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

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SIREN SONG:
A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF GENDER AND INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE IN *GOTHAM CITY SIRENS*

By

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Bachelor of Arts – Interdisciplinary Studies
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ABSTRACT

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

by 
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Dr. Sara VanderHaagen, Examination Committee Chair 
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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 Comics 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. 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 the narrative paradigm and visual rhetoric as organizing principles, I argue that Gotham City Sirens provides readers with an specific interpretation of gender expectations and gender related social issues like Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). Specifically, I argue that Gotham City Sirens provides readers with an interpretation of women that upholds traditional gender expectations while also providing an interpretation to IPV that upholds prevalent socio-cultural domestic violence myths that denigrate the
seriousness of the issue. 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 diminish 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. This 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.
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DEDICATION

To my very own superhero, Shane: thank you for all the meals you have cooked and then forced me to eat because you knew I forgotten to. Thank you for all the nights you have nodded your head and understood when I’ve said: “I’m sorry, I can’t. I have to finish writing.” Thank you for all the times you’ve distracted me with Stumbleupon or tumblr because you knew I needed a break. Thank you for making me laugh when grad school has made me want to do nothing but cry. Lastly, thank you for reinforcing that you would be there to catch me if I fell and for all the times that you have caught me. I have been writing about superheroes for the past year but the greatest superhero I know is you. I love you and am grateful for all that you do.
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Chapter One: An Introduction

Introduction

This thesis evaluates 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.\(^1\) Although there are various popular comic book characters, superheroes are the most well-known and commonly read type. Jeph Loeb and Tom Morris explain that superheroes have extraordinary powers and abilities that are commonly used to “pursue justice, defend the defenseless, [and] help those who cannot help themselves.”\(^2\) The characteristics of “pursuing justice” and “defending the defenseless” are often subjective and left to reader interpretation. Additionally, superheroes are not solely depicted as “heroes” or “saviors”, they are also portrayed as victims or conflicted individuals who possess both good and bad qualities. The history and prevalence of superhero comics has led this study to focus on how comics disseminate messages of gender and femininity. Though male superheroes offer readers a way for understanding gender expectations, I propose that a female superhero’s negotiation and enactment of gender and superhero expectations assigns meanings to these characters that provides readers with an interpretation of gender appropriateness and desirability. In order to better understand comic book messages concerning women, this project analyzes *Gotham City Sirens* (2009) as a rhetorical object. The Gotham City Sirens are three well-known female superheroes published by DC Comics: Harley Quinn (Harley Quinzel), Poison Ivy (Pamela Isley), and Catwoman (Selina Kyle).

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\(^1\) The terms comics and comic books will be used synonymously.

Comic books are recognized for the relationship between textual and visual devices in storytelling. Because these two modes work together to form a narrative, this project seeks to understand how text and image interact to disseminate a particular message about appropriate feminine actions and behaviors. As an overarching theme, I am interested in the ways that comic books depict women, their actions, and how meanings are assigned to those actions. When I started this project, I originally proposed two different texts and sought to evaluate how those texts contributed to notions of empowerment and/or objectification. The false dichotomy of my proposal was problematic and I reoriented this study to focus on gender expectations and messages about gender related issues like Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). In addition to reconceptualizing this project’s argument, I also changed my artifact to *Gotham City Sirens*. After reading the text, I came to realize that this narrative demonstrated a very explicit message about IPV, and I decided that it was important to understand how comic books provided interpretations about such social issues. Ultimately, this research seeks to comprehend if/how specific portrayals of women in comics provide readers with particular meanings assigned to womanhood, femininity, and victimhood.

With the completion of this study, I seek to expand on existing research regarding the depiction of women in popular culture and how those portrayals provide meanings of women and femininity. In my examination of *Gotham City Sirens*, I investigate the various rhetorical strategies exhibited in comics and how those strategies influence the meaning assigned to women. Scholars have examined the visual representations of women but rarely alongside a narrative. This project seeks to contribute to the field of
rhetorical studies by offering a new perspective of how gender is communicated through the media and how what is communicated has the potential to inform opinions.

**Research Purpose**

I ultimately seek to contribute to existing knowledge on comic books by investigating how comic books function as a unique form of discourse that is deserving of study. As I began to collect research for this project, I noticed that much of the previous work conducted on comic books explained its characteristics as a literary genre and its historical or sociological significance. Aside from the work of Kathleen Turner and Carol A. Stabile, comic studies have been largely ignored by those in the field of rhetorical studies. Notwithstanding this lack of research, comic books have been and continue to be prevalent fixtures in American culture. Within contemporary society, the public often gathers information about social expectations through mediated messages. Rhetoricians, feminists, mass media, and other scholars agree that the media has become a key source of information that defines expectations of gender and sexuality. I believe that the lack of attention on comic book discourse is problematic because it ignores a powerful interpretation of women and their expectations in society. Failing to recognize differing interpretations of womanhood and femininity hinders scholars’ ability to discern how gender expectations evolve, and are challenged and reinforced. The lack of rhetorical criticism on comics has motivated my study of this topic with the hope that I can introduce new rhetorical perspectives to the field of communication studies. Specifically, I wish to demonstrate the persuasive potential of texts that combine visual and textual strategies to disseminate their message. Additionally, I seek to expand existing knowledge on the impacts of visual messages occurring in narrative discourses. In due
course, I wish to introduce a way in which scholars can understand whether and how texts like comic books, have the potential to inform individuals’ attitudes and beliefs.

