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Filozofski fakultet

Preddiplomski studij: Engleski jezik i književnost – Njemački jezik i
književnost

Comics – The Mythology of our Era

Završni rad

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Osijek, 2015.

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Abstract

This paper discusses the mythological foundations of popular comic books *Detective Comics (DC)* and *Action Comics* – the Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman series, *Marvel Comics*, *Dragon Ball Manga*, and *Shonen Manga*. It pays special attention to the heroes' characterization and the similarities, as well as the discrepancies between mythological tropes and their comic book adaptations. The main thesis of this paper is that comic books are the mythology of our era. They are an integral part of our time and culture and serve to entertain, educate, and inspire the readers throughout times of either prosperity or poverty and hardship. What Heracles was for the ancient Greeks, Superman is today for us – an inspiration of a perfect warrior and what a human being should want to become. Batman is a modernized version of Odysseus, relying on his skill and intelligence, not just his brute force. Additionally, comic book characters and their stories reflect social and cultural phenomena of our time just as different mythologies depicted their culture and civilizations. The main conclusion of this paper is that comic books are a crucial part of contemporary culture and as important to our civilization as myths were to ancient Greek, Egyptian, and Norse cultures. These stories reveal how the culture worked in the time they were told. Their heroes depict the ideal, perfect human being, while the villains show us what is perceived as bad and evil. Sorcery and gods are today replaced mostly with science and alien beings that are way more advanced than humanity, but their job is the same: to act as a catalyst to the heroes' abilities and to act as a higher power compared to the heroes.

Introduction

Storytelling has always been an important part of a culture. Through stories, people are able to share and tell tales that can carry out a necessary function – be it to share information about history or a made up world with its own rules, a sad story of a character that is supposed to make the reader sad, a happy and humorous tale of a group of people that is to make the reader laugh, or a slow paced love story with only two characters that is there to generate an emotional investment from the reader to a fast paced tale of great adventure with an extensive amount of characters that entertains the reader and gets him/her excited. The sheer amount of possible functions and genres is limitless, and yet they all share one thing: they are there to entertain, educate, and offer an insight into an author's mind – his/her perception of the world, people and society.

As times have changed, so has the authors' perception of the world. Going from the Antiquity to the Dark Middle Ages all the way to the current postmodern period, we can see the differences in worldview just by looking at any piece of literature from those eras. Consequently, the character portrayals have changed as well.

In ancient myths the characters were never ordinary humans. These stories were always about gods, demi-gods, or later extraordinary humans that were classified as heroes. Mythology is also the first genre of literature that followed one character through multiple tales and adventures, focusing more on the protagonist than on the story itself. For example, Odysseus, a hero in the Trojan War, was described in Homer's *Iliad* and later in his epic *The Odyssey*. Not only did that allow the readers and listeners to have greater emotional investments in the characters they read about but it also removed the necessity of creating new heroes with new origins. Other cultures had their own myths and their own heroes. While the Greek and Norse gods had humanlike appearances and represented the perfect man/woman of that time, the Egyptian gods were unique as they had human bodies with animal heads, which is, ironically, also a trait of many monsters and enemies in Greek mythology. This later led to the ideas of animal motifs with a lot of heroes and villains in comic books centuries later, and inspired the creation of characters such as Batman, Hawkman, Cheetah, etc.

Mythologies set the foundation for literature throughout the years. This is most obvious in today's genre of comic books, whose stories and characters greatly resemble the ones in ancient myths of Greek, Egyptian, Roman, and Norse culture. Most characters with super strength like Superman and Son Goku were inspired by the tales of Heracles, whose strength was legendary and allowed him to perform deeds no other regular human would have been capable of.

The immortal villains who put the heroes' skill to the test and yet can never get killed by the heroes are an idea taken from the Greek mythology, where the Olympian Gods often meddled in the affair of mortals and yet never had to endure any real consequences for their actions, even if the hero won in the end. Comic books took that mentality with their most popular villains, creating the idea of the archenemy; a constant rival who always plots something against the other.

The magical and supernatural items were present in all mythologies, be it in the form of remains the slain monsters left (Medusa's head, Nemean Lions fur) to food that gave its consumer supernatural abilities (Golden Apples). They are present in both Western comics and Eastern mangas, usually to turn an ordinary human who accidentally found said artifact into a super being with superhuman powers and abilities. Some of these items can grant a wish, for example, bring the dead back to life (Dragon Balls), while others allow the user to transform into the super being (Millennium Puzzles).

Without those inspirations found in the old myths of different cultures, there would be no comic books today, nor would there be iconic characters like Superman, Batman, Captain America, The X-Men, and so many more who have helped both inspire generations in difficult times like war and poverty and create some of the best storylines in literature.

"At its simplest, a comic book is a series of words and pictures that are presented in a sequential manner to form a narrative that may or may not be humorous" (McCloud 1993). Comic books originated in the United States in the late 1800s, and contained everyday language combined with a graphical visualization of the given scene they desired to represent, removing the necessity of explaining the surroundings of a character or any form of body language. Since the 1960s, two major publishers have dominated the comic book industry with their super-hero books: "Marvel and Detective Comics (DC).

DC's official name for almost fifty years was National Periodical Publication; Marvel was known as Timely Comics from 1939 to about 1950, and then as Atlas Comics for much of the 1950s." Just as in literature, the styles and forms have changed through times, and comic book fans use the concept of "ages" to distinguish between them: the Golden (1938-1956), the Silver (1956-1971), the Bronze (1971-1980), the Iron (1980-1987), and the Modern Age (1987-present) ("A History of the Comic Book").

