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## **Making Sense of Gender through Superhero Narratives: Transmedia Evolution of “The Flash”**

**Ganna Tashchenko**

School of Foreign Languages, V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, Ukraine;  
Département des Langues et Cultures, University of Bordeaux, France.

### **Abstract**

The article addresses gender identity change through interaction with transmedia narratives. Much like other facets of an individual's identity, gender is shaped by master narratives dictating what is deemed socially acceptable. Since, according to the concept of dialogic self, voices of fictional characters resonate with audiences as strongly as those of people around or even their own voices, characters act as the driving force of the story. Turning into independent units of meaning, they reinforce the already existing dominant narratives or pave the way for new ones to emerge. The article argues that evolution of familiar characters in the transmedia spaces plays a pivotal role in shifting away from traditional notions of masculinity and femininity toward greater diversity. Serving as role models by their very nature, superheroes, who develop new aspects of their gender identities, vividly demonstrate this trend as exemplified by the transmedial journey of “The Flash”.

**Key words:** cultural memory, Flash, gender identity, identity change, transmedia narratives.

## 1. Introduction

Superhero narratives originating in American comics have long been viewed as a space for reinforcing gender stereotypes. However, they have also gained an important place in American culture and much beyond while superheroes have turned into symbols of courage, determination, selflessness, etc. They started building entire storyworlds around them in a variety of media while also adapting to the needs of time. The shift in gender identities taking place in these multilayer narratives both reflects societal changes and enhances them. Since superheroes already serve as role models to look up to, the audience is much more willing to accept and embrace their evolving gender identities.

Although comics constitute a relatively new medium of storytelling, their relevance is hard to overestimate for the United States and beyond. “As a distinctively American form of art, comics have contributed heavily to the culture of the world deriving from popular patterns, themes, and concepts and revealing reflectors of popular attitudes, tastes and mores. They speak directly to human desires, needs, and emotions” (Inge, 1982, p. 73). They are frequently viewed as modern myths whose characters are recognised across generations. Resonating with people from completely different backgrounds, comics contributed to building a shared cultural heritage indicative of the values and concerns of a particular time and place.

Many of the superheroes we know today were created amid the turmoil of the first part of the 20th century. In many ways, they have served as “cultural artifacts” embodying the times when they appeared. Batman was created in 1939 against the backdrop of uncertainty of the Great Depression. Captain America was first introduced in 1941 when the US was involved in World War II. Batwoman and Supergirl emerged in response to the feminist movement. L. Maslon and M. Kantor draw a comparison between comic book superheroes and Greek myths, highlighting a key distinction. These superheroes no longer hold the same significance as Greek myths did for the ancient Greeks; instead, they represent what Greek myths meant to Western civilization over centuries. (Maslon & Kantor, 2013).

These idealized images that turned into examples to follow have been subject to considerable criticism due to the gender stereotypes they fostered. It is argued that most superheroes “represent the ultimate paragon of masculinity - they are invariably strong, brave men that are capable of overcoming evil and adversity through the application of their will and power” (Dill & Thill, 2007, p. 855). Meanwhile, their appeal for the audiences and their adaptability allowed

comics to continue their path and provoked a wave of screen adaptations where new stories are being constructed around seemingly familiar characters across different media forming transmedia narratives further pursued both by professionals of the media industry and just fans.

Gender aspects of a character’s identity always form part of their image though their relevance to the main story line may vary. Even within one text gender representation of a character can significantly evolve, transmedia narratives in their turn create complex networks where different branches of the story can differ in terms of the character’s appearance, background, relationships with others as well as the way they live their gender. Being exposed to different conceptualisations of gender throughout the narrative, the recipients’ views can change creating a new norm or leading to a realization that there is actually none.

