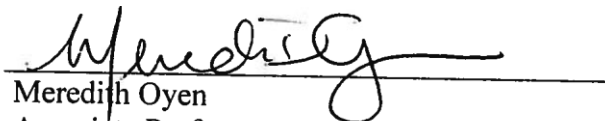APPROVAL SHEET

Title of Thesis: Ink, Mirrors, and Capes: How Comic Books Mirrored Societal Events
in American Culture From 1954-1990

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ABSTRACT

Title of Document:	INK, MIRRORS, AND CAPES: HOW COMIC BOOKS MIRRORED SOCIETAL EVENTS IN AMERICAN CULTURE FROM 1954 TO 1990.
	Chelsea René Mueller, Masters, 2017.
Directed By:	Doctor Meredith Oyen, History.

"Ink, Mirrors, and Capes: How Comic Books Mirrored Societal Events in American Culture from 1954 to 1990" follows the history of feminism within American comic books. Comic books have been reliant on social events and norms to remain relevant to readers; however, writers, artists, and editors have influenced young readers' perceptions of gender. The comics examined in this thesis includes those produced and released by well-known comic book companies Marvel Comics and DC Comics as well as independent and small comic book companies. Feminism influenced the comic book industry by shaping plots and characters, as well as influencing female geek culture. Comic book writers and artists in turn also influenced American culture.

Ink, Mirrors, and Capes: How Comic Books Mirrored Societal Events in American Culture from 1954 to 1990

By

Chelsea R. Mueller

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, Baltimore County, in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of master of arts in
Historic Studies
2017

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Introduction

In June of 2012 Marvel Comics released *Astonishing X-Men* #51, which chronicled the marriage of the mutant North Star to his partner Kyle. This marriage was covered in newspapers and magazines across America, including the *New York Times*, *Rolling Stone,* and *The Washington Post*.[1] While same sex marriages previously existed between comic book characters, this union was notable because the state of New York had legalized same sex marriage one year prior. New York City has been home to many superheroes, including North Star, and this legislation provided Marvel the opportunity to expand their universe while addressing current social changes. American comic books have a long history of reflecting the ideals, events, and concerns of their culture.

The relationship between the comic book industry and the public continues to evolve. In 1954, Doctor Fredric Wertham released *Seduction of the Innocent,* a book condemning comic books for creating delinquency, violence, and illiteracy in American youth.[2] Wertham's accusations influenced public decisions to temporarily ban comic books and implement the Comic Code Authority, a self-policing policy. This strict censorship, which was relevant during McCarthyism, eventually lost its influence on comics as more and more comic book writers used their work to address social concerns of the time. In July of 1972 the first edition of the feminist magazine *Ms*. was released. The cover, titled "Wonder Woman for President," depicted a giant

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[1] Mathew Perpetua, "Marvel Comics Hosts First Gay Wedding in 'Astonishing X-Men' Out superhero Northstar will wed his partner in June," *Rolling Stone,* under "When gay marriage became legal in New York State," May 22, 2012, http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news /marvel-comics-hosts-first-gay-wedding-in-astonishing-x-men20120522 (accessed January 15, 2017); George Gene Gustines, "Gay Superheroes Inspire a Wedding Ceremony," *The New York Times*, June 19, 2012, https://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/19/gay-superheroes-inspire-awedding-ceremony/ (accessed January 15, 2017); Michael Cavna, "Marvel Announces 'X-Men's Gay Wedding: Does this mean mainstream comics are 'evolving'?" *The Washington Post,* May 22, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/comic-riffs/post/marvel-announces-x-mens-gay-wedding-does-this-meanmainstream-comics-are-evolving/2012/05/22/gIQAjePNiU_blog.html (accessed January 15, 2017).
[2] Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, (Laurel, NY: Main Road Books, 2004), 25, 60.

Wonder Woman promoting peace, justice, and safety for American Woman.[3] Throughout the

1970s and 1980s, comic book writers relied heavily on public and historic events in American

culture as inspiration for stories and characters. As a reader of comics, personal history has

motivated my interest in examining how social events about women and feminism influenced the

comic book industry. This includes both cultural events and the evolution of female

empowerment as depicted by popular culture. Feminism, as defined in this thesis, includes the

agenda the feminist movement, equal treatment and rights between men and women, and

recognition of women's agency as independent and free thinking individuals.   This thesis will

explore the evolution of feminism in Marvel and DC Comics from 1954 to 1990, and it will

analyze how the plots and characters presented in comic books influenced popular culture

regarding gender.

In studying the relationship between comic books and American culture, this thesis will

examine how comic books reflect society's views on gender. From 1954 to 1990, the

representation of American culture in comic books changed drastically. Between 1954 and 1970,

comic books reflected social expectations for American behavior. Writers created the character

of Supergirl as the perfect American teenager. Batwoman was designed as a romantic lead for

Batman to avoid accusations of a homosexual relationship between Batman and Robin.[4] Few

strong female characters were present in comic books. However, from 1970 to 1980, writers and

artists placed more emphasis on reflecting current events. *Ms. Marvel* represented the feminist

movement, and the X-Men franchise, which had briefly depicted issues of segregation, became a

more potent allegory for racial, gender and sexuality based prejudices.

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[3] "42 Times *Ms.* Made History," *Ms. Magazine Blog*, August 11, 2014, http://msmagazine.com/blog/
2014/08/11/42times-ms-made-history/ (accessed January 2, 2017).
[4] Mike Madrid, *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* (n.p.:
Experimenting Angle Press, 2009), 62.

More female characters of different ethnicities were introduced in the comic book genre. By the 1980s comic books experienced a backlash against feminism. Many female characters were killed, and feminist writing and ideology was all but absent from comic books. However, writers began to explore topics of gender and sexuality, while select characters created during this time become indicative of heroines in later years. Moreover, female fan culture became more active with many female readers becoming the artists, writers, and illustrators of future comic books.

This study examines how the relationship between society and comic books developed. What role did comic books play in a changing culture? How did the ideas and portrayals presented by comic books differ from other forms of popular culture? Were the ideals of second wave feminism, such as equal opportunity in the workplace and the rights of women, accurately represented by the comic book industry and were the messages well received by readers? When the comic book industry placed more emphasis on fan culture, how were the changing plots and characters shaping the dialogue between readers and writers? The above questions apply to both the history of the comic book industry and the history of female geek culture.

Social norms and the feminist movement profoundly affected the representation of female characters in comic books. The rise and decline of feminism in these comics was dependent on the popularity and the relevancy of feminism at the time. Moreover, it was not the ideology of multiple movements, but popular culture's interpretation of social norms, expectations and opposition that influenced these comic books. Comic books relied on social events to appeal to readers and remain relevant. During this thirty-year span, few women worked within the comic book industry and their history has been largely unexplored.[5] The stereotype that young women do not read comic books, despite being inaccurate, still permeates fan culture today. In studying

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[5] Trina Robbins, *Pretty in Ink: North American Women Cartoonists 1896-2013* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2013), 59, 66-67.

the connection between society, gender and comic books, this thesis fills a void in the available literature and challenges many of the stereotypes regarding women and comics.

The Evolution of Academic and Popular Writing on Gender and Comics

During the latter half of the twentieth century, academic publications on the history of comic books were limited. However, in the 1990s the number of studies increased. One of the most prevalent and widely referenced sources is Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art Form*, which discusses the evolution of comics as an art from the use of panels and speech bubbles to pen strokes. Most publications from the early 1990s until the mid-2000s cover a variety of topics with diverse arguments. While writers of the twenty-first century agree that comic books relied heavily on societal events, most writers focused on the Golden and early Silver Age of Comic Books. In contrast, literary sources of the late Silver and Bronze Age of Comic Books are limited. Moreover, there are few writers who discuss topics of gender and race from a historical perspective. Scholars, writers, and individuals within the industry divide the history of comic books into four sections. The Golden Age of Comic Books covers 1938 to 1955, the Silver Age of Comic Books 1955 to 1970, the Bronze Age of Comic Books 1970 to 1985, and the Modern Age of Comic Books covering 1985 to present.[6] The following paragraphs will explore the available scholarship dedicated to comic books, society, fan culture, and gender.

There are extensive academic and popular writings on the connection between real world events in the early to mid-twentieth century and comic books. These topics include the influence of World War II, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the Comic Code Authority. The popularity of these subjects may in part be due to the origin of popular and well known

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[6] Shirrel Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 4.

characters such as Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Lois Lane, and Captain America, all of

whom were created in the period between the Great Depression and the start of the Cold War.

Jeffery K. Johnson's *Super-History: Comic Book Superheroes and American Society, 1938 to the*

Present presented specific examples of comic books interpreting social events in America

throughout the twentieth century. Johnson, a World War II historian, has been published from

academic and non-academic presses. While this book provided a crucial timeline, Johnson

presented a broad argument using superheroes to highlight social, political and cultural American

changes in the span of seventy years. [7]

The changing ideology of American society contributed to the decline of the comic book

industry. The influence of *Seduction of the Innocent* and the fear comic books generated in the

American public has been well documented and explored. The most detailed work is David

Hajdu's *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America*, an

extensive history of comic books from the end of World War II to the mid-1950s. His work

discussed the evolution of the industry, as well as the fear both the public and the individuals

working within the comic book industry faced during this period. While Hajdu discussed the

Comic Code Authority's influence on *EC Comics* and *Mad Magazine*, he also examined the

challenges faced by writers and editors in DC and Marvel Comics.[8]

Trina Robbins is one of the most prolific, referenced, and interviewed illustrators and

writers of the comic book industry. She has written for *Wonder Woman,* produced the first

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[7] Jeffery K. Johnson, *Super-History: Comic Book Superheroes and American Society, 1938 to the Present* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2012), 2. His second book, *Super Heroes in Crisis*: *Adjusting to Social Change in the 1960's and 1970's*, provides a more focused argument by examining American society during the height of the Cold War and how superheroes represent the needs of the public and the time. Jeffery K. Johnson, *Super Heroes in Crisis*: *Adjusting to Social Change in the 1960's and 1970's* (Rochester: RIT Press, 2014), xiv-xvi. [8] David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 322

allfemale created comic *It Ain't Me Babe*, as well as co-created and edited *Wimmen's Comix*.[8] In

the 1980s Robbins started researching and writing the history of female cartoonists in the comic

industry. Over the past thirty years, she has explored multiple aspects of the history of women

and the comic book community, with her work being published through nonacademic presses.

She is also one of the few writers who examined the history of female artists, writers, and editors

of mainstream and underground comics.   Both *Women and the Comics,* co-authored with

Catherine Yronwode, and *Pretty in Ink: North American Women Cartoonists 1896-2013*

examined the changing styles and ideals behind female cartoonists in comics and how the

industry was unwelcoming for many female artists. [9] She also explored changing trends and fan

culture in *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of ♀Comics from Teens to Zines*. [10] Robbins' passion

as a fan permeates through her writing, and she is one of the few writers of comic books who

initially presented a feminist perspective.

Author Mike Madrid has examined the relationship between the representation of female

characters in comic books and society from the Golden Age to Modern Age of Comic Books.

Like many other writers in this field of study, he has produced extensive work published by

nonacademic presses. However, Madrid's work, particularly in *The Supergirls: Fashion,*

Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines, offered extensive analysis on how

female roles in comic books reflected an idealized version of American woman during particular

periods of time. [11] Madrid's work relied heavily on feminist history and asserts that women have

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[8] Robbins, *Pretty in Ink,* 180; "Trina Robbins," *DC Comics*, 2016, http://www.dccomics.com/talent/trina-robbins, (accessed January 20, 2016).

[9] Trina Robbins and Catherine Yronwode. *Women and the Comics* (n.p.: Eclipse Books, 1985), 67.

[10] Robbins, *Pretty in Ink*, 6; Trina Robbins, *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of ♀Comics from Teens to Zines* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999), 4.

[11] Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 110.

played an important part in comics since the Golden Age.   He argued in *Divas, Dames &*

Daredevils:

Lost Heroines of the Golden Age that the emergence of more feminist-centered characters in the

1960s and 1970s was not a revolution, but an evolution as feminist characters existed during the

1930s and 1940s.[12] His work complements Robbins' idea that comic books go through periodic

phases of progressive and regressive representation based on social demands of the time.[13]

Madrid is one of many writers that have commented on the demure manner forced onto female

characters during the 1950s and 1960s.

Comic books published in the mid twentieth century introduced both tropes and societal

expectations to readers. *Comic Books and the Cold War: Essays on Graphic Treatment of*

Communism, the Code and Social Concerns presents a series of articles, which discusses the

changes and expectations of comics during the Cold War. "Girls Who Sinned in Secret and Paid

in Public: Romance Comics, 1949-1954," by Jeanne Gardner examined the portrayal of girls in

romance comics, particularly those who defied society's expectations.[14] While this article

discussed the romance genre, it also demonstrated how the standards implemented for girls in the

1950s still greatly affected the industry in the 1960s. Another article in this volume included

"The Amazon Mystique: Subverting Cold War Domesticity in *Wonder Woman* Comics, 1948-

1965," which discussed the radical departure of Wonder Woman's ideology from her Golden

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[12] Mike Madrid, *Divas, Dames & Daredevils: Lost Heroines of Golden Age Comics* (n.p.: Experimenting Angle Press, 2013), 16

[13] Robbins, *Women and the Comics,* 67.

[14] Jeanne Gardner, "Girls who Sinned in Secret and Paid in Public: Romance Comics, 1949-1954," in *Comic Books and the Cold War: Essays on graphic Treatment of Communism, the Code and Social Concerns, 1946-1962*, ed. Chris York and Rafael York (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2012) 99-100.

Age roots. The plot of *Wonder Woman* in the 1950s and 1960s no longer revolved around the influence of the patriarchy or current events, instead focusing on family, marriage, and comedy.[15]

Most authors agree that a radical shift occurred in how writers presented publicized societal events in the early 1970s. Marvel published several series introducing more female centered comic books. For example, Laura Mattoon D'Amore's article "Invisible Girl's Quest for Visibility: Early Second-Wave Feminism and the Comic Book Superheroine" evaluated the evolution of the Invisible Woman, Sue Storm, from unhappy housewife to a full-fledged and respected member of her team, *The Fantastic Four*.[16] D'Amore argued the 1970s ushered in an age of both Marvel and DC attempting to positively represent the ideals of the feminist movement. Robert G. Weiner's article "Portrayal of Nurses and Marvel Comics' *Night Nurse*" explained how the feminist movement inspired the comic *Night Nurse*. The nurses were placed in traditionally female roles yet did not adhere to female stereotypes. Wiener explained how *Night Nurse* was part of a series of comics during the 1970s that were created by women for women.[17]

This thesis will examine both the plots of comic books and the reasons behind their creation to determine how comic books reflected real world events. In addition to comic book plots and characters, letters to the editors, pamphlets and newspaper articles will further

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[15] Ruth McClelland-Nugent, "The Amazon Mystique: Subverting Cold War Domesticity in *Wonder Woman* Comics, 1948-1965," in *Comic Books and the Cold War: Essays on graphic Treatment of Communism, the Code and Social Concerns, 1946-1962*, ed. Chris York and Rafael York, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2012), 125-126.

[16] Laura Mattoon D'Amore, "Invisible Girl's Quest for Visibility: Early Second-Wave Feminism and the Comic Book Superheroine Americana," *The Journal of American Popular Culture (1900-present)*, 7, No. 2. (September, 2008): 3. EBSCO*host* (accessed February 10, 2016).

[17] Robert G. Weiner, "Portrayal of Nurses and Marvel Comic's Night Nurses," *International Journal of Comics*, vol. 12, no. 1 (April, 2010): 329.

demonstrate how relationships between fans and writers developed and how it influenced the portrayal of women in comic books. Significant events such as character introductions, deaths, costume designs, and major story plots and events that generated debate among fans are an important part of the conversation. To date both Marvel and DC Comics are two of the most well-known and powerful comic book companies in America. Most of the sources utilized throughout this thesis come from one of these two publishers. The comic books examined for this research include DC's *Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane, Batman, Wonder Woman* and *Supergirl* as well as Marvel's *The Uncanny X-Man, Ms. Marvel, Fantastic Four, Night Nurse, The Cat* and *Sensational She-Hulk*. Many of these comic books also contain lettercols, another critical source for this research.

It was Marvel and DC's policy to place two to three letters in every issue that praised or criticized plotlines and character development. Occasionally, editors published responses to fan inquiries. Despite the likelihood of being selectively chosen, these letters provide insight into the larger conversations between fans and writers. After the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent,* many newspaper articles followed the progress of book bans and burnings throughout 1954.[18] Whereas *Ms.* contributed to the positive influence comic books had on women and helped escalate Wonder Woman's status as an icon for feminine strength and power, other sources begin to identify problems with flawed female characters introduced during heavy censorship in the 1950s and 1960s. Susan Wood's 1974 pamphlet *The Poison Maiden & the Great Bitch: Female Stereotypes in Marvel Superhero Comics* condemned Marvel's reliance on stereotypical female

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[18] Peter Kihss, "No Harm in Horror, Comics Issuer Says." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Apr 22, 1954. http://proxy-bc.researchport.umd.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/113103458?accountid= 14577 (accessed December 23, 2016).

characterizations.[19] Underground comics such as *It Ain't Me Babe* and *Wimmens Comixs* were produced by an all-female staff discussing topics such as self-loathing, abortion, and same sex relationships. Many individuals within the comic book industry have published their memoirs or have taken part in interviews that discuss their personal experience. This includes interviews and memoirs from writers, editors, artists, cosplayers, and fans.[20]

Each chapter of this thesis explores a period covering approximately ten to fifteen years. Chapter one examines the relationship between comics and American culture particularly with regard to female representation. During the 1950s and 1960s comic books helped maintain the status quo, presenting the image of nonthreatening female characters who were dependent on a man. Chapter two examines the origins of the Bronze Age of Comic Books from 1970 to 1980. This section will further examine the influence of social movements, such as second wave feminism, and the comic book industry's attempt to create more feminist-centered stories and characters. During the 1970s a cast of diverse female comic book characters wore costumes that emphasized their figures and embraced their sensuality. Chapter three studies comic books and fan culture from 1980 to 1990. Popular culture of the 1980s introduced a backlash against feminism and female sensuality, with more female characters overly sexualized.   However, the female fan community was becoming more actively vocal and new female characters, introduced during the 1980s, would be indicative of female heroines of the 1990s.

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[19] Susan Wood Glicksohn, *The Poison Maiden & the Great Bitch: Female Stereotypes in Marvel Superhero Comics* (Baltimore: T-K Graphics, 1974), 20-29.

[20] Lee's work has discussed the creation of prominent female characters, such as Sue Storm, Ms. Marvel, and Wasp, in addition to writings about the history of Marvel Comics. Stan Lee, *The Superhero Women* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1977), 173; Stan Lee, *Son of Origins of Marvel Comics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), 114; "Chris Claremont.com The Official Website," *Chris Claremont.com*, http://www.chrisclaremont.com/ (accessed May 10, 2016).

Chapter I: Comic Books and Gender 1954-1969

During World War II, the United States Government utilized comic books, films, and advertising propaganda to encourage women to help with the war effort. Woman in the workforce were not uncommon. Single white women would work until they married, while women of color often continued to work after their marriage. Despite propaganda promoting white women as nurses, factory workers, or military personnel, historian David M. Kennedy observed that half of all single women were employed, "…while only 15 percent of the much larger number of married women, and a scant 9 percent of mothers with children under the age of six," were employed.[21] When GIs returned home, many women willingly left their jobs to marry and raise the next generation of Americans.[22] Writers and historians have scrutinized the depletion of female workers in postwar industry. Popular American culture stereotyped the 1950s as a time of complacency, materialism and presenting the perfect image of the American Dream. The mid-twentieth century definition of the American Dream, based on popular culture, was a good home, a husband as the sole provider, a happy housewife, and the nuclear family.