The thematic elements of comic books can be traced back to ancient Greek mythological gods and superheroes. Flash, a superhero who is "the fastest man alive" takes a lot from the Greek god Hermes with his winged helmet and boots in his original incarnation from the 1940's. Both heroes have similar looks and similar abilities, as Hermes was considered to be the fastest Olympian, a trait necessary for the messenger of gods.

Throughout the "ages", the powers and capabilities of the heroes and villains changed drastically. One of the basic properties of today's superheroes and villains is their super strength. The reason for those changes is simple. As society and its capabilities grew, so did the powers that elevated superheroes from ordinary humans. In a time where everything seemed to grow and expand in incredible speeds, from the number of people in the world to the number of cities, to the size of given cities and structures, to the things new inventions could do, the superheroes and their powers needed to evolve as well at the same pace. That led to the creation of characters whose properties and abilities could be described as omnipotent at some points.

Naturally, as the mythologies were different through different cultures, comic books differ throughout the world. The biggest rival to US comic publishers are Japanese comics called manga. They are divided by genres and styles – Doujinshi, Gekiga, Hentai, Josei, Seinen, Shōjo, Shōnen, Kodomo, Shōjo-ai / Yuri, Shōnen-ai / Yaoi – and, depending on the genre, range from pure action and adventure and action to pure hardcore erotica. The thematic in manga is way darker and psychologically more challenging than that of its Western counterpart, and it often tackles themes that would be a taboo and lead to censorship in the West such as incest, rape, torture, pedophilia, or gore.

While the Western comics focus on heroes who got their powers through magic, science, or their alien physiology, manga characters often get their power either through sheer training, which unlocks hidden human potential, or use mechanical suits and robots through which they battle or were experimented on at a young age for a secret project that gave them powers. Depending on the back-story, manga protagonists are often portrayed as anti-heroes or broken people whose decisions are morally questionable, often given a Freudian excuse as to why they behave in a certain way. While most heroes of the Western comics have a no-killing rule, making a character's death in comics a big and important moment, manga heroes seldom keep up to such rules, as a death in battle is seen as an honorable death in certain stories (Dragon Ball), or they are so powerful that they can brutally murder a great amount of enemies without much effort (Akira).

I. The Heroes

1.1 The Demi-Gods:

The Demi-Gods are considered heroes and characters that are way more powerful than regular humans ever could be. The origin of their powers differs from character to character, and most often they are not human, or are only partially human, or have been transformed into a non-human form through an experiment or accident, like The Hulk or Spiderman. Throughout their adventures, they easily take care of some problems with their great powers and strength, but once in a while run into someone who can match (or outclass) them in sheer power. In those situations, they manage to outwit their opponent or get an advantage that shifts the tide of battle. The most popular demi-gods are Heracles from Greek Mythology, Superman from DC Comics, and Son Goku from Dragon Ball Z.

Heracles:

Heracles (Latin name Hercules) is the son of the god Zeus and the mortal Queen Alcmene, as Zeus was rather famous in mythology to meddle with mortal women. He is the most famous of classical heroes and one of the cornerstones of Greek Mythology and the prototype for most heroes today. His main attribute was his superhuman strength, his fighting capabilities, his leadership skill and his desire to protect his friends and family (Bibliotheca). Still, in today's standards he would fit more into the role of an anti-hero, as he was hot tempered and easily angered and did not hesitate to kill innocents, even though he regretted it every time afterwards. His name means "glory of Hera", although Hera hated him and did her best to kill him since his infancy. As a goddess, she was always jealous of Zeus's "interaction" with mortal women and she wanted to unleash her wrath on his bastards. In one of her attempts, she filled Heracles' mind with blind rage and during his anger attack, he murdered many innocents that he encountered, including his wife and six sons. Once he came back to his senses, he mourned their loss and the guilt crippled him for a long time. "In order to calm his conscience, he was purified by King Thespius, then he traveled to Delphi to inquire how he could atone for his actions. There the oracle Pythoness advised him to reside at Tyrins and serve King Eurystheus for twelve years, performing whatever labor might beset him" (Bibliotheca). Heracles hated

that idea since he considered Eurystheus to be inferior, but did so anyway as he was afraid to oppose his father Zeus. Eurystheus ordered Heracles to perform ten labors, which he succeeded doing, but Eurystheus refused to acknowledge two of them since he had assistance in them – his nephew and sidekick Iolaus. "Eurystheus gave him two more tasks: fetching the Golden Apples of Hesperides and capturing Cerberus, which Hercules performed successfully, bringing the total number of tasks to twelve" (Bibliotheca).

Performing those twelve labors are an important part of the character and story of Heracles. During those labors, he faced odds that were even above a man of his powers, and yet managed to transcend himself and succeed. He used his mind and willpower to overcome those obstacles, something most heroes did in other stories afterwards. For example: When he could not damage the Nemean Lion with swords or arrows due to its nigh invulnerable skin, he choked it to death and skinned it with its own claws, earning a coat that protected him from almost everything (Bibliotheca). When he was not able to kill the Hydra due to its regenerative properties – another power often used in today's comics – he burned it to ashes so it could not heal itself anymore (Bibliotheca). When he tried to capture the Golden Hind of Artemis, an animal that was quicker than an arrow, he chased after it for a full year until the Hind tired out and finally caught it (Bibliotheca).