The present research focuses on the image of Barry Allen as one of the incarnations of the Flash in DC comic books and the corresponding TV show whose release started in 2014. The image of Flash is considered within his own storyworld and the DC universe in the comics and on the screen which continues growing to become representative of a wider variety of gender identities. The study is aimed at tracing transformations in the gender identity of the character as manifested in his path both as a superhero and a person. Each extension to the storyworld of the Flash gives the recipients an opportunity to see a familiar character develop new aspects of his identity which means that those who will keep the story going will proceed from a new range of characteristics associated with the image of the Flash.

## **2. Changing identity of transmedia characters**

Narratives are known to have a profound impact on our beliefs and values as well as any changes they undergo over the course of our lives. Transmedia narratives, in their turn, act even more subtly. It is not infrequent that individuals are unwilling to accept change, however, such resistance can potentially be overcome through a story which they are not only already acquainted with but a story they grew to appreciate.

Transmedia narratives represent a relatively new type of storytelling whose influence is yet to be discovered. The term was first proposed by H. Jenkins who mostly focused on the use of different platforms as an efficient tool employed to develop a franchise “with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 336). Transmedia storytelling has become an efficient business strategy since at present the characters and plots that we have known for quite a long time turn into brands which encourage audiences to play a video

game after watching a movie or buy a product “advertised” by their favorite character. However, transmedia narratives perform other functions that are more complex but just as crucial at a broader cultural level. While some elements of the narrative pursue purely commercial purposes due to recognizability of the story, others reflect social changes that have taken place since it first came into being, oftentimes becoming part of that change.

Different people may be familiar with some parts of the storyworld and ignorant of others. Meanwhile, the former come together to create a single storyworld in the mind of an individual. Transmedia storytelling aims to create a shared “storyscape” that encompasses a variety of elements like the setting, events, characters, rules consistent across all parts of a franchise, regardless of the medium they occur in. Having come into contact with a certain facet of the narrative, the person will consider all of its extensions as part of the same “story”. According to M.-L. Ryan, transmedia narratives present “a special case of transfictionality” where each new part of the storyworld expands the source by adding characters, leading to different outcomes or transposing it into a new context (Ryan, 2013).

“Worlds extend beyond the stories that occur in them, inviting speculation and exploration through imaginative means. Whether through verbal description, visual design, sound design, or virtual spaces revealed through interaction, it is the world... that supports all the narratives set in it and that is constantly present during the audience’s experience” (Wolf, 2012, p. 25). The way the story has been reimagined can be appreciated or disproved but every new reinterpretation is also able to challenge the previous ones giving the recipients an opportunity to unlearn deeply embedded patterns and reshape their identities.

The current study proceeds from the model of identity change through narratives proposed by Inge M. Brokerhof and her colleagues and inspired by M. Bakhtin (Bakhtin, 1973) and H. Hermans. The researchers emphasize the polyphonic nature of identity (Hermans, 2014) while distinguishing three pathways in which it can change. Within the framework of the Dialogical Selves Theory (DST) (Hermans et al., 1992), the self is constructed as a range of I-positions which, despite being distinct, jointly form our identity through a continuous dialogue taking place both interpersonally and intrapersonally. The dialogical nature of the self, thus, gives an opportunity to incorporate innovation and transformation (Gonçalves & Ribeiro, 2012) which contribute to a “complex, multivoiced, narratively structured self” (Hermans, 2014, p. 139).

The first pathway is closely related to the impact of fictional characters on our personality. Our identity is determined not only by our own voices but also those of others, not only real but

also imaginary people who enter this space within the self (Hermans, 2004). The storyworld experience largely depends on the characters it revolves around. "Our brain results show that people approach narrative in a strongly character-centered and psychological manner, focused on the mental states of the protagonist of the story." (Yuan et al., 2018). No matter how narrative is presented, verbally, visually or acoustically, the recipient will always be more affected by the characters, their actions, values, emotions, etc. H. Jenkins who coined the term of a transmedia narrative claimed that “a good character can sustain multiple narratives and thus leads to a successful movie franchise. A good ‘world’ can sustain multiple characters (and their stories) and thus successfully launch a transmedial franchise” (Jenkins, 2003). Some of the elements of a transmedia narrative can focus on the same events in the life of one or more characters, others will bring new developments. However, the character remains the center of the story and it is their image that allows the audience to track the evolution of the storyworld in its entirety.

