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**The Representation of Women in Comic Books, Post WWII
Through the Radical 60's**

by

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The Representation of Women in Comic Books, Post WWII Through the Radical 60's.

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“Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.” Virginia Woolf

The American comic book as long served as an alternative form of entertainment for a diverse demographic. Alongside jazz and Hollywood movies, the comic book is considered an indigenous American art form (Conroy). While the first comic book didn't originate in America, the comic book superhero and comic books as they are known today are credited as originating in America.

Comic books are not only a source of pleasure, but they also serve as a unique reflection of American culture. Comic book characters are usually depicted in visual and contextual extremes. These extremes are representations of how common stereotypes are turned into archetypes and can help us learn about contemporary American social structure. This is especially clear in studying gender roles, the focus of my research on female superheroes.

From the debut of the first female superhero, Wonder Woman, the representation of women was always within the frame of gender bias. The ascribed and acquired roles that women typically held post-WWII through the sixties, such as wife, mother and secretary, are nearly duplicated in comic books. The Rosie the Riveter era gave us women who could handle, “men's work.” The fifties served as a rollback to the forties with limited roles, and the sixties proved to be the richest decade for women up to that point. This research follows

the roles given to five female superheroes and helps to explain the social importance of this influential American art form.

Social-Role Theory

A role is usually defined as a set of expectations about the way individuals with certain social identifications will most likely act in certain situations. It is said that when human beings are engaged in almost any set of behaviors they are conveying information about themselves that tells others that they are playing a role (Birenbaum). Roles can be ascribed or acquired. An ascribed role is a role that we are given and did not earn. An example of an ascribed role could be daughter, mother or girlfriend. An acquired role is the opposite of an ascribed role. Acquired roles are roles that we've earned such as doctor or nurse.

Roles are important because the typical comic book superhero almost always has an alter ego, meaning they usually carry-on normal lives outside of their superhero persona. For male characters in the 1940s-60s, these roles are diverse and typically prestigious. In contrast, female characters were usually given very few roles with limited upward mobility. Because of the civil rights movement, second wave feminism and the sexual revolution, the late 1960's changed this landscape for women and their comic book counterparts.

Wonder Woman – Diana Prince

Introduced in 1941 in *All Star Comics #8*, Wonder Woman was the first female superhero. Created by William Moulton Marston, Wonder Woman debuted in the midst of WWII, at the same time of the Rosie the Riveter movement of women taking over typical male occupied positions. In her non-superhero form, Wonder Woman lives as army nurse, Diana Prince. Wonder Woman is a unique example of a female character that was specifically modeled as a feminist. Marston, a psychologist who invented the lie detector and feminist when feminism wasn't a household word, concluded that women were more honest, more

reliable and could work faster and more reliable than men (Conroy). He created Wonder Woman to counter to what he perceived as an overly masculine-dominated world. In a 1943 issue of *The American Scholar*, Marston wrote,

Not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength and power. Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weakness. The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus the allure of a good and beautiful woman.

Good intentions aside, Marston passed-away in 1947, leaving the characters of Diana Prince and Wonder Woman to DC Comics. New artists and writers took over and Wonder Woman went through a subtle standardization process that more closely mimicked typical female roles of the forties, fifties and sixties.

In the 1940s, Diana Prince had very few professional roles outside of her nursing job with the army. In her debut issue, Wonder Woman moonlights as a stage actress, but normally sticks to fighting crime (Moulton). In 1947, the year Marston died, Wonder Woman was part of the Justice Society of America, yet because of the limited roles available to women, she initially served only as the team's secretary, taking phone calls and dispatching help.

Regardless of Wonder Woman's feminist beginnings, the 1950s saw her lead a life similar to the more traditional superheroines. In 1954 saw the invention of the Comics Code Authority, which was created to regulate the content of comic books. While the Comics Code Authority had no legal authority over publishers, many distributors refused to carry comics unless they came with the Comics Code seal of approval. After the invention of the

Comics Code Authority, Wonder Woman comics no longer contained strong feminist story lines.

