I Need A (Super)Hero

An Analysis of Heroes and Superheroes, and Their Role as Intermedial Phenomena

Masterarbeit

zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades
Master of Arts (MA)

an der Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz

vorgelegt von
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Graz, 2014
**Declaration of Authorship**

I certify that the work presented here is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and the result of my own investigations. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Graz, March 2014

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(Bettina Koller)

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**A Note on Gendered Language**

No conscious effort has been made in this thesis to address all genders equally. I have used the male and female grammatical forms. Thus, I have perhaps chosen the literally most discriminatory version possible. However, this discrimination reflects the fact that my thesis is based on numerous stories written long before the onset of academic gender criticism and is about a topic which is dominated by male characters. Therefore, a polarized treatment of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ realms is more practicable for analysis. I apologize to my readers, knowing that their genders will be more than two.
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1. Introduction

“I need a hero”: These words are cried out by Bonny Tylor in her song “Holding Out For a Hero”, released in 1984, and have been famous in the music business ever since (cf. “Bonny Tylor” 2013, online). Not that famously, but nevertheless as intensely, the same declaration is made in a different context in the song “Hero” by the rock band Skillet, from 2009 (cf. “Skillet” 2013, online). But these are just two of many examples, not only in modern music, which declare the need for a hero. In fact, it seems that ever since man has felt the need to tell stories, the concept of the hero has been an inherent part of those. Fascinatingly, this is true for numerous cultures all around the world. Independently from each other, different cultures created myths and other stories with a hero as protagonist. Carlyle (1934: 19) argues that this is because “[s]ociety is founded on hero-worship. All dignities of rank, on which human association rests, are what we may call a Heroarchy (Government of Heroes) – or a Hierarchy, for it is sacred enough withal!” In the ancient Orient, for example, the character Gilgamesh was the hero of numerous different myths. In ancient Greece and Rome, heroic narratives were incredibly important parts of culture which is shown by a great number of heroes which are still known today, such as Ulysses, Achilles, or Perseus. Other European heroes are, for example, King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table in British myths, or Siegfried in the Nordic Sigurd-myths.

These wide-spread occurrences of the idea of the hero already indicate that the hero can be described as a concept that regularly appeared, and still appears, in literature. However, as the previous paragraph shows this concept is not limited to a single medium. Modern media still adapt the concept of the hero. Additionally, in the modern and post-modern eras the concept of the superhero developed beside the concept of the hero. Although the term superhero was first used regularly in comic books and graphic novels, the superhero has, similar to the hero, expanded into numerous other media. Therefore, the analysis of (super-)heroes, as provided in this thesis, reflects the development of the heroic and super-heroic concepts as intermedial phenomena.

This thesis provides information about the historical background of (super-)heroes, which demonstrates that the origins of superheroes are interwoven with those of heroes. However, there are considerable differences in the concepts underlying them, as well as in the contexts they are embedded in. Additionally, the historical approach enables a discussion of how social and/or political circumstances influence the development of certain ‘types’ of (super-)heroes.
Firstly, I briefly introduce some terms used in inter-media studies, such as transmediality. Since inter-media studies are a relatively young discipline and still developing, I focus exclusively on Werner Wolf’s intermediality model. Additionally, I include some theoretical approaches to a so-called myth scheme to show that there have already been attempts to find a basic concept behind the myth, which can be further applied to the concept of the hero.

In a second step I define the term ‘hero’, discuss the literary development of heroes, and show that, although there are different types of heroes, the heroic concept as we understand it nowadays can be traced back to Greek mythology.

Thirdly, I briefly discuss the ‘transitional’ phase between heroes and superheroes. This refers to the period in which no straightforward concept of the superhero had been established nor was the term ‘superhero’ used to label a certain type of hero. First steps into this direction were taken by creating heroes such as Tarzan, Zorro or Robin Hood. Additionally, the first shift between media can be seen. Long epic narratives of heroic actions are now transposed into a new medium, in this case cartoons.

In the next step I discuss the superhero. This means including the definition of the superhero, introducing the ‘superhero scheme’ by using different examples of superheroes from visual media, such as comic books, films, and TV series, as well as providing some historical background information on when and in which media the term ‘superhero’ was used for the first time.

Last but not least, I take a look at the concepts of the anti-hero and super-anti-hero. I show why these concepts are of the same importance for narratives as the (super-)hero and how they are influenced by society.
2. Intermedia Studies: Terminology

For many decades, the term ‘intertextuality’ was used by most scholars for the study of cross-references between texts. These references could be direct or indirect. One example of intertextuality is the Faustus theme. This topic fascinated numerous writers over centuries, as shown by Christopher Marlowe’s Faustus as well as by J.W. Goethe’s Faust. However, this term does no longer suffice since more media forms are available. As a consequence, intermedial studies developed, which look at various medial manifestations instead of texts alone.

Although intermediality is a relatively new field of scholarly studies and still appears to be a controversial topic, numerous scholars such as Joachim Müller and Irina Rajevsky, along with many others, consider the transmitting media and their relations worth specifying. Therefore, they have been trying to develop ‘new’ terms to describe different intermedial phenomena. The problem is that different researchers have been using different terms, or the same terms for describing different things. To avoid unnecessary complications or confusions, but to sketch out an overview into intermedial studies, a simplified version of Werner Wolf’s intermedial model is presented in the following paragraphs.

Wolf (2002: 165) points out that the term ‘medium’ describes two different things. Firstly, it can apply to the apparatus that is used to transmit information, such as books, radio, television, CD etc. Second, it can refer to the “frame of reference” (2002: 165). This frame is characterized by its specific (e.g. symbolic, iconic) use of one or more semiotic systems (e.g. language, images) to transmit cultural information. Intermedia studies rely on the second definition.

The first step in media analysis is to distinguish between ‘intramediality’ and ‘intermediality’. ‘Intramediality’ is used for relations between media products of one and the same medium. Examples of this are the previously mentioned category of intertextuality, but also intermusicality. Opposed to this, the term ‘intermediality’ is used for references between different media (e.g. film – text; song – film; painting – text; etc.). In his own articles, however, Wolf (2002; 2011) mainly focuses on intermedia studies. He distinguishes two main sub-categories: intermedial references that appear within one work, which he calls ‘intracompositional intermediality’; and those that spread beyond the boundaries of a single work, which he calls ‘extracompositional intermediality’ (Wolf 2011: 5).
Furthermore, Wolf distinguishes two main phenomena that reach beyond the borders of a single work. The first one is called ‘transmediality’. This term describes “phenomena which are non-specific to individual media and/or are under scrutiny in a comparative analysis of media in which the focus is not on one particular source medium” (Wolf 2011: 4). Transmedial features can appear on the formal level as well as on the level of content, and they can be historical or a-historical. Furthermore, transmediality connotes that the original medium cannot be easily traced and/or the original medium is not relevant for the analysis (Wolf 2011: 5). The second one is called ‘intermedial transposition’. This term describes an adaption of a formal or contextual feature from one medium to another. In contrast to transmediality, the origin is “heteromedial” (Wolf 2011: 5), which means the original work can clearly be traced and is very likely to have a certain influence on the reception of the work adapting the original’s features.

Within the borders of a single work, Wolf again distinguishes between two phenomena. The first one is called ‘plurimediality’. Wolf (2011: 5) states that “plurimedial artefacts produce the effect of medial hybridity whose constituents can be traced back to originally heterogeneous media.” These plurimedial artefacts can either be combined to form a new medium but still appear in their original form (e.g. illustrated novels), or they can be mixed, which would make the separation of the different media forms less accessible than the mixed use of them (e.g. film) (cf. Wolf 2002: 173). The second phenomenon, called ‘intermedial reference’ is slightly more complex.

[It] represent[s] a medial and semiotic homogeneity and thus qualifies as "covert" intracompositional intermediality. The reason for this is that intermedial references operate exclusively on the basis of the signifiers of the dominant "source" medium and can incorporate only signifiers of another medium where these are already a part of the source medium (see Wolf 2011: 5).

The intermedial reference can be either explicit or implicit. Explicit intermedial reference means that “the heteromedial reference resides in the signifieds of the referring semiotic complex, while its signifiers are employed in the usual way and do not contribute to heteromedial imitation” (Wolf 2011: 5). The implicit intermedial reference does not directly point out its reference to the original work but “elicits an imagined as-if presence of the imitated heteromedial phenomenon” (Wolf 2011: 5).

The following diagram (Image 2.1) provides an overview of all phenomena and terms discussed in the previous paragraphs.
With reference to the analysis of heroes and superheroes, one can anticipate that these concepts, along with the literary genre of myth, are transmedial phenomena. This is shown in the following chapters 2.1 and 3.1 However, one should keep in mind that individual (super-) heroes and their stories can have other intermedial features as well. Therefore, different categorizations can apply to them depending on the focus of research. This should be kept in mind, since not every single intermedial phenomenon that appears within the examples provided in this thesis is discussed.
2.1 Myth-Structure, the Heroic Journey, and Intermediality

Within literary studies, it is not only single texts that have been discussed and analysed, but many scholars have tried to find a structure that underlies every narrative. Significant for this field of research was the structuralist approach of scholars in the 1950s. In his book *Structuralism in Literature. An Introduction*, Scholes (1978: 13) introduces literary structuralism by acknowledging “that its roots are in social sciences (linguistics, anthropology), and that its very application to literature depends upon the relation between the language of literature and the whole language.” Earliest investigations in this field go back to Russian formalist Vladimir Propp, who was interested in “formal qualities of the tale, its basic units and the rules governing their combination” (see Scholes 1974: 67) such as grammar and syntax.

Another famous scholar was the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. According to Scholes (1974: 67), Levi-Strauss’s idea was that “the unit is not the tale but the myth, which finds expression in any number of tales, finished or fragmentary. A myth in this sense is a body of materials, which always reaches us in some modified form, and must be reconstructed from them.” This leads him to the conclusion that there must be a logical, mathematical pattern within every mythical narration. He calls this pattern the ‘canonical formular’ (a: b :: c : a⁻¹) (cf. Doninger 2009: 196). The “materials” myths consist of are called ‘mythemes’. They are the smallest parts of a myth and can be seen as equivalents to the linguistic minimal pairs. Minimal pairs are “two terms that change the meaning when they replace one another in the same situation” (cf. Doninger 2009: 198). ‘Mythemes’ can be separated and put together in numerous different ways to create “a potentially infinite number of stories by rearranging a limited number of known mythic themes” (cf. Doninger 2009: 203). Thus, new myths/stories are built with new meanings, but they are still part of the one original myth.

One set of ‘mythemes’ Lévi-Strauss explicitly pays attention to are dualisms and oppositions. Doninger (2009: 198) summarizes Lévi-Strauss’s ideas by stating that his

method of analysis, his canonical formula (a : b :: c : a⁻¹) relates what is the same (the two sets of parallel term: a and c, and b and a⁻¹) to what is different, more specifically, to what is opposed or inverted (the two sets of compared terms: a and b, and c and a⁻¹). To consider multiple variants simultaneously […], one must choose variants on the basis of their similarity; but to determine the significant oppositions of myth, one must isolate factors of difference.

It is undeniable that nearly all stories work on the basis of dualisms or oppositions (e.g. good vs. evil; male vs. female). One problem is, however, that Lévi-Strauss does not ask why they
do so, which is essential for explaining this phenomenon. It can be argued, for example, that such simplifications were made due to the oral tradition of storytelling. Moreover, there are counterexamples to these “simplified structures” of myths offered, for instance, by literature and films. These media can show many different story-lines within one narration, and do not have to stick to the chronological order (e.g. by using flash-backs) because they offer the possibility of re-reading/re-watching. This shows that the mathematical structure of Levi-Strauss’s myth definition, although reasonable from a structuralist point of view, does not consider other factors that influence the myth structure. This is only one point of criticism of many, which cannot be further discussed in this thesis. Nevertheless, from an intermedial point of view, to agree on Lévi-Strauss’s claim might seem tempting since it would imply that every narrative, independent from type/genre and medium, allows for transmedial transposition. This would open additional angles on an intermedial analysis.

Literary structuralism, however, was not the first movement that dealt with the question of story structure. There were other researchers dealing with similar issues and ideas who belong to completely different scientific fields. Some of these were Carl Gustav Jung, Heinrich Zimmer, and Joseph Campbell.

Joseph Campbell, if compared to Lévi-Strauss, seems to be less scientifically and more philosophically driven. According to Campbell (1968: 3), myths are bound to the cosmos and “pour into human cultural manifestations. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth.” In The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949/1968), he claims that a general structure, an archetype he calls ‘monomyth’\(^1\), underlies every myth. The ‘monomyth’ can be described as being the hero’s journey, the path he has to take and adventures he has to survive to be announced a hero. Campbell divided this journey into the parts departure, initiation, and return. Briefly summarized, this journey happens as follows: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from his mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (see Campbell 1968: 30). Each of these three stages consists of numerous sub-divisions. The departure of the heroic journey includes ‘the call to adventure’, the ‘refusal of the call’, ‘supernatural aid’, ‘crossing of the first threshold’, and the ‘belly of the whale’, as Campbell (1968: 49ff) calls them. The initiation is made up by the ‘road of trials’, the ‘meeting with the goddess’, ‘woman as the temptress’, ‘atonement with the father’, ‘apotheosis’, and the

‘ultimate boon’ (cf. Campbell 1968: 97ff). Campbell (1968: 193ff) divides the hero’s return into ‘refusal of the return’, the ‘magic flight’, ‘rescue from without’, the ‘crossing of the return threshold’, ‘master of the two worlds’, and finally the ‘freedom to live’. All these subdivisions can have different themes and adventures the hero has to pass before he reaches the end of his journey.