He was also very intelligent, a trait not often brought up as it gets easily overshadowed by his incredible strength. A great example of that is the cleaning of the Augean Stables. Having failed to get him killed in earlier labors, Eurystheus wanted to humiliate him by having him shovel feces and ordered him to clean the Augean Stables, which had not been cleaned in 30 years. Heracles knew this and scouted the area noticing the two rivers. He then went to Augeas and promised to clean the Stables in one day if the King gave him a tenth of his cattle without telling him that he was under orders to clean them anyway. The King, thinking that it is impossible and that he would be getting a free day's labor, agreed and Heracles brought his own sons to watch him swear an oath. He then diverted the two rivers to wash the stables clean, did not get his hands dirty and had Augeas' own sons testify against him when he tried to deny him his reward (Bibliotheca).

After he completed his twelve labors, Heracles would travel all over Greece, and appeared in Myths of other heroes and filled the role of a strongman any time it was

necessary for the story. He joined the Argonauts in search of the Golden Fleece, rescued the titan Prometheus by shooting and killing the eagle that tortured the titan, which was his punishment by Zeus for stealing fire from the gods and giving it to humans (Hesiod 129-132). To further elaborate his abilities as a warrior and leader, he managed to conquer Troy with a handful of his friends in a couple of days, something that took the entire army of Greece and most of their powerful heroes ten years to do, and even then only through Odysseus' idea to trick the Trojans with the wooden horse. During his many battles with other Olympians, Heracles managed to overpower them with his strength and in hand to hand combat. He was able to defeat Ares in battle by stabbing him in the thigh and then attacking and beating Apollo after he tried to heal his brother. He even went into Hades itself to bring his wife's friend's husband back to life, and he returned successfully. That was not his first venture into the underworld, as his final labor was to capture Cerberus, the three headed dog guarding the gates of Hades, without weapons or help (Bibliotheca).

After his enemies could not kill him in the conventional way, he is finally killed when the Centaur Nessus – a mythical creature with the lower body of a horse and the upper body of a human –gave Heracles' wife Deianira his blood-soaked a tunic soaked and poisoned by his blood, as Heracles had previously poisoned him when he tried to abduct his wife, telling her that it will “excite the love of her husband.” (Ovid 132-3). She gave Heracles the tunic years later after she heard that she had a rival for his love through a messenger called Lichas. Once poisoned, Heracles threw Lichas into the sea, believing that it was him who poisoned him, uprooted several trees and built a funeral pyre. Heracles burned in the pyre, leaving only his immortal side that rose to Olympus through Zeus' apotheosis, turning Heracles into a full god. (Bibliotheca).

Heracles' influence on current comic book heroes is visible today. His strength is one of the most used superpowers today; his strategic brilliance in battle and cunning nature is something shared by all important characters, and his care for his friends and family is a trait that separates the heroes and anti-heroes from the villains of the stories. With his nephew Iolaus he originated the trope of a hero with a sidekick. His adventures and usages in other mythologies originated the idea of crossovers – a character appearing

in a story of another character as a support. All these traits have helped shape two of the greatest characters of the modern comic book genre: Superman and Son Goku.

Superman

Superman (The Man of Steel/The Man of Tomorrow/The Last Son of Krypton) might be the most famous and popular superhero of all time. He is an alien from the planet Krypton, sent to Earth by his parents as Krypton was moments away from destruction. He landed on Earth as an infant and was found in his small space ship by the Kent family. They were a caring couple who raised him as if he had been their own child and it is because of them that Superman has an immense desire to protect Earth and humanity. They named him Clark, and he kept Clark Kent as a separate, secret identity from Superman (Siegel). Secret identities are an important concept in Western comic books, as the heroes hope to protect their friends and families, most often ordinary people, from their arch enemies who would immediately desire to harm them. That is a stark contrast to heroes from the ancient mythologies, who were proud of their feats and would boast all the time. This is also a proof of cultural differences. Whereas in mythic times self-value was based on how much honor and respect others had of you, the goal in modern society is more to fit into the majority of society and it is undesirable to stand out in any way.

Superman possesses a large number of powers. He is strong enough to even move planets, faster than the speed of light, can fly, has heat vision with which he can shoot heat beams out of his eyes, can freeze an object with his super breath, is invulnerable, can heal almost any wounds inflicted on him and can see through objects with his super vision. He also has a genius level intellect, flawless eidetic memory, and can learn, speak and understand any language he comes in contact with. His powers are explained by his Kryptonian physiology, as the radiation of Earth's yellow Sun gives him such powers and abilities, while a Red sun would drain his powers and turn him into an ordinary person with no powers. Another weakness of his is Kryptonite, which are rocks from his destroyed home planet that cause his strength to disappear. They also cause his headaches, nausea, and eventually, after longer exposure, death (Bernstein). Kryptonite is

his most famous weakness, which has become so popular that it has replaced the “Achilles Heel” as a metaphor for someone’s specific weakness.