In 1968, Wonder Woman went through yet another transformation. She was stripped of all her powers and learned martial arts. In 1973 her powers and traditional costume were restored, influenced by none other than Gloria Steinem, who featured her on the cover of Ms. Magazine in 1972.

Wonder Woman is an example of a character that has endured the test of time and remains the most well known and beloved of all female comic book characters. Regardless of her early start as a strong non-stereotypical female character, the transitions between decades and writers have altered her physical image, the story lines and the professional roles available to her.

Catwoman – Selina Kyle

Whether viewed as a superhero, a villain or simply the love-interest of Batman, Catwoman has endured many character transformations and is still holding strong today. Introduced in 1940 as a sexy and seductive jewel-thief, Selina Kyle, Catwoman's alter ego, has typically worked low-end, non-prestigious jobs. In 1951, Selina Kyle is revealed to be an air stewardess with amnesia, in 1954 she is seen running a pet-store, and in 1969 she's the owner of a beauty salon. Throughout all of her professional jobs, she is seen wavering back and forth between villain and superhero, but the creators never really decide on either. One can also see the obvious sexual-tension between Catwoman and Batman with Catwoman as the usual instigator. In 1967 Catwoman can be seen starting a jealousy war with Batgirl over the love of Batman.

With such transformations, Catwoman remains a complex character. But because of the limited social roles available to women, Catwoman's complexity was relegated to her dark personality and not her life outside of crime.

The Invisible Girl/Woman – Sue Storm

Perhaps it's just a coincidence that the only female member of Marvel's, the Fantastic Four was invisible, but Sue Storm, once a weak character always in need of rescuing, has grown into what is considered to be the strongest and most powerful character of the group (Conroy). It wasn't until 1964 when the Invisible Girl really learned the extent of her powers and was able to be a real asset to the team.

Sue Storm is different than both Wonder Woman and Catwoman because she never really holds any jobs outside of her ascribed role of girlfriend and in 1965, wife. Once married, the Invisible Girl becomes the Invisible Woman and gives birth to a son, earning her the role of mother. Above all else, Sue Storm is a gentle and passive character with no real life outside of her family and team.

The Wasp – Jan Van Dyne

The most stereotypical female character of the five, Jan Van Dyne, The Wasp, was the only female character of the Avengers. A wealthy heiress, Jan typically appears as shallow and self-centered and constantly comments on the attractiveness of the other members of her team. The Wasp has the ability to make herself larger and smaller. While large, her strength increases, and while small she has the ability to grow wings and fly. Interestingly enough, the Wasp is usually drawn as diminutively and never at her large size unless in extreme danger.

Debuting in 1963, The Wasp, similar to the Invisible Girl, never really holds a professional job outside of her role as an heiress. Jane van Dyne has either played the girlfriend or in 1968, the wife to Henry Pym, one of her teammates.

The Wasp may be the most interesting of characters to study closely because of her stereotypical behavior and hyper-femininity and her lack of acquired roles.

Batgirl – Barbara Gordon

Probably the most intelligent and refined of all the studied female characters, Batgirl is the poster-child for women's liberation. Debuting in 1966, Barbara Gordon is the daughter of the Police Commissioner, James Gordon, and a librarian by day. She's honest, hard working and book-smart. As a female version of Batman, Batgirl rides a motorcycle and is as fearless as Batman, and as curious as Robin.

Taking her cue from the women's liberation movement of the sixties and seventies, Barbara Gordon makes a steady transition from young librarian to capable congresswoman in less than six years. She loses the mousy and shy bookworm persona, as well as her hair-bun and glasses and turns into a confident modern woman with a flair for politics.

Similarities and Differences in Characters

While all of these female characters overlap in some way, it's important to point out some key similarities and differences.