Comic books helped maintain this image of the perfect American society. The most significant change in comics occurred in their representation of female characters. Formerly strong female characters focused less on crime fighting and instead focused on becoming wives and mothers. New comic book plots designated women as supporting characters or caregivers. With the decline of comic book sales after World War II and the rise of the romance genre, the comic book industry had dramatically changed in terms of production and story plots. The social

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[21] David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 777.
[22] Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear,* 777-780.

expectations held by the majority during the 1950s dictated the plot and the portrayal of female characters into the 1960s, with popular media focused on the Space Race and advances in technology and only a few comics attempting to depict the feminist movement. When advocacy for women's rights resurged in the 1960s, comic books writers struggled to accurately represent the goals of the women's liberation movement. Throughout the 1960s there was a disconnect between what was occurring in American culture and American popular culture. Except for the Invisible Girl and Batgirl, there were no feminist characters. This chapter will explore how comic books maintained gender stereotypes throughout most of the Silver Age of Comic Books.

Demobilization of Comic Book Heroines

During World War II, comic book companies increased their popularity by producing patriotic stories. DC and Marvel Comics were not the only comic book companies producing superhero and action stories. The comic book genres introduced numerous strong female lead characters throughout the 1930s and 1940s. These characters included Amazona, the warrior; the Woman in Red, the first female costumed superhero; Betty Bates, a lawyer who fought for justice in and out of the court room; and the infamous Fantomah credited as America's first superheroine. Mike Madrid credited World War II for the increase of female heroines in the comic book industry. Multiple heroines used their strength and resources to fight Nazis and promote American patriotism.[23] Strong heroines became an intricate part of the comic book storyline and were embraced by the public, especially young female readers. Letters to the editor indicated female fans welcomed these characters, such as, "We girls are sick and tired of boy

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[23] Madrid, *Divas, Dames & Daredevils*, 21, 67, 106, 144.

heroes" or "I believe that any and every comic book needs a feminine touch…To my way of thinking we girls should stick together!"[24] Well-known characters such as Wonder Woman and Lois Lane, while not outspokenly feminist, put their professional goals first and romance second. Most of these mainstream heroines were white, middle to upper class women; there were virtually no African American, Latin American, or Asian heroines. While these heroines were popular throughout the 1940s, the end of World War II signified a shift in the comic book industry and the attitude of the American public.

Historians and writers commented on the drastic change in attitude adopted by society in post-World War II America. June Cleaver replaced Rosie the Riveter and the idealized American women and mother went from working on the home front to working at home. Jeffery J. Johnson states, "Society expected conformity to the supposed homogenous culture and individualism or self-expression that fell outside acceptable limits was punished with ostracism. Cultural norms dictated that the man should be the household's provider, working hard to build a life for himself and his family."[25] This perception helped give rise to the white-collar worker and inspired the stereotype of men furthering commerce at day and returning home to enjoy the ideal life at night. Based on 1950s popular culture, the wife's role was to look after her family and home while being nurturing, submissive, and self-sacrificing.

Some writers have cited the 1950s as a time of extreme sexism in American culture with many women unable to find employment and expected to remain at home. This complemented the image popular culture emphasized of women enjoying their role as homemakers and

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[24] This letter to the editor is taken from *Wings* #35, found within Madrid's work. The comic series *Wings* was about a nurse turned spy, Jane Martin. Madrid, *Divas, Dames & Daredevils,* 18.
[25] Jeffrey K. Johnson, *Super-History*, 772.

performing tasks for their family while transforming their home into the fantasies depicted on

television sitcoms.[2627]   Some historians have suggested many women left the workforce

willingly after World War II and were eager to resume their lives in the home. Kennedy notes

that while

American women had embraced their identity as mothers, "…a vigorous resurgence of

nationalism and what Betty Friedan was later to call the feminine mystique of domesticity and

motherhood were the war's immediate legacies to American woman."[28]   Regardless of the

reasons for most white middle class women leaving the workforce, most historians agree there

was new emphasis placed on the role of mother in post-World War II America. While girls were

learning to find future happiness in their home making skills, romance comics rather than

superhero comics were published for the entertainment of young female readers.

After World War II the superhero genre lost its popularity with the American public. This

decline could in part be due to GIs returning home from the war. GIs wanted to move forward

from the war, no longer needing the morale boost of superheroes fighting the Nazis. Instead,

they wanted to focus on the American Dream -- buying a home and starting a family. Thus,

comic books declined in popularity and the industry disintegrated, leaving Marvel Comics, DC

Comics, Entertainment Comics (EC), Mad Magazine and Archie Comics as the only competitors.

With the decline of the superhero genre, other genres including westerns, mystery and romance

had the opportunity to thrive.[29] Comic book companies such as EC Comics thrived on their

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[26] Barbara J. Berg, *Sexism in America: Alive, Well, and Ruining Our Future,* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press,
[27]), 6
[28] Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear* 781.
[29] Johnson, *Super-History*, 72.

gruesome comics about violence and murder, while DC and Marvel produced more romance comics.

From 1944 to 1954 the number of romance comics produced increased dramatically. Even superhero comics were more reliant on romance. According to writer and popular culture historian Jennifer K. Stuller, "With Wonder Woman, you begin to see her adventures turn more to romance. You go from seeing Wonder Woman saving a woman and carrying her in her arms to Wonder Woman, the image of Wonder Woman, being carried across a stream by Steve Trevor. She spent many, many, many years not being a feminist character at all."[30] Wonder Woman became a self-titled series after the cancellation of *Sensational Comic*s in 1952.[31] After the death of *Wonder Woman* creator William Moulton Marston in 1947, Robert Kanigher took over the series. Wonder Woman's character had a complex history as a result of different authors having contrasting approaches and goals. There was also a change in the type of comic books geared to female readership with romance retaining popularity until the 1970s. *Archie*, *Millie the Model,* and *Patsy Walker* continued to be popular among female readers. New romance comics were introduced throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s. Titles such as *Young Romance* and *Hi-School Romance* were geared specifically at adolescent audiences; however, many of these new romance comics could not be as suggestive as their predecessors due to strict rules and regulations. [32] The number of comic books and comic book companies would greatly diminish due to changing public opinion.

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[30] Kelcey Edwards, *Wonder Women! The Untold Story of American Superheroines*, DVD, directed by Kristy Guevara-Flanagan (Harriman, N.Y.: New Day Films, 2012), 12:16-12:43.

[31] Tim Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound: The Curious History of the World's Most Famous Heroine* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 91.

[32] Gardner, "Girls who Sinned in Secret and Paid in Public, 97.

The early 1950s also brought a backlash against comic books that were visually jarring. EC Comics was well known for their horror and crime genre with most covers depicting mutilated bodies, women cowering in fear or gruesome beasts snarling at the reader. By the early 1950s the American public saw comic book companies and their employees as the cause of corruption in youths. Due to this negative reputation, many comic artists, illustrators, and writers were subjected to criticism from friends and family. This treatment, combined with the decline of comic book popularity, forced many individuals to leave the industry. This is further confirmed in David Hadju's 2008 book *The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America*. Hadju interviewed Janice Valleau Winkleman, an artist for Quality Comics, which produced 650 comics strips a month. When asked why she left the comic book industry, Winkleman stated, "My God…I couldn't go back out there—I was scared to death. Don't you know what they did to us?"[33] While Winkleman does not state who "they" are, she explains that the poor reputation of comic books had colored how others viewed her work. Public outcry about comic books being an evil in American society was growing throughout the nation. Winkleman's father, despite never seeing her art, scheduled a surprise job interview for her. Instead of taking her to Quality Comics to drop off her artwork, he drove her to Wall Street, and forced her into a finance company for this interview.[34] Winkleman rejected the job offer and proceeded to Quality Comics via the subway before returning home. The public's opinion of comic books would become negative as accusations of comic books causing delinquency escalated throughout the early 1950s.

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[33] Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague*, 5.
[34] Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague*, 214.

In 1954 Doctor Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* was published, and it

drastically influenced the comic book industry. Until this publication, little information was

available about Wertham's early work. In 1922 Wertham immigrated to the United States from

Germany and obtained a position at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore Maryland as a

psychiatrist. He specialized in examining popular culture's influence on cultural and social

issues.[35] He blamed comic books for the rise of delinquency in American youths, with most of

his criticism against EC Comics. Wertham's accusations also extended to the superhero genre.

Wertham accused Superman of promoting violence, claimed Batman and Robin presented a

homosexual relationship to children, and suggested Wonder Woman was a violent woman who

promoted lesbian relationships.[36] He describes Wonder Woman as "…a horror type. She is

physically very powerful, tortures men and has her own female following, is the cruel, 'phallic'

women. While she is a frightening figure for boys, she is an undesirable ideal for girls, being the

exact opposite of what girls are supposed to want to be."[37] Yet Wertham does not define what

girls are supposed to be, nor does he describe the desires of young female readers. Popular

culture, mainly books and television, during the 1950s typically presented girls as innocent,

sweet, and good. Years after *Seduction of the Innocent*'s publication, readers have criticized the

book for its lack of sources and misleading information. Wertham's accusations led to the 1954

United States Senate Subcommittee Hearing on Juvenile Delinquency and forced changes to the

industry.[37] Individuals within the comic book industry admitted that some comics did highlight

graphic violence and gore. Winkleman commented, "It was getting a little scary—there were

[35] Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, v-xi, xlv.
[36] Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent,* 193. [37]
Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 34.
[37] Amy Kiste Nyberg, "Comic Book Censorship in the United States," *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-comics Campaign,* ed., John A. Lent (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), 5254.

some really nasty comics then, and they were giving us all a bad name."[38] Concerns over

violence in comic books date back to their early conception.

In Jill Lepore's *Secret History of Wonder Woman*, she referenced a 1940 interview with

William Marston, the creator of Wonder Woman, confirming Marston's concerns for comics

presenting sadism and other cruel acts as early as the 1930s. While Marston declared that certain

comics do present controversial topics, there was an important difference between threats of

violence and actual sadism. Earlier, within the same interview, he also defended comic books

stating:

> And the two wishes behind Superman are certainly the soundest of all; they are, in fact, our national aspirations of the moment—to develop unbeatable national might, and to use this great power, when we get it, to protect innocent, peace-loving people from destructive, ruthless evil…. Then why should it be wrong or harmful for children to imagine the same thing for themselves, personally, when they read 'Superman'?[39]

Superman's character did not start off fighting evil masterminds. Instead, he defended the

defenseless. Other characters introduced during the Great Depression and World War II became

symbols for justice. However, by the 1950s media had changed the public perception of comic

books. Moreover, there was a sense of wholesomeness in post-World War II America. With the

rise of the Cold War, the American government and a large portion of the public challenged any

form of media that hinted at immorality or defied the wholesome American image.[40]

Throughout the 1950s, the *New York Times* released several articles following the

progress on book bans and legislation geared towards comic books. This included national book

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[38] Hadju, *Ten Cent Plague*, 214.

[39] Jill Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014), 185.

[40] Johnson, *Super-History,* 70-79.

swaps, trading horror comics for "good books."[41] According to the article, "Report at Albany

Hits Lewd Books: Legislative Group Proposes Six Bills to Curb Crime and Sex Publications,"

legislation was created in New York state to stop the negative influence of comics. The New

York Joint Legislative Committee on Comic Books, created in 1949 studied the impact of comic

books on children, attempted to pass six bills prohibiting the sale of lewd comics to minors with

a penalty of $150 for the first offense and $250 for the second. A third offence was considered a

felony.[42] There is little information available regarding the members of this committee and their

motivations for this act of censorship. However, multiple state and church groups organized

similar committees throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s to ban bad comic books.[43] While

the United States Government never sanctioned fines against the comic book industry, new

regulations governing the industry were enacted shortly after the hearings.

The Comic Code Authority (CCA) was established in October 1954. It listed

approximately 32 voluntary rules for each comic issue. Each comic book issue had to adhere to

these regulations to receive a seal of approval, located on the upper right hand corner of the front

cover. One editorial in the *New York Times* argued, "The appearance of such a seal is a welcome

sign. No less a group than the New York State Youth Commission hails in its latest bulletin 'the

new "clean look" in comics' which the seal is intended to insure."[44] By the 1950s most forms of

media in the United States were censored in some way. In 1930 the Motion Picture Production

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[41] "Nation Wide 'Book-Swap' Set," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Oct 14, 1954. http://proxybc.researchport.umd.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy-bc.researchport.umd.edu/docview/113045958?accountid=14577. (January 29, 2017).

[42] Warren Weaver Jr., "Report at Albany Hits Lewd Books *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Mar 12, 1954. 29, http://proxy-bc.researchport.umd.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com. proxybc.researchport.umd.edu/docview/113131823?accountid=14577. (accessed December 23, 2016).

[43] Nyberg, "Comic Book Censorship in the United States," 46-47.

[44] Dorothy Barclay, "That Comic Book Question," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, March 20, 1955. http://proxy-bc.researchport.umd.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy-bc.researchport.umd.edu/docview/113316866?accountid=14577. (accessed December 23, 2016).

Code, also known as the Hays Code, was created for cinema, prohibiting excessive violence, sexual content, criminal activity, and other controversial topics. For years' trade associations tried to pass regulations on comics, with the most successful being the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers' Comic Code 1948 with six vague rules. Most comic book companies did not join this organization.[45] While the CCA was voluntary, most stores and new stands would not carry titles without the seal of approval, thus affecting commerce. The CCA office was headed by Judge Charles F. Murphy, who was active on several committees to reduce juvenile delinquency, along with five unnamed women who assisted in censoring comics.[46]

The CCA had the authority to dictate matters from content to aesthetic choices. The rules instituted by the CCA included topics ranging from the representation of marriage to the amount of violence considered appropriate for children. One of the most peculiar regulations regarded word choices on the cover of comic books. General Standards Part A and Part B stated, "The letters of the word 'crime' on a comics-magazine cover shall never be appreciably greater in dimension than the other words contained in the title. The word 'crime' shall never appear alone on a cover. Restraint in the use of the word 'crime' in titles or subtitles shall be exercised. No comic magazine shall use the word horror or terror in its title."[47] This rule may have been directed specifically at EC Comics, who were renowned for their horror genre, thus drastically changing how they marketed their product.

Multiple texts from both popular and academic writers reference the Comic Code Authority as a turning point in 1950s entertainment. These hearings cemented the fear of

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[45] Nyberg, "Comic Book Censorship in the United States," 46.
[46] Nyberg, "Comic Book Censorship in the United States," 56-57.
[47] John A Lent, ed. *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-comics Campaign* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), 270.

delinquency within the public eye, with parents and leaders concerned with corruption in American youth.[48] As a result of the regulations comic books could no longer depict gruesome horror stories or risqué poses in romance comics. The CCA affected a variety of genres from romance to superheroes. Mainstream comics were tamer, maintaining the status quo of wholesome America. Characters such as Batman became less threatening, working more closely with law enforcement to save the public. Many comics became more light-hearted, with outlandish plots. Additionally, there was a lack of female representation in the superhero genre. Most female characters of the 1950s, with the exception of Lois Lane and Wonder Woman, were supporting characters. Hawkgirl, Saturn Girl, Batwoman, and Batgirl are among the most memorable of DC's female characters during the 1950s and 1960s. Except for romance comics like *Mille the Model* and *Patsy Walker*, female characters in Marvel's superhero genre were virtually nonexistent in the 1950s. Due to women's changing role in post-World War II America, comic books began to depict society's perception of a woman's place in the home. These perceptions shaped the Silver Age, and nowhere was this idea more pertinent in the 1950s and early 1960s than in the representation of female comic book characters.

Even Wonder Woman was forced to bend to the whims of society, becoming more of the perfect American woman. While the character of Wonder Woman continued to fight crime, the plots of various comics focused extensively on her relationship with United States Air Force Captain Steve Trevor.[49]   In a unique twist, Captain Trevor was fixated on marrying Wonder

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[48] James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 100-104; William H. Young and Nancy K. Young, *The 1950s* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 32.
[49] McClelland-Nugent, "The Amazon Mystique," 118-121.

Woman and often relied on her to save him from dangerous missions. Years after Marston's

death, writers remained uncertain as to how they should write *Wonder Woman*'s storyline, as

well as her character, morals and what she represented. DC writer, editor, and president from

2002 to 2009, Paul Levitz, wrote an extensive history on DC Comics during the Golden, Silver

and Bronze Ages. He states:

> Robert Kanigher's Wonder Woman was often literally at war with herself, perhaps a
> subconscious sign of her writer-editor's constant struggle with the memory of creator
> William Moulton Marston's vision of her character. Inheriting the character shortly after
> Marston's 1947 death, Kanighter dealt less with gender equality than straight adventures
> and romance. His sometimes masculine approach to Wonder Woman could be an odd fit,
> but the writer-editor sustained the heroine for 20 years.[50]

Batman and *Superman*, two other popular comics, also had a history of multiple writers and

cartoonists taking over the series, though their characters and methodology have been, for the

most part, consistent.

DC's *Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane*, running from 1957 to 1974, revolved around the

adventures of Lois Lane, whose character drastically changed in the 1950s. Since her creation in

the late 1930s, Lois Lane was presented as a hard-hitting journalist determined to discover the

truth at the expense of her own health and safety. Lois' character was the modern woman of the

1930s and 1940s. She had a career, traveled, and was respected, for the most part, by her male

colleagues and even helped save the day in a few issues. Lois also suspected her mild-mannered

co-worker of being Superman; however, she was often thwarted in her attempts to reveal his

identity.[51] By the time writers created her own comic series, Lois was completely changed.

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[50] Paul Levitz, *The Silver Age of DC Comics: 1956-1970* (n.p: Taschen, 2013), 318.

[51] Vibiana Bowman Cvetkovic, "Feminine Mystique: Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane in the 'Silver Age' of
Comics," in *Examining Lois Lane: The Scoop on Superman's Sweetheart*, ed., Nadine Farghaly (Lanham, MD: The
Scarecrow Press, 2013), 39-43.

According to writer and comic book historian Mike Madrid, "Lois Lane's career ambitions cooled and she's less interested in becoming an ace reporter and more interested in becoming Mrs. Superman."[52] While still a newspaper journalist, her adventures revolved around winning Superman's affections and acting more like a love-struck teenager without any control over her emotions. On almost every cover of *Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane,* Lois was shown swooning over Superman or wanting to start a family with him. Throughout the series, Lois was presented as petty, jealous of any competition for Superman's affections, and often unlikable. Readers were given no reason as to why Lois was in love with Superman other than being infatuated with the infamous Man of Steel. Superman stated he cared for Lois, but his actions indicated he rescued her out of a sense of duty, not love, and often chided her recklessness. Many female characters were written to represent women as needy rather than strong and self-reliant.

