensure maximum clarity of the topic at hand, it is necessary to explain the concept of disability from a medical point of view.

According to the data available on WHO's (World Health Organization) website, there are 1.3 billion people with various disabilities living across the world today and that number makes 16% of the entire population or 1 in every 6 people (URL 1). In UNCRDP (United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability), Article 1, disability is defined as long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairment (URL 2). If one were to closely consider the mentioned numbers and the following definition, several conclusions would present themselves. To start with, even though it may seem remote and foreign, disability is unfortunately not rare. Moreover, it does not discriminate, but rather, it can happen to anybody regardless of age, race, sex, religion, or status. Furthermore, disability may come from a congenital malformation, follow a disease or a traumatic event and it can affect either the mind or the body or both as well as vary in degree and severity. This means that it can range from being virtually undetectable to the observer, to leaving the person who carries it unable to take care of him or herself, perform basic, everyday tasks making them fully dependent on the help of others. Although the degree of disability may vary, one thing remains a constant. Its appearance will undoubtedly change the life of the person who is disabled but also, the lives of people surrounding them. This entails forming new habits, relearning behaviours, and reacquainting oneself with the world in the new context.

Based on everything that was stated so far, one may conclude that seeing disability as only a medical concept is inadequate. It affects every aspect of life and infiltrates its every dimension. That is why disability can also be viewed as a social and cultural construct.

According to Ellis, social and cultural models of disability have emerged as a response to oversimplifying and medicalizing the concept (2). The same author states that the social

model of disability originated in the UK, and it views disability as an obstacle that highly restricts one's social activities and greatly influences one's abilities to join the workforce (2). However, despite playing a significant role in raising awareness about disability, this model excludes individual experiences, impact of disability and cultural imagery associated with impairment (3).

As a reaction to this, the cultural model of disability appeared. As Mitchell and Snyder state, it proposes the idea that disability is a complex relationship between social, biological, and cultural elements (qtd. in Ellis 3).

Based on the previously mentioned data and presented definitions, one may conclude that disability is a medical concept that, once present in an individual's life, has both social and cultural implications. For example, a person's vision may be impaired due to a trauma, or an illness. It will inevitably influence the individual's ability to participate in regular social activities, from the ability to work, to participation in various forms of human relationships. Furthermore, it will place the individual within a social group he or she might have never considered and force them to adopt a new way of dealing with life. Disability will not change the individual at their core, but it will force them to adopt new habits, learn new behaviours, and acquaint themselves with technology and methods that will facilitate their participation in everyday life. For blind or visually impaired people, this entails the following: learn the Braille script and master the use of all the gadgets that use it such as the BrailleNote, learn how to use the white cane, learn how to navigate their surrounding with the help of a guide dog and learn how to rely more on their other senses. An interesting piece of information is that the white cane and oversized, dark sunglasses are, arguably, the most recognisable symbols associated with blindness.

What is more, the interests one may have probably will not change after disability but participating and enjoying them may merit a certain adjustment. It is highly possible that

through this process of relearning how to exist within the new context, the person will feel isolated and frustrated at times. Also, it is likely that he or she will feel as if they no longer belong to their community. The feeling of isolation and non-belonging may be further amplified if the person does not realize that he or she is not the only one disabled, and if he or she does not see people in similar conditions represented around themselves. Media and its various forms provide ample space for such representation. It is no secret that there is great power in the media and that with that power comes great responsibility. Through it, people's perception can be shaped and directed, information can be transferred, and an individual feeling out of place may be consoled.

## 2.1 Presenting Attitudes Towards Disability and Discussing Disability in the Media

According to Hall, representation links language and meaning to culture and the easiest way to define it would be to say that it is meaningful use of the language to represent the world to other people (11). It was already established that disability changes the life of a person in all its aspects. The person finds him or herself in a new context, living through experiences unique to the form of their own disability. Someone who is not disabled or a person disabled in a different way may not understand the experience of their fellow human unless his or her experience is not represented in some way. To explain this in simple terms, a proverb found in almost every language can be used and the proverb is: out of sight; out of mind. Essentially, this means that if disability, disabled people, and their experiences are not represented to the public, the public will not understand or even care. From this isolation, the sense of not really belonging to the community one is supposed to fit into, the sense of being the other can spawn. Being different, or other, as Hall puts it, is not good or bad but it is necessary for creating meaning and representing it to the world (237-238).

A question may arise in one's mind at this point and it is: why is this important? The answer lies in the following. If the true wealth of the world is found in diversity, does it not

mean that every social group and its unique experiences deserve to be considered as valuable? If human beings learn the most by observing other humans, can it not be said that every group can contribute to the general knowledge? Disabled people are not excluded from this. There is a lot that can be learned from a person who manages to live and thrive in a world that is not fully adapted to them or their needs. There is an interesting contradiction in the way disability and disabled people are perceived by the public. On one hand, weakness, helplessness, defencelessness, vulnerability, isolation, defectiveness, and otherness are commonly associated with the terms. On the other hand, disabled people are often referred to as real-life superheroes.

In the Foreword to the New Edition of Striker's work *A History of Disability*, Mitchell and Snyder provide an overview of how people with disability were perceived from ancient times to today. The perception shifted from the belief that disabled people should be left in nature to die of exposure, to segregating them into specialized institutions and finally, to recognition that people with disability have potential, that their experiences matter and that they can contribute to the society (vii). Further example of these attitudes is evident in the approach to the education of disabled people. According to Nordstrom, first attempts at educating disabled people were organized by the Church in the Middle Ages, segregation into specialized institutions followed and, finally, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was recognized that disabled people deserve to be included in education with their peers (2). From the stated, it is obvious that attitudes towards the disabled progressed from total exclusion, over partial inclusion to recognition that they are a part of society, that their experiences matter and that they deserve to participate in everyday life alongside their fellow human beings. Through the process of inclusion, a lot has been done. The education process is being adapted to suit the needs of disabled students. Business owners are being encouraged to employ disabled people through offering financial support and different benefits. Disabled people are being

encouraged to participate in sports. Disabled characters as well as disabled cast members have started appearing on screens and their roles are not always secondary.