Those weaknesses are very important in Superman’s stories, as he is a hero who without them would be virtually undefeatable. Just like his inspiration, Heracles, he has battled beings even stronger than himself and managed to defeat them through willpower and wit rather than with muscles. However, Heracles' strength is not even comparable to that of his modern counterparts, leaving his old feats unimpressive in today’s era compared to a character who, at one point, could move masses over 200 quintillion tons. His powers did change through the ages and incarnations, but he still remains one of the strongest characters in the DC universe. After DC decided to start over their stories and go a different route with the personalities and abilities of their characters, Superman’s power got reduced, and yet exceeds almost everyone else’s in comparison (Lobdell).

Another major difference between them is that while Heracles had no problem killing his opponents in battle, Superman follows a strict, self-imposed no-kill rule. This is a plot device used to explain just how aware Superman is that once he did that, he would cross a line and most likely use his powers in the wrong way. That was proven correct when in an alternate universe Superman killed his arch-nemesis Lex Luthor and afterwards established a dictatorship with his allies from the Justice League, renaming themselves Justice Lords (Gage). With the ancient heroes, there was never any doubt in their actions. If they did something wrong, they would atone and everything would be forgiven. However, that is not so with Superman and other modern heroes. The no-kill rule is sometimes the only thing that separates them from their opponents and helps us distinguish who “the good guys” are. For that reason, Superman locks his most dangerous foes away in the Phantom Zone, a realm where their powers are taken away from them (the equivalent of Tartarus where the titans were locked away) (Bernstein, Robert Adventure Comics #283).

Just like Heracles, Superman is no stranger to returning from death. However, whereas Heracles went into the underworld alive, Superman died in his first fight against Doomsday, a creature that regenerates itself after it is killed and becomes immune to that particular cause of death, but recovered later in his Fortress of Solitude. Death is easily cheated in comic books (and even easier in manga), as heroes who were killed in one

comic book issue are declared either comatose in the sequel or are sent to an alternate space and time. The overusing of that trope has led to the statements that death is cheap in comic books since no character stays dead for too long.

Another common Superman's trait is to team up with his enemies once a greater opponent threatens Earth, or the entire universe. He is teamed up with his nemesis Lex Luthor to stop the New God Darkseid, who wants to rule the universe and can match Superman in strength, speed, and powers. Furthermore, Superman and Luthor team up with Darkseid, and almost everyone else in the DC multiverse, to stop the Anti Monitor, a being that was threatening to destroy reality itself. Such team-ups are not seldom in modern comics, as they not only offer a new story with multiple characters people love to see interact but they also generate a great revenue and sales every time they do so. As it was special when Heracles and Odysseus met, the moment when Batman and Superman unite to fight crime and evil together is equally special. The interaction between those characters offers lots of possibilities, and if they decided to fight one another, it would be a great battle.

One major difference between Superman and Heracles is their personality. Heracles had a temper and did not care if anything would get damaged around him once he went wild. Superman's character is completely different. Throughout his adventures, he always seems to get hit and beaten down by most foes at one point, no matter how different they are in the power scale. On the one hand, he can trade punches with a New God like Darkseid (Kirby) and, on the other hand, get punched through a couple of buildings by a D-List villain in the next issue (Fox). The reason for that is simple: he is holding back. He created the trope "The World of Cardboard Speech" as a result, where he explained more than once that he could never allow himself to let go of his self constraints, as he could end up destroying everything around him. A being that could potentially push a planet out of its orbit with brute strength and could turn himself into a true god if he absorbed enough yellow sun radiation and make his current powers look like nothing in comparison to what he could become capable of, is limiting himself for the sake of the world he lives in, the innocent people around him and the enemies who he could kill in a heartbeat if he were not careful for a moment. Those self-limits are the

reason why he seems almost obsessed with obeying the rules and laws, which earned him the nickname “Big Blue Boyscout”.

Son Goku:

Son Goku is the main protagonist of the Japanese *Manga Dragon Ball*, *Dragon Ball Z* and *Dragon Ball GT*. He is one of the most popular shonen heroes in modern era and has greatly influenced the genre as a whole, which is why we can see a lot of his characteristics in other characters. He is the Eastern counterpart to Superman. Just like Superman, he is an alien who got sent to Earth as an infant. Both of their planets are destroyed and both are among the last living examples of their species. Both are powerful enough to destroy planets with relative ease; both are fast enough that they seem invisible to the human eye, and both have fought and overcome enemies that are more powerful than them. Still, there is one major difference between these two characters – motivation. Superman sees it as his obligation to protect Earth and humanity, and would do anything for that. Goku’s motivation is completely different. Goku is a martial artist who loves to fight and enjoys it more than anyone. His whole point in life is to train, become stronger and fight someone who can make him stronger and better. He is a kindhearted person who gets along with everyone, sometimes has his idiot moments and enjoys a great meal. Yet, all that changes once someone threatens his friends or family, which again links him to both Superman and Heracles.

Due to his Sayan physiology, he gets stronger every time he is close to death, allowing him to get beaten one moment and then annihilate the same foe not too long later. Another important difference is that he has two forms of transformation: his oozaru form, when he transforms into a giant ape and loses his senses, and his Super Sayan form in which his black hair turns into a gold color. The first transformation can be achieved by any Sayan staring at a full moon, drawing inspiration from the werewolf myth, while the second one can be achieved through great anger. Both of them increase his powers immensely, but his Super Sayan transformation has two more stages, each making him more powerful and enabling him to use more abilities and attacks.