Campbell provides seemingly countless examples of myths originating all over the world which conform to his myth-scheme: he names Greek heroes such as Jason, Theseus, and Aeneas; he summarizes Buddha’s development; he uses well-known (European) fairy-tales; he constantly quotes episodes from the Bible; he refers to The Thousand and One Nights; he mentions Goethe’s as well as Dante’s works; and last but not least he includes Indian and Egyptian mythology as well. These various different examples are used by Campbell to confirm his theory.

A summary of the journey can be seen in the following Image 2.2 The Hero’s Journey:

![Image 2.2 Hero’s Journey](Campbell, 1968: 245)

The image above and the previously mentioned examples Campbell includes in The Hero with a Thousand Faces show that there are similarities to Lévi-Strauss’s ‘mythemes’. The subdivisions of the ‘monomyth’ are interchangeable. The story teller might prefer to focus on one part more than on another, duplicate some of the parts within the narration, or fuse two or more sub-divisions or even characters. Additionally, Campbell (1968: 246f) notes that

outlines of myths and tales are subject to damage and obscurcation. Archaic traits are generally eliminated or subdued. Imported materials are revised to fit local landscape, custom, or belief, and always suffer in the process. Furthermore, in the innumerable retellings of a traditional story, accidental or intentional dislocations are inevitable.

Although Campbell is talking about myths and literary narrations in general, and therefore argues on an intertextual level, this notion perfectly addresses intermedial issues as well. In intermedial transpositions, such as film adaptations, for example, changes of the original
narrative seem to be the rule than the exception. There are, as Campbell mentions, reasons for changing the original. In the example of film adaption, the dimension of time is important. One reason is that very often decades or even centuries lie between the publication of a narration and a movie adaption, a time during which social needs will have changed. However, the time it takes for transmitting/receiving the story has to be considered as well. Readers of a novel, for example, have their individual paces. They are prepared to spend several hours reading the story, taking breaks of undetermined length whenever they need to, and thus it might take them several days, weeks, or even months to finish the book. Viewers of a movie, on the other hand, have other expectations. Although circumstances are different depending on whether one watches the film at home or in a cinema, one can basically assume that the audience of a film wants to watch it in one piece within an average time of two hours. The film, therefore, has to be more compact and maybe less detailed than the book, even if both basically tell the same story.

Although, or maybe because, Campbell achieved immense publicity, he has been strongly criticized. Robert Segal (1992: 42), for example, criticizes that Campbell assumes “[that] the sole correct interpretation of all myths is symbolic, a-historical, universalistic, mystical, and matriarchal. Both the East and all primitive peoples correctly decipher their own myths. Only the West misconceives its myths.”

The two above examples of Lévi-Strauss and Campbell demonstrate that, although both theories are incomplete and have to be used with caution, every narrative, independently from the medium it is transmitted by, can be seen as an intermedial phenomenon, specifically as a transmedial phenomenon, simply by being a narrative as such. If one tries out a thought experiment in which these two theses are combined, an interesting conclusion can be drawn: assuming there exists a ‘monomyth’ that consists of ‘mythemes’, and that every myth is about the heroic journey, one can conclude that the hero is one of many ‘mythemes’ that make up a story. Assuming further that Lévi-Strauss’s formula is correct and that through re-arranging these ‘mythemes’ other narrations beside myths are constructed, this would lead to the conclusion that every narration is about a hero. Admittedly, this seems rather exaggerated. On the other hand, it would not be completely wrong to say so. How this seeming contradiction is possible becomes clear when looking at some possible definitions of the term ‘hero’.
3. Definition of ‘The Hero’

In the previous chapter, the suggestion has been made that every story is about a hero. This seems to be accepted at least by Jonathan Stroud, an English novelist, who states on the cover of his book *Heroes of the Valley*: “Every legend has a hero, but not all heroes are legendary…”. As will be discussed in this chapter, every myth, every legend, every story told, whether written or oral, is a story about a hero in the widest sense. This does not automatically imply that his/her actions are considered to be heroic. The different semantic fields the word ‘hero’ is used in can be seen in the figure (Image 3.1) below, as well as in the following definitions of the hero.

![Image 3.1: Hero mind map. Source: Visual Thesaurus (2013, online)](image)

As can be seen in this image, there are five partly intermingling main fields in which the term hero comes up. The three categories from the left side to the bottom of the image are about the heroic actions of “fighters”, conquerors and “mythical beings”; i.e. about ‘legendary’ heroes. These are the heroes Campbell discusses in his theory of the heroic journey, and these are also the heroes this thesis deals with.

The next category of terms belongs to the hero of narratives, which was mentioned before. In this category, the hero is “[t]he man who forms the subject of an epic; the chief male persona of a poem, play, or story; he in whom the interest of the story or plot is centered” (*The OED* 1971/1982: 246). In other words, ‘hero’ can be used as a term for the main character of a story, the one the audience is supposed to sympathize or even identify with. This use of the term ‘hero’ is the reason why it can be said to be true that every story is about a hero.
The category on the right side of the image is related to the ‘heroic’ hero since it refers to the so called ‘every-day-hero’. Every-day-heroes are ‘normal’ people who excel in their everyday life, for example at work or at home with their families. 

But what qualities does a heroic hero have? Cornish (2004, online) notes that: “[a]lthough there are some timeless, universal qualities known as heroic, throughout history the idea of the hero has fluctuated and evolved to suit the ethos of the times.” Mike Alsford agrees with this idea, stating that: “images of the hero and their villainous counterparts have […] served as iconic receptacles for a wide range of cultural values, aspirations, and fear. What a culture considers heroic, and what it considers villainous says a lot about that culture’s underlying attitude […] ”(2006: 2). This can also be seen in the numerous different descriptions of the term ‘hero’ provided by different dictionaries and encyclopaedias.

According to The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology (1966: 438), a hero is a “man of superhuman qualities, demigod XIV […]; illustrious warrior XVI; man admired for his great deeds and noble qualities XVII;” Etymologically, the word can be linked to Latin, Greek, (Old) French, Spanish, and Italian. The former version heroe (XVI-XVIII) started to be replaced by the nowadays used version hero around XVII.

The OED (1971/1982: 245f), defines the hero as:

1. *Antiq.* A name given (as in Homer) to men of superhuman strength, courage, or ability, favoured by the gods and men; and immortal. The later notion included men of renown supposed to be defied on account of great and noble deeds, for which they were also venerated generally or locally; also demigods, said to be the offspring of a god or goddess and a human being; the two classes being to a great extent coincident. […]

2. A man distinguished by extraordinary valour and material achievements; one who does brave or noble deeds; an illustrious warrior. […]

3. A man who exhibits extraordinary bravery, firmness, fortitude, or greatness of soul, in any course of action, or in connexion with any pursuit, work, or enterprise; a man admired and venerated for his achievements and noble qualities. […]

Last but not least, the online encyclopaedia *Wikipedia* provides the following definition:

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2 In the group above the centered term, the ‘hero’ has nothing in common with the original meaning of this word. It is the name for a long sandwich, namely the hero sandwich. It is “made from a long roll or loaf of bread, typically with a filling of meat and cheese with lettuce and tomatoes” (see Encarta. World English Dictionary, 1999: 880). This is, however, a regionally coined use of the term ‘hero’, which seems to be the reason why it is hardly ever included when defining ‘hero’ (cf. “Hero Sandwich” 2013, online).

3 The *OED* provides literary examples for this definition dating from 1387 (Trevisa *Higden*) to 1840 (Thirlwall *Greece*)

4 The *OED* provides literary examples for this definition dating from 1586 (Warner *Alb. Eng.*) to 1885 (Edna Lyall *In Golden Days I*)

5 The *OED* provides literary examples for this definition dating from 1661 (Glanville *Van. Dogmatizing*) to 1853 (Maurice *Proph. & Kings*)
A hero […], in Greek mythology and folklore, was originally a demigod, their cult being one of the most distinctive features of ancient Greek religion. […] Later, hero (male) and heroine (female) came to refer to characters who, in the face of danger and adversity or from a position of weakness, display courage and the will for self-sacrifice—that is, heroism—for some greater good of all humanity. This definition originally referred to martial courage or excellence but extended to more general moral excellence. (“The Hero” 2013, online)

This shows that notwithstanding some changes throughout the centuries, the (fictional) hero has always been a person who stands out of the mass of average people through exceptional qualities such as courage, nobility, and the willingness to sacrifice his or her own happiness or even life for the well-being of others.

Additionally, one has to mention that in early literature it was very often men who were referred to as hero. Although the heroine is part of ancient literature, she usually has a different role than the male hero. The OED (1971/1982: 247) defines the ‘heroine’ of the ancient myths as a person with characteristics of a woman and a goddess, who is “distinguished by courage, fortitude or noble achievements.” According to the website GraecoMuse, the women in ancient Greek mythology hardly ever travel the world and seek out heroic quests, but very often become heroines through the act of sacrificing themselves for the greater good. Moreover, the heroines possess “qualities of wisdom, cunning and dignity” (GraecoMuse 2012, online) which they use to help the male heroes succeed with their quests. “[T]his concept of heroism is more passive in some respects to the male literary heroes, their quests and obviously heroic actions” (GraecoMuse 2012, online). However, in more modern narratives, the heroine’s characteristics have changed and she takes on a more active role. Examples for this are pop culture heroines such as Xena in Xena: Warrior Princess, Lara Croft in the Tomb Raider games and movies, and Buffy in Buffy the Vampire Slayer.
3.1 A Brief Overview of the Development of Heroes from Antiquity to Modernity

Cornish (2004, online) points out that “[t]he modern concept of the hero would not have been possible without the Renaissance.” This, however, is only true to some extent. The roots of many modern heroes go back to antiquity. Writers such as Homer, Sophocles, Aristotle, and Ovid created numerous heroes which are not only still known today, but seem to provide the prototype for many heroes that came afterwards. The most perfect example of this is Hercules, also known as Heracles\(^6\). In antiquity, numerous legends about him circulated. Even nowadays his stories are retold in literature, TV, the arts, and other media. Additionally, the hero Hercules has given his name to a certain kind of hero, the Herculean hero. Thus, the character Hercules himself has not only become an example of intermedial transposition but also of transmediality. But what is the Herculean hero? According to Waith (1962: 11), the Herculean hero is not always an offspring of gods but nevertheless “a warrior of great stature who is guilty of striking departures from the morality of the society in which he lives.” He is fierce, brave, and driven. Stories with a Herculean hero display the concept of “‘moral energy’. […] [T]hey clearly tell of a wonderful force inherent in the human body, capable of conquering this world and even of defying the world beyond. Terrible as are the manifestations of this force, there is no doubt that its effects are beneficial to mankind” (see Waith 1962: 18).

In the Middle Ages, however, the secular heroic hero was of no importance. The reason for this, according to Cornish (2004, online), was the strong influence of the church. “Living under the shadow of human sin, the Roman Catholic scholars of medieval Europe stressed the afterlife. Greatness came from God, not man, so the true heroes of Christendom were the martyrs, missionaries and priests preparing for salvation.” In English literature, for example, this kind of hero could be found in mystery plays.

It was not until the 14\(^{th}\) century, with the rise of the Renaissance, that the classical literature of ancient Rome and Greece, and thus the secular hero, were rediscovered. One of the leading writers who re-established the hero in literature was the Italian poet Petrarch. According to Cornish (2004, online), Petrarch picked up Cicero’s concept of education, which “was to cultivate not a narrow range of technical skills, but the single, noble virtue of manliness. […] A manly man was proficient in warfare, scholarship, government, letters and even the art of seduction”, which is a fitting description of the Greek hero Theseus, not Hercules. However, the Herculean hero did have his revival too, though changes were made to the concept. As

\(^6\) Hercules was used in ancient Rome whereas Heracles was his Greek name.
Waith (1962: 13) notes, Hercules’ origins lie in epic prose. However, in the Renaissance the narrative of the Herculean hero started to spread into the medium of drama, where Hercules’ and the Herculean hero’s characteristics developed to become so-called ‘tragic-heroes’.

As a brief addition, however, one has to mention that Greece, Rome, and Italy were not the only European countries with a rich history of heroes. In England, for example, two heroes stand out. Firstly, the noble and fearless Beowulf, whose tale belongs to one of the oldest known tales in English literature. Secondly, the legendary King Arthur, likely based on a military leader living in the 5th century (cf. Ohff 2004: 27), has been the hero of countless tales since the Middle Ages. Geoffrey of Monmouth was the first to dedicate a written narrative to King Arthur in his Historia Regum Britanniae (approx. 1136) (cf. Ohff 2004: 22/318). This started a wave of Arthurian narratives all over Europe. Many authors added further knights who fought on Arthur’s side, or even made a specific knight the main hero of their narrative (cf. Ohff 2004: 318-321). This might be because the knights had to serve specific social purposes. Since social circumstances in England were rather unstable for a long time, which caused constant changes of society’s needs, new knights with different qualities were created to fulfil those needs. However, all these knights, as well as King Arthur himself, share some qualities of the Herculean hero.

It took nearly four centuries to challenge the Renaissance heroic model. But with the Enlightenment, people longed for a different type of hero. Since ‘reason’ was the main theme that moved scholars and writers of that time (see Cornish 2004, online), it seems logical that in this period, heroes originating in myths or legends with the heroic qualities of Hercules or King Arthur were forced into the background. “[L]iterature explored themes of social upheaval, reversals of personal status, political satire, geographical exploration and the comparison between the supposed natural state of man and the supposed civilized state of man” (see “Enlightenment” 2013, online). Therefore, the hero of this literature was very often educated, civilized, and ideally a scholar instead of a warrior. At the end of the 18th century, however, Romanticism started to form a counter-movement to the Enlightenment as well as to the classical reception of myths. Some Romantics believed in “man's natural goodness and the call of individuals to develop their personality to the full” (see Cornish 2004, online). This opened the way for Greek mythology, though re-interpreted and re-invented, to find its way back into literature.