Probably the most striking similarity in characters is seen in the Invisible Girl and the Wasp. Both characters debuted around the same time, and both characters lacked professional roles outside of self-proclaimed vigilante. Both the Wasp and the Invisible Girl went from love interest, to girlfriend to wife within a matter of four to five years. In addition, both characters went from being weak characters to strong influential characters

around the same time. These similarities could exist because both the Avengers and the Fantastic Four share the same writers and artists and are published both by Marvel comics.

The most striking difference is shrouded in the Wonder Woman mystery. One could assume that Wonder Woman set an example as a strong feminist and other characters followed that lead. But the opposite had happened. Wonder Woman remained a popular character through the three decades mentioned, but after the death of William Moulton Marston, she went through the same transformation process that other female characters went through - she was turned into a secretary. Because of this reverse influence in comics, Wonder Woman, or Marston, never had the opportunity to set a positive example for other artists and writers who struggled to give female characters life. These creators were simply taking cues from their social-environment about the roles women were allowed to play and reflecting their socialization in their art.

Another important comparison can be made about female characters modeled after established male characters. Most of the characters researched were not modeled after male characters, but many female characters that existed around the same time were modeled after their male counterparts. Batgirl is the only character that was specifically modeled after a male character. However, it's important to point out that all of these characters did not debut in their own comics. The Invisible Girl and the Wasp debuted as team characters, but were never created as the leaders. And Catwoman and Batgirl both debuted in an issue of Batman. Wonder Woman is the only female character studied who did not debut as a supporting character, but she was able to get her own comic title a little over a year later (Conroy).

Last but not least, the most important similarity between characters is the lack of professional roles available to all of them until the late sixties. As laid out above, Wonder

Woman went through a “feminization” process in the fifties and then was restored to her original appearance in the late sixties. The Invisible Girl was never given a job except as wife and mother, and the Wasp was an heiress as well as a wife. In contrast, both the Invisible Girl and the Wasp married men who hold prestigious jobs outside of vigilantism, such as an aerospace engineer and scientist. Catwoman, usually portrayed as a thief and a villain, only appears to hold-down low-end jobs such as flight stewardess and shopkeeper. Because of Batgirl’s late debut, she is given the most complex and prestigious professional role out of all the female characters studied. Because there was such a contrast between the events of the early sixties and late sixties, the transformation from demure librarian to successful congresswoman in only six years doesn’t seem like such a surprising leap.

Limitations of the Research

While the evidence is fairly straightforward, a content analysis of any sort can come with flaws. The first difficulty encountered in the research was that there are no reliable comic book databases for easy access to archived materials. This made it extremely difficult to review all comics containing these characters and consequently allowed for gaps in the character timelines.

The last weakness in the research is that the hypothesis cannot be fully supported based on different artists and writers taking over characters through the decades. For instance, William Moulton Marston intended to create a strong female character unlike any other representation of women in comics. But after his death in 1947, the Wonder Woman character was handed over to other artists and writers with their own biases. While most of these characters studied typically follow the stereotypical roles available to women in the forties, fifties and sixties, a writer and artist may come along to change this representation of women. A creator-continuity was not done for this research.

Conclusion and Future Research

As stated above, comic books have the ability to both shape and reflect the changes in society. Comics mirror the fact that women were essentially “invisible,” in both comic books and American society in the 1950s and extremely active in the 1960s. This shows the important association between comics and real-life. But because comic book characters push the envelope and imitate gross stereotypes, they can serve as an almost conclusive analysis of the roles available to women and other minorities at the time.

Future research can look at visual representations of women in comic books and compare them to the images of men. Sociologist, Erving Goffman studied gender bias in advertisements and came up with a systematic approach to analyze ads. He looked at specific codes present in ads and considered what they said about society and social relationships. A similar analysis could be done for the visual representation of women as well as the social themes within the content.

Overall, this analysis has shown that comics have the ability to both reflect and shape society. Lowbrow or highfalutin, art imitates life and in some cases, life imitates art - especially in pop-culture.

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