Son Goku's fighting style also differentiates him from Superman and Heracles. While Heracles was a warrior and Superman is more of a brawler, Goku is a martial artist who

relied more on quick attacks and unconventional abilities. Goku is able to release great amounts of energy from the palm of his hands, called Ka-Me-Ha-Me-Ha, teleport any distance instantly, fly at great speeds, and collect energy from other living beings (even galaxies away) to form a powerful, giant ball of energy that can reduce any foe to dust (Genkidama). He also has knowledge of alien techniques. He and a partner can perform a dance that can fuse them together into one person more powerful than them together for a short time. He also ages slower than regular humans, as his Sayan physiology keeps him in his prime longer in order to fight for as long as possible. His hair never grows (except in Super Sayan 3 form) and his body can easily resist gravity over a hundred times greater than the one of the planet Earth.

What is interesting about Dragon Ball is also how cheap death is. While both Heracles and Superman came back from the land of the dead on many occasions, Dragon Ball has a different take on death altogether. Goku has died twice in the series, both times through self sacrifice in order to defeat the enemy. Both times, the Gatekeeper allowed him to keep his physical body in the afterlife. That allowed him to keep training even after death, turning all of afterlife into nothing but an advanced training ground for him. He met King Kai, who trained him after he died the first time and stayed his mentor until the end of the series. He also introduced Goku to powerful deceased warriors of other times and galaxies, which only enabled him to train and learn more. Also, the series Dragon Ball reveals the main plot device: seven balls that united summon a dragon who will grant the summoner one wish (later changed to two). That allows characters to be returned from the death anytime necessary, as collecting those seven dragon balls became easier and easier as the series progressed (Toriyama chapter 135).

Goku has no desire to be a hero and does not see himself as one. He only thrills for the fight and will even leave a dangerous enemy alive if he believes that both can get stronger and stay alive. He has no qualm abandoning his wife and son for a while once he decides to go train again, spending a year traveling the universe instead of returning home to them after he survived a planet exploding around him (Toriyama- chapter 135).

1.2 The Ordinary Humans:

Despite such a categorization, the human heroes are all but ordinary. They do not possess strength, or speed and invulnerability like the demi-gods do, but rely on training to hone their skills and preparation to overcome enemies that are on a different level altogether. *Shonen Manga* does not have such characters, as even heroes that are humans are not ordinary and possess some sort of superhuman abilities or have been altered in a way that changed them into becoming something more. The two most famous examples are Batman from *DC* comics and Odysseus from Greek mythology.

Odysseus

Odysseus is the legendary King of Ithaca and a hero in Homer's two epic poems *Odyssey* and *Illiad*. He is one of the most influential characters in Greek mythology who appears in many other stories besides Homer's epic cycle. During the Trojan War, he was one of the few Greek warriors the Trojans both feared and respected, as his ability in battle was only overshadowed by his intelligence. He survived and helped win a war in which even the gods interfered and tried to stop the armies of Greece (until Zeus forbade them to). He was also the key to Greece winning the war, as he came up with the idea of the Trojan Horse, a large wooden horse offered to the Trojans as a peace offering. The Trojans gladly took it, pulling it inside their city, behind the walls that protected them until then. The inside of the horse was hollow, and Odysseus hid there with a number of men. They waited until nighttime and then went and opened the gates, leading to the fall of Troy after ten years of war (Bibliotheca).

After Achilles was killed by Paris with the help of Apollo, Odysseus and Ajax found and returned his body. Both wanted Achilles' armor, which Hephaestus created for Achilles after his original armor was taken by Hector after he won his duel with Achilles' cousin and supposed lover Patroclus. Both felt that they deserved the armor, and the other soldiers agreed, but did not take sides, not wanting to anger either of the two men. Here is what makes Odysseus so great. Ajax and Odysseus were ordinary humans; both survived a war where even demi-gods were killed, and Ajax even taunted the gods at one point, claiming that he did not need their help. He was also the only warrior the gods could not stop, despite injuring him heavily; he still continued fighting. However, the receiver of

the armor was not decided in combat, but by the decision of fellow soldiers about who was the braver of the two. While Ajax was a great warrior, Odysseus used his intelligence and his natural gift of persuasion to be chosen as the winner. Ajax went mad after that and took his own life (Ovid 305-9).

After the war was over, Odysseus made his way back home to Ithaca. During his return, he and his crew visited the Lotus-Eaters, who gave two of his men fruit that made them forget where they were from. After that, they were captured by the Cyclops Polyphemus, who wanted and began to eat his crew. Odysseus blinded him by stabbing his eye and fled with his surviving men. While they were escaping, his pride overtook him and while he did his boast, he told the Cyclops his name. Polyphemus was a demi-god, and his father was Poseidon, the god of the sea. Hearing his son's pleas to make Odysseus's return difficult, Poseidon cursed him to wander the sea for ten years, during which he lost his whole crew (Homer, *The Odyssey* 5).

