

# The Eleventh International Graphic Novel and Comics Conference

## The Resonance of Comics: Social Impact and Possible Futures

### What if... Superheroes kill?

#### Evolution of Superheroes and Antiheroes during the Post-heroic Age

The antihero embodies competing values; he is the symptom of a crisis, and he exasperates it. During the 1980s these characters have their greatest success in superhero comics. The so-called *Dark Age* follows a profound crisis in American society, marked by the Vietnam War, the fear of nuclear conflict, but also by alternative cultural and social movements. Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, together with Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, are the graphic novels that represent this transformation.

Today, the western world faces a new crisis. Economic uncertainty, mass migrations, encounters and clashes with different cultures, terrorism, pandemics: our worldview and our truths are wavering. Superhero universe mirrors all of these. Antiheroes become more and more numerous, and superheroes lose a clear definition. Marvel's *Civil War* is probably the most emblematic example.

We are witnessing a new proliferation of antiheroes, and even superheroes are changing. The classic superheroes have begun to kill. Their relationship with the mask, with society, becomes much more problematic and "anti-heroic".

I will refer to Nietzschean concepts, such as the mask to distinguish the superhero and the antihero. Comparing *Dark Age*'s antiheroes with contemporary films and comics I will show how our perception of "heroes" has changed.

## *Dark Age's Antiheroes*

Today the word “antihero” is used confusedly, inappropriately. Every negative or ambiguous character is called “antihero” indiscriminately. However, not every “bad guy” protagonist of a story could be called antihero.

“Anti” does not mean the opposite of a hero. On the contrary, antiheroes must have heroic characteristics. The antihero is a hero, but he does not want to be one, or he cannot be one, or he should not be one. “*The antihero can exist only if the heroic model remains present in absentia, by preterition.*”<sup>1</sup> The antihero is still a hero, but fallacious, scandalous, decayed.

Antiheroes are born from a crisis, and they break with norms and conventions. In superhero's comic, what Grant Morrison calls the Dark Age marks the triumph of these characters.<sup>2</sup> The 80s: the USA has faced a deep crisis in the past years: the Vietnam War, fear for the atomic conflict, the cold war, JFK and Martin Luther King murders, the Watergate scandal – but also new cultural and countercultural movement like the civil rights movement and the hippie subculture: everything shows a profound social transformation and a crisis of values and certainties.

Two graphic novels, in particular, mark a turning point in superheroes' world: Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*<sup>3</sup> and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*<sup>4</sup>, two works that embody the *Dark Age's* essence. A deconstruction of the superhero figure characterises this period. Superheroes become extremely problematic: they do not fight for the supreme Good, because there is not such a thing.

However, can we still talk about superheroes? “*In an age of skepticism and dwindling faith, an age marked by the pervasive awareness of loss and disarray, the deliberate subversion of the heroic tradition may betray an urge to salvage or reinvent meaning*”<sup>5</sup> write Brombert. A superhero is a status quo defender: he reinforces our values, our truths. Consequently, if the status quo should not be reaffirmed but questioned – if there is the need to reinvent meaning – there is also the need of a new figure, different of a superhero: the antihero. Which ones are the concrete differences between superheroes and antiheroes? There are three major ones: the mask, the relationship with the society and the moral of these characters.

## *The Mask*

Superhero's origins are always marked by a traumatic, painful and unacceptable event: the death of Batman's parents, the death of Uncle Ben in Spider-Man, a devastating accident for Iron Man, the loss of Daredevil's father. Superheroes are born from tragedy; they create the mask, their new identity, after their previous life is destroyed by trauma, and they are forced to face the absurd. Grief is tightly linked to the experience of the absurd. Suffering brings back the human need to find a reason to survive his world.

*“Man does not deny suffering as such: he wills it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a meaning for it, a purpose of suffering. The meaninglessness of suffering, not the suffering, was the curse which has so far blanketed mankind.”*<sup>6</sup>

With these words, Nietzsche makes clear the connections between grief and search for meaning. *“The mask is created in relation to pain”*<sup>7</sup>: pain is unacceptable and senseless. If it cannot be avoided, then it must be justified. It is necessary to make sense of the chaos.

The creation of a new identity symbolizes the volition to establish a meaning despite the loss and affliction. It is a reaction against the absurd, which has forcefully torn apart the meaning of the existence of the hero up to that point.