While new female characters were created throughout the 1950s, they served to complement their male counterparts. Madrid states: "Male heroes were given female partners for two reasons: they provided sex appeal for male readers, and romance storylines to attract girls."[53] Batman was one of the comics most heavily influenced by the CCA regulations. As stated previously, he was transformed from a vigilante working against the law to caped crusader working alongside the police. There were few female characters in the early Batman series; however, in the 1950s the most well-known character and villain, Catwoman, was written out of the series. The only character who had the power to challenge Batman was gone and replaced with a more flattering image of womanhood.[54] In 1956, DC writers created Batwoman to serve purely as a love interest for Batman. While never confirmed, it is an accepted fact among most

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[52] Edwards, *Wonder Women!,* 14:08-14:17.
[53] Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 61.
[54] Edwards, *Wonder Women!,* 13:59-14:06.

comic book historians that this relationship was created to stop accusations of homosexuality between Batman and Robin. While Batwoman was proven to be a competent superhero throughout the comic series, Batman continually mocked and marginalized her attempts at crime fighting. Like Lois Lane's interactions with Superman, the relationship between Batwoman and Batman was another example of man's authority over a woman.[55] Throughout the series, she only fought crime when it was convenient for the plot. Similarly, Batgirl, introduced in 1961, was created to complement Robin in the *Batman* series. They created the perfect family, the Batman family: Batman and Batwoman as father and mother, while Robin and Batgirl acted as their surrogate children. This family of caped crusaders modeled the nuclear family for the American public.

Superhero comics were no longer geared toward female readers. Instead they were written for male audiences. Many female superheroes were converted into supporting characters with their goals revolving around marriage and love. While Lois Lane was a character in a superhero genre, she was a civilian without any super powers. The general consensus between comic book creators, writers and artists was that comic books, particularly superhero comics, were read by boys resulting in a male-dominated media. This perception would permeate throughout the comic book community for almost fifty years.[56] Therefore, many comics geared at young female readers were not superhero comics, but instead romance comics. The romance genre was renowned for its outlandish plots and beautifully drawn women in suggestive poses. Like the superhero genre, romance comics were heavily influenced by the CCA and the perceptions of women and romance of the time. The CCA prohibited anything highlighting

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[55] Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 64-65.
[56] Stan Lee and George Mair, *Excelsior! The Amazing Life of Stan Lee* (New York: A Fireside Book, 2002), 59. [58] Lent, *Pulp Demons,* 275.

seduction or "suggestive" character design, stating "Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities."[58]   As most romance comics relied on enticing imagery, these new regulations forced romance comics to be more subdued. However, many romance comics introduced during the late 1940s and early 1950s were geared at modeling wholesome morals for young female readers.

Women Leaving the Comic Book World

Immorality of young women was a major concern held by most white middle to upper class families of the 1950s and 1960s. Sexual activity before marriage was frowned upon, with popular American media presenting role models for young girls to emulate. Trina Robbins stated, "…the not-so-subtle message in all of the love comics was that no matter who she was, no matter what she did, a young woman could only find true happiness by meeting the right man, marrying, and raising a family."[57] Most romance stories became cautionary tales about the horrors that could befall women if they demanded too much passion and independence. The most prevalent plots revolved around young girls dating. Courting among American teens, particularly for young woman, had multiple unwritten rules regarding physical and sexual content. Most of popular culture placed women in charge of diverting physical contact. Jeanne Gardner observed that in the 1950s it was "…a girl's responsibility to avoid situations that would lead to all these horrible consequences."[58] These comics condemned sexual exploits as well as wild and rambunctious behavioral tendencies that were not socially acceptable. If a girl was considered "wild" her reputation and her family's reputation could be jeopardized both in reality

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[57] Robbins, *Pretty in Ink*, 108.
[58] Gardner, "Girls who Sinned in Secret and Paid in Public," 97.

as well as in the comic storyline. In some stories the girl was punished not for her own actions, but for the actions of those she associated with, even if she had no influence or control over events.[59] Despite the patriarchal influence on the romance genre, romance comics during the 1950s and early 1960s were a female-dominated field.

Romance comics in the late 1950s were one of the few genres with multiple female writers and cartoonists.   While men seemed opposed to women working on action comics, there seemed to be no reservations about female cartoonists working within the romance genre. Robbins maintained that "…action-oriented comics were becoming a male-only domain, all nationally syndicated comics were and had been a white-only domain."[60] However, the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent* contributed to a recession in comic book production, resulting in various individuals leaving the industry. While artists such as Winkleman left due to comic books gaining a bad reputation as well as the public distrust of the industry, other writers and cartoonists left to marry or pursue other job opportunities. Cartoonist Ruth Atkinson, creator the long running *Milly the Model* and Patsy Walker (*Hellcat*), left the comic book industry to become a wife and mother in the mid-1950s. The comic series *Girl Commandos*, published during World War II, was created by Barbara Hall and eventually passed onto Jill Elgin. Hall would eventually become part of underground comics in the 1970s.   Elgin left the comic book industry in the 1950s to become a well-known children's book illustrator.[61] Many women were not credited for their work in the comic book industry. While women were resigned to working

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[59] Gardner, "Girls who Sinned in Secret and Paid in Public," 94.
[60] Robbins, *Pretty in Ink*, 110-111.
[61] Robbins, *Pretty in Ink*, 115-116.

on romance comics, the genre was slowly being taken over by men until virtually no women remained in the genre by the early 1970s.[62]

Many female artists and cartoonists also faced workplace discrimination throughout the 1950s. Christine Lyttle, who also went by her married name Christine Smith, applied for work at Western Printing and Lithography. At the time of the interview, Smith was informed they did not "hire girls." Despite the company's claims, she was hired and made corrections to various issues for six weeks before she was permitted to draw. She drew novelty comics, comic pages, and covers for various comics including *Little Lulu* and *Tarzan* as well as Walt Disney comic books *Mickey Mouse, Silly Symphonies* and *Sleeping Beauty*. Despite Smith's long career in comics, she only received credit for an *I Love Lucy* coloring book, released in 1959.[63] Other female writers and artists faced similar discrimination. Marie Severin, who previously worked for EC Comics, applied for a position at Walt Disney Productions in New York City where she was informed that Disney did not employ women. This point was reinforced when the male receptionist at the front desk showed her one of their illustrating rooms lined with rows of desks with only men working. Severin eventually found employment with Marvel, where she cocreated *Spider Woman*, collaborated on *Howard the Duck*, and drew covers for issues of *Iron Man*, *Conan the Barbarian,* and *The Cat*.[64] In addition, many female artists left the comic book and comic strip corporations throughout the late 1940s and 1950s. There were few employment opportunities in mainstream comics for female African American writers and cartoonists. There was little information available about women who found success as cartoonists for African

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[62] Robbins, *Pretty in Ink*, 111-118.
[63] Robbins*, Pretty in Ink*, 110.
[64] Robbins*, Pretty in Ink*, 110-111; M. Keith Booker, *Encyclopedia of Comic Books and Graphic Novels* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2010), 564-565.

American magazines.[65]

     The last woman to write for romance comics was Elizabeth Berube, who worked for DC's *Girl's Love* and *Girl's Romance* until the early 1970s. While the superhero genre gained popularity, the romance genre steadily became unpopular. Marie Severin, referred to by Stan Lee as "Marie the She," was the only recognized woman working for Marvel during the 1960s. Elizabeth Berube and Marie Severin were the only women who received credit for their work throughout the 1960s.[66] It would be several years before the industry employed more female writers and artists. Little popular and academic writing has examined the influence and agency of these female cartoonists of the 1950s and 1960s. For the most part these cartoonists' history has been undocumented. Similar to the decline of female cartoonists, comic book writers and artists would not explore relevant social topics until the end of the Silver Age of Comic Books.

Social Movements of the 1960s in Comics

     America was experiencing many social and political changes during the Silver Age of Comic Books. Multiple social movements occurred during the 1960s: the origins of second wave feminism, protests of the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the formation of the Black Panther Party. However, the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement were largely absent in comic books of the 1960s. Madrid noted, "The world that Marvel Comics created in the 1960's was an exciting one. But if you asked if the world of the Marvel superheroes reflected the great social changes that would sweep America in the 60's, the answer

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[65] Trina Robbins credits Jackie Ormes as the first African American female cartoonist, working on comic strips such as Torchy Togs and Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger in the early twentieth century, retiring by the mid-1950s. Robbins, *Pretty in Ink*, 110-111.

[66] Robbins, *Pretty in Ink*, 118.

would be no."[67] Major events that represented the realm of comics included the Vietnam War and the Space Race. Unlike superheroes from World War II, DC characters Green Lantern, Batman and Wonder Woman were not involved in the Vietnam War, and few plots revolved around fighting the Viet Cong. *Superman* #216 "The Soldier of Steel" was the only Superman comic that placed the Man of Steel in the midst of the Vietnam War.[68] However, most of the comics were no different from the typical adventures of the *Superman* series. Marvel used the backdrop of the Vietnam War for the origins of Iron Man. Iron Man, the billionaire playboy Tony Stark, was severely wounded by a Viet Cong landmine after a weapons test. Captured by the enemy forces and badly wounded, Stark created a machine preventing shrapnel from the explosion from entering his heart. He then tricked his captors into providing him material to build an iron suit to escape.[69] However, in both Marvel and DC, the Vietnam War served as a footnote in the stories rather than the major plot point.

Few plots revolved around racial inequality or the Civil Rights Movement. However, Marvel introduced two African American characters, Black Panther (1966) and Falcon (1969). Black Panther, T'Challa, was the ruler of the fictional African nation Wakanda, and the first African American superhero in mainstream American comics. Although the *Black Panther* comic predated the formation of the Black Panther Party, the character has since become synonymous with the movement. While T'Challa would regularly appear in mainstream comics such as *Fantastic Four* and *Avengers*, he would not have his own series until the 1970s.[70]

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[67] Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 112.

[68] Robert Kanigher, Ross Andru, and Mike Esposito, "The Solider of Steel!" *Superman* 1, no. 216 (May, 1969), Cover.

[69] Stan Lee, Larry Lieber, Steve Ditko, and Don Heck, "Iron Man is Born," *Tales of Suspense* 1, no. 36 (March 1963), 4-12.

[70] Sean Howe, *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story* (New York: Harper, 2012), 97.

Similarly, Falcon made regular appearances in *Captain America* as Steve Rogers' wingman. After discovering a Nazi base, Sam Wilson helped Captain America fight the bad guys and gained the ability to fly through the use of jetpack wing, earning the moniker Falcon.

The most successful representation of female characters in positions of power occurred in the 1960's *Batman* television show. The villainous and occasional lover of Batman, Catwoman, was played by multiple actresses, but the most remembered performance was that of AfricanAmerican singer and actress Eartha Kitt, who portrayed the character from 1967-1968.[71] Television roles for men and women of color were often limited to background characters in these years, but Eartha Kitt's Catwoman was clever, conniving, seductive, and empathetic. These characteristics were rare for any female character regardless of ethnicity. The *Batman* television series, while remembered fondly, reinforced stereotypes of comics being simple adventures for children. Television of the 1960s utilized tropes of 1950s television, particularly regarding female characters. During this time, popular media had not accepted the idea of an independent single woman as a leading role.

The Early Struggles of Feminism in Comic Books

The relationship of comics to the growing feminist movement was even more complex. In 1963, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* examined the influence of societal expectations on women regarding their validity as housewives. Friedan attacked the idea of the happy suburban housewife, revealing that numerous, typically middle class, white women were not satisfied with their lives. She explained how women were taught to find fulfillment by finding a husband and keeping him happy, buying appliances, raising children and keeping them healthy,

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[71] Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 65-66, 69.

while looking and acting more feminine. Freidan claimed, "They [women] learned that truly

feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights-- the independence and

opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for. Some women in their forties and

fifties, still remembered painfully giving up those dreams…"[72] *The Feminine Mystique* only

studied a small population of women and their dissatisfaction, but challenged the norms

presented in romance comics.

Women living in the suburbs embodied the ideal image presented by society; however, this

image no longer appealed to younger generations. Expectations placed upon girls by the

commonly held beliefs of white middle class America were contradicted by their environment.

In fact, the ideals media were portraying were not accurate to what young woman were

experiencing. Friedan continued:

> It has been blamed on education which made American girls grow up feeling free and equal
> to boys--playing baseball, riding bicycles, conquering geometry, and college boards, going
> away to college, going out in the world to get a job, living alone in an apartment…testing
> and discovering their own powers in the world. All this gave girls the feeling they could be
> and do whatever they wanted to, with the same freedom as boys, the critics said. It did not
> prepare them for their role as woman.[73]

This baby boomer generation wanted more for themselves and future generations. The 1960s

was a time of social change; in the same year that *The Feminine Mystique* was published the

Equal Pay Act was passed, and the following year Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was

passed banning employment discrimination based on sex or race.[74] The 1960s also introduced the

counterculture, which blatantly rejected the social norms of the previous generation. In addition,

Second Wave Feminism was being introduced to a new generation of women. Throughout the

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[72] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: WW. Norton & Company, 2013), 2.
[73] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 75.
[74] "Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964," *U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*,
https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/statutes/titlevii.cfm (March 10, 2017).

1960s and 1970s the women's liberation movement fought for women's equality. Their goals included workplace equality, equal pay, reproductive rights, as well as bringing an end to sexual harassment and domestic abuse. The sexual revolution was becoming more prevalent; women fought against sexual objectification, and fought for the right to sexual freedom and having total control over their bodies.[75] Comic books were slowly beginning to explore and represent the modern woman.

While the *Wonder Woman* series embraced the style of the modern woman, the plot of the series did not reflect the changing attitude of the female image. Trina Robbins argues this may be due to the many writers not knowing what the women's movement stood for during this time.[76] Mike Sekowsky took over as writer for the *Wonder Woman* series at the time the comic's narrative involved the Amazon nation fleeing to another dimension to preserve their power. However Wonder Woman decided to remain on Earth in order to be with her love interest Steve Trevor. By staying on Earth, Wonder Woman was stripped of her powers and fully adopted her civilian identity, Diana Prince. As Prince, she then opened a mod boutique and learned martial arts from a blind instructor, I Ching. This *Wonder Woman* series was the typical action adventurer hero and not the well-loved warrior who promoted peace and sisterhood.[77] The *Wonder Woman* series of the 1960s was later criticized by fans and feminists due to the drastic changes in her personality as well as the lack of feminist messages in the series. Many of the plots of the 1960s Wonder Woman revolved around fashion, love and science fiction plots.

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[75] Megan Le Masurier, "Popular Feminism and the Second Wave: Women's Liberation, Sexual Liberation and Cleo Magazine," in *Women in Magazines: Research, Representation, Production and Consumption*, eds., Rachel Ritchie, Sue Hawkins, Nicola Phillips, S. Jay Kleinberg (New York: Routledge, 2016), 203.
[76] Robbins, *From Girls to Grrlz*, 81-85.
[77] Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 201-205.

These changes resulted from DC Comics attempting to reimagine the *Wonder Woman* series due to the lack of sales generated by the comic since the 1950s. According to a 2003 documentary, *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked,* writers hoped this new Wonder Woman of the late 1960s, would be embraced by the Women's Liberation Movement. While sales were bolstered by this new Wonder Woman, the changes angered many fans including many feminists. Editor Denny O'Neil, who was employed to help complete Wonder Woman's transformation, stated within the same documentary that this decision was one of the biggest mistakes of his career and that he understood the anger fans felt.[78] There are few sources to confirm this attempt at creating a new liberated Wonder Woman to represent the feminist movement. Most DC female superhero comics throughout the 1960s continued to reinforce the accepted notion of femininity.

Supergirl was the best example of how comics sought to represent the perfect American teenaged girl of the 1960s. While Supergirl was introduced in 1959, she did not get her own comic series until 1972. However she made regular appearances in *Superman* comic books and was a regular star of the *Adventure Comics* series. Like the plots of *Superman*, *Supergirl* stories revolved around concerns from saving the world to saving a cat stuck in a tree. The most common trope was her powers continually being altered by various forms of kryptonite, as well as various male leads falling in love with her. Like Superman she rejected multiple proposals of marriage, but continued to be romantically involved with various men, some of whom were even non-human. Supergirl was the idolized teenager, putting her duty before herself. Madrid states,

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[78] James Grant Goldin, *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked,* YouTube, directed by Steve Kroopnick (History Channel, 2003), 49:34-49:45. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ygx_rUJ3XaI (accessed April 20, 2017).

"…Supergirl's fate is in the hands of her adult guardian [Superman]. She is the obedient and dutiful daughter who does what she is told and stays out of sight."[79] The adventures, while entertaining, are unremarkable, standard action adventure with a superhero. Feminism of the time was seldom referenced throughout the *Supergirl* series of the 1960s. However, for some female DC characters their images were beginning to change dramatically.

Near the end of the 1960s *Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane* introduced a more adventurous Lois, closer to her original personality. In a 1968 cover, Lois Lane is shown tearing the "Superman's Girlfriend," part of the cover off, informing Superman "Get out of my magazine **Superman**! I'm leaving **Metropolis** to start a new life…one that **doesn't** include **you**!"[80] Lois was once again more daring, putting herself in danger for her friends instead of bidding for Superman's affection. However, writers did not always know what to do with Lois' storyline. In some issues, she was presented as representing the feminist movement as well as discussing social change, while moving away from Superman to pursue her own goals. However, due to reprints of past issues and inconsistent writing, some of the plots continue to rely on tropes and her attempts to win Superman's affection.

Lettercols were split regarding how Lois Lane's character was depicted. The letters from female fans addressed many fans' displeasure in the ridiculous and recycled plots of *Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane*. A 1968 letter by Donna Gisolo expresses how many fans were getting sick of the back and forth between who Superman loved more, Lois Lane or Lana Lange (his former girlfriend), and was thankful that Superman finally expressed his love to Lois.[81] Another

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[79] Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 87.

[80] Leo Pen Dorfman and Kurt Schaffenberger, "Get Out of My Life, Superman!" *Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane* 1, no. 80 (January, 1968), Cover.

[81] Frank Robbins, Irv Novick, and Mike Esposito, ""Witch on Wheels!" *Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane* 1, no 83 (May 1968), lettercol.

letter in 1969 by Meredith Sloan criticized the repetitiveness of comics with almost every other issue carrying the same basic plot: Lois marrying a random guy and Superman realizing he had made an awful mistake. She states, "Why doesn't he marry her already? He's being completely stupid about the whole thing! And I'm sure I'm not the only reader who feels this way."[82] There is a clear gender divide in the lettercols, with female readers in the late 1960s expressing anger at the absurd banter and plot within the series, while many male readers were fine with the outlandish adventures. Like Lois Lane, Batgirl underwent a radical transformation in the late 1960s.

Batgirl was one of the few female characters of the 1960s that presented positive female representation. Batgirl was now a young woman, Barbara Gordon. On her way to a costume party, dressed as the female version of Batman, Gordon stopped thugs from attacking Bruce Wayne. Realizing she could make a difference helping others, Gordon continued to fight crime. While her origins were not as dramatic as other DC characters, her rise to super-heroism was not motivated by a man.[83][84] Barbara Gordon as the intelligent crime fighter has been the definitive version of Batgirl for the past fifty years. She was a self-sufficient, college educated, career woman and head librarian for Gotham City Library, one of the biggest libraries in the DC Universe.[85] The DC Universe, or DCU, is the fictional world inhabited by DC characters; the same concept applies to Marvel and other comic book companies. She rescued multiple superheroes, including Batman and Robin, and has even rescued Supergirl in a few crossover

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[82] Robert Kanigher, Irv Novick, and Mike Esposito, "The Superman - Wonder Woman Team!" *Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane* 1, no. 93 (July 1969), lettercol.
[83] Gardner Fox, Carmine Infantino, and Sid Greene, "The Million Dollar Debut of Batgirl!" *Detective Comics* 1, no.
[84] (January, 1967), 1, 2, 5.
[85] Fox, Infantino, and Greene, "The Million Dollar Debut of Batgirl!" 3-6.

issues.[86] Supergirl depicted what society expected teenagers and young girls to be, whereas

Batgirl was a better representation of the feminist movement. While she worked with Batman,

she had no romantic interest for him. As writer Mike Madrid noted, "This was, perhaps, the key

to Batgirl's liberation. There is nothing that Batgirl would ever want more from Batman than to

trade crime-solving tips, she isn't interested in marrying him or stealing his precious freedom."[87]

During the 1960s, Batgirl best represented the ideal relationship of men and women working

together for a common goal. Part of her popularity may in part be due to her lack of

superpowers.