In Victorian times, two distinct movements took place at the same time. Some writers were seeking escape from the industrialized world by dealing with the topic of literary, as well as
historical heroes. The mythical hero was again revitalized since some writers still believed in the Romantic idea that heroism could not be learned, but one needed to be gifted, even demigod like, to become a real hero (cf. Cornish 2004, online). At the same time, the Greek myth cult established itself in America for the first time (cf. Brown 2007: 433f). However, there was an alternate movement, especially in England. The “earnest heroism of middle-class virtue” (cf. Cornish 2004, online) appeared for the first time in English literature. This form of heroism valued being earnest, doing one’s duty, and keeping society from degenerating. This means that in the middle of the 19th century, everybody who behaved according to social rules, and who tried to do his best to improve not only his, but also the lives of others, was seen as a hero whose story was worth telling, no matter how ‘common’ this person was (cf. Cornish 2004, online). This attitude was thought to influence not only literary characters, but also society.

With the start of World War II the mythical hero took over again. However, this revitalization deviated quite strongly from the Greek examples. The English author George Orwell, for example, “did not ascribe to heroism semi-divine greatness or classical virtues; instead he admired ‘a moral quality which must be vaguely described as decency’” (see Cornish 2004, online). In America, on the other hand, a different movement came to life, in which a newly labelled hero was established, namely the superhero. Although not always clearly referring to mythology, many characteristics of the superhero display a strong connection to the characteristics of mythological heroes.

Nowadays, the technical possibilities to transmit narratives have drastically increased. Mass-media culture as well as growing multiculturalism might be the reason for nearly every kind of hero appearing in modern narratives: heroic, super-heroic, anti-heroic, and even villainous features can be found in heroes. They can be (demi)gods, common people, sometimes even animals. Their strengths can be physical or mental, natural or supernatural, trained or gifted, and in some cases the hero does not have any strength at all. As Cornish (2004, online) criticizes, it seems to be too easy to become a hero today, since numerous people equate being a celebrity with being a hero.

In summary, this outline shows that although the idea of an ideal hero has been changing ever since it was first conceived, it seems that narratives always find their way back to Greek, and of course Roman, models. According to de Almeida (1981: 5), this is a natural development since “our history begins with the Greeks, and we will always return to Greece. The return presupposes the timeless influence and authority of Greece, but the variety possible in our
response denies blind, rote imitation.” Jaeger (1945: 15) describes this further by stating that “we always return to Greece because it fulfils some needs of our own life, although that need may be very different at different epochs.” Therefore, some brief examples of Greek heroes and how they influenced modern literature are provided in the following chapter.

3.1.1 Heroic Myths and Modern Media

Although thousands of years have passed, the heroes of Greek mythology are still the most famous ones in the Western world. But even back then, heroes had numerous different qualities and features. Thus they can be seen as the ancestors of nearly every type of hero that has been following.

Hercules, labelled as being the greatest hero of all times by some people, was the most admired hero in ancient Greece. He is legendary for his superhuman strength, bravery, near invulnerability, and he is the only hero that was granted immortality by his father Zeus (cf. Auerbach et.al 2004: 59). Despite his strength, Hercules’ life is full of challenges and grief. The revengeful goddess Hera never stops to tease Hercules. One day, she causes a severe madness, in which he kills his wife and children. To do penance, the Oracle of Delphi sends Hercules to Eurystheus, who assigns the hero to the nowadays famous twelve labours of Hercules, which no other living human would have been able to accomplish (Hamilton 2005: 237ff). These are, however, not his only adventures. Hercules slays monsters and giants, rescues innocent people, frees Prometheus, rights wrongs, and even plays a role in the gods’ defeat of the Titans. However, he is not the perfect hero as many recall him to have been. Hamilton (2005: 232ff) stresses numerous times that, although Hercules has his heart at the right place most of the time, he has many weaknesses. He falls victim to hubris, which means arrogance and pride. Additionally, he is also reckless, stubborn, and emotional. Although Hercules does penance every time he wrongs someone in whatever way, he does not from his mistakes, which seems to be rather un-heroic.

This unheroic aspects are hardly ever retold in adaptions of the Hercules theme. The most popular adaptions display Hercules as being heroic, brave, and incredibly strong, but his character possesses the ability to develop and defeat his hubris. Examples for such adaptions as intermedial transposition are the TV series Hercules: The legendary Journeys or Walt Disney’s animated movie Hercules. The story’s function as transmedial phenomenon can be seen, for example, in the video game Glory of Heracles or the film Hercules in New York.
Another example of a famous Greek hero is Theseus. Compared to his friend and cousin Hercules, Theseus has other qualities. He is not as strong as Hercules, but still far stronger than many other men. This allows him to claim his rightful position as heir to Aigeus, king of Athens. Inspired by his cousin, Theseus wishes to become a hero himself. Therefore, he is looking for dangerous adventures wherever and whenever he can. For example, he clears the road to Athens of villains. According to Hamilton (2004: 220ff), Theseus’s most famous heroic action is volunteering to be one of the oblations to the Minotaur, which Athens has to pay. Theseus manages to slay the Minotaur with his bare hands and stops this cruel rite forever. While reigning as king of Athens, he becomes a member of the Argonauts, hunts the Caledonian Boar, fights against centaurs, captures the young Helena to provoke her brothers’ anger, and he even travels to the underworld. One has to mention, however, that in this case he has to be rescued by Hercules (cf. Hamilton 2005: 225ff).

Theseus’ political achievements are remarkable as well. When he becomes king of Athens, he introduces some radical changes. He unites the tribes around Athens, lays down many of his rights as king, and allows the citizens of Athens to participate in council. He is admired for his wisdom, reason, sense of justice, statesmanship, sympathy, and calm nature (cf. Hamilton 2005: 223-225; 233). These qualities label him as glorious hero as much as they distinguish him from Hercules’ character. What is similar to Hercules, however, is that he is not infallible. Theseus, for example, leaves Ariadne on an island after they fled together from Crete. If he does so on purpose or not depends on the sources, but he clearly fails her. This seems to be even more unjust since he would not have been able to leave the labyrinth without her help (cf. Hamilton 2004: 223). Later in his life, he wrongly assumes that his son Hippolytus, a man of pure virtue who has been dedicating his whole life to the goddess Artemis, is involved in the death of Phaidra, Theseus’ wife and Hippolytus’ step-mother. Theseus curses his son who dies shortly afterwards. As Artemis herself comes to tell Theseus that he made a severe mistake, he abandons himself to despair.

Although Theseus’ story is not re-told as often as that of Hercules’, he does serve as a template for other narratives. Theseus is, for example, a character in Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Mary Renault’s historical novel The King must die as well as the movies Minotaur and Immortals, for example, centre their plots on Theseus’ and his adventures. Additionally, the story of Theseus and the Minotaur is named by Susanne Collins as an inspiration for The Hunger Games (see “Interview Collins”, online). The resemblance cannot be denied. As her sister Prim is called to be a tribune, Katniss volunteers to take her sister’s place, which resembles Theseus’ volunteering to face the Minotaur.
A modern day example that combines nearly all ancient Greek heroes is Riordan’s *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* young-adult book series (2005 – 2009). In these five books, the main hero is called Perseus “Percy” Jackson, a child that lives in New York and finds out that he is the son of Poseidon. He is named after the only ancient Greek hero, who, according to Ogden (2008: 145), never “had to grapple with any dilemma or emotional conflict of the sort to allow him to express a personality. [...] Perseus merely does what is right, defeats unpleasant monsters and hostile gods with relative ease [...]”. This means that Perseus, son of Zeus, seems to be one of few examples of the flawless hero in Greek mythology. In *The Sea of Monsters* (2006: 112), Percy explains that his mother chose his name because Perseus “was one of the only heroes in the Greek myths who got a happy ending. The others died - betrayed, mauled, mutilated, poisoned, or cursed by the gods.” Since he gets a happy ending as well, the name seems to be a lucky charm.

Percy, like all other demigods who manage to survive mythological monsters trying to kill them, is destined to become a hero. This destiny is embedded in every hero’s DNA, which sadly causes ADHD and dyslexia. Percy, however, is not like any other hero. The Oracle of Delphi foretold that a demigod son of the Great Three, of which is believed there are no others except for Percy, will be essential for the Gods’ destiny when he turns sixteen. Since Percy still has four years until then, he spends his time training combat skills, flying Pegasus, and accomplishing quests to save the gods, Western Civilization, and mankind. Together with his friends, he re-lives numerous adventures of Greek heroes such as Hercules, Odysseus, and Achilles had mastered before him. This helps the demigod and his companions to figure out how to kill, for example, Medusa, the Minotaur, and many other monsters. Percy travels to the underworld more than once, and even bathes in the river Styx to become nearly invincible. He tames Daedalus’ labyrinth, travels the Sea of Monsters, literally carries the world on his shoulders, and stops the Titan Lord Chronos from destroying Olympus. Since he is a demigod and son of Poseidon, he has special strengths. He can, for example, control the sea, breath under water, talk to horses, and sea water helps him to regain strength and heal his wounds. In summary, one can say that Riordan took the Greek mythology, found a way to transport it to modern day America, and created a teenage - hero that manages to re-experience the adventures of the probably greatest heroes of literature before he even turns sixteen. Additionally, this close relationship to ancient Greek myths makes it easy to apply Campbell’s myth scheme to the narrative.⁷

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⁷ For an analysis of Percy Jackson’s heroic journey see, for example, Ben Langdon (2010, online).
An intermedial analysis of these books, however, cannot be summarized as easily. One can describe these books as being intertextual because the original stories and the book series belong to the medium of literature. Another angle for analysis is that, since they transmit the concept of Greek mythology, the books can be labelled transmedial phenomena. Additionally, if one considers just one book at a time or assumes that all books belong to one storyline and therefore must be seen as being one story, the argument that the books’ content is an intermedial reference to the system of Greek mythology, or to individual Greek heroes, must be considered as being correct as well. Last but not least, one has to mention that the book series is becoming a movie-series, of which the first two parts have already been released. The books serving as models for movies make them the subject of an intermedial transposition. This shows that some intermedial phenomena can be analysed from different angles, which causes that different categorizations apply at the same time.
3.2 Late Heroes, early Superheroes

As the previous chapters have shown, there are numerous different types of heroes. In the early twentieth century, a concept of another type of hero started to develop. The hero is still called hero, but he adopts some new features which nowadays are seen as typical characteristics of the superhero. To deal with these ‘in-between’ heroes in detail would be beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore, three examples are discussed in short to sketch out some of their features.

Metken (1970: 48) names Tarzan as one of the most famous “forerunners” of superheroes. The character Tarzan first appeared in Edgar Rice Burroughs’s Tarzan of the Apes (1914) and developed into the hero of a whole book series (cf. “Tarzan” 2013, online). Burroughs’s Tarzan creation, however, was so popular that it became a transmedial phenomenon. But why is Tarzan in-between heroism and super-heroism? Basically, one can say that Tarzan still belongs to the group of heroes. He is morally pure due to his isolation in the jungle, which is why he can be described as being a ‘noble savage’. He is physically fit, and sees it as his duty to protect the weak (cf. “Tarzan” 2013, online). Additionally, his actions can be related back to well-known ancient heroes. He has to fight against lions and other wild animals, which can be compared to the heroic actions of Hercules, David, or Samson (cf. Metken 1970: 48). What makes him become more than ‘just’ a hero is that he has other qualities which are beyond normal human’s powers without being a demi-god. Tarzan, for example, learns languages very fast and can even communicate with animals. “His strength, speed, stamina, agility, reflexes, senses, flexibility, durability, endurance, and swimming are extraordinary in comparison to normal men” (see “Tarzan” 2013, online). Last but not least, in Tarzan’s Quest (1935) he even becomes immortal (cf. “Tarzan” 2013, online).

There are, however, heroes which show more similarities with superheroes than Tarzan. One example is Zorro. Zorro was created by Johnston McCulley and first appeared in The Curse of Capistrano (1919) (cf. “Zorro” 2013, online). His public identity is Don Diego de la Vega. De la Vega is a nobleman who lives in California. He acts as being indifferent to social nuisances so to not draw attention to his real feelings, which he can freely express as his alter ego Zorro. Unlike the heroes discussed so far, the protagonist wears a costume when he takes on the role of the hero.

The character's visual motif is typically a black costume with a flowing Spanish cape, a flat-brimmed black sombrero cordobés, and a black cowl sackcloth mask that covers the top of the head from eye level upwards. In his first appearance, he wears a cloak instead of a cape, and a black cloth veil mask covering his whole face with slits for eyes. […] His
favored weapon is a rapier, which he often uses to leave his distinctive mark, a Z cut with three quick strokes. He also uses a bullwhip. In his debut, he uses a pistol. (See “Zorro” 2013, online).

Zorro is famous for his skill with his sword, his agility, as well as his “fox-like sly mind and well-practiced technique to outmatch an opponent” (see “Zorro” 2013, online). Many of these features can be found in modern-day superheroes. The costume to hide the true identity as well as a symbol that is used as some kind of label is very common for superheroes. Especially Batman seems to be reminiscent of Zorro. Both of their public identities are noblemen who become “Dark Knights” to fight for justice. In Christopher Nolan’s version of Batman, Bruce Wayne, just like de la Vega, behaves as if indifferent to hide that his alter ego is the Dark Knight. Last but not least, they both use acquired combat skills instead of superhuman powers to defeat their enemies.