During his travels, Odysseus entered Hades and asked the souls there for advice about how to return to Ithaca. In Hades, he met his former crewmember he had forgotten after his death, his mother from whom he learnt about the state his home was in, Agamemnon, of whose fate after the war he learned, and even Achilles himself, who admitted himself how foolish he was due to his own pride. Once he returned home, he masked himself to be a beggar and observed his wife who he had not met for twenty years by that point. Once he saw that she had been faithful to him, he slew every suitor who had inhabited his home in desire to marry his wife since he was believed to be dead. When she did not believe him once he revealed his identity to her, she made an offhand remark about how their bed was moved. He then disclosed how his bed's headboard was part of a massive tree that the palace was built around, and that it was impossible to move it, showing her that it was indeed him (Homer, *The Odyssey* 23). Odysseus' influence on today's heroes is as common as Heracles's. Heroes who use their intelligence and sharp mind over sheer power are all influenced by his character, and in stories usually are able to defeat or stun opponents who are way more powerful than them. He was the example that demi-gods were not the only ones able to perform great deeds and take part in such adventures, as he made it out alive even when the gods wanted him dead. Batman comes

to mind immediately, as he is an ordinary human who relies more on his intelligence, deception, and willpower than strength and brute force.

Batman

Batman (The Caped Crusader/The Dark Knight/The Bat) is nothing more than Bruce Wayne in a bat suit, and yet his character gained popularity that can rival Superman. As a millionaire and an owner of a giant company that produces newest models of many technological branches, he has access to newest gadgets that help him fight crime in Gotham City (DC's version of New York) and save the world from danger with the Justice League. His gadgets range from a chained hook gun, with which he can grapple almost any object and maneuver around with it, smoke pellets that allow him to disappear or cause disarray with a larger number of enemies, a cape that allows him to glide for a short time, visors in his mask that gives him night vision, infrared vision, heat vision, and many more. He also has his own base set up in a cave under his house called the Bat Cave, where he stores his suits, gadgets, cars, boats, and planes. It also has a giant computer through which he can access police files, hack into any system in the world, and run independent DNA analyses or fingerprint searches if he has a sample. His butler Alfred Pennyworth is also a former actor and secret service agent, and often serves as a medic whenever Batman gets injured, as long as it is not something that exceeds his skills like in the case when Bane broke Batman's back (Grant).

Batman also possesses a great variety of skills. Like the aforementioned Nightwing, who was his sidekick at one point, Batman is an expert of almost all martial arts in the world, as there are only two others who managed to beat him in direct hand to hand combat, one of them being a superhuman enhanced through a super soldier experiment. Batman has a genius level intellect, has multiple doctorates and degrees, has been running a successful business for years while he fought crime and is savvy with all types of human technology. He is a master psychologist, who knows how to use fear and intimidation to get information he needs without ever seriously injuring any foe. He is also considered the greatest detective in the world, having an eye for details and resources to process any evidence found way quicker than GCPD ever could. He is in peak physical condition, able to bench-press up to 600 pounds and run as quickly as an

Olympic level sprinter. His training also made him proficient in stealth, as he can sneak around without being noticed and even hide again if his position gets compromised. He is so good that he can disappear in a matter of someone looking away for a moment, and when they look back, he is gone. He even managed to do that to Superman, who has super hearing (Berkowitz).

Batman's biggest weaknesses are his social skills and his paranoia. He does not hesitate to lie and manipulate his sidekicks, allies and friends in order for something to happen. He also analyzed his Justice League colleagues and created strategies in how to stop them in case they went rogue, which caused a rift between him and the league once they found out. It also is the reason why Richard Grayson left his role as Robin and became Nightwing, tired of Batman's manipulations and lies. Despite all this, Nightwing loves him like a father, Superman trusts him to the level that he gives him a piece of kryptonite if it ever becomes necessary to stop him, the Justice League comes to his aid any time he needs it and listens to his advice. GCPD Commissioner Gordon trusts him enough to give him classified information on crimes and individuals if Batman requests them, even if he is considered a vigilante and a criminal by the justice system. Gordon's daughter, who has been aiding Batman as Batgirl until she got crippled by The Joker, still keeps assisting him as The Oracle, hacking into every database Batman cannot get access to, and feeding him information critical for his success in his current endeavors (Cronin).

However, he also has the most dangerous enemies in all of comics. His most famous enemy is The Joker, a psychopath whose whole point in life is to make Batman finally crack and break his no kill rule. There are other dangerous villains like Bane, a genius who enhances his physical powers with Venom, Two Face who is Batman's former friend whom he did not manage to save, Mr. Freeze, who just wants to cure his wife but cannot do so without stealing money, dangerous chemicals, etc (Johnson).

Batman's no kill rule is self imposed, just like Superman's, but for him it is way more personal. Bruce Wayne became the Batman the moment his parents got shot in front of him when he was eight years old. His whole quest is driven by the desire to create a world where no child has to witness their parents getting killed in front of them. He knows that he is not sane either. After all, he is a grown man wearing a bat suit and fighting criminals during the night while still keeping a double identity as Bruce Wayne.

If he does kill only one person, he knows that there would be no going back, that he would not be able to stop himself from doing so again, and that it would make him no better than any of his enemies. His rule is so sacred to him that even after The Joker, Two Face, Bane, and many more manage to escape from the prisons and asylums and end up killing even more people any time they do so, he still refuses to finish them off for good. Besides, in many “What if” stories, where he does break his rule, his fear is proven true as he does more damage than all of his enemies ever have. That was proven especially true in *The Killing Joke*, 1988, when he snapped the Joker’s neck and left, forfeiting his most important rule and continuing to kill his enemies mercilessly. Unfortunately, DC comics re-released these comics and undid those murders, as it was deemed too risky and dark for their audience (cf. *Dark Knight*, *Dark City*).