Based on early lettercols, Batgirl's introduction was met with mixed reviews. However,

as the series continued many fans, both male and female, grew to admire Batgirl. In #363, fan

Audis Williams wrote, "Batgirl's so good I rank her with Batman, evenly. I cast my vote to bring

her back again and again. Maybe even give her some solo stories."[88] Some fans were fascinated

with the dual personality of Batgirl and how she effortlessly blended with the comic book series.

A fan letter from Guy H. Lillian III in issue #363 stated, "…somehow the spectacle of this

supposedly meek and helpless young female engaging in mortal combat with a horde of swarthy

crooks brings my blood to a fighting boil, gets the adrenalin going, and generally makes the whole

yarn three times or more interesting and entertaining than if it were merely Robin or some other

idol-worshipper type out there trading knocks with the wicked."[89] Like many

superheroes, her stories revolved purely around beating bad guys and helping people in need.

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[86] Cary Bates, Win Mortimer, and Jack Abel, "The Supergirl Gang" *Adventure Comics* 1, no. 381. (June 1969), 2324.

[87] Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 129.

[88] Gardner Fox, Carmine Infantino, and Sid Greene, "The True-False Face of Batman" *Detective Comics,* 1, no. 363, (May 1967), Lettercol.

[89] Ibid.

One of the most well recognized characters of the 1960s, Sue Storm, gained recognition for her ties to the space race as well as subtle subtext about early feminism.   Popular culture capitalized on the Space Race and how it could shape the future of America. While the Space Race began in the mid-1950s, the launch of Sputnik by the Soviet government in 1957 motivated America's increased interest in space exploration. These advances in technology and obsession with space travel as well as the future permeated throughout popular culture from fashion to cinema. Many new television shows of the 1960s were set in outer space, while still representing the women as a wives and mothers. *Lost in Space*, *Thunderbirds*, *Jetsons* and *Star Trek* were centered around space exploration, technology and ideas of life in the future. *Star Trek* is considered one of the greatest science fiction shows in the history of entertainment. It is also important to the history of geek culture and arguably, the catalyst for science fiction's rise in popularity. There were multiple female leads on the original *Star Trek* series. One most remembered was Communications Officer Lieutenant Nyota Uhura, an African American woman. *Star Trek* placed women of color in positions of power and continued to represent individuals of different ethnicities throughout various incarnations of the show.[90] While comics had not reached the level of self-consciousness associated with titles such as *Star Trek*, they were beginning to explore aspects of the space race as well as presenting stronger female characters.

The *Fantastic Four* was Marvel's first comic series after re-naming the company and it depicted several people obtaining their powers after being exposed to cosmic radiation. The team dedicated themselves to the advancement of science and crimefighting.   Reed Richards (Mr. Fantastic) had the ability to stretch any part of his anatomy, Johnny Storm (Human Torch) could light himself on fire and control the element, Ben Grimm's (The Thing) skin was made of

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[90] Kathleen Sweeney, *Maiden USA: Girl Icons Come of Age* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 157

rock making him extremely resilient, and Sue Storm (Invisible Girl) could turn invisible and later create forcefields.[91] Part of what made the *Fantastic Four* so popular was their family dynamics. They were a modern dysfunctional American family that bickered and had contrasting views and agendas. However, they were a family that knew how to set aside their differences and work together for the greater good.

The Invisible Girl was Marvel's most well-known female character during the 1960s. Stan Lee has stated in his 1970s book, *The Superhero Woman*, that when he was introducing new female characters in the 1960s and 1970s he was trying to avoid tropes and ideas that had been seen before. In his autobiography, *Excelsior! The Amazing Life of Stan Lee,* Lee explained he wanted Sue to be more than a token female character who needed to be rescued in every issue. Instead, Sue was created to be an integral part of the team. Lee purposefully created Sue Storm as Reed Richards fiancée because female characters in the superhero genre were always girlfriends, and he wanted to attempt something new.[92] He even criticized other comics about the lack of depth given to female characters, likely refereeing to *Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane*. He states:

> What few heroines there were all seemed to follow the same pattern. They weren't actually heroines at all; they were just the heroes' girlfriends. They worried when their man went off to fight the ferocious foe, and they usually spent the rest of the time tearfully imploring him to give up his dangerous calling-or else they'd wonder why the guy they were dating in his Brooks Brothers suit wasn't as brave and glamourous as the multi muscled misanthrope who was flying around town in his cape and form-fitting long johns –never dreaming that both of them were one and the same guy.[93]

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[91] Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and George Klein and Christopher Rule, "The Fantastic Four," *The Fantastic Four,* 1, no. 1 (November 1961), 3-10.
[92] Lee and Mair , *Excelsior!,* 116-117.
[93] Stan Lee, *The Superhero Woman*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 57.

However, Sue does display many of the tropes associated with female characters of the 1960s: she was docile, sweet and obsessed with fashion. Reed's character treated her more as a daughter or child then a fiancé. Yet despite her rocky start, the Invisible Girl struck a chord with the public as a character and a symbol of early feminism. The 1960s is where readers can see a subtle change in female representation.

Writers have compared the Invisible Girl to the plight of the feminist movement. Many writers have argued that comics throughout the 1960s did not positively or accurately represent the feminist movement. For the Invisible Girl this is true for the first few issues. Laura D'Amore explains that the Invisible Girl represents the evolution of pre-feminist awakening. She states, "Sue was the superhero equivalent of the suburban housewife, who, although a veritable CEO in the home, was uncompensated and unrecognized for her successes."[94] Throughout the series she is rarely of any help and there is little development of her character. However, she eventually develops and obtains the ability to make force fields and turn others invisible. The negative side of her power was if she makes someone else invisible she herself has to remain visible. While some readers may see this as a weakness, it has been interpreted as a metaphorical strength, "…but in actuality it is critical to her newer, stronger identity. This power privileges her visibility, rendering others (men included) invisible. It is the ultimate feminist fantasy, making women apparent for their strengths, while minimizing interference from others."[95] However, it is difficult to determine how much of the writing was influenced by feminism and how much writers and historians are reading into subplots.

Feminism was just being introduced by writers in comics near the end of the 1960s.

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[94] D'Amore, "Invisible Girl's Quest for Visibility," 3.
[95] Ibid.

However, most the Silver Age maintained the image of complacent girlfriend or housewife. While comic book plots of the 1950s and 1960s reinforced the perfect American image, comic book writers in the 1970s would challenge gender roles. In the 1970s, comics became part of mainstream culture and comic books were finally producing female centered comics. Comics such as *Ms. Marvel*, *The Cat* and *Night Nurse* were all created to appeal to new readers. While mainstream comics remained male dominated, new female writers and artists were once again emerging. Additionally, the number of female artists and writers increased dramatically in underground comics. After the CCA began to censor the content of comic books, underground comics became a more recognized part of the comic community. For years, underground comics were male dominated, with women being objectified or placed in compromising positions. Many female artists such as Trina Robbins began producing their own comic book series in the 1970s, with other cartoonists following suit.

Chapter II: 1970s Comic Books and Feminism

Most comic books of the 1960s did not represent the social changes occurring within American culture. The dawning of the 1970s brought an end to the Silver Age of Comics and ushered in the Bronze Age. At this time, writers began to cover more controversial topics including race, poverty, and prejudice. The topic of feminism was one that writers struggled the most to include in their storylines. When feminism was addressed it centered around topics of equality and recognition. The feminist movement least affected well established mainstream comics, such as *Wonder Woman*, *Supergirl* and *Fantastic Four*. However, new mainstream comic series introduced throughout the mid to late 1970s attempted to examine issues of gender, feminism, and identity. Writers, editors, and artists in Marvel and DC embraced aspects of the

sexual revolution within their comics. Female characters wore more revealing clothing, highlighting their physique, and embraced their sexuality. While many of these comic books failed, lasting only a few issues, some survived and thrived with characters that continue in popularity. To date, debate ensues among writers and historians regarding the relationship between comic books and second wave feminism. There were writers and artists challenging gender norms and influencing the mindset of young readers.   More female cartoonists and writers challenged the comic industry, taking a stand against sexism in mainstream and underground comics. These women created series that revolved around sex, sexuality, and feminist objectives. The first ten years of the Bronze Age of Comic Books brought an awakening for female comic book geek culture, which would become more prevalent in later decades. The feminist movement and its ideology influenced comic books of the 1970s, particularly Marvel writers and artists, and in turn these comic book writers influenced popular culture.

The Dawning of the Bronze Age

Comic book writers, artists, and fans credit the death of Spiderman's girlfriend, Gwen Stacy, in 1973 as the catalyst for the Bronze Age. The death of such a pivotal character, caused by the actions of the hero, ushered in a darker style of comic books which contrasted greatly with the wholesome comics of the Silver Age. To save Gwen Stacy after she was pushed off the Brooklyn Bridge by the Green Goblin, Spiderman shot a web to wrap around her leg and stop her fall. While the web succeeded in halting her fall, the sudden stop created a whiplash motion that snapped her neck and killed her.[96] Golden and Silver Age heroes were always able to rescue the innocent in time. While characters had been killed off in the past -- like Uncle Ben, Daredevil's

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[96] Michael Mallory, *Marvel: The Characters and Their Universe* (New York: Cartwell Books, 2014), 92-93.

father, as well as Superman's and Batman's parents -- these characters were meant to die early in the series to motivate the hero into taking up crime fighting. If anything, parental figures have had a time-honored tradition of being killed off by both Marvel and DC writers. However, Gwen Stacy was a popular character and her death dealt a devastating blow to the fan community. This major twist in the Spiderman storyline meant any character, regardless of his or her popularity, could be killed off suddenly. While there were few main character deaths in the 1970s, this new reality for superheroes was darker than in previous decades. Comic books began to explore various topics and concerns that had been prohibited under the 1954 Comic Code Authority.

Throughout the 1970s, comic book publishers attempted to produce comic books pertaining to relevant social issues. Drug addiction was a growing concern for the United States Government.[97] According to comic book creator Stan Lee, the United States Government contacted Marvel Comics about producing a series of comic books about the dangers of drug addiction.[98] This prompted the creation of *Amazing Spider-Man,* #96 through #98, in which

Peter Parker's friend Harry Osborn nearly suffers a drug overdose.[99] However, Lee was unable to publish the three issues due to the CCA's unwillingness to relent on regulations regarding controversial topics. The word "drug" or any mention of substance abuse never appeared in the regulations, leaving certain topics to the discretion of the individuals in charge of censorship. Section "C" of the CCA stated: "All elements or techniques not specifically mentioned herein, but which are contrary to the spirit and intent of the Code, and are considered violations of good taste or decency, shall be prohibited."[100] As a result of the CCA's unwillingness to approve

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[97] Johnson, *Super-History*, 110

[98] Mallory, *Marvel,* 88.

[99] Mallory, *Marvel,* 91.

[100] Lent, *Pulp Demons*, 275.

these issues, Lee was forced to speak with the publisher of Marvel, Martin Goodman, to plead

his case. Lee informed Goodman that, "…we're [Marvel] supposed to do what the government

tells us and I got this letter from Washington. And besides, this is a good thing. It's letting kids

know that drugs are harmful." Goodman defended Lee's decision to release the issues, which

worked in Marvel's favor.[101] Issues #96 through #98 were well received by fans and provided

opportunities for other comics to address current social issues. While the CCA would continue

to influence mainstream comics, necessity dictated the reexamination of these regulations to

better fit the changing culture.

In 1971, after the release of *Amazing Spider-Man* #96 through #98, the CCA updated

their guidelines for mainstream comic books. While many protocols remained the same, there

were subtle changes made in most sections. The biggest change was that narcotics could be

referenced in comics if they were not encouraged or justified. Images of children taking

narcotics as well as discussion on how to profit from illegal drug trade remained prohibited.[102]

While protocols were still extensive, these updates provided writers more freedom to explore

various aspects of American culture. Three months after the release of *Amazing Spiderman* #96,

Green Lantern released vol. 2 #85, in which Green Arrow's sidekick Speedy was revealed as a

drug addict. Speedy was eventually able to recover from his drug addiction, but for several issues

a rift remained between him and Green Arrow.[103] Writers and historians have praised these plots

revolving around topics of drug addiction for their originality and influence on comics.

Fans and critics have praised both the death of Gwen Stacy and Osborn's overdose for

their original plots and the changes to comics that stemmed from their release. However, Susan

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[101] Mallory, *Marvel*, 88.
[102] Lent, *Pulp Demons*, 274.
[103] Johnson, *Super-History*, 111.

Wood Glicksohn's *The Poison Maiden and the Great Bitch: Female Stereotypes in Marvel Superhero Comics* stated that while the comic itself was admirable in presenting the dangers of drug addiction, it also unintentionally presented a double standard regarding the misrepresentation of women. In the comic, Harry Osborn takes drugs as he was unable to keep up with the demands of his daily life, particularly his relationship with his girlfriend Mary Jane Watson. Glicksohn explained that Osborn's drug addiction may never have transpired if Mary Jane did not have an "…ego-destructive personality underneath her superficial physical appeal."[104] Glicksohn maintained that Marvel Comics, over time, had continuously presented women as a problem for male characters.   Female characters seldom carried the plot or performed any task outside of acting as a foil for the hero.   She stated that comics confused young readers as they were meant to "…detest Gwen's 'feminine tears' and emotional storms, and admire Natasha's 'masculine' independence, her skills and daring." [105] Glicksohn further stated that in American culture, anything feminine or associated with womanhood was considered weak in popular culture. Until the early 1970s most supporting female characters acted as love interests to the hero. Glicksohn makes a plea to Marvel asking them to better represent female characters in leading roles.

Glicksohn utilized Germaine Greer's concept in the *Female Eunuch* regarding female stereotypes: "the poisoned maiden," and "the great bitch." The maiden is the perfect and pure princess, inaccessible and won only through physical and mental pain. The bitch is the deadly female, devious, greedy, clever, and dishonest, who acts as a worthy opponent for the hero.[106]

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[104] Glicksohn, *The Poison Maiden & the Great Bitch*, 7.
[105] Glicksohn, *The Poison Maiden & the Great Bitch*, 3.
[106] Glicksohn, *The Poison Maiden & the Great Bitch*, 14.
[108] Glicksohn, *The Poison Maiden & the Great Bitch* 29.

These stereotypes permeated throughout mainstream comics in the 1960s and early 1970s. Sue Storm helped overcome such labels by presenting a more equalized image by balancing motherhood and crimefighting while being an anchor for the Fantastic Four. However, the character of Invisible Girl acted more like a stereotypical caregiver rather than her own character.[108] Glicksohn notes that if comics want to reflect reality, fans need to have characters they can relate to that accurately represent female strength to both male and female readers. Therefore, more positive representation of female characters are necessary. With the rise of the feminist movement, more writers struggled with the idea of a liberated women instead of the old perceptions of maiden or bitch. Glicksohn claimed that Marvel had not fully embraced the feminist movement, "This is especially evident when in an attempt to be 'now' and 'liberated' (and increase sales by putting female curves on display?) Marvel creates a degraded 'femme force,' a warped image of women's creative potential straight out of pornographic fantasies."[107] Both Marvel and DC embraced and successfully capitalized on the sexual revolution.

In 1954 the CCA had multiple regulations regarding human anatomy and sexual content. However, the 1971 revisions limited the section labeled costuming to two rules: "1) Nudity in any form is prohibited. Suggestive and salacious illustration or suggestive posture is unacceptable. All characters shall be depicted in dress reasonably acceptable to society. 2) Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities."[108] Women's fashion of the 1970s departed from the modest clothing of the previous decades. For years, the female navel had been tabooed in popular culture, until singer Cher proudly exposed her navel on national television.[109] Since comics have always imitated the fashion trends of the

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[107] Glicksohn, *The Poison Maiden & the Great Bitch,* 30.
[108] Lent, *Pulp Demons*, 275.
[109] Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 159

time, both civilian clothing and female super-suits were drawn to complement the female figure.

Due to female characters being drawn with realistic proportions, many of these fashion designs

presented a more body positive image.

The modest skirts and space suits were gone and female characters were depicted as

openly displaying their physique. Skirts became shorter, bodysuits were skin-tight or similar in

cut to a swimsuit. Within the universe of the superhero, the heroine was not chastened for

wearing revealing clothing, and they could hold positions of authority over men and still be

respected. Author Mike Madrid commented on the changing trends for female characters

stating:

> But, if the women's liberation movement created a new, emancipated persona for the superherione, it would be the sexual revolution that would provide an image that would make her new liberation role more palatable to the still mostly male comic book audience. The social changes of the 60's counterculture movement heralded a new era of sexual freedom and expression. Sexual freedom was a topic, and in a sense a trend, that permeated popular culture in the early 70's. If comic book readers were not of the age to be engaging in sex, they were certainly aware of its allure [110]

Sex appeal became a hook for many comics to increase sales and popularity. There was a

consensus that the initial allure of an attractive female lead helped the feminist rhetoric in the

comic. The comic book *Red Sonja* had a female heroine in a metal bikini fighting crime and

winning against countless men. Though in a unique twist, most of the men, typically the good

guys, were as equally unclothed as the heroine.[111] Red Sonja struck a chord with the public and

unlike many new female driven comics of the 1970s that had very short runs, lasted for fifteen

issues over the course of two years. While comics continued to struggle with positively adopting

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[110] Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 158.
[111] Lee, *The Superhero Woman,* 35-36.

the rhetoric of the feminist movement, writers and feminists recognized the importance of comic

books and what they could symbolize for the future.

Feminism in DC Comics

The most pivotal moment of recognition for both comic books and second wave

feminism was with the release of the first independent issue of feminist magazine *Ms*. in 1972.

Ms. depicted a larger than life Wonder Woman swatting a fighter jet away from peaceful

America with the title, "Wonder Woman for President." Within the same year, Bonza Books

published the anthology *Wonder Woman* with several articles, including those by feminist Gloria

Steinem and the late William Marston, about the cultural impact of Wonder Woman as a

feminist. In a 2012 documentary, *Wonder Woman! The Untold Story of American*

Superheroines, Steinem explained the reason behind the famous issue of *Ms*.:

> The first regular cover of *Ms*. magazine we wanted to have something that was big and said you can't have democracy without feminism. So we thought, what bigger image than a superhero. The idea of Wonder Woman striding through the world as a colossus, stopping war with one hand-distributing food with another with hand, what could be better than that? Then we had discovered she had fallen on very hard times.[112]

As previously stated in chapter one, Wonder Woman's character had drastically changed since

her creation in 1941. In the 1960s to the early 1970s Wonder Woman had given up her powers,

opened a boutique and learned to use martial arts. Throughout most of the series, Diana Prince

embarked on zany adventures. While readers saw glimmers of a Wonder Woman interacting

regularly with the public, readers did not see Diana Prince as a competent entrepreneur. Wonder

Woman, the most powerful women in the DC universe and equal to any man, was powerless.