On the one hand, fictional characters can act as role models which become guiding figures that are consulted when a person needs to make a decision or choose how to act (Brokerhof et al., 2018). On the other, such characters can allow us to catch a glimpse of who we could become, our possible selves, “individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). It is in this way that gender stereotypes are reinforced when narratives suggest role models that embody or promote them. Nevertheless, transmedia storytelling provides multiple versions of the same character who is naturally evolving while remaining the role model the recipient has already incorporated. Changes that a well-known character is going through are able to encourage the audience to reimagine their future selves as well.

The cultural pathway reveals how narratives provide structure for stories of our own lives as well as suggest categories used to interpret the world around. Humans are wired to seek coherence, including in the sense of self. Narratives provide us with central themes, plots, metaphors that give meaning to personal stories (Berger 1996). They also offer information about the culture or society in which they are created, reflecting the social identity of the main audience (McCracken, 1998). Transmedia storyworlds structure our experiences at the cultural level but they also have the ability to extend almost indefinitely while their characters sometimes live quite unexpected stories, their gender identities and gender perceptions being reimaged to modify the master narrative to meet the needs of the time.

In social semiotics, the character is defined as a “cultural element that finds its own being or ‘making sense’ in a wider sociocultural dimension, including transtextual and transmedia changes and intersemiotic translations. It is a semiotic object that forms itself among and through texts” (Marrone, 2021, p. 25–26). Such a definition appears to apply to transmedia characters as well. It emphasizes their ability to go beyond only one text and with time turn into easily recognizable symbols which draw the recipients into new stories. Some representations will prove very close to the original, “canonical” image while others will contribute some aspects of the character’s identity. However, it is their ability to change and evolve that allows the audiences to do the same while exploiting the ideas the characters embody to make sense of the real world.

This idea correlates with the third pathway which is related to self-reflection. The novelty the recipients find in transmedia narratives may encourage them to take a new perspective on their received ideas. In some instances, this process can go even beyond an increased self-awareness, the audience will change their sense of self by trying to actively shift between different pre-existing positions, a state often found in successful counseling (Hermans, 2014). Transmedia narratives, therefore, create worlds able to challenge themselves while the recipients of every new story will hear one more voice to counteract their stereotypes, including those related to gender.

### **3. Transmedia narratives: gender in cultural memory**

Unlike biological sex, gender is a social construct encompassing certain personality traits, behaviors and roles attributed to individuals within a given society. Far from being objective, these fixed perceptions have been perpetuated in the narratives humanity has been building throughout its history both through language, art and traditional behaviors observed on a daily basis. Such individual experiences further become stories that allow people to reflect on their own experience in order to make sense of the world in its entirety (Goodman, 1978). “A narrative approach understands individual lives as constructed within, against and in concert with culturally canonical narratives of what a life is and how a life should be lived” (Fivush & Grysman, 2022). On the one hand, it gives structure to our life and social interactions. In the course of history, storytelling was an indispensable component in the emergence of culture which presupposed a certain common worldview to be shared. Stories gave meaning to alliances people were forming and mutual responsibilities they assumed (Boyd, 2018) which, in its turn, ensured survival of humanity as well as its prosperity in the future.

On the other hand, the same stories soon turned into self-fulfilling prophecies, becoming more and more rigid. They locked people into the ways of being they have never chosen. Recurring practices grow into standards, models to follow, by “doing gender” in specific ways, people forget to think of what they aspire to at that moment in time, what kind of legacy they wish to leave for future generations. Thus, the so-called master narratives arise where certain experiences as well as stories they give rise to are transformed into “canonical narrative frameworks” which guide members of the society as commonly accepted criteria of the value to be attached to the events to come (McLean & Syed, 2015). “The characters, situations and stories act as schematic representations of the world, i.e. as behavioral and opinion models and, at the same time, as keys for deciphering the world” (Casetti & Villa, 1992, p. 216). From their first days, children are absorbing narratives circulating around them, they are also expected to keep the story going.