The third example is The Phantom. He can be described as being somewhere between a hero and a superhero as well. Created by Lee Falk, The Phantom first appeared in newspaper strips in 1937 (cf. “The Phantom” 2013, online). “Unlike many fictional costumed heroes, the Phantom does not have any supernatural powers, but instead relies on his strength, intelligence, and fearsome reputation of being an immortal ghost to defeat his foes” (see “The Phantom” 2013, online). The myth of him being immortal comes from the fact that the duty of becoming The Phantom is passed on from father to son. In the strips, the reader gets to know that Kid Walker is the present day Phantom and actually the twenty-first in line that accepted his father’s legacy. What makes The Phantom more of a superhero than a hero is the fact that he wears a costume. This is necessary to disguise his true identity and thus enables the creation of the myth of his immortality. “As part of the official uniform, the Phantom wears a black mask and a purple skintight bodysuit. He also carries period-appropriate sidearms, currently two M1911 pistols, in a special belt with a skull-like buckle” (see “The Phantom” 2013, online). He also wears two rings which can be seen as his emblem. The one he wears on the right hand is skull-shaped and used to mark enemies; the one on the left hand is shaped like four crossing sabres and is used to mark friends and people under the protection of The Phantom. Although he is not, as mentioned, the first hero who wears a mask, “the Phantom [is] the first fictional character to wear the skin-tight costume and eyes with no visible pupils that has become a trademark of superheroes” (see “The Phantom” 2013, online). Additionally, like many superheroes, the original Phantom avoids killing his enemies, which reflects his noble character that marks him as (super-)hero. Last but not least, his origins, like those of numerous modern day superheroes, can be traced back to some sort of comic-book medium.
3.3 Definition of “The Superhero”

In contrast to the hero, the superhero does not have a long tradition. Therefore, the concept of the superhero has not yet had the chance to develop as much. Basically, the superhero is defined as “a character in stories who uses special powers, such as great strength or the ability to fly, to help people” (see Longman 2001: 1448). The online encyclopaedia Wikipedia provides a more detailed definition, stating that:

A superhero [...] is a type of stock character possessing extraordinary or superhuman powers and dedicated to protecting the public. [...] By most definitions, characters do not strictly require actual superhuman powers to be deemed superheroes [...]. Normally, superheroes use their powers to counter day-to-day crime while also combating threats against humanity by super villains, their criminal counterparts. [...] As well, superheroes sometimes will combat such irregular threats as aliens, magical/fantasy entities, American war enemies such as Nazism or Communism, and godlike or demonic creatures. (See “Superhero” 2013, online).

As these definitions show, the superhero is similar to the hero and possesses very often powers beyond the natural abilities of a ‘normal’ person. He can do what the average person could never achieve, with powers that very often are supernatural, superhuman, and demi-god-like. In contrast to the hero, however, the superhero tries to hide his true identity by wearing a costume and using a different name, which is discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

3.4 The Superhero-Scheme

Most superhero stories can be said to follow a hero’s journey in the sense of Campbell’s myth scheme. The reason for this is that there is very often a connection between superheroes and mythological heroes, as mentioned before. Fingeroth (2004: 13), for example, refers to Jerry Siegel, the developer of Superman, who stated that he “conceived a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men [he] ha[s] ever heard tell of.” The hero’s journey, however, is clearly not enough for becoming a superhero, otherwise one would not need to add ‘super’ to the ‘hero’. There are several other features (which can be seen as transmedial features as well) a superhero needs to possess in order to become more than a ‘mere’ hero.

Some of these features depend on the type of superhero. Not all superheroes have the same abilities. There are, for example, supernatural or alien superheroes, such as Thor and Superman. They come from a different world, plane, realm, or whatever the artists creating the superhero might call the superhero’s non-earthly origin. This origin provides them with
superhuman powers. Another category of superheroes are those who are human, but gain superhuman powers through some kind of incident. Such incidents might be biological, chemical, or physical accidents. Spiderman, The Hulk, The Fantastic Four, and The Flash belong to this kind of heroes. Between these two categories are so-called mutants, such as the X-Men. They are human beings but born with special abilities because of an evolution of their genes. Last but not least, there are humans who do not have superhuman power, but use technology, gadgets, strength, agility, and wit to defeat their opponents. Examples for this kind of superhero are Batman, Green Arrow, and Iron Man.

What seems to be the first rule for becoming a superhero is to create an alter ego or a secret identity. Every superhero has a special public appearance when fighting villains. Peter Parker becomes Spiderman, Steve Rogers becomes Captain America, Selina Kyle becomes Catwoman, and so on. However, it seems even more important that along with the name comes the outfit. Hardly any superhero runs around in just jeans and shirts - they all wear a special costume. Usually, the costume consists of a mask concealing the hero’s face and a skin-tight, jumpsuit-like outfit that emphasises the hero’s athletic body. It displays the superhero’s characteristic colour and/or his emblem. There are, however, superheroes with a more striking outfits than others. As will be discussed later in more detail, some superheroes are used as patriotic icons. Therefore, it is no surprise that the costumes they wear display this patriotism with their colours. Captain America (see Image 3.4.1), the most patriotic of them all, seems to be a living American flag: red, blue, white and covered in stars and stripes, a big “A” for America placed on his forehead.

Wonder Woman (see Image 3.4.2), for example,

arrives in America, pre-packaged in red, white, and blue. Her tight-hugging pants are spangled with white stars on a field of blue. Her red […] boots possess pronounced white stripes at the top and running down center of them. […] she wears a prominent golden eagle, long the symbol of America’s national pride, on her halter top. (see Smith, 2001: 134)

Superman’s costume (see Image 3.4.3), on the other hand, does not seem as patriotic. He does not use the stars and stripes motive as such, but the colours of his costume are still based on those of the American flag. He wears a blue overall-like costume, decorated with what seems like red boots and underpants he wears above the suit, a red cape as well as the world famous red ‘S’ in a yellow and red diamond shape on his chest.
As can be seen in the above images, neither Wonder Woman nor Superman wears a mask. This is, however, more an exception than a rule, and they do alter their face in different ways. Superman, for example, wears glasses and styles his hair differently when acting as Clark Kent.

The reasons for creating a new identity when fighting criminals are clear. Alsford analyses Superman and states that “Kal-El hides his Superman persona both out of fear of his enemies targeting his vulnerable human friends as a way of getting at him but also to engage with the world as an ordinary human being” (2006: 34). This statement can be generalized for all superheroes. They wear costumes and masks to hide their identities in order to protect their friends, family, and more importantly for most stories, their one true love from villains. The second identity also enables them to live a normal, non-super-heroic life where they can be with their loved ones. Additionally, they use their superhero-identity to protect themselves from the law. Many superheroes are seen as vigilantes who take the law into their own hands, which is punishable by law.

One has to mention, however, that in modern adoptions, some superheroes reveal their true identity. Tony Stark, for example, declares publically that he is Iron Man at a press conference in the 2008 movie Iron Man (Faverau, USA). The members of The Fantastic Four (Story, USA) are seen saving people after a multiple collision even before they have the possibility to create a superhero alter ego in the 2005 movie version. Another example is Thor (Ranagh, USA). The 2011 movie version never really tries to conceal the god’s true identity. The only time when he appears as the comic book version’s alter ego Dr. Donald Blake is when Jane Foster’s team hack into the government’s database to free Thor from S.H.I.E.L.D.’s imprisonment and can be seen as a gimmick.
Another re-occurring aspect that can be seen as cliché is the superhero’s character. Very often the superhero is a social outsider. Characters such as Peter Parker (Spiderman), Bruce Banner (The Hulk), and Reed Richards (Mr. Fantastic), for example, are what is nowadays referred to as ‘nerds’. This term already implies that they do not fit into mainstream or popular society because they are interested in technology and science. Though their intelligence is above-average, they lack social confidence and self-esteem to some degree, which is why they only have a few friends who are very close to them. A different kind of social outsider can be seen in Bruce Wayne (Batman) and Oliver Queen (Green Arrow). Being billionaires and belonging to the city’s most powerful people makes them important members of society who have to engage in social interactions regularly. However, they still do not really belong to society, since they more or less have to hide their true intentions, their true selves. Only the people closest to them, who in both examples are their employees, know that they are behind the mask of the city’s hero.

There are also other examples which do not belong to the above mentioned categories. One of these examples is Clark Kent (Superman). Although he is not seen as a social outsider, his shy, introverted, and cowardly-seeming behaviour keeps him from being popular. Another example is Matt Murdock (Dare Devil), who is not fully integrated in average society due to his blindness.

There seem to be different reasons why superheroes are very often social outsiders. Basically, it seems that managing social relationships and saving the world at the same time seems to be too complicated for the superheroes, and maybe even for the author of the story. Additionally, the less people the superheroes connect with emotionally, the less likely it is that their true identity is exposed. Another point of view, based on the dichotomy of self and other, is offered by Alsford. He argues that by being unique in the world every individual has his/her own qualities to make the world a better place. The hero, or superhero in this case, however, shows a very special form of uniqueness, and thus otherness, “which typifies the heroic figure in a variety of forms and ironically in most cases it is precisely the transcendentally resourced power of the hero which makes them out as tragic and lone figures” (see Alsford 2006: 25). In other words, the superheroes’ uniqueness makes it hard for them to relate to other, more ‘normal’, people.

Another reason why some superheroes might have troubles connecting with others is their tragic past. Very often, this tragic past includes the loss of the parents. Examples are Peter Parker (Spiderman), who lost his parents in a car accident as a boy and his uncle Ben, who
was shot, as a teenager. Clark Kent (Superman) lost his Kryptonian parents as their home planet was destroyed, and, depending on the story’s version, sometimes even his human parents in an accident. Bruce Wayne (Batman) becomes an orphan after his parents are shot in a robbery. Tony Stark (Iron Man) and Oliver Queen (Green Arrow) lose their fathers. Basically, one can argue that this tragic past is a trigger for the superheroes’ fight for justice and a better world, or for seeking vengeance. Either way, the loss they feel pushes them further and shows them the goal they have to achieve in order to overcome the pain this loss causes. Fingeroth, on the other hand, has a different explanation. He claims that the loss of the parents is part of the superheroes’ freedom to be unaccountable. They do not have parents watching every step they take, which enables them to freely develop into the person they need to be (cf. Fingeroth 2004: 66).

The next schematic feature of superheroes is their weakness. As mentioned before, most superheroes are partly based on mythological archetypes. Therefore, most of them have weaknesses. How striking these are, however, depends on the “type” of hero they are. Normal human beings such as Batman, Green Arrow, and Iron Man, have the same weaknesses as every other person. Their advantage is merely their skills, which help them to avoid lethal injuries. The same is true for numerous human superheroes with superhuman abilities. A special case is Spiderman. He, as mentioned before, gained his powers through a biological incident. Although he can be killed by weapons created by man, this is not considered to be his greatest weakness. In his special case, he himself, in the form of a villain called Venom, is the villain that threatens his life most severely.

Some superheroes with superhuman abilities cannot be killed by normal weapons. Superman, for example, is also known as “The Man of Steel”, because he is nearly invincible. He was born on another planet, which further leads to the fact that he cannot be hurt by anything that was produced on earth. It takes green Kryptonite to weaken his body and thus make him vulnerable. However, there are very few superheroes who are considered to be impossible to kill. Two other examples are The Hulk and Wolverine from The X-Men. Whereas The Hulk really seems to be invulnerable, Wolverine can be hurt, but his healing powers prevent him from being lethally injured.

The next indispensable feature of every superhero tale is the villain. In order to be a superhero, one must have a (super-)villain one can fight. Usually, the villain’s qualities and abilities equal those of the hero who fights the villain. This is a tool of suspense as well as logic. If the superhero was considerably stronger, it would be easy for him to catch the bad
guy. If the villain was stronger, it would be illogical that he is defeated by the superhero. But what is the essential difference between the superhero and the (super-)villain? Cooley (1989, online) states that “[t]he tragic hero prefers death to prudence. The comedian prefers playing tricks to winning. Only the villain really plays to win.” A different view is offered by Alsford (2006: 132), who states that villains are “unrelated to anything other than themselves. Thus everything that they encounter is to be regarded as a resource, something that can be consumed and used. The villain is, first and foremost, a user.” However, both views on villains have one thing in common, namely that “being a villain has more to do with a particular attitude of mind rather than any particular power, or indeed any particular action” (see Alsford, 2006:132-133). However, to discuss characteristics of the villain any further would be beyond the scope of this thesis.

One of the less common transmedial features of the superhero scheme is the appearance of so called ‘sidekicks’ which help the superhero. Examples of sidekicks are Robin, who helps Batman, Kato, who assists The Green Hornet, Jim Rhodes, who helps Iron Man, and Jimmy Olsen, who aids Superman.

Last but not least, during the Silver Age (1956-1970), superhero groups which are able to fight against bigger threats than the individual superhero, became popular. Examples of this are DC’s Justice League, Marvel’s The Avengers, Fantastic Four, and X-Men.
3.5 Superheroes, Comic Books, and American Society

For the development of the superhero as discussed above, the comic is of great importance, especially in America. The American companies DC Comics and Marvel Characters, Inc., called the “Big Two”, not only controlled more than 60% of the comic book market in 1997, their companies are still growing (see McAllister, 2001:19). Additionally, they “share ownership of the United States trademark for the phrases ‘Super Hero’ and ‘Super Heroes’ and […] own the vast majority of the world’s most famous and influential superheroes” since the 1960s (cf. “Trade Market” 2013, Online). Hence, one has to acknowledge that the American comic book industry is essential for the creation of the new type of hero called superhero. Therefore, the following chapters on superheroes and super-heroism focus exclusively on superheroes created in American media. This can be seen as another difference between heroes and superheroes, since most of the best-known heroes in Western society originate in European literature. 8 One has to keep in mind, however, that other nations have also developed certain types of superheroes. Numerous protagonists of Asian manga comics or anime series and films can be described as superheroes too.