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[112] Edwards, *Wonder Women!*, 17:27-18-07.

It was Wonder Woman of the 1940s that had resonated with the feminist movement. Throughout those comics Wonder Woman was depicted fighting evil villains that were typically men who did not respect women. She promoted the rhetoric of equality and sisterhood while encouraging other women to stand up for their rights. A 1972 article by Steinman stated:

> Wonder Woman's family of Amazons on Paradise Island, her band of college girls in America, and her efforts to save individual women are all welcome examples of women working together and caring about each other's welfare. The idea of such cooperation may not seem particularly revolutionary to the male reader…but women know how rare and therefore exhilarating the idea of sisterhood really is.[113]

Wonder Woman was one of the few comics, for years, that had multiple female characters and embraced the idea of women being as capable as men. While the character of Wonder Woman never actively advocated for women's rights, there were examples of feminist rhetoric in several issues.

To this day, these changes made in the 1960s are regarded as one of the worst decisions made to the *Wonder Woman* series. While the idea of Wonder Woman learning how to fight without her powers was intriguing, writers commented that the adventures were entertaining but did not have the same feminist message.[114] *The New Wonder Woman* series was akin to the romance comics of the 1950s instead of the superhero genre. In *The New Wonder Woman* #181 and #182 (which was reprinted in issue #197) Wonder Woman fell in love with a man after knowing him for a day, then when he betrayed her to a villain, she attacked him while crying and then fled Man's World back to Paradise Island.[115] These changes angered many fans, including

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[113] Gloria Steinem, "Wonder Woman" (repr., 1972 in *The Superhero Reader,* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 205.
[114] Edwards, *Wonder Women!*, 18:03-18:22.
[115] Mike Sekowsky and Dick Giordano, "A Time to Love a Time to Die!" *Wonder Woman*, 1, no. 197, (December, 1971), 24-26, 37-39

Gloria Steinem, who had grown up reading and admiring the original Wonder Woman. She

stated:

> We [the feminist movement] had to persuade -- not to say lobby -- and practically march
> in the street to get her [Wonder Woman] her magical powers back. But, also, we wanted
> all women to be represented. And I remember the person in charge of Wonder Woman
> calling me up from DC Comics, he was so annoyed, and he said: Okay, she has her
> magical powers back, her lasso, her bracelets, she has Paradise Island back and she has a
> black African Amazon sister named Nubia. Now will you leave me alone?[116]

In February of 1973, Diana's mentor, I-Ching, was killed. While seeking out his killer, Diana

suffered a head injury resulting in amnesia. Despite her injury, Diana travels back to Paradise

Island where her memories, powers, and armor are restored to her. While on Paradise Island,

Nubia was introduced to readers for the first time as an Amazon warrior whose strength rivals

Wonder Woman. [119] Diana returned to Man's World, as Wonder Woman, to begin a new life.

Despite Diana's return to power, feminist rhetoric was absent throughout most of the

series. After the mid-1970s, writers scripted Wonder Woman as a capable fighter and

humanitarian. There were multiple interactions between Wonder Woman and other female

characters throughout the series; however, the message of sisterhood that had been so important

to the original Wonder Woman comics was not as prevalent. On the surface, most of the 1970s

Wonder Woman stories were like any other superhero comic book of the time. However, while

the feminist movement had an influence on comic books, in many respects the symbol of

Wonder Woman had an even greater effect on feminism. To date Wonder Woman continues to

represent feminist strength and pride. Despite the lack of a feminist message in the comic,

Wonder Woman continued to be a beacon for feminism in other forms of media.

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[116] Edwards, *Wonder Women!*, 18:23-18:56 [119]
Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 205.

The Wonder Woman television series continues to be one of the most fondly remembered representations of her character.   Airing from 1975 to 1979, the show's first season focused on Princess Diana leaving Paradise Island to fight Nazis during World War II. The second and third season, renamed *The New Adventures of Wonder Woman*, were set in the 1970s with Wonder Woman now fighting against various evils, such as terrorism. Most of the villains throughout the series underestimated Wonder Woman due to her gender, though she continued to defy their expectations of feminine strength. In addition to crime fighting, Wonder Woman as well as her alter ego, Diana Prince, promoted sisterhood and encouraged men, women, and children to defy gender norms. Actress Lynda Carter stated that many people were wary of the show when shooting began, believing that a woman could not carry the series. She was also informed by various individuals after obtaining the part that women would hate her for being Wonder Woman. These comments inspired her to define the television version of Wonder Woman, stating, "I went around really deciding how I wanted her to be. She would be interested in the community of women -- certainly not against men -- but for the community of women. I thought it was my job to show women that this guy is knocking you around, well, ya know, knock him back."[117] The show helped the public bond with a character that was both a warrior and a peacemaker. As a result, Lynda Carter's Wonder Woman to this day remains a feminist icon.

Film and television had more success in exploring the influence of feminism in popular culture. In addition to Wonder Woman, other feminist television shows included *Charlie's Angels, The Bionic Woman, The Mary Tyler Moore Show,* and *Maud*. Each show promoted a female leader either fighting crime or trying to lead a normal lifestyle in a male-dominated society. These shows, particularly the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, were important in positively

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[117] Edwards, *Wonder Women!*, 23:41-56

representing the modern women who were not linked to a man. These women were strong characters in positions of authority.

While the action heroine concept would not be fully explored in film until the 1990s, early characterization and concepts were introduced in the 1970s by the characters Princess Leia from *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977) and Ellen Ripley from *Alien* (1979). Both became characters that advanced the plot and through their actions saved the day. Ripley transformed how female characters were written and "…became a revolutionary film icon. Among the reasons for her iconic status is that she was one of the first final girl archetypes to defeat a villain without any help or rescue from a man."[118] The "final girl" was the girl that stood out from the crowd and defied the gender norm of hysterical horror victim. This was a departure from the damsel-in-distress that had been so prevalent in horror and action films of previous centuries.[119] No longer were women the love interest or the first victim, they were the hero. Princess Leia became a powerful and influential character in the *Star Wars* series, advancing the plot as well as assisting in the rescue of herself and her male teammates.[120] She held a position of authority and expected to be treated with respect. She had a strong character and held information pertinent to both the characters' escape from capture and the fate of the universe. Princess Leia's brash and no-nonsense attitude endeared her to fans who embraced her message of defiance, hope and empowerment. Unlike movies and television, most comic book characters did not have as much success in promoting feminism.

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[118] Gladys L. Knight, *Female Action Heroes: A guide to Women in Comics, Video Games, Film, and Television* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2010), 98.
[119] Knight, *Female Action Heroes,* 99.
[120] Knight, *Female Action Heroes,* 240.

Other DC comic series such as *Supergirl* were unaffected by the feminist movement. Supergirl was the perfect American superherione and teenager, compassionate, sweet, and docile. In the feminist comic book *It Ain't Me Babe*, a three page strip titled "Breaking Out" presents well known comic characters from Little Lulu to Supergirl breaking free from comic stereotypes. After being lectured by Superman as to why she needs to stay on earth while he goes to other planets, Supergirl flies away stating "This is the last time you're going to get away with this, Superman. I'm tired of being bossed around. Our partnership is Over!!!"[121] Supergirl teams up with other female comic book characters to fight against patriarchy. *It Ain't Me Babe*, like other unground comic books, were sold in comic book shops, which were gaining popularity. These underground comics were not as well-known as DC comics. While DC's Supergirl was presented as a competent fighter, the comic never portrayed the level of feminism as depicted in *It Ain't Me Babe*.

Most covers of *Supergirl* were similar to romance comics with poses that emphasized her figure. The series lasted for ten issues over the course of two years, though Supergirl continued to appear in other comic publications. Throughout Supergirl's early history, Superman continually governed her. He made decisions that dictated her future, yet he made her live in an orphanage instead of making room for her in his personal life. The closest DC's Supergirl came to presenting a feminist message was in Supergirl #9 "The Super-Amazon!" Supergirl, intent on cutting herself off from men after her boyfriend had an affair, flew to Paradise Island. While en route to the island, Supergirl rescued Nubia and Queen Hippolyte (Wonder Woman's sister and mother) from shark-men and then joined the Amazon nation. Poison from a shark-man's bite

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[121] It Ain't Me Babe Basement Collative, art by Carol, "Breaking Out" *It Ain't Me Babe,* ed. Trina Robbins, in *The Complete Wimmen's Comix,* Ed., Gary Groth, Michael Catron, and Keeli McCarthy, (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, Inc, 2016), 21.

began to affect Nubia and Supergirl flew to a far-off island to find a cure. On the Island, Supergirl was captured by three witch-doctors, causing her to temporarily lose her powers. She was rescued by a man named Fong, who took it upon himself to be her protector. However, Fong dominated her and did not aid in her attempt to return to Paradise Island. Eventually, she freed herself and regained her powers. After curing Nubia, Supergirl flew back to Man's World, as she no longer wanted to be isolated.[122] The comic provided subtle subtext regarding men's domination of women with their own objectives. It also depicted that fleeing from problems would not resolve relationships between men and women. Subtext regarding gender was common throughout most DC comics. Various writers would hint at social concerns, but would not openly discuss the topic or resolve the issue by the end of the comic.

Throughout most of Lois Lane's run in *Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane,* Lois represented a stereotypical and even offensive image of women. Lois was a combination of the "poisoned maiden" and the "great bitch," appearing as a brat rather than a successful career woman. By 1968 more comics revolved around advancing her character; however, few issues addressed social concerns of the time. The most well-known and controversial attempt at relevancy was #106, titled *I am Curious Black*. In this issue, Lois attempted to write an article about life in Little Africa, a predominately black neighborhood in Metropolis, by interviewing the residents. After discovering no-one would talk to her, Lois used one of Superman's machines to change her ethnicity from Caucasian to African American for twenty-four hours. Throughout the comic, she saw firsthand the poor conditions of the buildings and treatment many African American men and women were forced to endure. The issue ended with her giving a blood transfusion to an African American man who was shot while stopping drug dealers. After

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[122] Cary Bates and Art Saaf, "The Super-Amazon!" Supergirl, 1, no. 9 (January, 1974), 3, 4, 17, 17-20.

the transfusion, the effects of the machine wore off.   Despite differences in ethnicity the man

accepted her help graciously, their hands clasped together in the final panel. [123]   The comic has

been one of the most controversial issues of the series and was one of the few attempts to explore

social topics in the series. Most the comics utilized tropes of her fretting over Superman's lost

affection rather than reflecting feminist prose. *Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane* ended in 1974.

Perhaps this reflected the changing times, as female characters that fretted over their love interest

no longer had a market in comic books. By the mid-1970s the romance genre was all but absent

from industry.

Marvel Women to the Rescue

While DC writers and artists stuck to more conventional storytelling regarding gender,

Marvel comics embraced the changing atmosphere of the 1970s. Marvel started creating comic

series by women for women. Comic creation was in many respects still a male-dominated

profession. Jean Thomas, wife to editor Roy Thomas, recognized the amount of male-dominated

media and suggested various titles to increase female readership. These included comics such as

The Cat, Shanna the She-Devil and *Night Nurse*.[124] While many of these comics were not

successful upon their initial release, only lasting a few issues, several characters have withstood

the test of time and continue to make regular appearances within modern comics. The most

wellknown of these heroines was Spider Woman, co-created by Marie Severin, who worked on

multiple comics published by Marvel. Other characters were also dramatically changed to make

them more confident and productive. Black Widow was no longer a villain, but a competent

crime fighter who could hold her own against heroes such as Spiderman. Marvel received both

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[123] Robert Kanigher, Werner Roth, and Vince Colletta, "I Am Curious (Black)!" *Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane*, 1, no. 106 (November, 1970), 4-14.
[124] Weiner, "Portrayal of Nurses and Marvel Comic's Night Nurses," 329.

praise and criticism for their attempts of embodying the feminist movement. Fans identified with these new characters and Marvel continued to produce successful new comics, though the company also experienced several failures.

Night Nurse contrasted greatly from nurse comics of the 1950s and 1960s. The series lasted for only four issues and focused on the lives of three nurses, Linda Carter, Georgia Jenkins and Christine Palmer. Based on the cover of the first issue the comic looked like the typical romance comic from the previous decade, where Linda Carter was forced to choose between her career and her lover. However, within the issue Carter chooses her career. Robert G. Weiner's article "Portrayal of Nurses and Marvel Comic's *Night Nurse"* stated, "Twenty years earlier, a comic would not have had its female characters make that type of choice. Jean Thomas' writing was very progressive, and here the story takes on a depth that traditional superhero comics did not have."[125] There was a sense of female community and the covers of the next three issues often depicted the nurses as protectors, fighting to save their patients' lives from physical harm.[126] The comic also focused on women speaking up for themselves as well as serving the community regardless of race or creed. *Night Nurse* focused more on the heroics of everyday women, and not superhero characters.

The Cat was another comic released during Marvel's attempt to reflect feminism. Like *Night Nurse*, *The Cat* only lasted four issues. The first issue tells the story of Creer Grant, a sophomore at the University of Chicago who left college before completing her degree to marry Police Officer Bill Nelson. The marriage, while happy, depicts Greer slowly becoming

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[125] Due to the lack of Night Nurses Comics, I have to rely on image available on line as well as the works of other scholars. Night Nurses is one of many comics released during the 1970s that has been forgotten and few writers have commented upon. Weiner, "Portrayal of Nurses and Marvel Comic's *Night Nurses,"* 331.
[126] Weiner, "Portrayal of Nurses and Marvel Comic's *Night Nurses,"*332-334. [130] Stan Lee, *Superhero Woman*, 154.

complacent to Bill's demands. She was transformed from a docile girlfriend to a compliant

housewife. One page provided subtext for the relationship, stating, "…she [Greer] felt more

helpless than ever before, because he seemed to like that in a woman. Only now and then would

Greer try to *assert* her-self—but she always sighed, smiled and gave in."[130] Like Sue Storm's

character, this plot referenced the stereotypical housewife image feminists fought against. When

Greer's husband died shortly after their marriage, she needed to find employment and her place

in the world. Through her former college professor, Doctor Tumulo, Greer obtained a job as her

tech assistant. Doctor Tumulo and Greer worked on a series of experiments to unlock the full

potential of women, though it is never explicitly stated what that potential was. Doctor Tumulo

instilled a sense of pride in Greer that she had lost during her marriage to Bill. [127] Pride was

another theme addressed throughout the female-centered comic. Women embracing their gender

without any shame and not having to be apologetic for their passions, strengths and weaknesses

was a potent theme. This aspect of female empowerment continues to be an important

component of comic books of the 1970s and feminism to the present day.

Greer was one of the few female superheroes whose origins were similar to a male

superhero. When a donor halts the progress of the experiment and disagrees with Doctor Tumulo

on whom to test the technology, Greer agreed to undergo the experiment. After weeks of testing

Greer obtains better agility, heightened strength, and a sixth sense. Doctor Tumulo discovered

the donor intended to use the experiment to create a master thief. The donor's test subject's

senses were further heightened by a cat suit with steel claws and amplified hearing in a helmet to

help in burglary. Doctor Tumulo witnessed the test subject's death from a failed attempt at

scaling the side of a building, an act which resulted in her own death by the hands of the villain.

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[127] Stan Lee, *Superhero Woman*, 156.

Greer became enraged by her friend and mentor's death and sought revenge. She stole the cat suit and maimed several of the donor-villain's henchman. In the end, realizing he could not beat her super abilities, the villain killed himself. Upon discovering his body, Greer lamented the bloodshed, saying, "All our plans for the betterment of womankind --! I did what I set out to do, and I did it **well** – But have I **misused** my powers? Have I become a stronger **woman** – only to become a **poorer** human being?"[128] While *The Cat* only lasted a few issues, it relied heavily on feminist rhetoric. It asserted female dominance and depicted women working together for the betterment of womankind. The story invoked messages indicative of the feminist movement, similar to the rhetoric of the original Wonder Woman. The series ended due to the writers and artists Marie Severin, Wally Wood (the only man on the comic) and Linda Fite all focusing on other projects, and as a result becoming unable to work on future issues of *The Cat.*[129] The character was re-imagined in 1974, assuming the identity of Tigra. As Tigra, Greer no longer presented the feminist message that was central to *The Cat*.

Tigra's first appearance in *Jungle Comics* revealed Doctor Tumulo was not dead, but in a coma. After awakening, she found Greer badly beaten and on the verge of death. She took Greer to her family, the Cat People, where Greer's health was restored by transforming her into the half-feline, half-human Tigra. Greer's first appearance in *Jungle Comic* enforced a sense of community surrounding the Cat People. The feminist rhetoric and messages were gone and Greer was depicted as a sex symbol. Her yellow and blue body suit was replaced by a black bikini over her orange fur. It was depictions such as this that caused critics like Glickson to take issue with female representation in comics. [130] *The Cat* represented the evolution of women from

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128 Lee, *Superhero Woman*, 170.
129 Lee, *Superhero Woman*, 148,
130 Tony Isabella, Don Perlin and Vince Colletta, "Tigra - the Were-Woman!" Giant-Size Creatures, 1, no. 1 (July, 1974), 16-22.

housewives or girlfriends to independent women. Tigra was more of a sexual being embodying

the sexuality that was associated with the Sexual Revolution of the 1970s. Throughout most of

the early 1970s Marvel failed more often than succeeding in creating characters to represent the

feminist movement.

It wouldn't be until the late 1970s, near the end of Second Wave Feminism, that the

company found success with another original character. Ms. Marvel premiered in 1976, created

to embody the feminist movement of the 1970s.[131] Within the first two pages of the comic, Ms.

Marvel was shown fighting bank robbers while passersby looked on in awe. This scene segued

into a conversation with the Editor-in-Chief of the *Daily Bugle* J. Jonah Jameson and his newest

employee Carol Danvers, the alter ego of Ms. Marvel. Danvers refused to write traditionally

female news articles on recipes and diet, therefore Jameson hired her to write a piece about New

York City's newest vigilante/superhero. The interaction ended with Danvers and Jameson

discussing her salary. Before Danvers left Jameson's office, she corrected his use of her title as

Miss Danvers, stating, "And one thing more, Jonah…my name is Ms. Carol Danvers."[132] This is

a direct reference to women's growing use of Ms. as a title instead of Mrs. or Miss to

demonstrate they were independent women not associated with a man. In 1972, four years

before the release of Ms. Marvel #1, Ms. became an honorific title for single women recognized

by the American public. [133] This title was cemented in the public eye due in part to the media

coverage of feminist rallies and the release of the magazine *Ms.* This first issues makes direct

references to both the feminist movement and well know feminist such as Kate Millett.[134] A

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[131] Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 180-181

[132] Gerry Conway, John Buscema, and Joe Sinnott, "This Woman, This Warrior!" *Ms. Marvel,* 1, no. 1 (January 1977), 7.

[133] Thomas M. Holtgraves, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Social Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 64-65

[134] Conway, Buscema, and Sinnott, "This Woman, This Warrior!" 7.

common trope throughout the series was Danvers having to reputedly hearing sexist comments from Jamison and some of her male co-workers. While the first few issues relied heavily on feminist rhetoric, latter issues utilized the show-don't-tell approach in depicting feminism.