According to Thomas, when it comes to disabled literary characters, they are often placed in the background and serve as aliens whose main purpose is to provoke emotional reactions from other characters in the narrative as well as the readers (9). The same author claims that disability is often used as a metaphor which may result in misrepresenting the experiences disabled people live through on an everyday base as well as, trigger the reader's stereotypical thinking about disability (10-11). To put the mentioned in simpler terms, disability and disabled characters are often used as a prop to highlight the main character's humanity, noble and benevolent inclinations as well as their compassion. For the reader, the presence of a disabled character may also trigger an emotional response. For example, rage if a tragic destiny befalls him or her, pride if he or she rises above his or her circumstances and satisfaction if the villain of the narrative receives his or her comeuppance by being disabled in some way. This raises an interesting dilemma. On one hand, the reader is inclined to feel compassion, even pity, for the disabled character and on the other hand, he or she may view disability as a proper punishment for the villain in the narrative. To illustrate this point, would Tiny Tim's passing in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* be less impactful on the reader or Scrooge if the boy were not disabled? Furthermore, should the reader question his or her presumed relief when Mr. Rochester's mentally disabled wife Bertha finds her fiery doom in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*? If Captain Hook had both his hands, would he be any less threatening to Barrie's Peter Pan in the novel of the same name? Finally, in the world of drama may it be daytime or written, when the narrative comes to its conclusion, would the deceiving, plotting and manipulative characters be punished enough if they, after losing everything, were not disabled in some way as well? Is it necessary to place such emotional charge on disability and is it even possible to avoid it?

As Ellis states, in the 1990s and 2000s, under the influence of disability academics and activists, the image associated with disability in the media started to change (5). The author states that disability was no longer used as the strategy to get rid of or punish bad characters, but rather, disabled characters as well as disabled cast members started appearing as the main protagonists in popular narratives (5). For example, one of the most iconic characters of all time, Darth Vader from George Lucas' *Star Wars*, is an immensely powerful amputee. Tyrion Lannister, from the series *Game of Thrones* based on George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, is a little person or a dwarf who is aware of his disability and wears it like armor. He lives in a violent world, surrounded by people who despise, mock, and underestimate him due to his disability but he manages to outlive and surpass them all. Kaz Brekker, from the Netflix series *Shadow and Bone* based on Leigh Bardugo's *Grishaverse*, suffers from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and must use a cane in order to walk. None of what was mentioned stops him from building a successful criminal career, gaining a reputation as someone who is not to be messed with and running his own gang.

Disability may vary in form and severity, that was already established. At this point, it is necessary to note that, while it may affect one's abilities to do things in the usual, conventional way, it does not affect one's desires, aspirations, and ambitions. The state of the body does not determine the state of the mind. A blind person can paint, read or write, a deaf person can create music, an amputee can run and a person using a wheelchair can play sports; all the mentioned is just a matter of adjustment.

Considering everything that has been presented so far, several conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, even though there is a distinction within the community of disabled people primarily dependent on the type and severity of the disability, a shared history exists. Secondly, all disabled people are affected by stereotypes commonly associated with disability. Thirdly, there is quite a lot of knowledge contained among people who have learned to live in

a world that is rarely suited to their needs. Finally, there is a need to share this knowledge and potential for great output of works that could represent the community of disabled people the way it should be represented. Inevitably, to one watching closely the existence of disability culture will become apparent.

## 2.2 Disability Culture

How does one define culture? It can be private or public, tangible or intangible, seen and felt. On one hand, it can be explained as social behaviour and customs a social group shares and passes on through generations. On the other hand, it can be viewed as the sum of human creative output or, put in other words, art in all its various forms. There are some customs that are unique for a particular social group and the rest of the world recognises them as theirs. Furthermore, there are some works of art that were created by an individual, one member of a social group and the rest of the population recognised their worth and made them universally popular classics. This category is comprised out of written works, songs, films, paintings and other visual artworks. It is often said that the artwork reflects the mood of its author in the moment of creation as well as the mood of the time. Thus, one is able to distinguish a romantic from a realist, a classicist from a modernist or a futurist from an antique. Following this stream of consciousness, popular culture can be explained as the creative output that, in a particular moment in time, happens to capture the most interest and attention from the public. For example, a painting may be created, a song or a film released, a series of magical novels may be written and the public pauses to enjoy. The factor that makes any of the mentioned reach the level of a classic is its durability or, in other words, how long it manages to keep the attention of the public. Artworks considered to be a part of the popular culture are often accused of being simple, lacking in depth and devoid of substance. However, it must be noted that simplicity is not necessarily a negative trait and that meaning as well as substance are highly personal. For instance, the most beautiful painting, admired by the



masses means nothing to a person who cannot see it, just as a song with brilliant lyrics and masterful instrumentals does not mean a thing to a person who cannot hear it. Does this mean that art is not available to disabled people? In some cases, unfortunately, yes but luckily, that is not a general rule. To illustrate this point, the blind or visually impaired people may enjoy paintings through tactile art. The artist uses raised lines while creating the painting and the person may discover and enjoy it through touch. What is more, a person who cannot hear but enjoys the atmosphere of a concert may also enjoy the lyrics being performed through the help of an interpreter. Such interpreters are especially appreciated when the artist has a way of playing with the language as, for example, rap-artists do. The mentioned points suggest a certain level of consideration towards disabled people but does the consideration stop there? Under the influence of disability rights movements, the recognition of the fact that disabled people have a place in society and deserve to participate in everyday life with their peers as well as the emergence of inclusion, a window in the lives of disabled people was created. Through it, one was able to see that a disabled person is a person just like any other; someone with experiences, dreams, wishes, aspirations and abilities, perhaps different from the norm but still real and valuable. A disabled person is able to contribute and create just like any other person. Considering everything that was stated about culture so far inevitably brings the question about how disability and culture come together; do they come together at all, and the simple answer is yes.

