

Apr 20th, 1:00 PM - 2:30 PM

## Siren Song: A Rhetorical Analysis of Gender and Intimate Partner Violence In Gotham City Sirens

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### Repository Citation

Schmidt, Scarlett, "Siren Song: A Rhetorical Analysis of Gender and Intimate Partner Violence In Gotham City Sirens" (2015). *Graduate Research Symposium (GCUA) (2010 - 2017)*. 1.  
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# Siren Song: A Rhetorical Analysis of Gender and Intimate Partner Violence in *Gotham City Sirens*

Scarlett Schmidt  
Communication Studies

## Abstract

This project investigates comic book discourse. Specifically, I investigate how comic narratives provide readers with an interpretation for how they should discern and assess “appropriate” behaviors for women. The artifact of analysis included in this project is DC Comic’s *Gotham City Sirens* (2009). This text features popular female superheroes: Catwoman, Harley Quinn, and Poison Ivy. Because comic books utilize both textual and visual means to disseminate a message, this project evaluates the visual rhetoric of these characters within the narrative. Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm is used to provide an understanding to how these visual means contribute to the meanings assigned in the narrative. Using these paradigms as organizing principles, I argue that *Gotham City Sirens* provides readers with a specific interpretation of gender expectations and gender related social issues like Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). In terms of gender, these characters experience a tension between their gender expectations and the expectations derived from their roles as superheroes. The way in which these characters resolve this tension influences the meanings they are assigned based on their experiences with IPV. Ultimately, Catwoman and Harley Quinn are assigned meanings of “non-victimhood” that denigrates the significance of the issue and blames these women for their abuse. Superheroes have skyrocketed in popularity over the past fifteen years and their narratives are extending to individuals that are not necessarily comic readers. The cultural significance of superheroes suggests that comic books appeal to a wide audience who has the potential to be influenced, even implicitly, by these messages.

## Conceptual Background

- “Rhetoric is the study of what is persuasive.”
- The media is the “key site” for defining desirable gender expectation.
- The media is the “central source” of information about social issues.

## Comic Analogues

- Comics = imitation of reality.
  - That comparison is an interpretation that carries meaning.
- Readers can then use this meaning to perceive and assess real world issues relating to the message.
- Comic narratives are disseminated through a combination of visual and textual means .
- Both visual and textual devices send denotative and connotative messages based on real world meanings.
  - Meanings must be grounded in” good reasons.”
- These good reasons must ring true to a reader’s experience (narrative fidelity).



## What Time Tells: Gender, Society, and Female Superheroes

- Female superheroes reflect and provide meaning to socio-cultural gender expectations of a given time
- Thirty-eight inch bust size, a twenty-four inch waist, and a hip measurement of thirty-six inches.
  - Preferable to adhere to socio-cultural gender expectations over superhero expectations.
- Women who break gender expectations are too aggressive and therefore unable to fulfill superhero expectations.

## Golden Age (1938-1955)

- **Comics** – Female superheroes act as auxiliaries to male counterparts who are fighting the war.
- “Cheesecake” pinups

## Silver Age (1955-1970)

- **Comics** - Female superheroes fill archetypal gender roles (e.g. mother, virgin/whore, bitch). Danny O’Neil reconceptualizes Wonder Woman as a non-superhero .

## Bronze Age (1970-1988)

- **Comics** – Response to *Ms.* Magazine .

## Modern Age (1988-present)

- Comics – Female superheroes as supermodels.
- “The Renaissance” and calls for diversity.



## Conclusion

- Comic books have been and still are conceptualized as being for men.
- It is extremely difficult for a female superhero to fulfill both superhero and gender expectations — giving readers an interpretation that it is more desirable to meet gender expectations than have superpowers.
- The meanings assigned to these character through the tension of expectation influences the meanings assigned to them as victims.
- Superheroes have *a priori* meanings of agency, leaving female superheroes unable to be a “pure victim.”
- When female superheroes do not fulfill their expectations of agency, they cannot be placed in the pure victim/ agent dichotomy.
- Not being placed in the dichotomy gives these characters meanings of “non victimhood.”
- Meanings of non victimhood denigrate a victim’s experience with intimate partner violence and places blame for abuse on the victims.
- This text does not necessarily change beliefs but it does provide an interpretation of gender appropriate behavior.

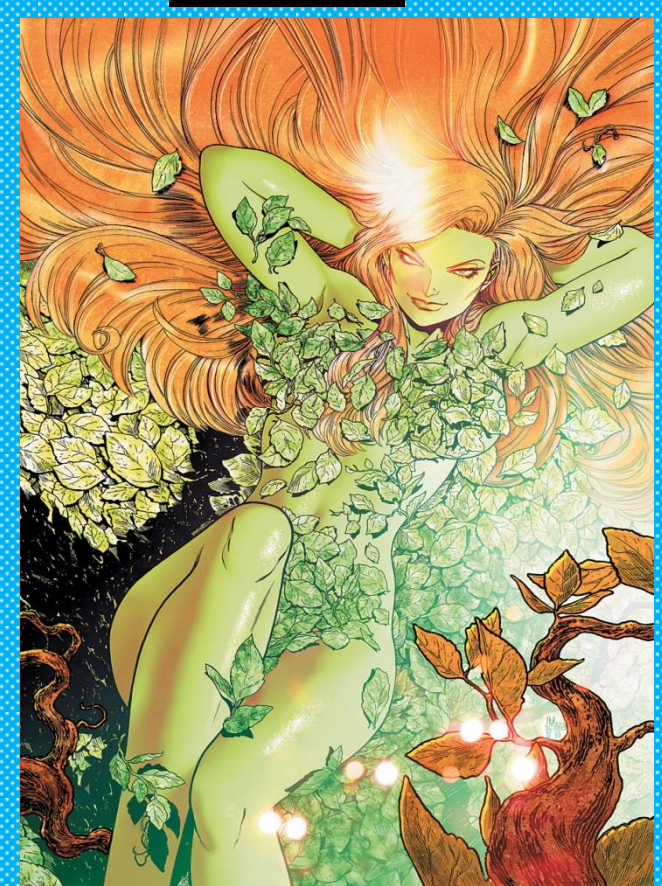
## Future Directions

- Examining gender AND race is outside the scope of this evaluation.
- This project evaluated a text from DC Comics, future research could investigate comic analogues in independent publishers to discern similarities and differences.
- Future research could analyze how these text could be used to justify sexism and sexual assault in “geek culture” and the general public.

## References

- Only brief references are provided. Please contact [schmi151@unlv.nevada.edu](mailto:schmi151@unlv.nevada.edu) to request references.
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## Poison Ivy - The Rose



- Manipulative and authoritative
  - “Cheesecake shots”
- Defies gender and superhero expectations – is portrayed as aggressive.

## Catwoman - The Kitten



- “Weak as a kitten.”
- Bound and tortured.
- Upholds gender expectations but defies superhero expectations.

## Harley Quinn - The Lolita



- The Lolita
- Sexualization of innocence.
- Too sexualized to fulfill gender expectations but too self-interested to uphold superhero expectations.

Abuser – cannot be defined in relation to victimhood

Intimate partner violence – overshadowed by Harley Quinn’s experience. Already has meanings of agency but is neither “pure victim” nor agent.

Intimate partner violence – main plot of the narrative. Already has meanings of agency but is neither “pure victim” nor agent. Preferred Interpretation – Harley is responsible for her abuse