At the beginning of the series, Danvers had no idea she was Ms. Marvel as she blacked out whenever she was transformed into the superhero. Fearful of her blackouts, she consulted a friend and therapist who witnessed her transformation into Ms. Marvel. He told Danvers that she could likely end these blackouts if she chose one identity, either Ms. Marvel or Carol Danvers, but she could not be both. However, this statement was proven false in the issue "Homecoming." The titan Hecate revealed to Danvers that she had always had a unique strength, and that her two identities could coincide. After this revelation, Danvers was able to fully embrace both identities, feeling a sense of rejuvenation.

> **Danvers**: This is …I feel like I've just been born! Hecate you seem to know what's going on who am I?
> **Hecate**: "Who you've always been—Carol Danvers and Ms. Marvel.[135]

Both *Ms. Marvel* and the *New Adventures of Wonder Woman* explored topics of dual identity and feminism. Could a woman be a mother, daughter, wife, and feminist at the same time? Both series answered 'yes' to this question. Unlike male heroes who only used their civilian identity to navigate daily life, superheriones used both identities to explore multiple aspects of gender and society. Ms. Marvel did not have to give up any part of herself, instead she embraced all aspects of her identity to be whole.

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[135] Chris Claremont, Jim Mooney and, Joe Sinnott, "Homecoming," *Ms. Marvel*, 1, no. 13 (January, 1978.) 10.
[140] Gerry Conway, John Buscema, and Joe Sinnott, "Enigma of Fear!" *Ms. Marvel*, 1, no. 2 (February, 1977), Lettercol.

The comic suffered from poor writing, but it continued to inject subtle references to the feminist movement throughout the series. Many comic book writers were not familiar with the ideals and goals of the feminist movement and thus some of the plots and concerns appeared superficial. Within the second issue of *Ms. Marvel*, comic writer David Anthony Kraft penned a letter to Marvel fans discussing the creation of *Ms. Marvel*. The letter stated that Kraft was unsure of what to write in the letter, initially wanting to focus on feminism, but admits to being the least qualified individual to discuss this topic.[140] Though such a statement could be false modesty, it remains likely that many of the male writing staff did not understand the feminist objective. The success of *Ms. Marvel* resulted in later issues with writers that understood how to write competent and strong female characters. These later issues resonated with fans.

Lettercols from *Ms. Marvel* fans had varied opinions as to Marvels feminist messages. The first lettercol contained mostly negative feedback. One reader stated,

> …it [Ms. Marvel] should be an action-oriented comic and not a soapbox for women's lib…. Ms. Marvel, in both her identities, will never be anything but a cardboard parody of a person unless you break her free of the model you've cast her in with the first issue. I'd hate to see such a good character die because of an ideological obsession.[136] While *Ms. Marvel* was not initially popular, when writer Chris Claremont took over the series he was successful in gaining popularity for the comic. Claremont had a reputation for producing well written, relatable, and strong female characters. His run as writer helped flesh out Carol Danvers as a character. A fan letter from Jana C. Hollingsworth stated, "With the news that Chris Claremont will be taking over, I can write with a feeling of optimism…Chris, you're currently my favorite Marvel writer, and a lot of my enjoyment comes from your excellent handling of women characters."[137] Fans praised the changes Claremont made to the series, particularly how he humanized Ms. Marvel. A letter by Cheryl Ann Klepper stated,

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[136] Chris Claremont, Jim Mooney, and Joe Sinnott, "Death Is the Doomsday Man!" *Ms. Marvel*, 1, no. 4 (April, 1977), Lettercol.

[137] Chris Claremont, Jim Mooney, and Joe Sinnott, "Bridge of No Return," *Ms. Marvel*, 1, no. 5 (May, 1977), Lettercol.

>...Ms. Marvel is being treated differently than many of Marvel's past women heroes. I think the differences is that while you know Ms. Marvel is a woman, when you read the story you don't consciously preface everything she does with the idea that this is a woman doing it. She is treated as a person…that is as it should be. People should be recognized for themselves—their own strengths, weaknesses, traits, etc. – without these being colored by the stereotype pigeonholing of person as man or woman first.[138]

Throughout the mid twentieth century few letters to the editor were published by female fans. During the 1970s, female fan mail slowly increased. These letters provide insight into the minds of fans as well as providing writers insight into the likes and dislike of their audience. In addition to popularizing Ms. Marvel, Claremont was also credited with the creation of other strong female characters that continue to be a staple of Marvel Comics.

Chris Claremont helped popularize the *Uncanny X-Men* franchise by introducing a new cast of characters and topics of racism and prejudice. Throughout the 1960s the X-Men were the same as any other superhero team. All the original X-Men team members were middle to upper class white men, and one woman, who fought against the forces of evil to defend mankind. However, in 1975 Claremont introduced new characters of different ethnicities and backgrounds. The new team consisted of Banshee (from Ireland), Sunfire (Japan), Wolverine (Canada), Colossus (the Soviet Union), Nightcrawler (Germany), Storm (Kenya), and Thunderbird (Apache nation).[139] Created by Len Wein and Dave Cockrum, who were well known for creating multiple characters for Marvel and DC, Storm was the only female member of the new team and became one of the most distinguished X-Men.[145]

Storm became the new leader of the X-Men, making her the first woman of color in comic history to lead a superhero team. Storm graced the pages of *Uncanny X-Men* two years

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[138] Chris Claremont, Jim Mooney, and Joe Sinnott, "Nightmare," *Ms. Marve*l. 1, no, 7 (July, 1977), Lettercol.
[139] Len Wien, Dave Cockrum, and John Costanz, "Deadly Genesis!" *Giant-Size X-Men,* 1, no. 1 (May 1975), 3-10.
[145] Joseph J. Darowski, *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor: Race and Gender in the Comic Books*, (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 67 [146] Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 173.

after the appearance of the first African American Bond Girl, Rosie Carver, and one year after

the first African American model to appear on the cover of *Vouge* magazine, Beverly Johnson.

Storm was also the only women whose hero name was not defined by her gender. [146] When

asked about making her the leader in a time when female characters in comic books were

typically not in positions of power, Claremont responded:

> It didn't seem having a women in a position of power…as implausible to me as it did perhaps to others, but that perhaps grew out of the fact that I know too many dynamic, alpha character women in my own life….I mean, part of the reason for her taking center stage as official leader of the team was she did it at the time when she had no superpowers, and for my perspective that was a little bit to demonstrate, not only was she cool, she really was the best at what she did, not to show that she was better than men, but she was the best person for the job.[140]

Storm would continue to lead in multiple reinterpretations of the comic. She was often the

levelheaded member of the team, not letting her emotions dictate her actions. However, various

artists have argued whether Storm's initial introduction was sexual or empowering.

Like many other Marvel characters introduced during the 1970s, Storm openly displayed

her body in little more than a stylized swimsuit with a cape. Throughout the series, Storm wears

modest clothing due to societal constraints. When readers first saw Storm, creating rain during a

drought in Kenya, she wore only a skirt, with her long hair covering her breasts.   Claremont has

claimed that this choice in clothing was due to her African heritage, however, it may also have

been to entice male readership. Madrid argue that "She was sexy without being overtly sexual—

her allure came from her powerful persona, and goddess-like quality."[141] Regardless of her attire,

fans have admired the character of Storm.

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[140] Jen Neal, "Chris Claremont: Storm was the Best Person for the Job!" *SciFiNow*, June 18, 2016, https://www.scifinow.co.uk/interviews/chris-claremont-not-to-show-that-she-was-better-than-men-but-she-was-thebest-person-for-the-job/

[141] Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 174.

Her character was an important stepping stones for having more women of color

positively represented in comic books. Marvel introduced two other African American women

as supporting characters throughout multiple titles. This included Doctor Claire Temple, who

assisted hero Luke Cage and Misty Knight, a former NYPD police officer turned vigilante after

losing her arm in a car bomb. Within the same fan letter by Jana C. Hollingsworth in *Ms.*

Marvel's "Bridge of No Return," she stated favorite characters included Storm, Jean Grey, Misty

Knight and Coleen Wing.[142] These characters resonated with readers and have been recognized

as strong female leaders, making appearances in multiple comics and advancing the plot through

their actions. As stated previously by Gloria Steinem, the feminist movement was meant to be

inclusive of all women, regardless of ethnicity.[143] While the feminist movement broke into

various factions, it was created with the intent of encompassing the rights of all women.

However, this sense of unity was still prevalent in comic books, reaching out to readers and

allowing them to see themselves reflected in these diverse female heroes. While mainstream

comic books hinted at the changes occurring within society, due to the feminist movement a new

off shoot of Underground Comics embraced women's liberation.

Feminism Goes Underground

Unlike mainstream media, underground comics were exploring various aspects of

American culture. In 1970 Trina Robbins and Barbara Mendes co-produced the first all-female

comic book *It Ain't Me Babe. It Ain't Me Babe* became accessible through comic book stores,

which were gaining popularity in the 1970s and selling various underground comics.   The comic

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[142] Chris Claremont, Jim Mooney, and Joe Sinnott, "Bridge of No Return," *Ms. Marve*l, 1, no. 5 (May, 1977),
Lettercol.
[143] Edwards, *Wonder Women!*, 18:23-18:56.
[151] Edwards, *Wonder Women!*, 17:27-18-07.

was produced due to the male dominated atmosphere of underground comics as well as a lack of

female perspective in comics. Robbins explained that when *It Ain't Me Babe* was first published

it was criticized by men in the comic book industry and feminists.[151] Nevertheless, the comic

was a success and sales from *It Ain't Me Babe* helped launch other comic titles in 1972,

including *Wimmen's Comix* and *Tits and Clits Comix*. Robbins stated, "When I put together *It

Ain't Me Babe* in 1970, I had to seek out women who were willing and able to draw comics.

Twenty-two years later, [in 1992] when *Wimmen's Comix* closed the cover of her last issue, there

were more women drawing comics than ever before. Today there are even more than that. The

Babes and the Wimmen had opened the door for them."[144] These writers gained recognition
from readers and writers across the nation for their success at leveling the playing field within the

world of comics.

In January of 1979 the magazine *Cultural Correspondence* published multiple interviews

with various feminist artists and writers. Robbins explained that after the publication of

Wimmen's Comix support came flooding in from various individuals, "At comic conventions I

have found that it is the Aboveground cartoonists who are happy to see women drawing comics

and who are interested in relating to me as a professional and an equal."[145] The underground

comic community continued to grow and thrive with women continuing to write about pertinent

topics pertaining to American culture. Two years after the release of *It Ain't Me Babe*,

Wimmen's Comix made its debut.

Wimmen's Comix had a series of writers and artist who collaborated on various issues,

with a different woman leading the team for each issue. While the need for an all-women's

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[144] Gary Groth, ed., *The Complete Wimmen's Comix* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, Inc, 2016), xiii.
[145] Paul Buhle, Marcia Blair, and Ron Weissberger, ed., "Interviews with Women in Comics," in *Cultural Correspondence*, no. 9, (January 1, 1979) 10 https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:213656/.

comic stemmed from a lack of accurate representation of the Women's Movement, writers

recognized a need for more female representation, drawing attention to the lack of women within

the arts. One of the contributors to *Wimmen's Comix*, Terre Richards, explained how she first

heard about feminist comics and why she was so interested. She stated:

> As a result of the Women's Movement there was a growing awareness of women in all
> areas of the arts as well as publishing, so the time was right for an all-woman's comic,
> and when I heard from my boss, Ron Turner at Last Gasp, that Pat Moodian was editing a
> women's comic and they were looking for contributors, I jumped at the chance.   We met
> at Pat's house and decided that night that we would produce an on-going title of comics
> by women and that we would function as a 'collective,'…Thus *Wimmen's Comix* was
> born.[146]

While Terre Richards did not collaborate on *It Ain't Me Babe*, for several years she would

contribute to *Wimmen's Comix*. The series ran from 1972 to 1992, an impressive run for an

independent, underground series.

   Wimmens Comix explored various topics including sex, sexuality, and abortion, topics

important to the feminist agenda. *Wimmens Comix* had one of the first openly lesbian characters.

While this first appearance was played more for comedy, the fourth issue of *Wimmen's Comix*

depicted a positive image of same sex relationships through a loving couple. LGBT rights had

become part of the feminist movement with many of these feminist lesbians wanting basic

human rights.[147] *Wimmens Comix* also tackled another controversial aspect of the feminist

movement, abortion. Abortion was a taboo, with many women and young girls feeling they

could not be openly discuss this subject. Two of the most striking stories revolved around a

teenager and a young woman unexpectedly becoming pregnant.[148] It also played on the

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[146] Buhle, Blair, and Weissberger, "Interviews with Women in Comics," 21.

[147] Roberta Gregory, "A Modern Romance," *Wimmens Comics #4,* ed, Shelly Sampson, in T*he Complete Wimmen's Comix,* eds., Gary Groth, Michael Catron, and Keeli McCarthy, (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, Inc, 2016), 164-167.

[148] Lora Fountain, "A Teenage Abortion," *Wimmens Comics #1* ed, Patricia Moodain, in T*he Complete Wimmen's Comix,* eds., Gary Groth, Michael Catron, and Keeli McCarthy (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, Inc, 2016), 44-48,

helplessness women felt due to the lack of responsibility on the part of the male in these

situations. Other underground comics continued to appear throughout the 1970s and addressed

similar topics.

Multiple titles throughout the 1970s focused on desexualizing women and presenting

relevant concerns within the comics. In multiple issues a woman appeared unclothed; however,

the female body was more positively represented than in the mainstream comics. *Tits and Clits*,

created by Joyce Farmer and Lyn Chevely (also credited as Chin Lyvely), which was equally sex

positive for women during this time.   They stated, "Neither of us [Joyce Farmer and Chin

Lyvely] was much of a comics fan, but at the time we started I owned a bookstore, sold u.g.s, and

was impressed by their honesty but loathed their macho depiction of sex. Our work, originally,

was a reaction to the glut of testosterone in comics. As most us know, sex is a very political

business."[149] Sexual pleasure and female body functions were topics not openly discussed and

women in the 1970s were trying to expand the conversation and make more women comfortable

with the female body. *Tits and Clits* and *Wimmens Comix* provided women an opportunity to

tell their story and relate to something being published in popular media.

Within the same interview Lyvely later stated, "Our original commitment was to concentrate on

female sexuality, and our titles indicate that."[158] Similarly, *Wimmens' Comix* used jarring

images to address concerns of women. According to artist Aline Kominsky, "Well, on a

universal cosmic level I think all women (I dunno about men) fear that men will be repulsed by

their bodily functions, juices, odors, pimples, 'cellulites'.…Well, this all seems obvious, and like

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Debbie Holland, "Fucked Up," *Wimmens Comics #3,* eds., Sharon Rudahl, in T*he Complete Wimmen's Comix,* ed., Gary Groth, Michael Catron, and Keeli McCarthy, (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, Inc, 2016), 121-123.
[149] Buhle, Blair, and Weissberger, "Interviews with Women in Comics," 13. [158]
Buhle, Blair, and Weissberger, "Interviews with Women in Comics," 13. [159]
Buhle, Blair, and Weissberger, "Interviews with Women in Comics," 17.

the women's movement and sex revolution are supposed to have made everybody un-uptight."[159]

Self-awareness toward the female body became a topic which continued to be a prevalent

message in both second and third wave feminism. While mainstream comics were interested in

sensuality, underground comics explored multiple aspects of sex including sexual satisfaction.

Part of the reason for the success of these underground comics was taking away mysteries that

revolved around women and sex by humanizing the conversation. Writers and artists hoped *It*

Ain't Me Babe, Wimmen's Comix, and *Tits and Clits* would equalize women by taking some of

their embarrassment away from the female body and sensuality.

       With the dawning of the 1980s comics took a darker turn. There was less rhetoric about

female equality and more reliance on female sex appeal. In the Documentary *Wonder Woman!*

The Untold Story of American Superheroines author Jennifer K. Stuller argued that the

hypermasculinity in media of the 1980s became a backlash against feminism.[150] There were

feminist characters and relevant topics addressed in comics of the 1980s, but most writers

neglected the feminist ideology established in the 1970s.   Many female comic book characters

died in the 1980s. While the future for feminism in comic books seemed bleak, the 1980s

introduced a new generation of female fans to comic books. Comic book fans from the 1980s

would grow up to write comics or be involved in other forms of the media that influenced future

readers. Popular culture now had various comic cons, fanzines, and letters to the editor. Above

all women had a sense that there were more girls in geek culture that were not going away.

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[150] Edwards, *Wonder Women!*, 30:39-30:50.

Chapter III: Gender, Fans, and Comic books

During the 1980s, the Bronze and Modern Age of Comic Books overlapped.   The Modern Age gained recognition by fans and critics for its gritty imagery and more dire plots. While real world events influenced comic book stories, comics were not blatant about reflecting social concerns of the time. The comic book industry continued to introduce various female characters throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Despite the continuation of certain ideals and plots, overt feminist messages were absent from most comic books. Additionally, female empowerment through sexuality was largely replaced with hypersexual images of women. Comic books of the 1980s marked an awkward time between second and third wave feminism. Many writers and historians of popular culture have referred to the 1980s as a time of backlash against feminism. During the late Bronze and early Modern Ages of comics, writers, editors, and artists focused on world building and character motivation. Most writers and artists ignored or neglected the development of female characters; however, select writers challenged the status quo regarding female equality, representation, and sexualization. Moreover, letters from female fans dominated comic lettercols, and female geek culture became a bigger phenomenon within the comic book community. In addition to cultivating the geek community through their love of the material, these female readers would grow up to become writers, editors, and artists for mainstream and independent comics. While feminist messages in comic books of the 1980s were minimal, there were select characters that have been interpreted as feminist and have been revered by the growing fan community. Though this was a dark time for feminism in comic books, the early Modern Age of comic books marked an important part of defining female characters and geek culture for future readers.

Strong Characters and Dark Turns

Popular culture had changed dramatically in the 1980s with emphasis on the individual hero. The number of popular films and cult classics in the action genre depicting well-muscled men fighting against the villain in loud, violent confrontations was staggering. These included *Die Hard*, *The Terminator*, *Lethal Weapon*, *RoboCop*, *Rambo*, and *Predator*. Throughout most actions films the female lead was either the love interest or the daughter, similar in format to popular culture of the 1950s. Even film classics such as *Ghostbusters*, *Back to the Future*, and *Goonies* had multiple female characters yet focused on the male leads. Female characters that were brash, outspoken, and authoritative were often relegated to the supporting cast. Writer Jennifer K. Stuller stated, "The 80s were sad. You see all that hyper masculinity in action movies as sort of a backlash to the feminist movement in the 1970s.[151] While most media was geared at men, there were select pieces of popular culture centered around female characters.

These movies were not necessarily feminist, but they had strong female characters who advanced the plot and fought against pre-established notions of gender. While the characters Princess Leia and Ellen Ripley were well received by audiences and fans in the 1970s, it was the sequels in the 1980s that cemented their status in popular culture. Both women were leaders fighting against an evil that threatened everything they held dear. While depictions of women were lacking, movies with teenage female leads became more common. These films included: *Breakfast Club*, *Pretty in Pink, Heathers*, and *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Many of these films openly discussed teenage concerns, parental influences, and sex. While movies had well written

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[151] Edwards, *Wonder Women!*, 30:39-30:50.

and developed female characters, comic books suffered from a lack of well-written

femalecentered comics throughout most of the 1980s.