Listening to and then retelling the story, people embraced their gender identities as imposed by the society around them without questioning their limitations. Over generations, physical strength, self-sufficiency, and emotional control have been associated with masculinity while female traits of character include compliance, compassion and dependence. Until recently, the narratives of gender construction have been relatively uniform, each new story, be it mono- or multimodal, contributed to reinforcement of the existing gender representations by promoting stereotypical binary thinking which sometimes clashes with the reality of the 21st century itself. Though the influence of gender inequalities inherited from previous centuries or even millenia remains strong in the collective unconscious, cultural narratives have become much more diversified. The number of media and platforms is growing so rapidly that it is virtually impossible to control all the new stories coming alive as people are searching for their identities. Questioning the stereotypical perceptions of gender, they build alternative stories which resist the master narrative, transmedia storytelling being part and parcel of this process. The different stories within a transmedia narrative enter into conversation not only with each other or the recipient but also with the entire space of culture through its collective memory. They determine the way a culture remembers itself, constantly creating new memories.

C. Harvey claims that “memories might be articulated through words, still images, audiovisual material, performance or interactivity, or indeed a combination of these different modes. They were the mechanisms by which the “storyworld” was effectively sewn together, helping create a common diegetic space for me – and countless others – to explore” (Harvey, 2015, p. 8).

Therefore, by getting absorbed into a transmedia narrative, recipients seek to learn more about their favorite characters and events of their life.

Familiarity with the core of the storyworld creates certain expectations among the audience. However, it is also one of the principal reasons why modifications to seemingly stable narratives are so efficient in bringing change in our usual perceptions of social phenomena. Unlike, for instance, screen adaptations which make the audience compare the original and the screened work, every new element of the transmedia storyworld enters a different kind of a relationship with its predecessor(s) (ibid) where malleability of our memories both individually and collectively comes into play.

Flexibility has always been one of the most essential features of stories which lies at the basis of corporate cultures, political campaigns and more. In the process of narrating, things are selected, structured, accentuated, or left out, with the goal of gaining a new perspective on what has been experienced (Kraus, 2007 p. 40). This is the way culture evolves through narratives which are constantly balancing on the border between freedom and determinism.

New meanings can be interpreted only on the basis of what an individual already knows about the subject. Meanwhile, it is up to the writer (speaker, director, game designer) what they are going to say. “A transmedial text (as any text in culture) is a structure as well as a process conditioned by the reservoir of meaningful growth immanent in any culture text, realizing itself in contacts with other texts, texts from another semiosphere or another chronological layer of culture”. (Ojamaa, 2015, p. 29). The way a new branch of the narrative is reshaped becomes a “form of action”, a dynamic event transcultural (Reiss & Vermeer, 1984; Koller, 1995; Dusi, 2015) able to lead to a change of the master narrative. We learn through stories but we also unlearn through them. When speaking about the role of transmediality in education, J. Sánchez-Martínez and S. Albaladejo-Ortega argue that “the re-interpretation of the starting text, the multiplicity in the approach to events and characters, and the extraction of fictional elements and induction of new ideas and values, activates an ability to connect knowledge and assumptions from the fictional world with those of the real world. It can lead to new perspectives and practices” (Sánchez-Martínez & Albaladejo-Ortega, 2018, p. 60).

Transmedia narratives provide a space for the change to take root. Only one branch of the narrative suffices to sow the seeds. Having got accustomed to seeing their favorite male character so invariably strong, resolute and reserved, the recipients may be surprised to encounter him feeling weak, admitting his mistakes, fighting his own demons or even changing his gender identity altogether. Nevertheless, this image stays with them as part of the storyworld in question which

leads to deconstruction of a stereotypically masculine image. Transmedia environments actively integrate transgender characters and those representing LGBTQ communities while the images of powerful women have long become quite commonplace. Future developments of the storyworld both those initiated by professionals and springing within fandom, can easily pick up on any branch of the narrative. At a certain moment in time, this representation will no longer be perceived as unusual having become part of the master narrative.