In the Glossary of their work *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Disability: Looking Towards the Future*, Ellis et al., define disability culture as “made and lived by disabled people. A complement to the disability rights movement, disability culture is produced by, lived and reproduces body–mind difference as vital, valuable and generative.” (xxii). Despite the simple explanation of the term culture at the beginning of this chapter and the definition of disability culture offered in the preceding sentence, unfortunately, the simplicity stops there.

Culture, be it popular, alternative or disability is ever-changing, evolving and growing with every new artwork created by an artist. The fact that culture is not only created, but also lived further complicates matters. One may surround him or herself with priceless artworks but that does not mean he or she is cultured in any way. Furthermore, an artist does not choose his or her audience; with whom the art resonates cannot be firmly determined before it goes out into the world. An artist who is not disabled does not create art just for the people who are not disabled, just as the disabled artist does not create art just for the people who are disabled. For example, Ray Charles and Andrea Bocelli do not sing exclusively for the blind or any other social group but for anyone who finds whatever they are looking for in their music. Leigh Bardugo's, John Milton's or Helen Keller's works are not enjoyed only by the disabled but rather, by anyone with the taste for the written word. Stephen Hawking did not leave his findings, theories and ideas specifically for disabled physicists to build upon but rather to the whole scientific world and beyond.

The point of the stated is that there are no strict and rigid divisions between cultures and the only constant is the state of flux. Also, it must be noted that there are examples of cultures colliding. To illustrate, a band many would characterize as alternative goes from playing in obscure venues to filling arenas and stadiums all over the world. This can be viewed as a progression from the alternative culture, into the popular culture. In the same fashion, a work created by a disabled artist can capture and hold the attention of the entire world. In such a moment, does the fact that he or she is disabled matter? The answer is no, it does not. In fact, through representation, the creative process that led to the creation of the work may be presented to the public, the artist's experience may be shared and it would mean another step towards better understanding between the disabled and non-disabled. Moreover, a disabled individual living life in a constant feeling of isolation, hopelessness and otherness may realise that being disabled does not mean the end of all productivity and enjoyment of

life and, perhaps above all, that he or she is not alone, that he or she does belong and that there are people willing to see, hear and understand.

### 3. BLINDNESS; DEFINITION, SYMBOLISM AND THE BLIND SUPERHERO

Thus far in this paper, it was established that disability may vary in type and severity which means that it is an umbrella term used to cover many different states of being. It was also determined that disability can affect either the mind or the body or both. Damage to any one of the human senses can be referred to as sensory disability and in the continuation of the text, damage to the sense of sight will be discussed.

According to the data available on WHO's (World Health Organisation) website, there are more than two billion people across the world living with some kind of condition that affects the eyes and accordingly, the sense of sight (URL 3). Also, in their World Report on Vision, the mentioned organization defines blindness as visual acuity of less than 3/60 or the loss of the corresponding field of vision in the eye that is better despite the best possible attempt at correction (URL 4). In the same Report, visual impairment is defined as visual acuity of less than 6/12 but equal or better than 3/60 in the better eye following the best possible correction (URL 4). Put in simpler terms, this means that blindness can be defined as the loss of vision and visual impairment as the lowered ability to see. Along with various mishaps and unfortunate events that may bring about the two, WHO mentions cataract, glaucoma, age-related macular degeneration, refractive error, and several other conditions as the primary culprits (URL 4). Furthermore, it is emphasized that in many cases visual impairment and/or blindness could be avoided, even prevented if the people affected had access to appropriate medical care which is often unavailable to them due to the fact they live in remote, rural areas, often in poverty (URL 4).

It must be noted that impairment or loss of any of the senses is a tremendous trauma for the individual but suffering the impairment or loss of vision is especially difficult. This is because humans process their surroundings mostly through vision. At the earliest stage of life,

babies use vision to establish communication with their parents. Subsequently, they learn behaviours by imitating what they see. Further proof of the importance of vision can be found in the fact that, along with visual art, architecture and landscaping, make-up and fashion industries exist. If certain liberties are taken in rewording a well-known proverb, one may say that beauty is in the eye of the one who is able to see.

Also, it is necessary to mention the following. For an average individual, living life as a blind person or with a lowered ability to see may be hard to comprehend. This does not mean that he or she lacks empathy, and it does not put in question their humanity. It simply means that the person in question never had to deal with issues of such nature and hopefully, they will never have to. However, navigating the world and life with a diminished or non-existent ability to see is the everyday reality for many people. The most mundane, even trivial tasks most people can perform on autopilot, such as buying groceries, crossing the street, or getting from point A to point B, turn into challenges. Unfortunately, the issues do not stop at the mundane level, but they spill over into every single aspect of life. Obstacles appear during the education process, in joining the workforce, participating in social events and, as if the mentioned was not enough, the disabled individual is constantly faced with others questioning their ability to do basically anything. To combat this, the best means blind and visually impaired people have at their disposal is representation.

### 3.1 Blindness Seen as More Than a Sensory Disability

There are several metaphorical meanings commonly associated with blindness. To say that an individual is blind alludes to the fact that he or she is not willing to see reality as it is or that he or she is willing not to see crimes or atrocities being done. In contrast, to say that someone has their eyes wide open refers to the fact that they see reality as it is and can even serve as an indicator of their character, meaning that they are a careful realist with their feet placed firmly on the ground. It is virtually impossible to count all the written works whose

authors celebrate the beauty of their love interest's eyes; from their shape to the color. The eyes are a window to the soul, a mirror that reflects the state of the world, wells that hold rivers or forests and so on. To call love blind is to allude to the fact that normally functioning eyes do not matter at all when it comes to forming meaningful relationships. What is more, arguably one of the most famous proverbs concerning justice claims that she is blind. This point is further emphasized by depicting the Goddess of justice with a blindfold covering her eyes which is supposed to signify that justice is objective and unbiased. Furthermore, there is also an assumption that blind people possess clairvoyant powers that allow them to see, or rather read, the world in a unique way and even see into the future. Where do these assumptions and interpretations come from? To find the answer, it is necessary to observe how blindness and blind people were perceived throughout history.