Comic books took a dark turn with gritty imagery and harsh treatment of female

characters. Within the course of ten years Phoenix (Jean Gray), Batwoman, and Supergirl were

killed. Ms. Marvel was placed under mind control, raped, forced into another dimension, and fell

into a coma. Wasp divorced her husband Hank Prim after being physically abused by him. The

Black Canary suffered an injury from a drug dealer, leaving her barren.[152] Mike Madrid

explained that, "Heroines had spent the 70's fighting to be treated as equals to men. The new

decade delivered a barrage of agony that would test these women's strength in new ways. They

cut their hair, ditched their high heels, and hunkered down to face this cold decade."[163] Multiple

historians and writers maintain that feminism, within American culture of the 1980s, came to a

standstill, not advancing or regressing.

While feminists continued to advocate for women's rights, these feminists were more

concerned with sex rights. Some historians maintain that feminism had merely changed from the

1970s to the 1980s with this new movement being labeled the "Sex Wars."   Historians have

examined how the feminist agenda evolved throughout the late twentieth century. According to

Professors Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter's *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, a

series of political battles occurred throughout the 1980s, "…over the regulation of pornography,

the scope of legal protections for gay people, the funding of allegedly 'obscene' art, the content

of safe-sex education, the scope of reproductive freedom for women…"[153] However, these

movements were not as well broadcasted at feminist rallies and events of the 1970s. In fact,

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[152] Madrid, *The Supergirl*, 225-226 [163]
Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 226.
[153] Lis Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1.

antifeminism was slowly escalating throughout American culture with many Americans unaware of the goals and objectives of these new movements. Comic book writers struggled with identifying sexual freedoms apart from sexual cruelties.

One of the first indications of this dark decade was the release Avengers #200, "The Child is Father To...?" in October of 1980. The plot of this 200th issue tells the story of Ms. Marvel's mysterious pregnancy. She came to full term in a matter of days and delivered the baby without any pain. However, the child, Marcus, rapidly aged into a full-grown man over the course of twenty-four hours and was revealed as the individual who impregnated Ms. Marvel. Marcus revealed he was born in another dimension, Limbo. His father was a magician from Limbo who rescued a drowning woman from Earth, then utilized the advanced technology of this dimension to manipulate and seduce the women. After his parents vanished, Marcus tried to escape the dimension and discovered freedom may be possible if he was reborn on earth. He captured Ms. Marvel and used the same machines to manipulate and rape her. However, Marcus' plan does not work and he must return to Limbo. Ms. Marvel leaves with Marcus as the Avengers watch her go.[154] This issue continues to be hated by readers and writers within the comic community. The idea that Ms. Marvel would leave with her rapist angered fans and earned the issue the nickname, "The Rape of Ms. Marvel."[155] Marvel was not proud of this comic, and no one has taken full responsibility for the concept and creation. Former *Ms. Marvel* writer Chris Claremont had an opportunity to amend for the sins of the comic a year later.

In October of 1981, *Avengers Annual* #10, "By Friends -- Betrayed!" returned Ms.

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[154] Bob Layton, George Perez, Jim Shooter, David Michelinie, and Dan Green, "The Child is Father To...?" *Avengers*. 1 no 200 (October 10, 1980), 5, 8, 11, 27-34

[155] Carol A. Stickland, "The Rape of Ms. Marvel - Carol A. Strickland," *Carol A. Stickland* http://carolastrickland.com/comics/msmarvel/ (March 25, 2017), Michael Westgarth, "On the Rape of Ms. Marvel," Geek Insider, April 25, 2013, http://www.geekinsider.com/on-the-rape-of-ms-marvel/ (March 25, 2017).

Marvel to earth. The issue was set approximately six months after Avengers #200 and in it Ms.

Marvel escaped Limbo after Marcus' death, his time on earth having caused him to age at an

accelerated rate. Three months after returning to earth, the mutant Rogue attacked Ms. Marvel.

Due to Rogue's ability to absorb powers, memories, and physical strength through skin contact,

Ms. Marvel slipped into a coma and was rescued by Spiderwoman. Spiderwoman contacted

Professor Xavier, the head of the X-Men, who helped Ms. Marvel recover and restored her

memories. Near the end of the comic Ms. Marvel confronted the Avengers accusing them of

betraying her and allowing her to be taken by Marcus, knowing he had manipulated her.

> There I was, pregnant by an unknown source, running through a nine-month term literally overnight – confused, terrified, shaken to the core of my being as a hero, a person, a woman. I turned to you for help, and I got jokes…. Your concerns were for the baby, not for how it came to be – nor of the cost to me of that conception. You took everything Marcus said at face value. You didn't question, you didn't doubt. You simply let me go with a smile and a wave and a bouncy bon voyage. [156]

One very important component of the feminist movement in the 1970s was having rape crimes

publicly acknowledged, with blame being placed on the rapist.[157] This comic touches on topics

of rape, victim blaming and shame that comes from such a violation. Claremont worked to

provide Ms. Marvel with a story arc that addressed these issues in *Avengers* #200.

Claremont provided Ms. Marvel with the opportunity to conquer this traumatic

experience while forcing awareness on the Avengers' actions. In a 2016 interview with webzine

Sequential Art, Claremont stated, "The hurtful element of the entire saga is not simply what was

done to her but that her friends -- her trusted team-mates -- apparently took what was happening

at face value. For Carol, it was a violation of the bedrock principles on which she'd built the

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[156] Chris Claremont, Michael Golden, and Armando Gil, "By Friends -- Betrayed!" *Avengers Annual*, 1 no. 10 (January 10, 2981), 38.

[157] Maria Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda: Feminism and the Politics of Sexual Assault*, (Boston: Northeast University Press, 2000), 112-115.

structure of her entire life. "[158] At end of the issue Ms. Marvel refused to return to the Avengers

instead remaining with the X-Men with whom she trusts. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s

women were trying to present the anti-rape movement not only as a feminist concern but as a

public policy as well. In the comic, Marcus eventually dies, but he was never punished for his

crime by a jury or even by the Avengers. Both during the pregnancy and her return to earth, Ms.

Marvel discussed how she was never given a choice in the conception. While not specifically

stated, the accelerated growth of Marcus prevented Ms. Marvel from terminating the pregnancy.

Readers can see clear influence of the Roe Vs. Wade court case, in addition to feminist agenda

regarding female reproductive rights. Even though the *Avengers Annual* #10 utilized subtext to

examine these social concerns, it was a blatant message at the heart of female sexual violations.

The Challenges of Feminism in the 1980s

Avengers Annual #10 would act as foreshadowing for the feminist agenda throughout the

1980s. While feminism was no longer considered a mainstream topic in most comics, feminist

anti-rape organizations were taking a firm stand regarding legislation to protect women.

Throughout the 1980s, established legislation was extended and passed to protect victims. This

legislation was meant to clarify the law on accusations of rape, as most legislation in the late

twentieth century was not well defined in distinguishing the difference between rape of a minor

and rape of an adult.[170] However, rape remained a taboo subject for most of the American public

with blame being placed on the victim. The feminist movement of the 1980s attempted to take

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[158] Jennifer M. Contino, The X-Men, Carol Danvers and Chris Claremont: Revisiting the Past," *Sequential Tart*, November 28, 2016, http://www.sequentialtart.com/article.php?id=2996 (accessed April 1, 2017). [170] Bonnie G. Smith, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History, Volume 1*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 553.

blame off victims, providing them with support, protection, and reassurance. Women's

liberation of the 1980s focused more on the legislative aspects of women's rights.

While the feminist agenda and goals were not as well-known and publicly broadcasted as

the 1970s, the movement was still alive. Women from various organizations specialized in

supporting victims of abuse and violence while promoting the modern businesswomen working

in traditionally male dominated fields. However, the popular culture declared feminism dead.[159]

In addition to the tragedies other female character suffered, Batgirl was paralyzed from the waist

down by the Joker, Elektra from Daredevil was brutally murdered, and Evey (from *V for

Vendetta)* undergoes physical and emotional abuse to be "freed" from her fears by the title

character.[160] However, there were also characters introduced throughout the 1980s that

embodied the ideals of second wave feminism and the incoming third wave feminist movement.

Chris Claremont was credited for maintaining feminist messages in the X-Men series.   In

Uncanny X-Men #143, a lettercol, signed by Doctor Phillip S. Kott of the Bureau of Labor

Statistics stated, "I anticipated Jean's death and Kitty Pryde's arrival, but Scott's [former X-Men

leader] leaving was a surprise. Storm is the logical candidate for team leader, partly because

she's the coolest the brightest X-Man left…but mostly because of your history of feminism."[161]

Once more, throughout the X-Men series, male members of the team were absent for most of the

plot, thus leaving female members to fight the bad guys. Unlike the Silver and early Bronze Age

of Comics, female characters were not petty or jealous of each other. Throughout the 1970s and

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[159] Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 86-88.

[160] Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 231, 243; Allen Moore and David Lloyd, *V for Vendetta* (New York: DC Comics, 1989), 147-167.

[161] Chris Claremont, and John Byrne, "Demon." *The Uncanny X-Men,* 1, no. 143 (March, 1981), 119.

1980s Marvel was at its peak, particularly with the *Uncanny X-Men* franchise. Two of the most well-known characters of the series were introduced during the 1980s: Rogue, a mutant villain turned hero, and Kitty Pryde, a thirteen-year-old mutant with the ability to phase through solid matter.

Of all the X-Men characters, Kitty Pryde resonated the most with fans. Multiple academic articles have centered around Kitty Pryde's evolution, story arc, and Jewish heritage. Her mutant powers surfaced at the age of thirteen, forcing her to grow up and overcome her flaws. Of all the X-Men characters introduced during this time, Kitty evolved the most. She had the quintessential "coming of age story" molding her into a more dynamic character. There were multiple aspects of her personality that appealed to fans: her parents' divorce, her maturation, and her appearance. Physically, Kitty was similar in looks to any other American teenager girl. The female geek who didn't fit the ideal perception of beauty saw herself mirrored in Kitty's character. Madrid stated, "Kitty appeared at a time when American popular culture was rediscovering the cute but quirky, lovable teenage girl, through John Hughes' movies like *Sixteen Candles*, and the breakthrough TV sitcom *Square Pegs*."[162] While adult women were drawn in the comics as supermodels with voluptuous figures, girls were being depicted more accurately both physically and psychologically.

Fans letters to X-Men writers and artists praised them for their realistic representation of a female teenage character. Shortly after Kitty Pryde's first appearance, a letter from Julie St. Germaine was published in *Uncanny X-Men* #136:

> I am even more thrilled about Kitty Pryde, however. She's young, unsure of how to handle her power, and most amazing of all: she's not pretty! I like that skinny, flat chested kid…Kitty's youth and the relative normalcy of her home life will add a

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[162] Madrid, *The Supergirls,* 237.

refreshing contrast to the other x-men. Dealing with her parents' divorce has real potential and is also new ground in the Marvel Universe. Her friendship with Ororo is touching, and should be developed more fully….Kitty Pryde is growing up from a sheltered child to a young women who has to the face the existence of evil in the world.[163]

Published fan mail from boys, girls, men, and women praised the authenticity of Kitty's youth and inexperience. Kitty lacked confidence and experience, held grudges, was quick to anger and changed her mind frequently regarding likes, dislikes, fashion, and even her code name. These aspects were very typical of a teenager, but they were never depicted as major character flaws, but part of her personality and evolution. Throughout the early 1980s X-Men lettercols were dominated by female letters to the editors. While the comic book community witnessed an awakening of female geek culture in the late 1970s, 1980s comic books held the most influence on female fan culture. Part of this awakening was due to characters like Kitty Pryde.

The 2012 anthology *Chick's Dig Comics* presented multiple articles written by women who are vocal within the comic book community about their experiences as comic book fans, writers, and cosplayers. Jill Thompson worked on *Wonder Woman*, the award-winning *Sandman* with Neil Gaiman, and her own comic series *Scary Godmother*.   While Thompson grew up reading and enjoying *Archie Comics*, it wasn't until her early teen years that her passion for comics was ignited through a copy of *Uncanny X-Men* #131. After reading this issue, Thompson's love of comics was born and was further nourished by seeing herself reflected in the stories and characters,

> She [Kitty Pryde] kind of looked like me! She was the same age as Me! Lived in the Chicago area! Boy oh boy, I identified with her immediately. I hit the ground running right along with that character. Lord knows, I always wanted magical powers, super

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[163] Chris Claremont, and John Byrne, "Child of Light and Darkness," *The Uncanny X-Men.* 1, no. 136 (October 1980), lettercol.

> powers, some kind of amazing power...and here was a comic filled with a bunch of women who had powers beyond belief.[164]

Thompson's neighborhood comic book store owner, Rick, encouraged her love of reading. What was once a hobby blossomed into a career as a comic book artist.[165] X-Men was one of the few comic books of the 1980s that stayed faithful to a feminist message with multiple female characters regularly interacting.

While Kitty had characteristics like the 1970s heroines, she was more indicative of the 1990s-action heroine: stubborn, strong-willed, and confident in her abilities. She would continue to influence other writers, directors, and artists throughout her run.[166] Her introduction marked an awkward time between second and third wave feminism. Writer Margaret Galvin's article "Kitty to Cat" has been widely referenced throughout comic book scholarship. In it, she interpreted Kitty's ability to walk through solid matter as a symbol of transcending boundaries.[167] Out of all the characters introduced during this time, Kitty Pryde best embodied the ideology of second wave feminism while also acting as a precursor to third-wave feminism. Third wave feminism was a younger demographic than second wave feminism. Galvin further stated Jean Grey's death signaled the shortcomings of the 1970s-white feminism. However, she argued:

> By marked contrast, Storm thrives in the 1980s, redefining herself… and besting Cyclops for leadership even during a period of powerlessness…all of which underscores the flourishing of multicultural feminism that takes place in the decade. In forging a

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[164] Jill Thompson, "Comic Book Junkie," in *Chicks Dig Comics,* eds. Lynne M. Thomas and Sigrid Ellis (Des Moines, IA: Mad Norwegian Press, 2012), 139.

[165] Thompson, "Comic Book Junkie," 140.

[166] Producer, director, and writer Joss Whedon is a well-known comic book fan. His desire to write strong female characters, stemmed in part from the lack of feminist characters during the 1980s. In multiple interviews, he has stated that his most revered and iconic character of the 1990s, Buffy Summers, was influenced by Kitty Pryde. "Interview: Neil Gaiman and Joss Whedon," *Time Magazine*, (Sept. 25, 2005) http://content.time.com/time/arts/ article/0,8599,1109313-3,00.html.

[167] Margaret Galvin, "From Kitty to Cat: Kitty Pryde and the Phases of Feminism" in *The Ages of the X-Men: Essays on the Children of the Atom in Changing Times,* ed. Joseph J. Darowski (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014), 48-49. [180] Galvin, "From Kitty to Cat," 49.

relationship with Storm respectful of her wisdom and leadership, Pryde represents a new breed of feminist who operates horizontally in how she transgresses boundaries and builds partnerships.[180]

In most popular culture to date, women are depicted as territorial and threatened by any women entering their domain. Kitty challenged this stereotype by interacting with multiple female characters. She looked up to her mentors who were strong and competent women, and she formed friendships with girls her own age. Kitty is read as a feminist due to the subtext in language. One objective of third wave feminism, or Girlie Feminism, was challenging stereotypes and embracing multiple aspects of girlhood whether they were traditionally feminine or masculine concepts.[168] Mutants in the Marvel Universe were a metaphor for discrimination. Throughout the series, Kitty fought against discrimination and did not allow others to dismiss or belittle her; she fully embraced her mutant identity.   Her speeches against discrimination can be read as advocating against sexism. Her actions are read as feminist, promoting sisterhood and female strength. Iconic subtext throughout the X-Men series would continue to inspire fans on a personal level, helping them find acceptance within themselves.

The X-Men were different from previous superhero teams due to their status as outsiders. They were mutants, declared by society as freaks, and yet the X-Men continued to help those who condemned them. Fans who were considered outsiders due to their race, gender, or sexuality could relate to these characters who did not fit societal norms. Sigrid Ellis, editor-inchief of *Apex*, an online magazine specializing in prose and poetry about science fiction, has been vocal about her experience with comic books. In her article "Kitty Queer" she discussed her personal journey acknowledging her sexuality. In college, Ellis was exposed to LGBT

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[168] Jennifer K. Stuller, *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors: Superwomen in Modern Mythology*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010). 67-68

history and how same-sex relationships had not been recognized in mainstream literature and cinema. However, some writers and artists explored gay and lesbian relationships through subtext. Upon re-reading a copy of *Excalibur* #24, part of the X-Men series, Ellis rediscovered a scene depicting Kitty and one of her friends, Courtney Ross, in a romantic situation. While Kitty Pryde had been written as straight, the subtext regarding her relationship with her friends Illya Rustputent, Rachel Summers and Courtney Ross connected with Ellis on an emotional level. If one of Ellis' favorite characters was a lesbian, she questioned what this revelation and relationship could mean for her. She could find acceptance and hope within characters and stories she had grown to love. Ellis gives Chris Claremont credit "…for slipping queers into my comics when the CCA forbade it. When I did finally come out to myself, the X-Men didn't judge me."[169] Many individuals felt isolated by their hidden sexuality and found comfort in subtext written for their favorite characters. Many writers implemented changes that would further social commentary and positive representation regarding gender and sexuality in later comic books.

However, throughout most of the 1980s writers struggled with positively portraying main characters of different sexualities. The character Northstar, created by Chris Claremont and John Byrne in 1979, was written as a gay man who was "in-the-closet" reportedly due to CCA regulations prohibiting an openly gay superhero lead. Similarly, in 1988 DC created Extrano, a flamboyant hero that embodied every stereotype associated with gay men. Both Northstar and Extrano were meant to have an AIDS storyline to address the growing concerns of the time;

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[169] Sigrid Ellis, "Kitty Queer," Ed. Lynne M. Thomas and Sigrid Ellis, *Chicks Dig Comics* (Des Moines, IA: Mad Norwegian Press, 2012), 110.

however, both Marvel and DC deemed the story arcs as too controversial.[170] Unfortunately,

there are few primary and secondary sources available regarding these two characters and the

CCA's control over comics during the 1980s. According to Amy Kiste Nyberg, one of the few

writers to cover the influence of the CCA, censorship in mainstream comics was beginning to

wane throughout the 1980s.[171] However, even with the 1971 revision, section C of the CCA was

still intact, stating: "All elements or techniques not specifically mentioned herein, but which are

contrary to the spirit and intent of the Code, and are considered violations of good taste and

decency, shall be prohibited."[185] The vagueness of such a statement allowed censors the

authority to eliminate anything they deemed inappropriate. While most comic book companies

were willing to adhere to the regulations dictated by the CCA, DC Comics was the most vocal

about demanding updates to these regulations.[172] While Marvel was producing comics that drew

parallels to American society, even slightly promoting feminist messages, DC had taken a darker

view on social issues.