According to Wright (2001: 14) the comic is often seen as a medium of entertainment and not taken very seriously. However, numerous different forms of comics are part of our everyday lives and address different target groups. Thus, comics are a true mass medium. Its unique style also makes the comic a medium that reaches a large number of people:

> Comic art combines printed words and pictures in a unique way. The complex nature of this combination allows for much flexibility in the manipulation of meaning, but often in a context that is constrained with a small space […] These characteristics have implications for both representation and interpretation of ideological images and meaning. (McAllister, Sewell, and Gordon, 2001: 3)

Although the comic was used to reach the masses as early as the 19th century, the form used for superhero-comics developed rather late. It was not until the 1930s that the comical features of the comic strips were expanded and that they started to include suspense, adventure, and realism. Additionally, whole comic books started to be published instead of the previous limited form of the comic strips (see Knigge, 2004: 72).

This development from small comic strips to extensive comic books, and more often whole comic book series featuring the same main character over and over again, enables comic book

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8 One reason for this is the late ‘discovery’ of North America. It was not until the 18th century that Americans started to develop their own culture and literature independently from European influence (see “American Literature” 2013, online).
authors to cover more complex issues within their works. Social and economic circumstances all around the world have their impact on the content. Comic book artists want to create a realistic world, reflecting problems and threats the society has to deal with (cf. Metken, 1970: 44). Although these problems seemingly cannot be solved by mere humans, there is hope: the superhero. He has the duty to save the world, sometimes even other realms. His weapons are bravery, endurance, and morality on the mental level, and immense strength on the physical level (cf. Metken, 1970: 48). Although this is also true for the previously discussed ‘early superheroes’, which developed in the so called “Stone Age of superheroes”, (see Levitz 2011:6), the real superhero as such rose within the “Golden Age” (see Levitz 2011: 44), starting in 1939 with the first appearance of Superman and ending in 1956.

The question why superheroes have been such a big success since the 1940s is answered differently by various researchers. “To some, they can be an entertaining and therapeutic method of breaking life’s harsh realities to such a young and spoiled American youth. To others, comic books can be a powerful tool for reaching this shifty and ever fickle demographic who are soon to be Americas future leaders” (see Danklefsen 2009, online). All of them, however, agree that it has to do with social circumstances.

Wright (2001: 32f) observed that one of these circumstances was the joining of America in World War II. During the time of the war, the superhero comics boomed. One reason for this is that comic books were accepted as a mass medium by Franklin D. Roosevelt, who knew that he could benefit immensely from the superhero comic books. He was aware of the comic books’ influence on people and wished for designs that helped him to transmit American values (see Danklefsen 2009, online). The protagonists of the comics, for example, symbolized the idealized American, not because of their superhuman strengths, but because of their patriotic attitude (displayed through their actions as well as their costumes), their strong moral values, as well as the enemies they fought against. Therefore, as Knigge (1996: 127) states, the first superheroes were products of the American social and political issues. Their function was to support a general awareness of American strength during the war and the fight against the enemies of the democratic way of life.

In the 1950s, however, there was an attempt to censure comic books, led by the psychiatrist Frederic Wertham. He claimed that comic books had a negative influence on adolescent people, but he did not completely succeed with his “crusade” against the comic book industry (cf. Danklefsen 2009, online). The government could see that comic books could pose a threat to teenagers, as Wertham claimed, and put the comic book industry under pressure. To avoid
problems, the comic book industry established its own censorship rules called Comics Code Authority. They created a guideline every publisher had to obey in order to have a comic book published with the CCA seal of approval. This censorship had various effects.

Superman worked closer than ever with lawful authorities; Batman and Robin spent more time with girls; And Wonder Woman hung out more with Steve, but superhero relationships stayed at the level of grade school crushes. [...] These strict self-enforced guidelines had done the trick in removing government pressure from their industry, but the sales of comic during that time plummeted and it would be a long time before they would recover. (see Danklefsen 2009, online)

After World War II and the Vietnam War, another flood of changes affected society, and with it the comic book industry. “By the mid-1980s, DC Comics had undertaken a project of reinventing its major stars by retelling their stories and renumbering their comic book series in order to appeal to a new generation of fans” (see Smith, 2001: 138). The reason for this was that the new generation of teenagers had different experiences than the previous generation, and needed different role models. The unquestioned patriotism displayed by Superman, Captain America, and Wonder Woman, for example, now seemed somewhat outdated. The nation had been confronted with too much destruction and loss to keep on believing in the good a war would bring to the world. Comic books became slightly darker and even more critical about the American dream, although they still tried to satisfy the needs of popular American society.

Even in modern adaptations of the original superhero models, alterations that display modern society’s needs and political circumstances can be seen. Many superheroes have been ‘modernized’. The first Iron Man comics, for example, were published in 1963. Creator Stan Lee included “Cold War themes, particularly the role of American technology and business in the fight against communism. Subsequent re-imaginings of Iron Man have transitioned from Cold War themes to contemporary concerns, such as corporate crime and terrorism” (see “Iron Man Comic” 2013, online). Another change is that Nick Fury used to be white in the original comic book version. In the recent Marvel film-adaptations, however, he is played by Samuel L. Jackson, an African-American actor. One can assume that this is not only based on Samuel L. Jackson’s talent as actor, but an attempt of reducing the overwhelming dominance of white (male) characters within the Marvel universe. Through this slight multi-cultural touch, the films do not only become a little more modern and ‘politically correct’. Moreover, it provides the black-American society with a strong and successful role model to identify with, which they hardly ever found in older comic books.
To show how the features of superheroes have been changing over the decades, I have chosen two examples. The first example is Superman, who was the first hero labelled as superhero. What makes him special is that his superpowers come from his alien origin as well as the fact that he is one of the very few almost flawless superheroes. The second example is Wonder Woman. Like Superman, she belongs to the small group of nearly flawless superheroes. What makes her special, though, is that she is one of the extremely few female superheroes which have been able to make a name for themselves in a male-dominated area.

3.5.1 Superman

As Gresh and Weinberg (2002: 1f) mention, alongside Sherlock Holmes and Mickey Mouse, “Superman is one of the best known fictional characters in the world”. After he appeared the first time in 1938 in *Action Comics* #1, the comic book industry started to boom, and with it of course Superman’s popularity. A whole franchise developed, including comic books, comic films, toys, TV series, and games. He can be seen as essential for the development of numerous other superheroes, but he has also “served as inspiration for writers in other mediums, musicians and even comedians. As a testament of his impact on life as we know it, his name has become synonymous with omnipotence” (see Bensam 2012, ebook pos.34). Gresh and Weinberg (2002: 2) state that his popularity derives from the fact that he was one of the first science fiction-heroes besides Flash Gordon, and that Superman’s superhuman powers have been the main source of attraction for the people since the 1940s.

But as society has been changing, Superman has been changing as well. In the first Superman comic books, “Superman’s powers were super merely when compared to those of a normal human being” (see Gresh and Weinberg, 2002: 2). The original writers of the *Superman* comics, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, tried to stay as close to physically realistic powers as possible. Therefore, the original Superman, for example, “has tremendous strength and can jump great distances, but never flies” (see Gresh and Weinberg, 2002: 16).

The doctrine of physical possibilities, however, did not last very long. The growing audience demanded something more, something extraordinary. Therefore, Superman’s challenges became more dangerous. These new adventures reflected the on-going threats in the real world. Due to World War II, as mentioned in the previous chapter, people were living with constant anxiety. “As Superman faced greater challenges, the extent and nature of his powers increased. A Superman that could withstand the force of an artillery shell seemed inadequate when measured against the power of an atomic bomb” (see Gresh and Weinberg, 2002: 2). He
“was used as figure of hope for American readers and soldiers” by showing him helping the Allies in World War II defeat the Nazis (see Bensam 2012, ebook pos.518). Superman’s growing powers included his ability to fly at the speed of light. He became even stronger until not even “moving planets” were a problem for him (see Gresh and Weinberg, 2002: 16). After World War II, Superman gained further powers, such as heat vision, the ability to breathe in space, and time travelling (cf. Bensam 2012, ebook pos.199). Later, he was additionally ascribed to have the powers of x-ray, infrared, telescopic- as well as microscopic vision, and superhuman hearing. He could breathe frozen air and was able to breathe in an unnatural amount of air (see Bensam 2012, ebook pos. 409). According to Gresh and Weinberg (2002: 2-3), Superman’s powers were at their height in the 1960s. During that time, he was nearly completely invulnerable and only magical or other supernatural objects or people were able to pose a threat to Superman. This became a problem, since his invulnerability caused a lack of suspense. The writers of Superman had to come up with magical and other supernatural enemies and tricks to provide reasonable threads for “The Man of Steel”. One of these objects was, and still is, green Kryptonite. As Bensam (2012, ebook pos. 434) states, it is “an uncontested fact that Superman is vulnerable to green Kryptonite. […] The concept of Kryptonite was first made known to [the] public in 1943”. This shows that Superman, no matter how powerful he might have been, never was completely invulnerable. Besides the green Kryptonite, however, Superman seemed to be nearly invulnerable, which caused the lack of tension in the stories featuring him. This problem was solved in the 1980s by re-writing Superman’s history and background and thus weakening or even omitting some of his powers and abilities. Another remarkable change besides the downgrading of Superman’s powers was that his earthly parents Martha and John Kent, do not die when Clark is still a boy, but become supportive elements and important for the development from Clark Kent to Superman (cf. Bensam, 2012, ebook pos.263). This can be seen as a clear statement on how important the role of family and the family’s support was in the American value system of the 1980s.

One question that arises every time when dealing with superheroes is where the superhero’s superpowers come from. In Superman’s case, the explanation for his abilities is rather simple: His powers lie within his alien DNA. Although Superman’s background story slightly changed over the decades⁹, what has never been changed is that he has his origins on the planet Krypton. This heritage is always used to describe the origins of Superman’s powers, although different explanations are provided based on his origins. In early versions, all the

⁹ The different background stories as well as variable storylines are explained through the concept of the DC Universe multiverse, which would be beyond the scope of this master thesis.
Kryptonians had the same powers as Superman. Since this made it somehow unbelievable that their planet was wiped out, other explanations were integrated into the story. In other versions, for example, Krypton has a much higher gravity than earth, which is responsible for Superman’s strength as well as his ability to fly. Additionally, the yellow sun influences Superman’s body and provides him with other superhuman strengths, he would not have on Krypton (cf. Bensam, 2012, ebook pos. 210; 434). This explanation even made it into the most recent film adaption, Man of Steel (Snyder, USA 2013). The fact that his superhuman powers derive from his alien origins does not only help to make the story more plausible. According to Gresh and Weinberg (2002: 6ff) it is one of many reasons why Superman has been attractive for the audience since his first appearance. People in the 1940s started to wonder whether human beings were the only intelligent life-form in the universe, and whether aliens wander the earth. Even scientists started to deal with this question and came up with calculations to prove that it is not only possible, but very likely, that there are alien life-forms out there in the universe. This made the comic’s idea that there was an alien living on earth with superhuman powers both plausible as well as interesting to the audience.

There is, however, another aspect that seems to be responsible for the great success of Superman. Closely related to the ongoing crisis in Europe and thus not completely separable from World War II, the topic of immigration has been an important issue in the United States since the 1930s. Immigrants from all over the world represent an important part of American society, and therefore they needed someone to idealize and identify with such as everyone else. According to Fingeroth (2004: 54) this someone was found in the Superman comic books, since Superman himself can be seen as an ‘immigrant’ from another planet. Fingeroth states that

Superman’s powers […] protect and preserve the vitality of the foster community in which he lives in the same way that immigrant ethnicity has sustained American culture linguistically, artistically, economically, politically, and spiritually. The myth of Superman asserts with total confidence and childlike innocence the value of the immigrant in American culture. (2004: 54)

One has to mention, however, that there is a flaw in Fingeroth’s assumption. Superman does not really have to immigrate into our world. He is born and raised in an American society by humans to be a human himself, not as alien who has to adjust to society. Of course there are numerous challenges he has to master due to his superhuman powers, but nevertheless he has been taught the American value system since he was a baby. He does not have to struggle to fit into a different culture, like immigrants have to, because he has been part of the ‘human culture’ ever since he can think.
This can be seen as reason why he does not consider himself second to none, although compared to the human race he definitely is. He is never described as being a god, demi-god, or anything else human beings consider as being 'naturally' superior to them through their belief system, although there is definitely a “mythic chord which has become part of American if not international culture ever since”, as Alsford (2006: 34) calls it. It is hard to deny that the story of a superhuman being sent from outer space, which then is adopted by human parents and is destined to help and save people wherever and whenever he can, seems rather messianic. “The notion of a transcendent saviour with powers beyond our own exercising benevolent impartiality is a potent one and one that Superman, up to a point, embodies” (see Alsford 2006: 34). This aspect of Superman’s story can be related to Campbell’s previously discussed myth scheme and again demonstrates that many myths and stories are linked on an intermedial level.

3.5.2 Wonder Woman

According to Smith (2001: 129), Wonder Woman “has served as a symbol for a number of ideological positions”. Therefore, it is essential to discuss her development when talking about the interrelation of comic book superheroes and social and political circumstances. First and foremost, Wonder Woman seems to be a focus for female identification and a “figure representative of the struggle for feminine equality” as Smith (2001: 129) puts it. Robinson (2004: 27) goes even one step further by arguing that “[i]n the beginning there was Wonder Woman. And in the beginning of Wonder Woman, there was feminism”. Although one has to mention that Wonder Woman was not the first super-heroine in comic books, she became one of the most famous ones due to her potential for identification. Kainz (2009: 94) refers to Wonder Woman’s creator Charles Moulton10, who describes Wonder Woman as an alternative to the otherwise male-dominated, violent comic books of the Golden Age. He wanted to create a female role model different from the housewife role common at the time that women were forced into. His wanted his protagonist to be a woman to whom girls could look up to with pride.