According to Barasch, in the time of antiquity there were three levels to observing blind people. The first level had to do with direct, social, and emotional experiences shared between blind people and those who are not blind (8). The second level involved the concern about what brought about the state of blindness; was it a divine intervention or the doing of a demon, was it a punishment for the blinded individual and what has he or she done to bring it about (9). The third and final level, as Barasch states, had to do with the assumption that blindness has meaning however ambiguous and illusive it may be (9). From today's viewpoint, when it is widely known that visual impairment or blindness stem from either disease or trauma, it is interesting to note that people in antiquity associated so much meaning and fear with a physical state. Remnants of this form of thinking about blindness echoed through centuries and shaped the imagery associated with it. Perhaps the most obvious example of this can be found in literature.

In many religious texts, regardless of the religion they belong to, as Hartsock claims, the inability to see is often used as a metaphor for spiritual insight (59). According to the

same author, the eyes are means of defining a character's personality and blindness usually signifies the following: the character in question is amoral and should be pitied due to the fact that he or she is despised and punished by God, or that he or she possesses prophetic powers (81). An echo of the interpretation of blindness mentioned previously can be found in the literature of the Romantic period. Larrissy mentions and emphasizes the importance of the blind bard character who embodies both physical blindness and the supernatural ability to feel the language and music that he performs (1-2). In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, influenced by all the revolutionary changes introduced in the industry brought about a new concern directed towards the blind and visually impaired. Their monetary well-being as well as the social position in the urban space came into question. As Tilley puts it, an association between blindness, poverty and illiteracy was established (3). According to the same author, it was during the mentioned period that blindness started losing its mystical lore and real experiences of blindness started being put to paper (216). This means that both blind authors and blind characters started shaping the imagery associated with their disability (216-217).

If the mentioned is considered closely, a similarity between a point made previously in the paper becomes apparent. The blind, over the course of centuries, went from being ignored, to being pitied and their disability mystified, to finally being included in the shaping of their own narrative. The stereotypes commonly attributed to disability were also attributed to blindness despite the fascination it awoke. To understand blindness and living life without the ability to see, it is not enough to simply close or cover one's eyes. The experiences of those who live with blindness every day are necessary and their willingness to share them should be encouraged and welcomed. Disability, including blindness, should not be demonized, mystified or presented as a punishment because, even though it can be characterized as a personal tragedy, it does not signify the end of life. It requires a change in perspective, learning new behaviors and forming new habits. If the person is willing, he or she may even

teach a thing or two about strength, resilience and dignity to the rest of the population. Precisely for this reason, authors who are blind and choose to write about their lives and experiences such as Helen Keller, are priceless. Furthermore, seeing blind characters on the big screen can also be helpful in lessening the fear and prejudice surrounding blindness. As it was already established, representation is of utmost importance. For example, Toph Beifong, a fictional character from the animated television series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, is a blind earth-bender who is in no way limited by her disability. In fact, she is portrayed as one of the most powerful characters in the entire narrative. Another example of a powerful blind warrior is Kenshi Takahashi from the *Mortal Kombat* universe who, along with his excellent swordsmanship, possesses telekinetic abilities. Chirrut Imwe is a blind monk-warrior from George Lucas' *Star Wars* universe, specifically from *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*. He uses the Force to see and plays a vital role in the narrative that allows his companions to successfully carry out their mission. There are several examples of narratives in which the main character is temporarily blinded in order to gain a different perspective about their surroundings or to further develop their skills in an unexpected context. Arya Stark from *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin is one such character.

All the mentioned examples provide an interesting take on blindness and challenge the stereotypes connected with it while still maintaining a certain mystical fascination with the state. However, there is a figure that takes all commonplace assumptions about blindness as well as disability and tosses them out of the proverbial window.



### 3.2 The Blind Superhero

In order to begin, it is necessary to explain the idea of a superhero. For the most part, they are presented as ideal representatives of the human race physically, mentally and morally. In the Introduction to *The Superhero Book* Misiroglu states that, in order to be called such, a superhero must possess certain traits and they are: the urge to defend the world from evil, a secret identity, strength, invulnerability and a certain theatrical flair (xi). Often, such characters are depicted as having different superpowers such as superhuman strength or speed, telepathy, matter manipulation, time travel, heightened senses and so on. Usually, these powers awaken or are acquired after a trauma such as exposure to chemicals, death of a loved one, unfortunate meetings with radioactive animals or inadvisable interaction with a magical object. There are even instances in which the only powers the individual possesses are their genius mind and copious amounts of money. Regardless of the origin story, all superheroes share the desire to do good and protect the innocent in whichever city they happen to call home. They protect the innocent by fighting their opposites, the super-villains.

It is widely known that disabled people are often referred to as real-life superheroes, but what happens when a disabled person, or a blind one, is the focal point in a superhero narrative; when he or she is literally a superhero?

According to Misiroglu, the first disabled superhero was The Black Bat; a lawyer who loses his vision when gangsters splash him with acid and, following his recovery, discovers he can see in the dark (529). A similar but far more famous character about whom there will be much discussion in the continuation of this thesis paper is Matt Murdock also known as Daredevil. It must be noted that disability is sometimes a part of the hero's origin story, as in the two cases mentioned in the previous sentences. Also, it can be one of the character's traits

when the audience meets him or her. Charles Xavier, also known as Professor X from the X-Men universe, who uses a wheelchair from the moment he is introduced to the audience, is one such character. Finally, disability may be a pivotal moment in a character's development. For example, in the Batman universe, when Joker shoots Barbara Gordon, she becomes a paraplegic but manages to rise above and becomes the Oracle, provider of information and support for many DC characters.

Furthermore, the figure of a blind superhero is particularly interesting because it represents the meeting point between popular culture and disability culture. Such a character subverts stereotypes attributed to both a superhero and a disabled person. It was already established that disability is often equated with weakness. In contrast, a superhero is considered to be the embodiment of strength. Disabled characters are usually placed in a narrative's background and represented as moral support to the main character or as the means for allowing their emotional growth as well as showcasing their humanity. Following this stream of consciousness, a question may come to one; can a disabled person, a blind person, be a superhero, a pivotal character in a narrative, and do everything that a superhero does? The answer to this compelling question is very simple. Yes. He or she can be a superhero and he or she can do everything a non-disabled superhero can do. Evidence to support this claim will be provided in the continuation of this thesis paper.