People can be resistant to change for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they build a more positive image of the group they belong to while attributing negative traits who are not its members. Moreover, it is not infrequent for individuals to fall victim to confirmation bias when they are inclined to believe information that corresponds to what they already consider to be true. Stories of any kind - books, films, radio programs, comics - are more effective in accelerating social change for the simple reason that the recipients do not expect to be persuaded and consequently show less resistance to the ideas embedded in the narrative. What is specific for transmedia storyworlds, the first link in the chain has already gained enough popularity and cultural significance. All the extensions to follow are governed by “multiple creative forces which author various parts of the story, a sense of long-term continuity, a deep character backlog, and therein a sense of permanence” (Scolari et al., 2014, p. 49). When a narrative goes so deep into the memory of a culture, its members will listen to its characters, seeing them as good friends. The story they tell has a potential to be interpreted as evolution rather than an attempt to change their opinions against their will.

#### **4. The ever-evolving story of the Flash: embracing different identities**

The storyworld of the Flash is quite representative of the way traditional views of masculinity can be altered through a single character whose destiny is closely linked to that of other DC superheroes. Barry Allen plays an important role in the DC universe. He is one of the characters who contributed to the Silver Age of comics. Being one of the founders of the Justice League and interacting with other members of the DC storyworld, the image of Barry was crucial for future reinterpretations in a variety of media as the one who introduced the readers to the Multiverse and many other concepts such as the speed force.

What is also important both in the comics and the series, Flash not only builds his own storyworld, he is a frequent guest in those of other DC characters. The Justice League on the pages of the comic is substituted by the Arrowverse which includes Arrow, Legends of Tomorrow, Supergirl, Batwoman, Black Lightning, etc. The Multiverse surrounding Flash is known for its

gender diversity. The DC comics welcomed multiple female characters, some of the most famous of them being Batwoman and Supergirl. The TV series based on them depict a wide range of LGBT community members, many of whom inhabit the storyworld of Supergirl.

The comic itself depicts Barry as someone different from a stereotypically masculine superhero. Barry Allen is a forensic scientist who was fighting crime on a daily basis even before he got his powers, superspeed and superhealing. Therefore, he uses his knowledge and analytical skills to fight his opponents. Unlike many other superheroes walking in the dark, Barry inspires people around him bringing hope in their lives. The comic books lay the basis for an image of a superhero who becomes a paragon for reasons different from those of Captain America or Superman. It is these features that are further exploited and expanded in the screen adaptation that creatively reinterprets Barry’s adventures from the comics published in different periods of time. The series builds a consistent image of a superhero who possesses a different kind of strength, that, deriving from his emotions, from people around him, from his intelligence which comes before his superpowers.

The first visible change that the viewer encounters in the series in comparison to the comic book is the very appearance of the character. Various incarnations of Barry Allen as Flash in comics have well-defined muscles emphasizing an idealized male body. He is frequently represented in domineering positions with a quite aggressive expression on his face. However, the first impression of Barry Allen in the series does not match the common expectations. He is well-built but does not appear physically strong, his voice is quite soft for a man. In fact, the audience meets an awkward young man in love with science. At that point he has not been struck by lightning charged with dark matter which granted him his superpowers, however, he is doing everything in his power to protect his city. This image stays with the viewer, determining the perception of Barry Allen as the one who will recur to something different than pure force.

Even before receiving his supernatural abilities, Barry used his mind to fight for what he felt was right both in the series and in the comic. Having turned into a superhero, he still relies on science to realize his full potential. Team Flash is working in a lab surrounded by figures and formulas telling them which speed Barry will need to run on water or go up a building. Barry himself explores his limitations as well as those of his adversaries proceeding from their scientific foundations. His superhero identity encompasses not only speed but also his knowledge and skills as a forensic scientist.