Not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, and power. Not wanting to be girls, they don't want to be tender, submissive, peace-loving as good women are. Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weakness. The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength

10 Charles Moulton was only his pseudonym. Moulton’s real name was William Moulton Marston. He was a psychologist who studied at Harvard. For more information about Moulton see “Charles Moulton” 2013, Online.
Thus, she is not only a female role model, but becomes attractive for a male audience too.

According to Fließer (1992: 61) Wonder Woman belongs to the women in “super-heroine comics” which he puts in contrast to “women in superhero comics”. Wonder Woman and super-heroines similar to her “[...] do personify archaic mothers. [...] They fulfil the original role of mother on an abstract level in risking their own lives for the safety of a helpless mankind, battling danger personified by villains” (see Fließer 1992: 69), whereas “women in superhero comics” most of the time are used to emphasize the superhero’s greatness and power by being rescued by the superhero or by admiring him. Either way, they are displayed as ‘damsel in distress’, dependent on a strong man.

One thing that has been strongly criticized by feminists ever since, however, is Wonder Woman’s outfit. They argue that her tight pants and revealing top reduces her to a sexual object and upstaged her role as super-heroine. This is, in fact, a point of criticism for nearly every known super-heroine. Gresh and Weinberg (2002: 169) are only two out of many who argue that “[i]n the past thirty years, women became more visible in the world of superhero comics. But unfortunately, that visibility wasn’t only as characters but also in regard to their costumes. [...] Too many female lead characters are still just beautiful bimbos in thongs.”

This issue, however, is not going to be part of this thesis.11

Smith (2001: 130), on the other hand, focuses on a completely different aspect of Wonder Woman, namely her role to “fulfil expectations associated with the melting pot metaphor”. Smith compares her role as an immigrant to Superman’s. The fact that Superman was raised in America since he was an infant makes it unquestionable that he is able to associate with the American way of life and American values. Since he never experienced his own Kryptonian culture, or any other culture at all, it is only natural that he assimilates perfectly. Wonder Woman, on the other hand, was raised on an island called Paradise Island. Moreover, she is actually the princess of this island. For Smith (2001: 133) “her immediate and unquestioning obedience to the American way when encountering it for the first time as an adult seems incongruous with the circumstances of her origin.” For the war-threatened people in America in the 1940s, however, this sent out a straight message: The American way of life is the right way of living. Even the princess of an island who was isolated from Western society her

11 For more information about feminism and/or women in comics see, for example, Robinson: Wonder Women. Feminism and Superheroes (2004), Kainz: “Ansichten und Entwürfe über Heldinnen Figuren inComicverfilmungen” (2009) or Danziger-Russell: Girls and their Comics (2013).
whole life, acknowledges this immediately. This strengthens the Americans’ belief in their nation and society at a time when this was sorely needed, and generally displays the ideal behaviour of immigrants.

But again, with a changing society some of Wonder Woman’s features were changed as well. In the re-written version of George Perez, Wonder Woman is no longer opposing wartime enemies, but is deeper ensnared by her mythological roots and has to stop the Greek God of War, Ares (cf. Smith 2001: 139f). Additionally, she does not take on a second identity, which is very unusual for superheroes. Another difference is that she does not immediately speak the English language, but has to learn it. Last but not least, she does not completely abandon her heritage. On the contrary, she keeps praying to her gods and returns to her island every now and then. These changes can be seen as the influence of the rising awareness of multi-nationality, multiculturalism, and the shift from the ‘America as melting pot’ metaphor to the ‘America as salad bowl’ metaphor. The Amazonian princess is not absorbed by the American culture, not assimilated, but instead becomes accommodated (cf. Smith, 2001: 140).

This change, however, did not last very long. In the 1990s, William Messner-Loebs started to rewrite the Wonder Woman story again, going back to her origins as an assimilated American superhero instead of her being an Amazonian ambassador. She becomes completely isolated from her homeland, stays in America and has to adopt the American way of life. She has to work for a fast food franchise to earn her living, which should, according to Smith (2001: 144), indicate that “she must undergo an American quest for identity and prove that she has the Protestant work ethic” before she can become a real American. This shows that, as Smith (2001: 145) puts it, “Americans expect their heroes, even when touched with the exotic, to be fully Americanized. Though they are fictitious representations of ideology, popular culture examples like Wonder Woman contribute to re-enforcing the importance of the Ameri-centric beliefs.”

In summary one can say that the Wonder Woman comic books and their interaction with society have not been a ‘one way road’. Although the comic books’ messages changed depending on America’s needs, numerous readers were influenced by these messages, and thus the comic books have been influencing the readers’ attitude towards numerous social and political issues. Beyond the comic book medium, the Wonder Woman theme has established as well. In the 1970s, for example, a movie as well as a TV series named Wonder Woman was very popular. Most recently, she is part in the animated TV series Justice League and a new edition of the movie as well as the TV series are intended to be produced.
3.6 From Comic Books to other Media

For Alsford, the recent success of heroic fiction in popular culture is based on cultural and social developments. He sees the revival of heroes, and along with them of villains, as a reflection of today’s society’s needs, values, and attitudes. Additionally, it seems to attract people’s wish for a guide to navigate their lives.

The confidence and certainty with which these figures [heroes and villains] apparently make their way through life is enviable particularly to ordinary human beings who, as a rule, tend to find themselves lost in a world of increasing complexity. It seems [...] that the myth of the hero, and indeed the villain, represents our desire for a greater sense of confidence, personal identity and power to affect the world in which we find ourselves, through no fault of our own. (see Alsford, 2006: 3)

Indeed, almost every hero struggles with his life as common a person as well as with his heroic duties. The fact that superheroes are able to balance these struggles more or less successfully shows that they are in fact super-human, since many people might not consider themselves able to handle that much responsibility.

Alsford’s incorporation of the villain in his analysis opens another interesting aspect. According to him, it is not only the hero people are interested in, but also his counterpart, the villain. Both demonstrate extraordinary strength, wit, and/or volition, which are qualities desired and admired by society. Considering the different ways heroes and villains use their abilities, it is easy to find a connection to Sigmund Freud’s structural model of the psyche. When comparing the psychological model and the structure of super-heroic tales, the villain equates the id. As Hank de Berg (2003: 50) explains, “[t]he id does not argue or deliberate, possesses no values or rules, and respects neither common sense nor logic. It is pure craving”. The superhero resembles the super-ego, which “comprises the norms, values, and ideals that upbringing and education have instilled in us” (Berg 2003: 50). In his book, Berg argues that both, id and super-ego, are rather radical and uncompromising desires. Although hardly any hero or villain can be considered as radical as their psychoanalytical resemblance, it is clear that there are connections to this model since “[b]oth the id and the superego seek to influence not only our mental state but the way we deal with the world around us” (Berg 2003: 51). The third part of Freud’s model is the ego. In this resemblance, the ego are the ‘common’ people, those who are threatened by the villain and saved by the hero, and even more the recipient of the story who has to balance his/her own position between the hero’s and the villain’s actions and needs. Another aspect that supports the resemblance of the psychoanalytical model and superhero tales is the fact that the id, or the villain, is always independent from society. The id always seeks for sexual pleasure whereas the villain always seeks for revenge and/or power,
no matter what the social norms are. The ego as well as the superego, on the other hand, “vary according to time and place” (Berg 2003: 57), which does apply to superheroes as well, as discussed in chapter 3.4. It seems that nowadays, people see themselves confronted with their id, although in this case, it is connected to society. Technology and economy are constantly growing and encourage consumerist behaviour. Many who feel the “craving” (Berg 2003: 50) for social power have to displaying status symbols such as the latest fashion trends and technological devices to be acknowledged by society as being ‘superior’. This can be seen as one of the reasons why fictional villains gain more and more potential of identification and thus attractiveness. Therefore, it seems that society needs the ideals of the super-ego, personated by the fictional superheroes, to save it from itself more than ever.

The previously mentioned varying character of superheroes is also discussed by Kainz, although she refers not only to the content but also to the medium. She (2009: 93) states that, once created, superheroes are not unchangeable. On the contrary, they are continually developing. Superheroes are constructed, deconstructed and re-interpreted. Although numerous superheroes have their first appearances in comic books or graphic novels, they are not bound to that specific medium, which demonstrates the superhero theme’s intermedial, and especially transmedial, character. As Kainz (2009a: 9) notices, comic books and their heroes have a remarkable potential for inter-medial interaction, especially with the medium of film. It is the steady development of the film industry and its technology that makes possible high-quality comic-book adaptions and their display of the heroes’ powers as realistic as one can imagine. The film medium’s multi-medial characteristics offer a true-to-life experience beyond the medial limits of comic-books. As Havas and Habarta (1993: 242) argue, movies display some kind of realism, whereas comic books are a way of creating a fanciful, fictional reality within the readers own mind. This means that the main difference is that movies create the feeling of being experienced life, everything we need to see and hear is provided by the movie, whereas comic books rely on the readers’ power of imagination to some degree. This and can be seen as additional reason for the changing characteristics of superheroes in comic books and films.

The shift from one-dimensional, ‘unrealistic’ comic books to realistically portrait in movies becomes most obvious in the recent rise of 3D technology. By adding the third dimension, the audience is taken one level deeper into the world displayed on screen and feels as if becoming part of the story itself. This can be described as a kind of symbiosis: The action-loaded story of the superhero perfectly suits the needs for a well-designed 3D movie, since it offers countless possibilities of including eye-catching special effects, whereas the 3D design makes
the reception of the superhero-movie even more attractive for the audience by displaying superhuman, unreal powers, as realistic and true-to-life as possible. The perfect interaction of story and special effects can be seen as one explanation why in the last few years superhero movies became part and parcel of Hollywood productions.

Another popular medium for superheroes is television. Over the decades many TV series about and around superheroes have been developed. What is remarkable is that there are products for two different target groups. The first products are the animated TV series for children and teenagers. In the early 90s, animated series such as Spider Man: The animated series (1994) and The Adventures of Batman and Robin (1995) were incredibly popular. Recently, the superhero’s themes were re-written into new series such as Batman: The Brave and the Bold (2008) and Ultimate Spider-Man (2012). One has to mention, however, that especially for this target group an incredible amount of non-American superheroes has been established as well, namely the heroes of manga and anime series originating in the Asian cultures, which will not be dealt with in this thesis.

The second range of products are directed at teenagers and adults. One example for this is the 60s TV series Batman. This series was still closely related to the comic book style, thus representing an intermedial reference. It uses comic book typical features, such as ‘sound effects’ especially in fighting scenes as shown in Image 3.6.1.

![Image 3.6.1 Batman Sound Effects](image)

One of the successful modern superhero TV series is Heroes (2006). This TV series belongs to the category of superhero stories which are independent from comic book originals and can be seen as forerunner of numerous similar TV series featuring humans with superhuman powers which are not yet real superheroes. Another example of this kind is the TV series Alphas (2011). The superhero-like characters in this series are, similar to the X-Men
superheroes, the next step of mankind’s evolution. They have special abilities just like superheroes, but they do not have a secret identity or wear costumes like most superheroes do. Another similar TV series, which is based on comic books, is Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D (2013), which is a spin-off of the successful blockbuster movie The Avengers (2012). The series does not exactly feature superheroes, but is based around a group of common people trying to find humans with special abilities and protecting them, as well as fighting against villains, alien objects, viruses, and anything else that can be considered evil. Last but not least, the TV series Arrow (2012) is based on DC’s Green Arrow comic book series, and features Oliver Queen, whose alias The Hood, or also Arrow, is a vigilante who tries to save Starling City from corruption, criminals, and destruction.

Another medium that picked up the superhero theme is art. Over the years painters have been inspired by superheroes and dedicated some of their works to the world-saving men and women. Famous artists who have done so are the 60s and 70s pop art icon Andy Warhol (see Image 3.6.2) and Roy Lichtenstein. Lichtenstein, for example, used “word balloons, primary colours, and Ben-Day dots, mimicking the primitive four colour printing techniques of the day. Lichtenstein’s comic-inspired works helped legitimize comics as an art form and remain popular in the twenty-first century” (Misiroglu and Roach, 2004: 524). A more modern artist dealing with superheroes is Andreas Englund. He dedicated a whole series to the superhero theme called Portraits of an Elderly Superhero. In this realistic portraits, Englund shows an elderly superhero in everyday life situations, sometimes doing non-heroic things, which can be seen as a satiric approach to the superhero’s typical scheme of youth, agility, muscularity, bravery, and nobility. One example of these portraiture is shown in Image 3.6.3.
Of course there are numerous other media which adapted the superhero theme. There are, for example, video games, role playing systems, radio plays, novels, musicals, and songs dealing with superheroes, or at least with the concept of the superhero. To deal with all of these media would however be beyond the scope of this thesis.
3.7 The Anti-Hero

If one considers the development of heroes, one must not leave out the concept of the anti-hero. Although the term was first used in 1714 (cf. “Anti-Hero” 2013, online), the concept has existed nearly as long as the concept of the (flawless) hero. The anti-hero is defined as “a central character in a story, film, or drama who lacks conventional heroic attributes” (see “Anti-Hero1” 2013, online). This means he is characterized by weaknesses such as arrogance, ignorance, egoism, greed, recklessness, or amorality. Additionally, he might lack virtues such as bravery, pertinacity, or trust in society and/or his own personality. Moreover, compared to the hero, the anti-hero is not reluctant to act violently or even to kill (cf. Ofenloch, 2009: 21). These features very often originate in the “turbulent, violent backgrounds and conflicting motivations” (see “Anti-Hero2” 2013, online).