#### 4. BLINDNESS AND SUPERHEROES

An attribute that can be attached to every concept presented and discussed thus far is undoubtedly *complex*. The presence of disability in the form of blindness is sure to influence every aspect of an individual's life regardless of their origin story and, superheroes are no exception to this.

Arguably the most famous blind superhero to come out of Marvel's creative factory is Daredevil. He first appeared in a comic by Stan Lee entitled *Daredevil: The Man Without Fear* in September of 1964 and in the mentioned issue the following information may be found. His backstory consists of being bullied in his adolescent years, building himself up physically and becoming a lawyer and finally, participating in a life-altering accident. While saving an old, blind man from getting hit by an incoming truck, Matt Murdock comes in contact with a radioactive compound and loses his eyesight. While recovering from the accident, he realizes that his other senses have miraculously heightened and that he can "see" his surroundings via a built-in radar and "feel" colours. His sense of touch becomes so sensitive that he can read anything written by feeling the impressions the ink leaves on paper. Furthermore, he can hear the heart beats of any person and determine if they are lying or telling the truth. Finally, he does not forget a scent once he has smelt it. Matt Murdock as Daredevil is so imposing in fact that his father's killer suffers a heart-attack upon seeing him. As any other blind person would, he uses a white cane but his doubles as a weapon, a grappling hook and contains cables that allow him to climb the walls. The narrative's plot happens in New York, in Hell's Kitchen which means that the characters are placed in an urban space that is definitely not adapted for a blind man to navigate easily.

When it comes to blindness in Daredevil's narrative, it allows him or rather, Matt Murdock, to blend in with the crowd and assume the role of a non-threatening, almost

innocent individual. In fighting the cabal of his enemies, blindness is no hindrance and it can be said that his heightened senses make it virtually unimportant. Interestingly, he receives no mystical powers usually associated with blindness such as clairvoyance. His strength remains human but through constant training and his heightened senses, his coordination becomes superhuman. Also worthy of note is the fact that his social life is not influenced by blindness but rather, his desire to distance himself from the people who are closest to him stems from the desire to protect them from the dangers he faces as Daredevil.

Madame Web, whose real name is Cassandra Webb, is a character created by Danny O'Neil and John Romita. Her first appearance dates back to the 1980 and *The Amazing Spider-Man No. 210*. Based on the mentioned comic book, the following can be said about the character. She suffers from MG (myasthenia gravis), a condition that affects all her muscles, especially the eyes, robbing them of their function. This condition also makes her dependent on an external life-support system that can be described as armor resembling a spider-web in its shape. The armor allows her to move, and it can also be used as a weapon allowing her to use it as an extension of her limbs. The powers she possesses are aligned with the mystical allure of blindness which means that she can see into the future, influence the minds of others and "see" her surroundings by sensing the energies around herself. She establishes herself as, in her own words, "a psychic, a sooth-sayer, a witch" (11). In the plot of the mentioned comic, she is placed in a supportive role to the main character, Spider-Man. By using her clairvoyant powers, she helps him solve many mysterious cases of kidnapping, impersonating people and even helping him in preventing assassinations. Her powers make her a target for those who would use them for their own advantage and, when she eventually comes close to her last breath, she transfers them to Julia Carpenter.

Also known as the second Madame Web, Julia Carpenter came out of Jim Shooter and Mike Zeck's imagination. She made her first appearance in 1984, in *Secret Wars #6*. During

her complex story-arch, she was known as Spider-Woman, Arachne and finally, as Madame Web. She received her original powers during an experiment in which she got injected with a cocktail containing, among other ingredients, spider venom. In *The Amazing Spider-Man* #637, she inherited Cassandra Webb's powers and became the next Madame Web. Given the mentioned, it is easy to conclude that she had similar superpowers as Spider-Man; super-strength, speed, reflexes and agility as well as the power to create power from the molecules floating in the air around her. All of this is further amplified when she receives the original Madame Web's powers. She loses her eyesight but becomes more powerful with the addition of telepathic abilities to her already impressive arsenal. The character can be seen as both the main as well as a supporting character in the various narratives she appears in.

Irene Adler, also known as Destiny, was created by Chris Claremont and John Byrne at the beginning of the eighties. The character made her debut in *Uncanny X-Men* #141. She is a mutant whose powers of precognition (the ability to see into the future) manifested in her early adolescent years. For 13 months she feverishly wrote down her visions into 13 diaries which caused her to lose her eyesight. The event did not lead her to helplessness but rather, through her power of precognition, she could "see" where the objects in her vicinity would be. Also, she used a crossbow as her weapon of choice. At one point, she hired Mystique to help her make sense of the information she wrote down in her predictions' diaries and while they were collaborating, their turbulent relationship started. At first, she was pitted against the X-Men but subsequently, after many conflicts, she turned into their ally. This character is interesting not only because of her blindness, powers and impact on the whole narrative but also because she transitioned from the role of an enemy to the main cast of characters to the role of an ally. She is one of the first homosexual characters in Marvel universe and it is interesting to note that she and Mystique are considered to be one of the most iconic superhero couples.

Created by Joss Whedon and John Cassaday, Ruth Aldine or Blindfold first appeared in 2005, in the *Astonishing X-Men vol.3 #7*. One of her defining features is the blindfold she wears to cover the area where the eyes are usually located. She was born without eyes but that does not stop her from being the most powerful superhero among those who were mentioned so far. Her powers include telepathic and telekinetic powers, precognition and retrocognition (the ability to see into the past), clairvoyance and astral projection. A traumatic encounter with her brother during which he stole half of her power left her mentally unstable and this usually manifests in her peculiar speaking pattern. Despite being so powerful, her experiences left her without a taste for battle and it can be said that she is considered to be an odd-ball. However, it must be noted that this perception of her does not have anything to do with her disability but rather, it comes from her behaviour.