Batman's biggest power, despite only being human, is his willpower. It is what kept him going even when his body gave out on him. He managed to fight off every enemy who tried to take over his mind; he managed to stay awake for multiple days when one of his foes was capable of harming him in his dreams; he came back from a broken spine and regained his physical skills in short time etc. (Moench). The Green Lantern Ring, a powerful tool that chooses its own wielder and relies on willpower and imagination chose him just as the Yellow Lantern Ring did, which relies on his owner to be able to cause fear in others. He refused them both.

II. The Villains:

The Villains in old mythology were never really elaborated upon apart from a hero's story. They served a purpose of posing a threat to the hero and confirming his greatness once he managed to overcome them. In Greek and Roman mythology, the villains were gods who wanted a hero's death, like Ares in some of Heracles stories, warriors such as Hector in Illiad who were on the opposing side or monsters. The monsters can also be divided into two smaller groups. The first group are animals with certain properties – large bodies, or multiple body parts – that make them special. In Heracles' first labor, he fought a lion. The certain property there is that the lion's skin was invulnerable. Another example is the Hydra, which is a giant serpent with multiple heads or Cerberus, who was a large dog with three heads (Bibliotheca).

The second group contains the animal-human hybrids. The best known example for that group is the Minotaur, a monster with a human body and a bull's head or Medusa, who had the lower body of a snake, the upper body of a woman and who, instead of hair, had snakes grow out of her head. Medusa had another ability that made her dangerous. Unlike the Minotaur who was a monster that used physical strength, Medusa would turn to stone anyone who looked her straight in the eyes.

It is interesting to compare how those villains came into existence. In old mythology, most of those hybrids got created through the manipulation of the gods. The Minotaur was born when the Cretian Bull and Minos' wife Pasiphae mated after Aphrodite made her fall in love with it to punish Minos. Medusa and her sisters once were so beautiful that Aphrodite became jealous and cursed them and turned them into the monsters they became. Similarly, in modern comics, many of the heroes and villains are created as superhuman through experiments or accidents. Captain America was given a super soldier serum that stopped his aging and gave him a body in its prime and at peak human condition. On the other hand, Ben Grimm from the Fantastic Four turned into a stone-like humanoid creature with red stone skin and named himself The Thing as he did not believe that he looked human anymore. It is a great metaphor about humans meddling and playing as if they were gods, which often has terrible results. However, the villains in comic books and mangas are different. Often the writers invest as much time into them as they invest in the heroes, which leads to villains gaining so much popularity that they

never truly die in the story, no matter how bad their situation seems. This is a major difference between them and the mythic heroes who usually fought their monsters once and killed them. The modern heroes, on the other hand, rarely kill their opponents, which leads to the villains returning again and again. Because of that, heroes have certain villains associated to them as an exclusive. Superman has Lex Luthor, Batman has the Joker, Green Lantern has Sinestro, Wonder Woman has Giganta, and the Flash has Zoom as their arch-enemies who they fight over and over again. Except for Lex Luthor, the other villains serve as foils for the heroes, showing them what they could become if they succumbed to their inner evil (cf. the animated film *Justice League-Doom*, loosely adapted from Mark Waid's *Tower of Babel*).

Manga villains are different. While the Shonen villains do share similarities to their Western counterparts, in other genres the villain tends to do more psychological damage to the heroes. They will go for the heroes' loved ones, barely ever directly confronting the protagonist. One example would be Johan Liebert from "Monster", who is a psychopath saved by the protagonist Tenma – a doctor who performed the live saving surgery on him – who tries to break Tenma nine years later and show him how they are not so different. He never tries to physically harm Tenma, which makes this case different from its Western counterparts where a physical fight is more likely to occur between them than any form of dialogue. (cf. Schultz, Kishimoto ch. 443).

III. The Achilles' Heel

The Achilles' Heel is a famous trope in today's media and storytelling which is used to describe someone's weak point. It was introduced in Homer's *Illiad* through the hero Achilles, who was invulnerable except for his heel, and got killed after Paris shot an arrow through it (Heslin 166–69). There are many versions of how Achilles got his weakness. The most prominent one is that his mother, after it had been foretold that her son would live a short, but adventurous life, took him to the River Styx, which offered the power of invulnerability and dipped his body into it, but it did not wash over his heel as she was holding him by it, which left it vulnerable (Burgess 9).

In modern comics every hero has a weakness, no matter how overall powerful he is. Superman has kryptonite which takes him down, and as long as it is close, he cannot even move away from it. Goku and the whole race of Sayan are rendered immobile and weak the moment somebody grabs their monkey tail. The Green Lantern's Ring is weak against the color yellow, and Wonder Woman loses all her powers if she gets tied down by a man (Pasko). There are too many examples to list them all, but the point is always the same: every super powerful being, even if it seems omnipotent, has a weakness the heroes (or villains) can use to overcome them.

It is an important trope in storytelling, as a lot of characters today are overpowered and it would be illogical and almost asinine to have them lose the conventional way. Through it, a regular human like Lex Luthor can make Superman wince in pain in front of him, when without it Superman could kill him by breathing at him a bit harder than usual. *Marvel Comics* provides a great example of that with the villain Thanos, who is the titan of death and so powerful that he has defeated the combined forces of the Marvel Heroes more than once. However, his motivation for destroying everything in his path is that he is in love with Death, who is personified as a woman, and in order to make her happy, he sends more and more souls to her. Ironically, he is immortal and cannot die no matter what and how much he wants that to happen. He wants to be by her side and he knows that what he is doing is wrong. Because of that, he always sabotages himself consciously in hopes that finally the heroes will be able to kill him and reunite him with the woman he loves (Infinity Gauntlet #5).