The concept of the anti-hero “has evolved over time, changing as society's concept of the traditional hero has changed” (see “Anti-Hero” 2013, online). This means that, although basic features of the anti-hero established in early literature still apply, some of the anti-hero’s characteristics have changed. Additionally, the reception of the anti-hero is strongly dependent on the image of the hero. Depending on social circumstances and on society’s needs, one or the other concept has been more relevant. The anti-hero, in contrast to the hero, is not used to praise contemporary society and display its strengths. On the contrary, this concept has been “used at times as a mirror for social commentary and political critique” (see “Anti-Hero2” 2013, online). This is possible because the anti-hero appears to be more complex and authentic than the hero. He simultaneously shows depth and shallowness.

This leads to the question of what constitutes the difference between an anti-hero and a villain. The website flowerstorm.net describes the anti-hero as “someone with some of the qualities of a villain […] but with the soul or motivations of a more conventional hero (see “Anti-Hero2” 2013, online). In other words, he is somehow in a state between good and evil, perfection and devastation, like most human beings.

One of the best known classical anti-heroes is Ulysses. The Greek poet Homer included Ulysses in his famous Iliad and made him the main character of his epic poem Odyssey. His most striking strength is his wit with which he is able to fool many of his enemies, as he did, for example, with the Trojan horse (cf. “Ulysses” 2013, online). Ulysses is, however, not as noble as other classical heroes such as Theseus. He is not reluctant to lie, cheat, and murder if it helps him achieve his goals. Moreover, he does not feel guilty when he does so, unlike Hercules.
Later in history, different concepts of the anti-hero were developed. In Renaissance, for example, Machiavelli created an alternative version of the Petrarch’s hero of virtues. “His heroes were those who thought it was better to be feared than loved; who practiced cruelty rather than charity; who didn't base their conduct on firm principles but on the winds of fortune” (see Cornish 2004, online).

In Romanticism, “Byron cultivated a scepticism about established systems of belief that, in its restlessness and defiance, expressed the intellectual and social ferment of his era. And through much of his best poetry, he shared his contemporaries’ fascination with the internal dramas of the individual mind” (see NAOEL, 8th Ed., Vol. 2, 2006: 607f). Based on this, the category of the ‘Byronic hero’ was established. The Byronic hero “is an old, legendary figure who has travelled far and wide and has enormous experience of life and people. He is reticent and awe-inspiring. […] He is proud and cold in his behavior” (see Mishra, 1992: 179). The Byronic hero’s life is dominated by his tragic past and his self-exile. His past makes him suffer for the rest of his life, and he thinks that only death can cure these wounds. Nevertheless, he does not demand sympathy. This attributes him with some kind of melancholy (cf. Mishra, 1992: 179ff). Despite all his flaws, he is willing to face his destiny because he “remains undaunted and defiant throughout” (see Mishra, 1992: 181). Moreover, the Byronic hero is an “extraordinary and mysterious person. He is pensive and cynical. He is a man of vast and varied experience of life. […] In the battlefield, he is fierce and valiant. He suffers from some secret agony which makes him depressed and disconsolate. He is noble, dignified and resolute” (see Mishra, 1992: 190). Last but not least, the Byronic hero is not a static character, but gradually changes throughout the story (cf. Mishra, 1992: 191). One cannot fail to notice, however, that many of these features also apply to the Herculean hero, and even for Hercules himself. So why is there a difference? Some might say the reason for this is that there is only a fine line between good and bad, and thus it is easy to slip from being a hero to being an anti-hero. More appropriate would be to say that there is a huge grey area between being completely good or bad. Therefore it seems to be a rather subjective evaluation, which depends on social values to name one person a hero and the other an anti-hero.

In modern day media, the anti-hero is as popular as ever. He appears in numerous different forms, but most of the time he is an ‘average’, middle-class man and no ‘Prince Charming’. Very often, he is forced into situations where he has to save lives. Ideally, the modern anti-hero is armoured with sarcasm, a bad attitude, a fast vehicle, and anything that can cause explosions. In other words, the modern day anti-hero is the hero of the Hollywood action movies. Perfect examples are John McClain in the Die Hard movies, Dominic Toretto in The
Fast and the Furious movies, or Frank Martin in the The Transporter movies. However, there are also more “complex” versions of the anti-hero represented in Hollywood blockbusters, such as the very popular Jack Sparrow of the Pirates of the Caribbean tetralogy. This shows that the many faces, facets and features of the anti-hero seem to make him especially attractive for today’s audiences.

3.7.1 Examples of the Anti-Hero in English Literature

The anti-hero is present in nearly every culture. It seems, however, that the anti-hero always had a special significance in English literature, even though the character might not be explicitly named as such. This can be seen, for example, in the previously mentioned Byronic hero. But Lord Byron was not the first author using anti-heroes as protagonists. In the sixteenth century, for example, the anti-hero was far more popular than the hero. This can be seen in William Shakespeare’s works as well as in the following example of Christopher Marlowe.

Marlowe’s major dramas, Tamburlaine, The Jew of Malta, and Doctor Faustus, all portray heroes who passionately seek power – the power of rule, the power of money, and the power of knowledge respectively. Each of the heroes is an overreacher, striving to get beyond the conventional boundaries established to contain the human will. (see NAoEL, 8th. Ed., Vol. 1, 2006: 1022f)

Of the three mentioned plays, Doctor Faustus displays some very unique features. According to Cole (2005: 304), the play’s “supernatural context […], and the central importance of theological concepts of evil and suffering within that context, distinguish it from all other tragedies of the time, and suggests a relationship to the English morality plays.” The obvious theme of morality and Faustus failing to accept human limits and religious values mark him as anti-hero. Throughout the play, Faustus can never be considered a hero or a villain. This can be seen when he closes the deal with Mephistopheles, demanding Mephistopheles to “letting him [Faustus] live in all voluptuousness, having thee [Mephistopheles] ever to attend me, to give me whatsoever I demand, to slay mine enemies and aid my friends […].” (see Marlowe 1604/2005: 17). Although he mostly seeks to use the nearly infinite powers offered by this deal for his own good and pleasure, as a villain would have done, and definitely wants to see his enemies dead (which is atypical for a hero), he simultaneously thinks about helping his friends, a noble gesture a villain would never think of. This dichotomy is also represented by the characters of the Good Angel and the Bad Angel, which repeatedly try to influence Faustus. Unfortunately for Faustus, he constantly chooses the wrong path, blinded by his own desires, ignorance, greed, and pride, which leads not only to his death, but to condemnation in
hell, which makes Faustus not only an anti-hero, but also a tragic hero in the Aristotelian sense, which means he is “good, but flawed” (see Muir 1991: 364).

Because the tragic hero is like ourselves, we feel that, but for the grace of God or by the luck of the draw, we might have met with a similar disaster. […] But although the tragic hero is like ourselves, Aristotle insisted […] that he should be a person of some eminence, whom we would normally look up to, so his fall would be more shocking and have greater repercussions on the society in which he lives” (see Muir 1991: 364).

In Faustus’ case, we look up at his genius. Therefore, it is shocking that a man as educated as Faustus is too blind to see the true value of his life and soul and too narrow minded to realize that he is outwitted by Mephistopheles.

Another extraordinary example is the character Satan in Milton’s epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1674). Although he is clearly the antagonist of the heroic couple Adam and Eve, he is considered to be an anti-hero as well. In the poem, Milton “radically reconceives the epic genre and epic heroism, choosing as protagonists a domestic couple rather than martial heroes” (see *NAoEL*, 8th Ed., Vol. 1. 2005: 1789). Wallace (2008, online) supports this statement by arguing that “Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* as an inverted epic or anti-epic. He has twisted and reversed the epic conventions to conform them to his retelling of the Biblical account of Creation and the Fall as given in Genesis.” This retelling includes Satan being the hero, or rather anti-hero, in the first parts of the book, since he “leads a revolution against an absolute monarch (see *NAoEL*, 8th Ed., Vol. 1. 2005: 1830). But how can Satan, commonly known as The Evil of all Times, be displayed as some kind of hero? Forsyth (2003: 30) finds the reason for this by connecting Satan to ancient Greek heroes and their qualities:

He [Satan] is a variant of Achilles, who equates honor with his own status […] and feels slighted by his commander-in-chief, refuses his orders and believes himself superior. Both epics turn on the connection between ‘a sense of injur’d merit’ and the hero’s wrath. He is Odysseus and Jason on their heroic voyages, leader and chief warrior in battle during and after the War in Heaven, and through it all the most powerful speaker, able to rally and organize his troops with the eloquence of his appeals to their own heroic values.

Forsyth is not the only one stating that Satan’s most powerful strength, which makes him appear to be heroic, are his rhetorical skills. Many scholars and writers, such as the previously mentioned Lord Byron, admired the eloquent character Milton has created. As Kaiter and Sanduic (2011: 454, online) argue

Nothing can match the heroic determination, power, courage and energy manifested throughout Satan’s early speeches. The convincing eloquence with which the debate is carried on stresses Satan’s self-glorification. He is, as ever, the predominant voice of the assembly, allowing, it is true, the voicing of individual opinions, but seeing to it that his views and his will prevail.
Another connection to Greek epic heroes is that Satan falls victim to his *hubris*. His insuperable pride prevents him from realizing that he fights a hopeless battle. “For all his grandeur, Satan suffers from the ultimate fatal flaw, at least in terms of Milton’s Christianity: his inability both to recognize his sinful nature and to accept the forgiveness God makes readily available” (Wallace 2008, online). In this respect, he is very similar to the previously discussed Faustus. However, Satan is far closer to the border of roguery than many other anti-heroes in media, since he in fact tries to seduce and condemn the heroes of the poem.

Last but not least, one of the most famous anti-heroes of Victorian times comes from the detective genre. Sherlock Holmes, created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in 1887, is best known for his brilliant mind and keen perception. Although he is by far a more morally correct person than the previously discussed examples (not only because he is not in contact with the devil, or Satan himself), his attitude still displays plenty of room for improvement. Herbert (2003: 9) describes Holmes as a “social misfit, psychologically damaged or lacking in some way. Holmes, a cocaine addict, is alienated from society, and relies upon his friend, Dr. John H. Watson, for a normative grounding in the world.” This social disengagement, however, does not serve the protection of others, as described in chapter 3.4. He is no ‘nerd’ who is excluded from society by society. On the contrary, he is a typical dandy. Mesmar (2009: 54f) summarizes the dandy’s character as standing in contrast to the Victorian values of modesty and honesty. He is an extravagant person without morality, shows disrespect for society and is extremely egocentric. Moreover, he belongs to the intellectual elite, is delighted by and uses wordplays and puns as well as paradox speeches with which he tries to provoke while remaining within the social conventions and under the blanket of charm and beauty. Therefore, it is no surprise that Holmes does not help people for the sake of helping. He does not, as many heroes and superheroes, feel the urge to use his talents for the greater good. Holmes likes to be intellectually challenged, so he solves mysteries and catches criminals for his personal pleasure. Additionally, he does not mind breaking laws and tricking people, as long as it helps achieving his goals.

Sherlock Holmes is still one of the best known fictional detectives of all times. He has been featured by numerous authors besides Doyle and has recently allured millions of viewers to go to the cinema and watch TV, which makes him a perfect example of a transmedial anti-hero. According to Stephen Kelley (2012, online), the reason for Holmes’ continuing popularity despite him being an anti-hero is rather logical. Sherlock Holmes “isn't a very likable man, but he isn't supposed to be likable – he's supposed to be right. That's how he gets
away with it. From a narrative perspective, it makes sense: these kinds of antiheroes are unpredictable, interesting, cool and funny […].”

Other examples of the anti-hero, which are not being discussed in more detail in this thesis, are Hamlet in Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Professor Higgins in G.B Shaw’s Pygmalion, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Tom Stoppard’s absurd drama Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead, Severus Snape in J.K Rowling’s Harry Potter series, and Crawly in Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett’s Good Omens. This very short list of anti-heroes in English literature demonstrates that there are several kinds of anti-heroes in different literary genres at different literary periods. Additionally, it shows that the anti-hero is even more ambivalent than the previously discussed hero, which is the reason, as already mentioned, why he is very often more interesting, appealing, realistic, and easier to relate to than the hero.
3.8 The Super-Anti-Hero

The anti-hero is also present within the group of superheroes. Not every ‘hero in tights’ is portrayed as being as flawless as Superman, Wonder Woman, or Captain America. On the contrary, most of the best known pop-culture superheroes have characteristics of the anti-hero. Numerous other features of the superhero scheme, however, still apply for the super-anti-hero, which is the reason why many of them cannot be clearly defined as being one or the other.

Barbara Kainz (2009a: 8) states that especially the most recent heroes are no longer descendants from the knights in shining armour, but “dark knights”, such as Batman is labelled literally in Christopher Nolan’s movie The Dark Knight (USA, 2008). She describes this as a more realistic display of the human features of superheroes since most of them are still human, or at least human in nature. Ofenloch (2009: 20) goes one step further in his interpretation of why the anti-hero has become of such importance in pop culture. Although he still gives the superhero credit for being a utopian role-model of idealized values, Ofenloch (2009: 20) argues that the flawless superhero cannot be an appropriate source of identification for the vast majority of people. The state of perfection displayed by the superhero cannot be attained by mere humans. Moreover, the fight of absolute good against absolute evil is too implausible to be a useful reflection of modern society and the superhero’s purity and infallibility appears rather hollow and unrealistic.