What can be inferred from the preceding text is the following. Each of the five mentioned characters has a complex story, all of them are powerful and all of them have an impact on their respective narratives. It can be said that, out of all of them, Daredevil is the one who carries the proverbial weight of his own narrative while the other four characters play supporting roles for others in their narratives. It cannot be said that those roles are not important, but they are not leading roles either.

Another interesting point for observation has to do with the power levels the characters possess. Out of all of them, Daredevil is physically the most powerful, but it is arguable whether or not he would win in a fight against any of the mentioned superheroines. In their cases, the lack of brute strength is compensated with their psychic abilities. Each of them has faced enemies, fights with odds that were not always in their favour and emotional turmoil while also dealing with the fact that they are disabled. For Matt Murdock and Julia Carpenter, disability came later in life, when they were already established adults. For Irene Adler it happened in her teenage years while Cassandra Webb and Ruth Aldine were born

disabled. The fact that all of them are disabled did not stop them from becoming strong and fighting in all senses that word possesses. For Matt Murdock, the moment in which he was disabled, was the moment that led him to become Daredevil. In Julia Carpenter's case, the moment she was disabled was also the moment in which her powers were amplified. In each of the five mentioned narratives disability is not placed in the role of a punishment or a tragedy but rather as a starting point or the source of power. All five of the mentioned characters share the ability to "see" the world around themselves in a unique way. Daredevil can see through his built-in radar while the other four characters can sense their surroundings through their mystical powers. It is interesting to note that, excepting Daredevil, all characters possess the mystical powers traditionally associated with blindness, primarily the ability to see into the future. At a previous point in this thesis paper, it was established that disability and, by association, blindness are commonly placed in the role of a punishment and characterised as a tragedy. They signify that an individual is despised or cursed by a god or a demon. Precisely due to such a connotation, it is interesting to discuss the representation and role of blindness in the five narratives of interest

#### 4.1 Representation and Role of Blindness in the Superhero Narratives

The approach to blindness and, by association, disability, in the five superhero narratives chosen for analysis in this study, represents a subversion of all commonplace assumptions and stereotypes associated with the two concepts.

To begin with, blindness is not considered to be a punishment nor a curse from a deity or any other powerful celestial being. It comes from trauma for Matt Murdock, from a physical state for Cassandra Webb, Ruth Aldine and Irene Adler, while for Julia Carpenter, it came as a part of her inheritance. Interestingly, if Matt Murdock was not blinded, Daredevil never would have existed. It was during his recovery from the accident that caused him to lose his eyesight that Matt discovered his other senses were heightened to an unparalleled level.

After inheriting the powers and blindness from the original Madame Web, Julia Carpenter found herself missing a sense, but possessing new powers that made her even more powerful than she already was. In these two cases, blindness can be seen as a source of power rather than a crippling state. Due to the mystical allure of blindness, Cassandra Webb established herself as a medium before Spider-Man enlisted her as an ally. The manifestation of Irene Adler's clairvoyant powers led her to frantically record her premonitions which ultimately robbed her of eyesight. Even so, the new circumstances she found herself in, placed her directly on the path that led her to the love of her life. For Ruth Aldine, the fact she was born without the organ that allows sight is virtually of no importance. Out of the five mentioned superheroes, she is arguably the most powerful.

What is more, in the narratives, the mystical lore associated with blindness is fully accepted. This is most obvious in the fact that four out of five analysed superheroes possess clairvoyant powers. Daredevil is the only one who does not have the ability to see into the future but in his narrative, there is an instance of playing with symbolism. His white cane, arguably the most recognisable symbol of blindness, commonly used to help blind people in navigating their surroundings, is used as a weapon. Another example of playing into the lore of blindness is the fact that all five characters of interest "see" the world around them through means such as a built-in radar or feeling and interpreting the energy in their immediate surroundings. All five of them lack the sense that is commonly described as the most important one, but that does not mean that they cannot see. It simply means that they "see" in a different way. Matt Murdock has to constantly remind himself to act like a blind person would in order not to give up his secret identity. It can be said that, when it comes to them "seeing", their blindness becomes a moot point; a matter of no importance.

When it comes to the social lives of the five superheroes, blindness is, again, a matter of little and no importance. All of them are depicted as having meaningful relationships. Julia



Carpenter is a mother, Cassandra Webb is married, Irene Adler is a half of one of the most iconic couples to come out of Marvel's creative factory. Daredevil is linked with several Marvel beauties. Finally, despite the fact that she is considered an odd-ball due to her nature and unusual speech-pattern, Ruth Aldine manages to find friends and plays an important supportive role when all of them find themselves in a dangerous situation. It can be said that it is not their blindness that isolates them from other people but rather, their desire to protect them from the dangers that they face as superheroes.

Unfortunately, representing blindness in such a way is not realistic. While it is true that once the eyesight is damaged, other senses will intensify even in the real world, they will not intensify to the point that the blinded person will be able to "see" in an alternative way. Also, he or she will definitely not develop clairvoyant or any other mystical abilities commonly associated with blindness. However, the person in question will have to learn how to navigate the world that is not adapted to their needs, to live in a context different from the norm and, to top it all off, do it while dealing with assumptions and prejudice rooted in the fear from the past; assumptions and prejudice that have only recently started to change. Also, it must be noted that, while it may be unrealistic to represent blindness in this manner, it is necessary due to a simple fact that it may help the person who was blinded to not consider him or herself punished or cursed. Furthermore, representing blindness as a source of power rather than a punishment can contribute to the diversification of discussions connected to it and, by extension, disability itself. To discuss blindness entails discussions about struggle, prejudice and adversities but, does that have to be a rule? No, no it does not. In the five analysed superhero narratives, blindness is just one of the features attributed to the characters and while it may be defining, it is certainly not the only one that matters. A person who is blind, is blind; there is no escaping that obvious, dim-witted fact. Still, the person in question can be so much more; an athlete, an artist, a teacher, a scientist, and even a superhero.