Dystopian Futures and Their Influence

The most notorious comic books series published under DC in the 1980s were *V for

Vendetta* (1988) and *Watchman* (1986). These stories were set in alternative worlds where

nuclear war began, while totalitarian governments and vigilante sanctions dictated the needs of

the public. *V for Vendetta* acted as a mirror for societal concerns of the 1980s. The title

character, V, seeks vengeance against the English Government that forced him into a series of

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[170] Kara Kvaran, "SuperGay: Depictions of Homosexuality in Mainstream Superhero Comics," in *Comics as History, Comics as Literature: Roles of the Comic in Scholarship, Society, and Entertainment,* ed., Annessa Ann Babic (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014), 146-148.
[171] Nyber, "Comic Book Censorship in the United States,"58 [185] Lent, *Pulp Demons*, 274.
[172] Nyber, "Comic Book Censorship in the United States," 59.

experiments. The people forced into these experiments did not conform to the perfect white

supremacy image, such as ethnic minorities, gay men and women. Hundreds of men and women

were placed in internment camps and died due to a combination of experiments and poor living

conditions. Valerie Page, an actress interned at one of these camps for her sexuality, left a letter

hidden in the walls of her cell.   The letter states,

> In 1992, after the take-over, they [the government] started rounding up the gays...They
> came for me, they told me that all my films would be burned. They shaved off my hair.
> They held my head down a toilet and told jokes about lesbians. They brought me here
> [the internment camp] and gave me drugs. I can't feel my tongue anymore. I can't
> speak…I imagine I'll die quite soon.[173]

These comics are dynamic messages about prejudice regarding sexuality. Both *V for Vendetta*

and *Watchman* have been praised for their reflections of societal fears of the 1980s. Nazi

Germany clearly influenced the internment camps and totalitarian government in *V for Vendetta;*

however, the plot can also be viewed as an allegory for the AIDs crisis. The AIDs epidemic

became a worldwide concern; however, government officials did little to ease public concerns.

However, there is little academic or popular writing about the influences surrounding the

creation of *V for Vendetta*.

Even before AIDs became a widespread disease there was a stigma associated with being

gay, and for this reason many individuals kept their sexuality hidden. While lesbian liberation

had been part of the second wave feminist movement, the factions had separated by the end of

the 1970s. Members of the LGBT community were further marginalized by mass hysteria

regarding the spread of the HIV virous. The combination of miscommunication and lack of

appropriate medical knowledge regarding communicable diseases resulted in both fear of the

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[173] Moore and Lloyd, *V for Vendetta*, 159.

disease and fear of the gay community.[174] The AIDs epidemic was a social, political, and

personal concern throughout the United States, and the comic book industry recognized this

growing concern. As previously mentioned, both Marvel and DC writers attempted to explore

these topics; however, it would not be until the 1990s when comic book writers and artists would

attempt to draw analogies to the spread of AIDs. While *V for Vendetta* had succeeded in

representing the fear the LGBT community experienced during such a crisis, other comics

missed this opportunity to relate to readers on a personal level. Most comic book plots and

characters were missed opportunities to discuss topics of gender and sexuality.   While DC was

focused on more adult themes in their comic books, their regular comic series were being

reimagined.

   Wonder Woman had dramatically transformed during the 1980s to resemble the initial

concepts of creator William Marston once again. Etta Candy, Wonder Woman's sidekick and

Diana Prince's coworker during the Golden Age, appeared more regularly throughout the Bronze

and Modern Age of Comics. In several issues, Etta is the motivation for Wonder Woman's

actions and progresses the plot. Etta and Wonder Woman have girls' night together and when

Etta is attacked by a demonic presence, Wonder Woman risked her life to save her friend.[175] One

of the greatest changes was in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, when Wonder Woman was erased from

existence. However, Wonder Woman was re-introduced to the DC Universe in 1988. Her

Amazon nation was composed of politically correct, racially diverse, peaceful warriors living on

the island of Theymescara. Wonder Woman was an ambassador of the people. According to

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[174] Paul J. Schmidt, "Blood, AIDS, and Bureaucracy. The Crisis and the Tragedy," *Transfusion Medicine Reviews* no. 25, January 1, 2011: 336 (accessed April 1, 2017).

[175] Gerry Conway, Jose Delbo, Dave Hunt, "The Strange Disappearance of Etta Candy!" *Wonder Woman*. 1, no. 279 (May, 1981), 6-14.

Madrid, "Writer/artist George Perez was trying to make the reintroduction of Wonder Woman friendly to female readers. She had a strong, muscular body that wasn't overly sexualized, and no longer wore high heels."[176] Unlike the other comic books of the 1980s, Wonder Woman was dramatic and lacked the grittiness of other comic series. The series revolved around messages of sisterhood and femininity. However, the *Wonder Woman* series would again be updated in the early 1990s.

Comic books have often focused less on being socially relevant and instead drew influence from historic events. Many comics that drew inspiration from World War II never addressed the horrors of concentration camps. However, in the 1980s writers were drawing clear analogies to the Holocaust. The 1980s *Uncanny X-Men* series "Days of Future Past" was set thirty-three years in the future, where mutants are considered dangerous and their numbers have diminished due to mutant-hunting robots, the sentinels. Those who were still alive have been forced to live in concentration camps and are on the verge of being comply obliterated by the sentinels. The comic book *Maus*, running from 1980 to 1991, was an allegory for the Holocaust, using animals to symbolize different religious and national groups. Mice represented Jewish men and women persecuted by cats an allegory for the Nazis. The comic received both praise for originality and intent as well as criticism for being insensitive and demeaning for the use of animals to represent such a horrific historical event. [177] Comics gained recognition as serious pieces of literature and art.

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[176] Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 213.

[177] Rhodes, A Complete History of American Comic Books, 126-127; Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman and Harvey Pekar* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 96-98.

Popular culture of the 1980s was more comfortable in depicting imperfect images of American society. Divorce rates in the United States increased, marriages were delayed and the nuclear family dissipated.[178] As a result, more popular media such as comic books and movies depicted more diverse homes. As stated previously Kitty Pryde's parents divorced in the middle of the series, and Janet van Dyne divorced her husband Hank Pym after he strikes her in a fit of rage. Even the Invisible Woman and Mr. Fantastic had separated in the late 1970s.[179] These events were parallels young readers could relate to as they were becoming the norm throughout American culture.

The Rise of Female Objectification

While feminist messages were lacking in most comic books, based on 1980s lettercols female readership escalated. It was during this time the female geek community began to grow. Multiple fans including Thompson were initially content with their small realm of comic book fans. However, as comic conventions became more common, fans realized that the number of female comic readers remained small.[180] Despite female fan letters dominating the lettercols of certain comic books, male comic book writers and fans were surprised to learn that women were reading comics. The age-old stereotype that girls do not read comic books was being challenged. However, it would take years before the female fan community became vocal about their investment in comic books. For years, female comic book fans had to combat sexism from other comic book fans and the comic book industry.

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[178] Bob Batchelor and Scott Stoddart, *The 1980s* (Westford: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), 24.
[179] Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 163, 226, 236.
[180] Tara O'Shea, "Confessions of a (Former) Unicorn," Ed. Lynne M. Thomas and Sigrid Ellis, *Chicks Dig Comics*, (Des Moines, IA: Mad Norwegian Press, 2012), 94-95.

During this time comic books continued to delay stories that addressed sexual issues of the time. This resulted in comics barely remaining relevant to current events. During the 1970s, the feminist movement pushed the image of a sexually liberated woman. It wasn't until the Dark Phoenix saga that X-Men writers could explore the sexual side of female identity. Jean Grey was possessed by an alien entity, the Phoenix, which gave her unparalleled power. While Jean could initially control the entity, and use this power to her advantage, she was eventually defenseless against Phoenix. Mike Madrid commented on Jean's turn to the dark side, "Despite the advances that women had made in comic books, there was still a message that they could not handle power as well as a man. They were powerful women giving into their desires, regardless of the costs."[181]   However, the Dark Phoenix provided depth for the character of Jean Grey, while raising the stakes for other teammates. The story can also be interpreted as a sexual awakening, transforming Jean from a clean and wholesome figure to a sexual being. However, her sexual liberation was short lived, lasting less than ten issues, before Jean Grey was killed.[182] Despite this failed attempt at sexual liberation, this comic continues to be revered by fans. Jean Grey's short lived sexual liberation was a metaphor for the 1980s. While female characters were sexual, their sexuality was clearly written for the male gaze. They were not written to embrace their gender, but to exploit it.

While the 1970s had brought a sense of embracing the female body, the 1980s were about admiration of the body. Men were drawn with broad chests and defined muscles, while women had sleek bodies with flawless skin and perfect proportions. There were notable exceptions to these standards, the most prevalent being Kitty Pryde. One of the most sexualized characters during these times was the Marvel villainess Emma Frost, the White Queen, first appearing in

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[181] Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 236.
[182] Chris Claremont and John Byrne, "Fate of the Phoenix," *The Uncanny X-Men*, 1, no. 137 (January, 1980), 31-35.

Uncanny X-Men #129. The White Queen could turn her skin into a nearly indestructible diamond substance. Additionally, she was telepathic, using her power of mind control to manipulate and deceive men to gain her own objective. Michael R. Lavin's article, "Women in the Comic Books" stated, "Her over-the-top costume was the stuff of male sexual fantasy: a push-up bustier, panties, and high-heel boots, all in white. The color scheme was particularly jarring, combining her look of a dominatrix with that of a demure bride."[183] Sensuality and sexier characters were becoming a bigger part of Marvel and DC Comics. Most popular culture of the 1980s capitalized on sex. While Cher had removed the taboo surrounding the belly button in the 1980s, Madonna had taken the world by storm with overtly sexual clothing. Many women were rejecting traditional feminine looks, instead choosing to wear bold colors and clothing that accentuated the female body.[184] However, popular culture had taken many of these changes to a new extreme with more provocative dress.

Sex became a tool to sell comic throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Marvel Comics introduced a very sexually appealing character in *Savage She-Hulk*. She-Hulk, also known as Jennifer Walters, was the cousin to Bruce Banner, the Incredible Hulk. After an accident, she required an emergency blood transfusion, and due to the limited time available, Banner gave her his blood. This transfusion resulted in her obtaining his hulk-powers. The *Savage She-Hulk* was canceled after one year; however, by the end of the series she was stronger than her male counterpart. Instead of losing control of her hulk form like Banner did, Jennifer was in constant control of herself. Throughout future series, She-Hulk was always in hulk form. Her character

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[183] Michael R. Lavin "Women in comic books," *Serials Review*, 24, no. 2, (1998), 97

[184] Nancy Whittier, *Feminist Generations: The Persistence of the Radical Women's Movement* (Philadelphia; Temple University Press, 1995), 218.

was confident, strong, and not apologetic about her sexuality. For years after the cancellation of *Savage She-Hulk*, her character made regular appearances in *Avengers* and *Fantastic Four*. In *Fantastic Four,* writer John Byrne created the definitive version of She-Hulk. Madrid stated, "…She-Hulk was the quintessential 1980s powerwoman—powerhouse lawyer by day, entirely capable of a man's job; by night, a seven-foot, emerald-hued hard body. The reinvented SheHulk wasn't just sexy, she was sexual…." She was big and beautiful, and could be unapologetic about her sexual appetite.[185] Unlike other characters in previous decades, She-Hulk was not punished for her sexual appetite and desires.

In 1990 the *Sensational She-Hulk* helped introduce meta humor into the comic book realm. Throughout the series, Byrne demonstrates the ridiculous ways popular culture objectifies women. One of the most infamous examples of satirizing objectification was in *Sensational SheHulk* #40, where the writer forces She-Hulk to jump rope "naked." Due to CCA regulations regarding nudity, She-Hulk's body is never fully revealed. While jumping rope, She-Hulk laments the ridiculousness of the situation. She states, "I mean here I am a successful **lawyer**…A member of the **Avengers**…A reserve member of the **Fantastic Four** no less…And just because I happened to make a **joking** remark in the letters page…I end up with all the **dignity** and **respect** I've worked so hard to **gain**…**Wiped away** in the name of a cheap thrills and – **maybe**—higher wages!"[186] While this issue came out in 1992, it was symbolic of the sexualization so prevalent in the 1980s. *She-Hulk* editor, Renee Witterstaetter, was written into the comic, pulling the jump rope away from She-Hulk and commenting on the absurdity of such a stunt. The next panel

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[185] Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 262

[186] Roy Cook, "Jumping Rope Naked: John Byrne, Metafiction, and the Comics Code." In Heroines of Comic Books and Literature: Portrayals in Popular Culture. Ed. Maja Bajac-Carter, Norma Jones, and Bob Bachelor, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 187.

reveals that She-Hulk had a swimsuit on the whole time, blurred by the movement of the ropes. Witterstaetter further comments that anyone who thought she would jump rope naked deserved to lose money on this issue.[187] A common trope throughout the series was Witterstaetter preventing writers from sexualizing She-Hulk. *Sensational She-Hulk* was praised by fans for its original writing and its use of meta humor. Byrne was known for his beautifully drawn female characters in skimpy outfits and alluring poses; however, throughout his run as writer he utilized satire to provide commentary about the CCA regulations and questioned the use of sleaze in comic books.

Throughout the 1980s various anti-pornography groups were being established. A large percentage of the sex wars revolved around women having rights over their bodies. This aspect of feminism was largely unrecognized in the 1980s most likely due to a lack of exposure by popular culture as well as women branching off from well-known feminist organizations. Additionally, the anti-pornography movements did not have a clear objective on how to stop men from abusing pornography nor using it as an excuse for objectification and abuse of women.[188] Regardless of the anti-pornography influence on feminism, there was a clear attempt to stop objectification of female characters in the media. Most media of the 1980s was geared at male audiences. Thus the independent female character who was sexually liberated was lost and replaced by male perceptions of the perfect woman.

The boldness of female characters' costumes and designs was reliant on CCA regulations of the time. The 1989 revision was more ambiguous, and the sections on attire and sexuality were given broader guidelines, such as, "Costumes in a comic book will be considered to be

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[187] Cook, "Jumping Rope Naked," 188.
[188] Duggan and Hunter, *Sex Wars*, 66-68.

acceptable if they fall within the scope of contemporary styles and fashions…Primary human sexual characteristics will never be shown. Graphic sexual activity will never be depicted."[189] The changes made during the 1980s and 1990s helped in creating comic books that were openly sexist in how they depicted female characters. The CCA's dissolution in the early 2000s has been viewed as a positive event, allowing comic books artists and writers opportunities to freely explore various controversial topics. However, there continues to be no accountability for sexualizing female characters.

Comic books of the 1990s continued to struggle with presenting feminist messages. However, by the mid-1990s organizations such as *Friends of Lulu* were founded to help increase female readership in comic books. For seventeen years, *Friends of Lulu* promoted female representation and assisted in endorsing and recognizing female artists. While this organization was successful, mainstream comic books were at a standstill in promoting feminism. The 1990s also ushered in the beginning of third wave feminism, which had multiple facets and factions including the "Girl Power Movement" and the "Riot Grrrl Movement." The girl movements were motivated by a younger demographic embracing concepts of "girlhood" and encouraging young women to challenge gender norms. However, third wave feminism would be another concept comic book artists would struggle to portray. The wide accessibility of the internet in the twenty-first century allowed more readers to access independent and self-published comics by women as well as drawing attention to sexism within the comic book industry.

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[189] Lent, *Pulp Demons,* 278.

Conclusion

The Women's Liberation Movement influenced the comic books industry by promoting the creation of more strong and diverse female characters. While comics did not always have a direct influence on cultural events, their effect on readers and fans shaped public opinion of comic books. At the beginning of the 1950s female comic book characters were dangerous influences that needed to be tapered, but by the 1990s these characters had become symbols of feminine pride and strength. Comic books have a long and convoluted history of feminism with various phases of progressive and regressive representation. Comic books of the 1950s and 1960s were part of this regressive era with more plots revolving around maintaining social norms than promoting feminist messages. By the late 1960s, writers begin to deviate from the traditional stories of the Silver Age.

While feminism was hinted at during the 1960s, 1970s comic books writers and artists embraced the changing atmosphere introduced by second wave feminism. Dozens of new female characters of different backgrounds and ethnicities were introduced to readers. Many of these writers attempted to create comics centered specifically around feminist rhetoric and ideology. Artists and writers such as Chris Claremont, John Byrne and Trina Robbins have gained reputations for being feminist writers due to their work. While many of these early comics failed, they helped create characters which continue to play important roles in modern comics. The 1970s helped cement the relationship between female characters and the public. Wonder Woman became a symbol of Women's Liberation and writers began to challenge stereotypical depictions of women in the media including comic books.[190] These comics

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[190] Glicksohn, *The Poison Maiden & the Great Bitch*, 3-14.

explored questions of female identity, authority, and sexuality. This is not to say representation of feminism was always accurate or inclusive. Most of the feminist rhetoric was geared at Caucasian audiences. Readers did not learn about rallies, protests, nor all the goals feminist strived to achieve.

The underground comic movement was at its strongest during the 1970s, introducing topics that were prohibited in mainstream comics. The feminist objective and goals were best mirrored in the titles *Tits and Clits* and *Wimmens Comix*. Abortion, same sex relationships, sensuality and taboo topics regarding the female body were openly discussed and depicted in these issues. While these series were not as well-known as mainstream comics they were hailed by feminists and comic book fans as an important turning point in female representation and involvement in comics.[191]

Feminism for most comic books of the 1980s had come to a complete stand still. Many female comic book characters were seriously maimed, killed, or overly sexualized. However, comic book writers explored darker themes of rape, gender, and prejudice. Marvel's *Annual #10* presented the most potent message about rape and how it affected not only women, but the surrounding community. Feminism was no longer as prominent a part of popular culture in the 1980s, but feminist organizations were still attempting to pass legislation to benefit and protect women legally.[192] Some comic writers explored aspects of gender as well as the harsh treatment of gay men and women while inserting subtext regarding characters that were "in the closet." Gender norms were being challenged, women could have traditionally feminine roles or they could have traditionally masculine roles. These characters and stories helped fans and readers

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[191] Jill Katz, "Women and Mainstream Comic Books," *Int. J Comic Art,* 10, no. 2 (Fall, 2008), 105-106.
[192] Smith, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History*, 553.

become more comfortable with themselves and embrace their identity as geeks. The 1980s presents two contradictory images as both progressive and regressive depictions of women coexisted in the comic book industry.

Recently there has been debate on whether superhero comics ought to address social issues. Should they be stories only to entertain the masses?[193] Comic books have always relied in their relevancy and their ability to connect with readers on an entertaining and emotional level. Moreover, comic books continue to change with the surrounding environment. In DC's *New 52* series, released in the early 2000s, writers revealed Batwoman was a lesbian. From 2009 to present, a new origin story for Batwoman was published so that readers could see more of her background, including her dishonorable discharge from the military for admitting to her superior officer she was gay. Unlike other comics, readers saw the toll crime fighting has on her as both a superhero and a civilian.[194] The strain of being a superhero has been a prevalent topic in recent comics. In 2012, Carol Danvers assumed the title of Captain Marvel, while the title of Ms. Marvel was passed onto Kamala Khan, the first female Muslim character in Marvel Comics. The new Ms. Marvel series followed the evolution of Kamala as she struggles to fight crime, balance societal expectations, and honor her heritage. Female empowerment continues to be a prevalent part of comic books with many early comic characters and concepts acting as inspirations for future characters and plots.

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[193] Tom Knighton, "Marvel Comics to Abandon Social Justice Storylines?" PJ media, (February 8, 2017) https://pjmedia.com/trending/2017/02/08/marvel-comics-to-abandon-social-justice-storylines/ (Accessed March 30, 2017).

[194] Carole Pruett, "My Secret Identity," in *Chicks Dig Comics*, ed. Lynne M. Thomas and Sigrid Ellis, (Des Moines, IA: Mad Norwegian Press, 2012), 71-73.

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