The creation of the new identity depends on the mission to which the superhero devotes his life to, on this basis he is ready to disclose a new meaning and sense of the world. In the symbol of the mask, we can see clearly the enormous effort made by the freedom to create a new meaning.

Batman's words from *The Dark Knight Returns* are emblematic: *“My parents... taught me a different lesson... lying on this street... shaking in deep shock...dying for no reason at all... they showed that the world only makes sense when you force it to...”*<sup>8</sup> The creation of the mask, together with the mission, are attempts to force the world to make sense.

In this respect, the births of the villain and the antihero follow the same pattern: *“All it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy. That's how far the world is from where I am. Just one bad day”* reasons (!) the Joker in the masterpiece of Alan Moore *The Killing Joke*.<sup>9</sup> Superheroes, villains and antiheroes are born from a “bad day”, a day

where the known world ceases to exist in the old meaning of things and needs to be recreated from the beginning. The difference lies in the reaction they have to the absurd that storms into their lives.

Identifying oneself entirely with the mask or persisting in the liminal state between two worlds is one of the key elements to distinguish superheroes from antiheroes. The superheroes are compelled to create a new sense and a new identity; however, they also stay partly tied up to their former existence. They keep on believing, as the Joker states, that the world before the mask makes somehow still sense. Antiheroes give up their “normal” identity, fully embracing the new persona they chose to be. Their only identity has become the mask; the only one possible meaning the world has is the one they enforce upon it. The cases of Rorschach in *Watchmen* or of V in *V for Vendetta* are emblematic.

V's purpose is not defending the society and the *status quo* but rather destroying it, setting a new order and new values. He refuses the meaning that his world already has, and he strives to destroy it and to create a new one. His mask has become his real face. V's identity is his only identity.

Rorschach identifies himself completely with his mask as well. He has completely rejected his former identity, together with his values and worldview. He does not believe that the world has a meaning in-itself: existence is random, meaningless. Nevertheless, he chooses, in a titanic rebellion, to impose though the mask his meaning on a “morally blank world”.

### *Liminal state and relationship with society*

The relationship with the mask mirrors the character relationship with society. The superhero is still bound up to the society in which he acts. Staying split between the brand-new world, he has created and the previous one, allows him to not conflict with the society but to be, in its eyes, a kind of protector.<sup>10</sup> It is fundamental, for the superhero, to remain in this liminal state.

*“Borders are the place for superheroes, who by virtue of what is different about them do not fit into the societies that they protect. [...] The defining feature of the superhero and the superhero genre is the liminal state: superheroes must remain on the borders.”<sup>11</sup>*

Antiheroes, on the other side, embrace their mask completely. They are wholly separated from their society. They are born from a society that should not be saved but challenged, even destroyed.

Superhero's function to protect and restore an essential "good" society while antiheroes do not reaffirm the status quo's values; instead, they challenge them. They bring a fracture with a negative reality. A revolutionary antihero like V attacks his status quo. His world is not good, but problematic, dystopic. While the status quo defended and restored by the superhero is overall good, the antihero of the comic finds himself always in a negative, tragic, corrupt reality.

Inside a society that should be destroyed and not protected, the protagonist cannot be a hero. The purpose of a character like V is not defending the society and the *status quo* but rather destroying it, setting a new order and new values.

However, V, to destroy his dystopic society, should also resort to action against our moral. He succeeds to defeat the fascist Norsefire government, but only with violence, terrorism, murder. Even if the London of Alan Moore appears entirely against our values, so are V's actions to destroy it.<sup>12</sup> A similar values conflict happens in *Watchmen*: Ozymandias saves (maybe) the world from the nuclear apocalypse, but only by killing millions of people. It does not matter, if the society is dystopic and horrifying for the reader as well: in it, V, Rorschach, the Comedian, Ozymandias, cannot be heroes. In their world – to be heroes, they are forced to act like monsters.

### *Values and Moral*

However, antiheroes are not immoral, not like the villains. Their morality is "heroic" like Nietzsche meant it. They live on absolutes. "*There is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished. Even in the face of Armageddon I shall not compromise in this*", writes on his journal Rorschach.<sup>13</sup> Superheroes have their own values, but in order to be heroes, they should compromise their morality with the common one, with the society. They should remain in the liminal state. For the antihero, instead, this liminality is lost, the dualism disappears.