Science fascinates him and goes far beyond an ordinary job. The series consistently constructs Barry’s image as a nerd who uses his expertise far beyond his workplace. He is living it in everyday life when telling his friend about organisms resembling zombies in the natural world after leaving the cinema or making up a name for his team at a night quiz which is based on a physical formula and the name of a music band. In the very first episode, the viewer learns that one of his favorite songs is “Poker Face” by Lady Gaga. While cooking breakfast for his girlfriend Barry is dancing to Old Time Rock & Roll from Bob Seger and The Silver Bullet Band.

Despite the fact that Flash meets and teams up with numerous heroes of the DC multiverse, he finds his own path. While some of them, such as the Black Lightning, the Green Arrow or members of the League of Justice, are more prone to resorting to violence, Barry becomes a symbol of hope as he sees and brings out the best in people. The superheroes who emerged as a response to the most disturbing events in US history, their brutal way of conflict resolution created a distorted image of a perfect citizen. Barry is depicted as someone kind, always trying to find a solution and even sacrifice his own life, if necessary. Some of his enemies are erased from reality by a changing timeline, others fall victim to their own thirst for power. The Flash, however, never takes a human life. From a visual perspective, when the Flash arrives at a crime scene, he refrains from immediately engaging his adversary unless human lives are at risk. His primary instinct is to save people, offer help, and resort to the use of force only when absolutely necessary. The Flash’s refusal to fight becomes the most powerful weapon against many of his rivals, sometimes it even transforms them into friends.

The Flash brings his core values into each battle and aims to instill them in every new member of his team, one of crucial developments in the series. The comic book shows Barry working with other DC superheroes, being especially close with Green Lantern. His ability to build strong relationships is further built upon through Team Flash, one of the driving forces of the plot in the TV show. Its introduction gives an opportunity to show that his moral principles lay the foundations of the leadership style he adopts. From the point of view of proxemics, Barry can rarely be seen in the center, staying among his friends which re-emphasises the idea of equality. Essentially, he does not position himself as a leader and still the team follows him naturally which might seem counterintuitive.

A male leader is traditionally viewed as a domineering individual enjoying a position of power and taking decisions unilaterally. The Flash, instead, relies on all members of his team whose contributions are equally valuable. Such a collaborative approach creates a distinctive environment

of equity and trust commonly perceived as a feminine manner to lead, gently with little to no conflict. Many superhero narratives include a science geek assisting the protagonist but having no real impact themselves. The Flash, in his turn, works in a team where everyone has a distinctive role to play, many of his friends have superpowers of their own and recurring to them to save Barry.

The series significantly expands on the emotional vulnerability of the character, a trait which is often associated with femininity rather than masculinity. Joy, fear, love or despair, he is not afraid of his feelings or even his tears. Vivid facial expressions of Grant Gustin, who plays the role in the TV show, become a real asset for the film-makers as much as his body language in general which contributes to the image of an awkward young man who lacks confidence. His voice is rather soft and even high-pitched, moreover, the actor manages his intonations well which when combined with the language of his body makes his emotional states even more explicit. Meanwhile, anger and aggression can rarely be found in his emotional repertoire.

Not only Barry’s relations with his team challenge the ideals of masculinity in the TV show, his interaction with his family is also based on their emotional bond and intimate conversations, though men are usually viewed as reserved and tend to suppress their emotions. In order to elaborate on this aspect of Barry’s identity, the film-makers introduce a new character into the storyworld, Joe West, his adoptive father. Admiring Joe, for his integrity, honesty and compassion, Barry is always willing to seek his advice in a variety of situations ranging from love to work, from his decisions as a superhero to communication with Barry’s own daughter who comes from the future. Personalities of Barry and Joe are to some extent contrasted in terms of masculinity representation.