## 4.2 Final Remarks

Based on everything that was stated so far, it can be said that the figure of a disabled superhero truly is compelling.

First of all, it represents the meeting point between popular culture and disability culture. This means that a concept which is sometimes considered to be a taboo, is presented to the masses through the means where they might not expect it. When watching a superhero blockbuster or reading a superhero comic book, one is probably not going to fixate on the fact that the superhero in question is disabled, but rather, he or she will enjoy their exploits. What is more, disability, usually considered to be a tragedy or a punishment, will lose that characterization and become secondary to every other ability the superhero or heroine possesses.

Second of all, the disabled superhero serves as proof that the dialogue surrounding disability does not have to be oppressive or avoided. As seen in the examples mentioned previously, all five superheroes are blind and that is only one of their defining features. Along with the fact that they are blind, they are also strong, cunning, resourceful and fascinating. It is undoubtable that the five characters of interest are fictional and live in fictional narratives, but in their storylines stereotypes and prejudice from the real world were taken and subverted. Blindness became a source of power, weakness turned into strength and commonplace prejudice became pitfalls for those who underestimated any of the five blind superheroes. This fact could be used as a guide-point for everyone to learn that disabled people are not just disabled; that a blind person is not just blind but that there is so much more hiding under that one, most obvious label.

Third of all, the figure of a disabled superhero stands as proof that there are no rules when it comes to what one can do or how one should look like. One may be gifted with powers and abilities at birth, but they can also be gained, inherited or learned. Strength does

not come only from defined muscles and, one does not have to dawn a cape or even have normally functioning eyes to be a superhero. Superpowers and disability aside, one will find him or herself in unknown situations that will require adjustment of behaviour, adoption of new habits and acclimation to a new context. Who can say how that process should look like? Finally, although the figure of a disabled superhero is highly fantastic, its presence in popular culture can be highly encouraging to a disabled individual. Up to this point, it was mentioned several times that disability is usually placed in the role of a punishment for the person to whom it happens and here it is emphasized again. Why? Because that is simply an unacceptable interpretation of the term. Disability stems from disease or trauma, not an angry deity, a vengeful demon or any other celestial power with a score to settle. Blindness is caused by disease or trauma to the eyes, not a calling to become a medium or a seer. Placing disabled characters; blind characters in main roles, roles of superheroes or roles of normal people living life as it is, with everything that it has to offer is important for breaking the perception of disability as a punishment. Also, it allows the disabled individual to see someone like him or herself, represented and acknowledged. Many disabled people feel like they do not truly belong to the community they are supposed to be a part of and seeing characters that remind them of themselves can be highly beneficial in lessening the sense of isolation and otherness disability brings with itself. The genre truly does not matter for this. On the surface, disability and blindness are simple concepts but, unfortunately, the simplicity ends at the surface level. Contained under it are social and cultural implications. On one hand, struggles, fear, judgement and prejudice that originated in the ancient past. On the other hand, there is defiance, strength, bravery and a demand to be recognised, understood and included. It can be said that the meeting point between those two hands resulted in the following: awareness was raised about the rights of disabled people, inclusion in its various forms was created, disabled people were included in creating the narrative connected with them and it

was recognised that the experiences of disabled people matter. While he or she might not be the most realistic representative of the disabled people community, the figure of a disabled superhero stands as a reminder that disability does not have to be viewed as an oppressive, taboo topic and that prejudice and stereotypes are there to be challenged, fought and ultimately defeated.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In the first sentence of this thesis paper imagination was referenced so it seems fitting that its conclusion will begin in a similar fashion. It can be argued that imagination allows people to create. It can also be argued that imagination is the means through which people are able to place themselves in the proverbial shoes of another and walk a mile or two in them. This is done most often when an individual perceives something he or she greatly desires in the life of somebody else or when an individual experiences deep empathy.

Empathy is precisely the tool that allows one to truly understand others and their circumstances. In order for it to be triggered, one must not be blind to the state of the world he or she inhabits or to the potential plight that his or her fellow humans experience on a daily base. Daily struggles are varied and depend on factors that can and cannot be controlled. For example, financial circumstances can change, one can relocate if his or her living conditions are not satisfactory and even one's physical appearance can be changed if one desires. A question ensues from the mentioned; what about those circumstances that cannot be controlled? What should a person who gets caught in the middle of an armed conflict or in a disease outbreak that paralyzes the entire world do? When an individual gets disabled and the damage to the body or mind is irreversible, what should he or she do?

It can be said that the prospect of being disabled is a notion that frightens many people. The mentioned fear may stem from the probability of it happening as well as the lack of knowledge or understanding of the concept and everything that it implies. Hall's ideas of representation and the other can be called up on at this point. Due to a lack of representation, a disabled person is seen as the other, misunderstood, mysterious and sometimes, feared. Representation is key in ensuring that the general public understands that disability is the result of a disease or a trauma and that while it most certainly implies a significant change, it does not equate to the end of all joy and, perhaps above all, it most certainly does not mean

the end of life. Actually, it signifies the start of a different life. The nature of disability cannot be described as good or bad but rather, it can be described as momentous. Viewed from a medical perspective, disability can be defined as damage to the body or mind that varies in degree and severity. However, medical perspective is not enough to understand disability or the everyday life of disabled people; social and cultural perspectives must be taken into account as well. This means that social elements such as the possibility for employment, access to social events, education, media and art as well as the overall quality of life cannot be overlooked when discussing disability. Such observations will inevitably lead one down the proverbial rabbit hole and, he or she will find him or herself looking at a world within a world; looking at a culture defined, shaped and enriched by disabled people. Disability culture, as any other culture, cannot be easily defined. It refers to the language, everyday life struggles and behavioural patterns unique within the disabled people community as well as the art produced within the mentioned community.

At this point, the notion of representation is again of crucial importance. Through it, the general public would be acquainted with the challenges disabled people face every day but also, with the fact that they are able, resourceful and capable of creating. The stigma placed on disability could be lessened, if not completely broken.