While superheroes and villains reaffirm our values proposing a clear fight between Good and Evil, antiheroes challenge our morality. They appear immoral at the beginning, but not like the villain that has an Evil worldview, opposite to ours – that in fact reinforce ours. Antiheroes challenge our worldview because they share our values, some of them at least, but they bring them to the extreme, showing the aporiae and the contradiction of our morality. Thanks to his liminal state superheroes can find a balance between different values: freedom and security, justice and vengeance, punishment and rehabilitation.

Antiheroes, on the other side, strongly affirm one value, despite the others. They challenge our worldview because their actions are not acceptable, yet they are inspired by a "value" that we share too, taken to its extreme consequences, breaking that balance with other ones. Consider this emblematic dialogue between Daredevil and the Punisher:

P: *«If you don't shoot you have a death on your conscience. A death you could have prevented. If you do shoot, you're a killer. »*

D: *«What kind of choice is that...?»*

P: *«The one I make every time I pull the trigger»<sup>14</sup>*

There is no choice in the Punisher moral, no possible compromise: killing the guilty, or be responsible for innocent's death. Even more problematic is the fact that, in his world, often the antihero has no other choice. In the dystopic society of V, of Rorschach, there can be no justice, only Vendetta.

### *Post-heroic Age*

What happens today? In a society without certainties, the figure of pure superhero is no longer possible. *“In a world on the verge of collapse, scene of endless conflicts, massacres, genocides, threatened by ecological catastrophes with apocalyptic consequences, superheroes [...] [represent] a gross lie.”<sup>15</sup>* Pure superheroes, incarnations of "Good", lose their credibility where values are uncertain and relative. Today the Truth, the Justice and the American way for which Superman fought have almost completely lost their meaning.

The problem arises when we ask ourselves what the Good is, wrote Umberto Eco in *The Myth of Superman*.<sup>16</sup> If during the *Golden Age* Good and Evil could seem - at least in appearance - relatively definite and shareable, today the complexity that we face does not allow such clear divisions between black and white. Like during the *Dark Age*, today, the Western world is facing a new crisis. Economic uncertainty, mass migration, encounters and confrontations with different cultures, terrorism, pandemics: our securities and our truths falter. The universe of superheroes reflects this crisis. Antiheroes are becoming more numerous.

However, something else is happening too: there are not only new antiheroes, instead, are the superheroes of the past that are changing.

One of the most emblematic examples is *Civil War*, a Marvel's saga directly linked to the 9/11 terroristic attack and the resulting PATRIOT Act.<sup>17</sup> Here there are not new antiheroes, but the classic Marvel superheroes are forced to choose a side and fight against or for the government, thus losing their liminal state and becoming soldiers, villains or antiheroes.

The gradual transformation of the superheroes marks this new "post-heroic" age. Superhero's secret identity seems to lose its importance, and more and more people know the real name of the superhero, thus making the split between individual and collective subjectivity disappear. Contemporary superheroes take off their masks, thus renouncing – willingly or not – their double identity. New heroes do not have a secret identity, and the old ones lose theirs. We can see this phenomena in comics: Spider-Man reveals his identity during *Civil War*<sup>18</sup>, Capitan America takes off his mask in *The enemy*<sup>19</sup>, Daredevil secret identity is revealed in Bendis Saga<sup>20</sup>, even the Joker knows that Batman is Bruce Wayne in *Joker: End Game*.<sup>21</sup> This trend is evident in superhero films as well: in Raimi's trilogy Peter always loses his mask,<sup>22</sup> Tony Stark reveals his Iron Man's identity at the end of *Iron Man* first movie,<sup>23</sup> in *Spider-Man: Far from home* Peter just tells his identity to one of his famous enemy Mysterio,<sup>24</sup> in *Marvel's Daredevil* Kingpin knows Daredevil's secret identity<sup>25</sup>.

The disappearance of the double identity can have two different outcomes: or the superhero gives up his mask and becomes a government agent – for example the Iron Man of *Civil War* – or choose the mask against his society, thus becoming an antihero – like *Civil War's* Captain America.