Working as a policeman, Joe is depicted as a confident leader who is physically strong, decisive and ready to take risks. He is also quite direct and possesses a characteristic sense of humor which he sometimes practices on Barry. While Joe deeply cares about him and is always there to listen and support his adoptive son whatever the circumstances, he also humorously emphasizes the differences in his communicative style and that of Wally, his other son. Referring to his conversation with the latter, Joe claims that he needs to be more nuanced with him while comparing Barry to “*a second daughter*” who overshares his feelings. Though not being serious, Joe still highlights the different approaches to dealing with emotions and expressing them that are observed in the two young men.

Barry’s relationship with Iris who will later become his wife deserves special attention. Both in the comic book and the TV show Iris West acts as his Lois Lane, grounding him, helping him to

stay focused. While the comic book authors rather focus on their relationship beyond Barry’s superhero identity, their shared path in the TV show is much more detailed. A patriarchal ideal of a family places man at its center. Nevertheless, Barry and Iris enter their relationships as equal partners. Iris has always been Barry’s “lightning rod”. In many instances, he is ready to be guided by his wife, both in everyday life and when fighting crime as Flash. When fighting Anti-Monitor in one of the cross-overs in the Arrowverse, Barry is identified as the Paragon of Love, one of the seven heroes who embody virtues of courage, hope, destiny, humanity, honor, truth, and love, the only ones able to save the world. Although he has been chosen because it is love that is driving him in protecting people and the universe, Barry himself believes that having Iris in his heart is the only reason why he could become a Paragon of Love.

Barry views his connection with Iris as one of his greatest strengths. In fact, it is her who helps Flash return his powers lost in a battle with another supervillain. Once again, he is struck by lightning but this time Iris is literally part of it. Their relationship is depicted as empowering and motivating while the idea of both of them being the Flash is frequently reiterated throughout the series which reinforces the shift in representation of a superhero as a loner who oftentimes sacrifices his private life to fulfill his mission. Barry, on the contrary, draws his strength and inspiration from the relationship that he finds enriching both at a personal level and in terms of his growth as a heroic figure.

While “The Flash” comics and the TV series allows for tracking various means through which modifications in a superhero identity are constructed, his interaction with other members of the DC universe not only shows the differences in the ways they approach the problems but also reveals the respect that he wins by being who he is. In the series the perception of Barry a beacon of light is reiterated by the Arrow. In the comic books, Barry chooses his name, Flash, after his favorite superhero, Jay Garrick. In the TV show, It was Arrow who suggested the name for Barry’s superheroic alter ego, it was also him who saw that the world needed a new kind of a hero, the one for whom human lives would always remain a priority.

*"I don't think that bolt of lightning struck you, Barry. I think it chose you."*

*"I'm just not sure I'm like you, Oliver. I don't know if I can be some vigilante."*

*"You can be better. Because you can inspire people in a way that I never could."*

*Watching over your city like a guardian angel, making a difference, saving people... in a flash." (Nutty D. et al., Season 1, ep. 31.84–32.06).*

## Conclusions

Flash does not manifest virtually any of the traits associated with a superhero as a living embodiment of masculinity. He lacks physical strength, is solving problems with his mind and his heart rather than physical force. He builds relationships, both with his team and his family, in a manner which could be considered rather feminine than masculine. He is not afraid of sharing his emotions and, moreover, turns them into one of his greatest assets. Flash sets a different model to look up to, a beacon of hope, a husband and a father.

Comic books, where superheroes were born, have been subject to extensive criticism due to the gender stereotypes they promoted. However, the Flash vividly demonstrates that superhero narratives are taking a broader perspective on gender representing a variety of gender identities. The cultural space itself is viewed as an infinite number of meaning-making possibilities to choose from and to modify at will. Superhero images as well as ideals of gender attached to them are deeply entrenched in the collective unconscious of people far beyond the US. Their deconstruction, nevertheless, gives an opportunity to instill familiar characters with different, even opposing values. Therefore, those who used to reinforce stereotypical gender perceptions are now subverting the traditional status quo due to the clash with their former selves.

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