It must be noted that, on that account, in recent years there has been an improvement. Disabled characters started appearing on the screen not only as supporting characters, but as main characters who influence the narrative's plot. Disability itself has moved from being the ultimate punishment for morally questionable characters, to being just one of the traits that define a character. Furthermore, it must be said that narratives with disabled characters in lead roles are not part of an obscure, alternative niche but rather, they are widely available and highly popular. What is more, such narratives represent the meeting point of disability culture and popular culture. Such meeting points imply an exchange of knowledge and provide a

glimpse into the world of disabled people. Arguably, those glimpses led the general public to refer to disabled people as real-life superheroes.

For as long as there were stories, protectors of the weak, those willing to battle the forces of evil, those possessing extraordinary abilities were celebrated and their stories retold. Gradually, such stories led to the creation of the comic book; the means for telling numerous superhero stories. Narratives in comic books deal with overpowered humans, mutants, aliens, hybrids and also, the disabled. The existence of disabled superheroes represents the subversion of every single stereotype connected to both superheroes and disabled people. A person perceived as weak, helpless, dependant on the kindness of others and their good will is placed in the position of strength, power and responsibility. In this context, the disabled person's role shifts from the one who needs help and protection, to the one who offers help and provides protection. This thesis paper has focused on the blind superheroes and the way in which blindness was portrayed in their narratives. The analysis of the five superhero narratives showed that blindness was portrayed as the source of their power or as its amplifier. Also, an overt playing into the mystical lore of blindness became apparent after observing the narratives.

In the current context of existence, when the world is recovering from a global pandemic, when there are multiple wars raging and when the sense of uncertainty prevails, one may wonder about the importance of the topic presented in this thesis paper. As it was previously stated, the moment in which a person is disabled is a momentous one and, their circumstances will be made that much more complicated with the presence of disability. For example, mundane activities such as grocery shopping are made that much more complicated when one cannot see the products he or she is buying, crossing the street suddenly becomes a perilous adventure and hobbies such as reading become unavailable if access to proper materials is not secured. As if the mentioned is not enough, the disabled one must also learn to

deal with the prejudice, stereotypes and assumptions about disability rooted in the minds of people everywhere. What does it take to deal with someone questioning one's intelligence just because one is not able to see, or hear, or walk? Boundless patience, resilience, strength and defiance. So, when it comes to the importance of the topic presented in this thesis paper, the following must be noted. Yes, it is important. The discourse on disability should be varied and it should never stop. To present disability not as a purely medical concept, a punishment, or something mystical that should be feared must be done. To portray the event, one might wish has never happened, as a source of power, as the moment from which a superhero originated might, at the very least, help the one deal with all the challenges that inevitably stem from disability. Subverting the script and showing that a disabled person can be powerful, ruthless and clever can lead people to see past the disability and recognise the person behind it. Also, it can serve as inspiration to a disabled person who is struggling with self-image, self-worth and the feeling of isolation. If the proverbial suit does not make the man or the woman, the same logic can easily be applied to disability and the following conclusion presents itself. An individual, who is disabled, is disabled but, at the same time, he or she is so much more.



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## Summary

### Blindness and Superheroes

Living with disability is the everyday reality for many people across the world. The simplest way to explain disability is to describe it as damage to the body, mind or both that may vary in form and severity. While it is commonly viewed as a medical concept, disability can also be seen as a social and cultural construct. This means that it will affect the life of the person who carries it in every aspect. He or she may develop a feeling of otherness, of not belonging to their community and he or she will face all the prejudice, misconceptions and fear surrounding disability. One of the ways to ease what was mentioned is representation. Through it, the general public may come to recognise that disability does not signify the end of life, that the experiences of disabled people matter, that they are instructive and that disability culture is real. Furthermore, the discussion about disability does not have to be avoided, it does not have to be a taboo and it can even revolve around superheroes.

The figure of a disabled superhero, more specifically, a blind superhero represents the meeting point between popular culture and disability culture. It is known that people take in about 80% of information about their surroundings through the sense of sight which is why any damage to the eyes or loss of vision is particularly traumatic. Because of this, placing a blind person in the position of power, as the protector and giving them powers that are based on superstitions and misguided beliefs about blindness is especially compelling.

Key words: disability, disability culture, blindness, the disabled superhero, the blind superhero.

## Sažetak

## Sljepoća i super junaci

Život s nekim oblikom poteškoće je svakodnevica za mnoge ljude diljem svijeta. Poteškoće je najlakše opisati kao oštećenje tijela, uma ili oboje koje može varirati u obliku i stupnju. Iako se smatra kako su poteškoće primarno medicinski koncept, može se reći kako su one socijalni i kulturološki konstrukt. Ovo znači da će prisutnost poteškoće utjecati na sve aspekte života osobe koje je nosi. On ili ona može razviti osjećaj otuđenosti i izolacije od vlastite zajednice te će se neupitno morati suočiti s predrasudama, krivim pretpostavkama i strahom koji se veže za poteškoće. Sve navedeno, moglo bi se promijeniti kroz adekvatni prikaz. Na taj način javnost bi se mogla upoznati s činjenicom da prisutnost poteškoće ne predstavlja kraj života, da su iskustva osoba s poteškoćama vrijedna i poučna te da kultura osoba s poteškoćama postoji. Također, rasprave o poteškoćama ne treba izbjegavati, ne moraju biti tabu i čak se mogu bazirati na super junacima.

Lik super junaka s poteškoćama odnosno, slijepog super junaka, je točka u kojoj se spajaju popularna kultura i kultura osoba s poteškoćama. Opće je poznato kako ljudi 80 % informacija o svojoj okolini primaju vidom. To je razlog zašto je oštećenje ili gubitak vida posebno traumatičan. Upravo zato je postavljanje slijepe osobe na poziciju moći, kao zaštitnika, s moćima koje su utemeljene na praznovjerju i obmanama vezanim za sljepoću, u najmanju ruku, zanimljiv potez vrijedan pažnje.

Ključne riječi: poteškoće, kultura osoba s poteškoćama, sljepoća, super junak s poteškoćama, slijepi super junak.