However, the most significant transformation concerns the superhero's moral. To be seen as a hero, he has to remain in his liminal state. His moral cannot be too different from the common one.

One of the fundamental rules superheroes used to have is the no-killing rule. Arnaudo writes that “a fundamental component of the superhero’s ethical code is that he must never kill, for any reason or under any circumstances, not even for self-defense or the greater Good. [...] The rejection of killing has as its fundamental corollary the absolute moral separation between superheroes and criminals.”<sup>26</sup> By killing, the superhero would rise to judge, jury and executioner, going to separate himself even more from society, losing his liminal status.

However, this rule depends on the common moral of the society in which the superhero acts. During the *Golden Age*, during wartime, when the villain – the enemy – is an embodiment of pure Evil, monsters without redemption, superheroes did kill, But the death of the bad guy always happened in a way or in contexts that fully justified it, making sure that the superhero came out clean. During the *Silver Age* superheroes never get to kill, under any circumstances. Even during the *Dark Age* superheroes never kill, only the antiheroes do. Even the Dark Knight of Frank Miller cannot kill the Joker and he “just” broke his spine.<sup>27</sup> However, today, especially in movies, superheroes kill.

Already with *Batman Begins*, we can see a significant change: Batman does not kill Ra's al Ghul, but he refuses to save him. “I don't have to save you” he tells him before jumping off the speeding train.<sup>28</sup> He could, but he chose not to. Where the Silver Age superhero tries to save any life, the new Batman, if not yet murder, certainly he fails to provide assistance!

Some more examples: Superman breaks general Zod neck in *Man of Steel*; in *Titans* Starfire and Raven kill at least five people brutally, just in the first episode of the show. Batman kills Two-Face in *The Dark Knight* and many thugs in *Batman v Superman*. Jessica Jones breaks Killgrave's neck, Iron Man and Captain America kill a lot of enemies soldier both in the movies and in the comics; Storm in *X-Men* fulgurates with her lightning her enemies. Arrow, at least at the beginning in the series, is just a Punisher with a bow. Wonder Woman has a lot of dead on her conscience. Even Spider-Man suggests in *Avengers: Infinity War* – throwing the evil alien out of the spaceship, effectively sentencing him to death.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, some characters who were once antiheroes, are now superheroes in all respects. One among all: Wolverine who continues to kill, yet he is now considered a superhero rather than an antihero.

Superheroes kill and – what is important – they still are seeing as heroes! Even though they become more complex and controversial figures, distant from the "pure" superhero topoi, they are not in conflict with their society. Their morality does not appear "extreme" to us- Once we would have defined these characters as antiheroes; today, our morality is different. Antiheroes challenge our morality – superheroes reaffirm it. If they kill remaining heroes, it indicates that killing is considered, today an acceptable action. The defence of our "Good" justifies the death of the "Evil" that apparently threatens us. However, this Manichean distinction works only as long as Good and Evil are not well defined, until one wonders what "Good" is, as Eco wrote, but it is made to coincide with "us", thus identifying the "Evil" in the "others".

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<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Morrison Grant, *Supergods. What masked vigilantes, miraculous mutants, and a sun god from Smallville can teach us about being human*. Spiegel & Grau, New York 2012.

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<sup>5</sup> Brombert, *In praise of antiheroes*. Cit. P. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche Friedrich, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Zur Genealogie der Moral. Kritische Studienausgabe herausgegeben von Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari*. DTV de Gruyter, München 2014. Trad. Eng. Carol Diethe.

<sup>7</sup> "Il sorgere della maschera è ricondotto al dolore." Vattimo Giovanni, *Il soggetto e la maschera. Nietzsche e il problema della liberazione*. Tran. Eng. Marco Favaro. Bompiani, Milano 2007. P. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Miller, *The Dark Knight Returns*. Cit.

<sup>9</sup> Moore Alan (Writer), Bolland Brian (Artist), *Batman: The killing joke. The deluxe edition*. DC Comics, Burbank 2008.

<sup>10</sup> The double identity is one of the most distinctive elements of the superhero. Peter Coogan defines it as "the clearest marker of the superhero genre" (Coogan P., *The hero defines the genre, the genre defines the hero*. In: Rosenberg R. S., Coogan P. *What is a superhero?* Cit. P. 6).

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