One Piece is a Shonen Manga about pirates, in which many characters have obtained abilities by eating Devil Fruits. Devil Fruits give them certain powers, depending on the fruit eaten, which range from turning their body into rubber and thus making them immune from blunt physical force to allowing them to transform into molten lava and generate large amounts of it. All Devil Fruits have the same weakness: those who eat them cannot swim, and seawater negates their powers and weakens them to the point that they drop to the ground and are unable to move due to the fatigue they get from it. This is inspired by the belief from Greek mythology that ambrosia would give immortality to anyone who ate it and the Norse myth of the Golden Apples, which was believed to do the same (Faulkes 60). The weakness of these Devil Fruits allows the capture and subduction of them through others who do not possess any Devil Fruit powers. Their equivalent to kryptonite are sea-prism tools like bullets and handcuffs that negate the powers like seawater does and render them helpless once they make contact with it (Oda Chapter 100).

IV. Direct Adaptations and Homages

The genre of comic books is well aware of its connection to the ancient mythologies, and does not try to hide that one bit. Moreover, both *Marvel* and *DC* have directly taken characters from Greek and Norse mythology and implemented them in their universes.

DC Comics has taken the Olympians and placed them as higher beings in their universe. Wonder Woman, one of the most popular heroines in DC and one of the founders of the Justice League, is the warrior princess of the Amazons, based on the Amazons from Greek mythology – daughter of Hyppolyta, the Amazonian queen, and daughter of Ares. Ares is also one of Wonder Woman's arch-enemies, as is Circe, directly taken from the *Odyssey* as she was the Nymphé that turned half of Odysseus' crew into pigs. Both Ares and Circe are incredibly powerful and pose a threat even to heroes like Superman. The other Olympians are mostly neutral and Zeus often asks Wonder Woman to right the wrongs either the other gods or creatures taken from Greek Mythology have committed (Azzarello).

Another homage to ancient myths is the DC hero Captain Marvel. He is a young boy who can transform into Captain Marvel by shouting Shazam. Shazam is an abbreviation in which four Greek characters are mentioned, and the last one is Hermes's Latin name:

S The wisdom of Solomon;
 H The strength of Hercules;
 A The stamina of Atlas;
 Z The power of Zeus;
 A The courage of Achilles;
 M The speed of Mercury. (Parker)

His arch-enemy Black Adam derives his powers the same way, but his shout includes the Egyptian gods, as he is the son of Pharaoh:

S The stamina of Shu;
 H The speed of Heru;
 A The strength of Amon;
 Z The wisdom of Zehuti;

A The power of Aton;

M The courage of Mehen. (Thomas)

Marvel Comics has directly taken characters from the Norse mythology into their universe, naming them Asgardians and giving them their own realm that is connected to Midgard (Earth) through a dimensional bridge. Odin, just as in Norse mythology, is the main god and father to all other gods. His two most well known sons are Thor, the god of thunder who carries a magic hammer, Mjolnir, who allows him to summon lightning and storms, and gives him the ability to fly, and Loki, the trickster god who is more proficient in magic than his brother, who relies more on his raw power. In Norse mythology, Loki caused Ragnarok, which is their equivalent of the Apocalypse during which all gods, including Thor and Odin died. His comic counterpart is trying to kill Thor as he is jealous of Odin's affection and favoritism towards him (Lee, "Journey into Mystery #114"). Thor is also one of the Avengers, *Marvel's* equivalent to the Justice League, and his membership cements the importance *Marvel* has given the whole Norse adaptation (Lee, "The Avengers #1"). *Marvel* also included the character of Hercules, which is the Roman adaptation of Greek Heracles. He has all characteristics of his Roman counterpart, especially his super strength and thirst for battle. Hercules is strong enough to hold his own in fights with opponents like Thor and The Hulk, who are among the strongest characters in the whole *Marvel* universe.

Conclusion

Mythology has laid the foundations for today's genre of Western comic books and Eastern Mangas. Heracles inspired the creation of Superman and Son Goku as super strong heroes with great leadership skills and loyalty towards their friends and allies. His determination against foes more powerful than him can be seen in today's stories so often that it has become a cliché. His appearances in the myths of other heroes have introduced the idea of crossovers in today's comics and he was the first hero to have a sidekick, another popular trait of the current heroes. Odysseus has inspired the creation of Batman, who has shown that people without superpowers can do tremendous things and become just as legendary and respected as their demigod counterparts. Both Superman's and Batman's no kill rule reveal the current value of life within our society, while the almost careless murders by the old heroes revealed the lack of that value within a mostly war oriented culture.

Comic books and mangas continue doing what myths used to do – they entertain, educate, and inspire their fans. Just as ancient cities identified themselves with characters from mythologies – Spartans, for example, called themselves the sons of Heracles – people have identified themselves with certain heroes/villains. The heroes have become popular icons and are present on both the big and the small screens and in numerous other media, including comic books. Accordingly, comic books have drawn upon mythological themes and tropes and adapted them into today's time. In other words, they represent the mythology of our era. In the future, they will be seen as myths told by an older civilization and will reveal just as much about our culture and what we deemed good, ideal, bad, and evil as the old myths reveal to us about the past.

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