Therefore, the super-anti-hero had to enter the stage, in comics as well as in other media. The super-anti-heroes have every-day problems, not ‘only’ the responsibility to save the world. DC Universe’s Batman, for example, does not put villains behind bars because he is good-natured. He wants to avenge the violent death of his parents. Ofenloch (2009: 20) however, does not see DC Universe as the main publisher of anti-heroes, but Marvel. He refers to Rauscher (2007: 51f), who claims that in the 1960s Marvel managed to include the social and political changes within its fancily created universe of superheroes. Marvel’s superheroes struggle in balancing their private and heroic lives. They range from social outsiders, such as Spiderman, to violent monsters, such as Hulk.

These human qualities portray the super-anti-hero more realistically and enable the reader/viewer to connect with him more closely. Thus, the super-anti-hero becomes more attractive and reliable at the same time. He is no longer a flawless person one can look up to but whose virtues are out of reach. The super-anti-hero becomes a real, human person one can
identify with. Thus, the slogan “with great power comes great responsibility” (*Spiderman*, USA 2002, R: Raimi) becomes some kind of burden. It is the superheroes duty to protect the world because he has the ability to do so, not because he wants to use his strength for doing something good (cf. Ofenloch, 2009: 21). This imposed duty can be seen as more recent development of the super-anti-hero. He suffers a “mental conflict that affects him beyond his troubled past” (cf. “Anti-Hero2” 2013, online).

One has to mention, however, that there are different ‘degrees of anti’ a superhero can be. Kainz (2009: 93) calls this an “abundance of variation of heroic features”\(^{12}\). Not all super-anti-heroes are, for example, violent, or reckless. Many try to follow some sort of moral code, although they obviously seem to have problems to do so. This makes them a modern ‘tragic hero’\(^{13}\). The previously mentioned Spiderman and Batman are examples for superheroes who follow a moral code, but also have features which are characteristic for anti-heroes.

There are, of course, numerous examples for the super-anti-hero. Moreover, it seems that one can find some aspect of the anti-hero concept in nearly every superhero of the last few decades. One has to mention, however, that the main medium using the anti-hero as a means of social criticism is the graphic novel. In contrast to the comic book, its, as the term suggests, novel-like complexity allows the stories it tells to be even more profound. As Andreas Rauscher (2009: 36) states, especially graphic novels published in the 1980s were very innovative. In order to reflect the mentality of that time, creators of graphic novels used shady settings and deconstructed the traditional superhero image, whereby they created dark and even dangerous super-anti-heroes. Examples of these, which were adapted by the ‘film noir scene’ later on, are *Sin City, Watchmen* or *V for Vendetta*.\(^{14}\) It is no surprise that this trend continues in today’s film industry. The multi-medial features of movies enable, similar to comic books and graphic novels, a complexity which allows challenging plots in addition to action-loaded scenes.

An example for less morally guided super-anti-heroes is Frank Castle alias The Punisher (Marvel Comics). He belongs to the category of normal human beings using their abilities to fight criminals. Castle, in contrast to the common superhero is not reluctant to kill his opponents. Other examples, belonging to the supernatural, in this case demonic, category of

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12 Translated by Bettina Koller. German original “Variationsreichtum an Heldeneigenschaften”.
13 Modern tragic heroes stand in contrast to Aristotle’s’ original concept of the tragic hero. Since the tragic hero is one side of heroism, this concept changed throughout time. For more detailed information about why and how it changed, see, for example, K.S. Misra (1992). The Tragic Hero through Ages.
14 For more information about the anti-hero concept in graphic novels see Andreas Rauscher (2009): „Von Gotham nach Sin City“. In: Comic. Film. Helden. p. 35-51.
super-anti-hero are Hellboy (Dark Horse Comics) and Ghost Rider (Marvel Comics). The
difference between these two is that Hellboy, an actual demon, was raised among humans. He
has adopted the human value system and tries to protect the world from evil demons.
However, his demonic origins cannot always be denied, especially since it is foretold that he
is destined to destroy the world (see *Hellboy: The Golden Army* 2008, R: Guillermo del
Torro). On the other hand, a person turns into a Ghost Rider after selling his/her soul to the
devil. During day, s/he is a normal human being. At night, however, s/he turns into a demonic
bounty hunter, looking for bad souls s/he can send to hell, with hardly any ethical compass to
guide him/her. Last but not least, there is The Hulk. As mentioned in chapter 3.4, he gained
his superhuman powers through an accident. Very similar to R. L. Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll
and Mr. Hyde*, every time the intelligent physicist Bruce Banner gets angry, he turns into a nearly
uncontrollable monster called The Hulk. This monster destroys nearly everything and
everyone that stands in its way. However, it still manages to save the world every now and
then.

To round off this thesis, a more detailed analysis of another super-anti-hero, namely Hancock,
is provided in the following chapter. Hancock is a good example for many aspects discussed
in this thesis: super-heroism, anti-heroism, intermediality and cultural influences on the
perception of super-heroic behaviour.

### 3.8.1 Hancock

One of the most recently developed super-anti-heroes is Peter Berg’s *Hancock* (USA, 2008).
Hancock, like Superman, belongs to the ‘supernatural’ type of superheroes. His origins,
however, are unknown. The viewer does not know whether Hancock and his kind were born
on earth or come from another planet. The only explanation for what they are is provided by
Marry Embrey, who is like Hancock. She says that they are “Gods, angels... Different cultures
call us by different names. Now all of a sudden it's superhero.” (see *Hancock*, USA, 2008, R:
Berg) This statement seems to be, like most of the movie, a kind of ironic statement on
superheroes and their development. As discussed previously, superhuman heroes became part
of literature early on. Back then, however, they were gods or demigods, not superheroes.
Moreover, this sort of ironic self-reference is what affects not only the movie’s, but also
Hancock’s character.

Hancock is, at least at the beginning of the movie, more ‘anti’ than the previously discussed
Superman or Batman. Throughout the first part of the movie, he is willing to use his
superhuman powers to help people, but destroys more than he saves. He is a careless, egoistic drunkard who is not able to control his temper. Furthermore, he seems to dislike people in general and does not really care about them. It seems that he feels obliged to use his power for 'good', but does not really want to do so. Therefore, the people of LA do not celebrate him, but despise him.

This changes when he meets the PR consultant Ray Embrey. Ray helps Hancock improve his manners, attitude, and look. With this shift, not only Hancock changes, but also the story’s focus. It is no longer a parody on superheroes, but becomes the story of the superhero’s search for identity. As he manages all these tasks, Hancock transforms from a super-anti-hero to a real superhero. This is, however, depicted very comically. The rude and reckless Hancock tries to stick to the rules Ray taught him, which leads to some rather ridiculous scenes. For example, before Hancock saves the life of a female police officer who is in great danger, he asks for permission to lift her and clarifies that he does not intend to harass her sexually. He keeps on telling police officers that they have done a great job during a bank robbery without even paying attention to what they have done so far. In other words, he seems to show the will to change for the better, but somehow does not seem to understand the rules he has to follow. Moreover, every now and then he slips back into old habits. This shows that he is not completely able to become the neat superhero one can find, for example, in Superman. However, since he does no longer harm the 'average' citizen, people tolerate some of his less super-heroic actions, such as cutting off a bank robber's hand that held the trigger for a bomb. Hancock’s motivation for this action was not that he especially wanted to save innocent people, but he was provoked by the robber calling him an "asshole". This can be seen as a critical comment on the people in the movie. As long as they do not get harmed, they do not care what methods their superhero uses to help them.

Since there are two clearly distinguishable angles used in the film, Ofenloch (2009: 29) labels it as a “hybrid”. He (2009: 29f) cites Koll (2008: 23), who also deals with the double standard of the film. Koll argues that the film intends to show the American society its mirror image (cf. Ofenloch, 2009: 29). Hancock does not only fight criminals, he also fights conventions and expectations. He, for example, hurts a woman as he tries to save her life. Instead of being thankful, people start to insult him, blame him for her injuries, and say she should sue him. In another scene, he teases a spoiled, suburban child who bullies other children. Although it is clear that this child deserves to be rebuked, Hancock does it in an extreme way which society disapproves of. As a result, they disapprove of Hancock himself. This makes him not just a social outsider like Spiderman or Batman, but he becomes a villain instead. However, Koll
(2008: 23) accuses the producers of not having been able to pull off the intention of criticizing society throughout the whole movie. (cf. Ofenloch, 2009: 30) As soon as Hancock finds out about his past, he becomes some kind of ‘tragic’ hero. Ofenloch (2009: 30) calls this the “return to traditional values”. Hancock tames his demons, adjusts his outfit, and becomes the presentable superhero the spoiled society wished for. Although both, Ofenloch (2009) and Koll (2008), see this as surrender to social expectations and thus as the film’s weakness, one could also argue that this is the film’s final criticism on society. It is so stuck in its ways and values that not even a superhuman, godlike force like Hancock is able to change society. Thus, the seemingly happy ending becomes a covert tragedy.

The movie’s duality can also be seen in the symbolism it uses. Throughout the whole movie, eagles can be seen in different scenes. An eagle, for example, is sewed on Hancock’s cap which can be seen in numerous scenes. In one scene the viewer sees a bust of an eagle on Hancock’s trailer. In these scenes, the eagle is used as equation for Hancock. Both can fly, live in an ‘aerie’ on a high mountain, and both are fast and strong. Additionally, both can be described as ‘endangered species’. This becomes obvious when Marry Embry tells Hancock that they are the only survivors of their kind and that he had been nearly killed several times by humans. When Hancock is imprisoned and draws eagles on his prison wall, the connotation of the longing for freedom can be added to the eagle’s symbolism. This symbolism, however, changes along with Hancock’s character. When he accepts his role as superhero, and starts wearing his costume, the eagle sewn to his costume’s back can be seen as a symbol for America, for super-heroism, and for patriotism, as it was already used for other superheroes such as Wonder Woman.

As a finale note on Hancock one has to mention that he is a Hollywood superhero, who had his first appearance not in a comic book but on screen. This means he is not a transmedial superhero, since the film is his original medium. However, this proves that the concept of the superhero developed beyond the comic book medium. It has been established well enough so that people do not need a well-known comic book original to recognize a superhero when they see one.


4. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have demonstrated various aspects of heroes and superheroes. Firstly, I have shown that heroes as well as superheroes have their origins in mythology and spread into various media and thus providing enough material for an interesting intermedial analysis. The idea of what is heroic and how this idea is used within different media, however, is strongly dependent not only on the medium, but also on society and its needs, values, and wishes. Alsford (2006:33) summarizes this adequately by stating that

> [t]he comic book superhero is [...] one of the most mythologically charged creative products of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Nowhere else do we find such a rich collection of archetypical heroic and villainous characters endlessly renewed and recast for each generation reflecting and manifesting contemporary culture’s highest values and greatest fears.

It is no surprise that, for example, Hercules serves as the template for a comic book superhero, since his legend has everything the modern superhero needs: a hero with superhuman powers, a troubled past, and ‘villains’ he has to fight in order to save the innocent. The ‘mere’ hero of Greek and Roman legends has become a genuine superhero. On the other hand, one could also argue that he has always been a superhero, but the term to label him ‘properly’ was invented around two thousand years later. Others, however, might disagree since the original Hercules neither has a costume nor a secret identity, which are characteristic for the modern day superhero. But if one observes most recent trends in film industry, this does not seem to be obligatory any more.

This means that there are hardly (super-)heroes present in stories who can be classified as a straight hero, superhero, or anti-hero. The majority of them are somehow ‘in-between’ these categories. Maybe this is the reason for the different categorizations of films with (super-)heroes as main protagonists in the film industry. Although the term ‘superhero movie’ seems to be part of our everyday language nowadays, the genre ‘superhero movie’ as such has not yet gained a foothold. If one, for example, searches the online platform IMDB\(^\text{15}\) for superhero movies, one discovers that most of them are categorized as adventure, fantasy, action, and/or science fiction movies. Only the comic book industry uses the term ‘superhero’ as a genre description. This supports the idea that there is no clear border of when a character is considered to be a hero, a superhero, or an anti-hero.

\(^{15}\) IMDB stands for Internet Movie Data Base. This platform provides users with latest news about films and cast, but also with all relevant information about specific movies and series. See: http://www.imdb.com/
Additionally, by providing numerous different examples from different times as well as media, I have demonstrated that humans have had the need to tell stories about heroes and superheroes for more than two thousand years. Asking the question whether it is the (super-) hero’s scheme that makes him worth being told stories about, or if it is the narration’s scheme that needs a hero, however, seems somehow as un-answerable as the question whether it was the hen or the egg that existed first. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that mankind will always need heroes, real as well as fictional ones.
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Danksagung


Als nächstes möchte ich mich bei meinem Supervisor, Professor Keiper, für die viele Zeit und Arbeit bedanken, die er in mich und diese Arbeit investiert hat, sowie für einige Ideen und Anhaltspunkte, die er mir eröffnet hat.

Ein weiteres Danke richtet sich an meinen Bruder und meine Freunden, die mein Interesse für das Phantastische und Übernatürliche, für Helden und Superhelden, geweckt haben. Für Musik-, Film-, Serien-, und Buchempfehlungen, von denen einige als Beispiele in dieser Arbeit genutzt wurden; und für die unzähligen Stunden (und Summen), die sie in Kinobesuche und Fernsehabende mit mir investiert haben. Das war mir für diese Arbeit von unschätzbarem Nutzen.

Zu guter Letzt möchte ich mich noch bei meinen helfenden Elfen bedanken, dafür dass sie sich die Mühe gemacht haben, meine Arbeit durchzulesen und mich darauf aufmerksam gemacht haben, wenn meine Gedankengänge nicht für die Allgemeinheit nachvollziehbar waren.