The prevalence and popularity of comic books serves as another justification for this study. Over the past seventy years, superheroes have had a significant cultural presence in the United States, appearing on mediums such as film, television, graphic novels, and comics. Since 2000, 37 superhero movies have been released, countless animated series have been created, ten live-action television shows have aired, and independent comic publishers have grown, resulting in increasing public interest in superheroes and their stories. For example, Marvel’s *The Avengers* (2012) broke the domestic box office record for a film’s debut weekend with $200.3 million, beating *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hollows, Part 2*’s record of $168 million. Television shows like *The Flash*, *Arrow*, *Gotham*, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, and *Agent Carter* have millions of viewers and a genre that was at one point on the brink of extinction has recently skyrocketed in popularity and cultural significance.

Though it may appear that comic books are only received by an isolated audience, the recent surge in public interest sparked by films like *The Avengers*, television shows like *Arrow*, and the availability of digital downloads have made comic books accessible to anyone who owns a television or has internet access. The long-standing target audience of comics is males between the ages of 16-35, yet comic books have come to gain readers from every ethnic background as well as readers who identify as female, transgendered, and/or androgynous. Recent market research suggests that 46.67% of comic readers are

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women, a percentage that indicates a shift away from the target demographic.\textsuperscript{4} With the prevalence of superheroes in American culture, it is important that scholars understand how these texts reflect and position certain members of society. The American comic book industry brought in an estimated $870 million in yearly sales for 2013.\textsuperscript{5} These sales numbers indicate that there is a large group of individuals who may be impacted by the messages of the stories they read in comic books. Because comics are increasingly popular, it is important to understand how these texts represent women and the implications for such representation. Superhero narratives are disseminated as entertainment. It is important to understand how rhetorical messages are disseminated as a form of entertainment because it can help scholars understand more of the implicit ways individuals are persuaded. This project hopes to advance ways in which critics can view how rhetorical messages can be disseminated through entertainment and the impacts of that persuasion.

In this chapter, I review literature concerning comic books. Of special consideration to this research is the “tradition” of female superheroes established in the Golden Age of comics (1938-1955). This literature review suggests that comic books are a mediated source of information that maintain and reinforce socio-cultural ideas that assign negative meanings to women who deviate from what is considered “normal” and “appropriate” behavior. Mila Bongco asserts that the visual and verbal interaction in comic books is versatile in that it influences how readers interpret a message.\textsuperscript{6}

Danzinger-Russell notes that the visual component is so essential to the narrative that “ignoring one medium leads to a misrepresentation of the story or worse, makes the sequence wholly incomprehensible.”7 In order to account for the interaction outlined by Bongco and Danzinger-Russell, this investigation will evaluate both the verbal and visual elements of *Gotham City Sirens* by also evaluating the text through the lens of visual rhetoric in addition to Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm. Following the literature, this chapter elaborates on how the narrative paradigm and visual rhetoric serve as exemplary frameworks for understanding this discourse. For clarification purposes, this chapter provides a plot summary of the text. To prevent confusion in later chapters, I will refer back to the plot summary described below. This chapter ends with a summary of the following chapters.

**Literature Review**

**Popular Culture and Rhetoric**

As noted above, the media is a key source of information and judgment in contemporary society. Rhetoricians like Kevin Michael DeLuca, Jennifer Peeples, and Simone Chambers have argued that mediated messages have influenced public deliberations on social issues, yet few scholars have examined mediated messages in comics. When scholars analyze the media, many look at film, television, and advertising but few look at comic books. Comics are mediated messages and as such, should be evaluated with the same importance. Notwithstanding this assertion, the lack of research conducted on these texts leads this project to rely on research about how women have been represented across different mediated formats. Perhaps such lack of investigation

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stems from different categorizations and definitions for what should be considered rhetorical. I support Campbell’s definition because it is broad enough to include emerging and unexamined forms of media while also providing a framework for what is considered rhetorical. This research advances Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s definition of rhetoric:

Rhetoric is the study of what is persuasive. The issues it examines are social truths, addressed to others, justified by reasons that reflect cultural values. It is a humanistic study that examines all the symbolic means by which influence occurs.⁸

With the concern “if everything is rhetorical than nothing is rhetorical,” some scholars have voiced their concern over accepting certain forms of communication as rhetorical, including comic books. When rhetoricians define certain texts as “non-rhetorical,” they are ignoring the individuals who could receive its message and the potential implications for such message. As I attempt to demonstrate throughout this project, comic books are rhetorical objects that have the potential to persuade readers, through symbolic means, towards a preferred interpretation of reality grounded in social truths. In order to better understand how comic books act rhetorically, it is important to comprehend how they fit within an overall context of media depictions in twenty-first century U.S. society.

In the twenty-first century, socio-cultural messages about gender and sexuality are increasingly being disseminated through mediated means. Angela McRobbie asserts that “the media has become the key site for defining codes of sexual conduct. It casts judgment and establishes the rules of play.”⁹ Defining codes of sexual conduct goes beyond establishing the “rules of play” for sexual activity to actually define what is

socially and culturally desirable in terms of gender. Deborah L. Tolman argues that the prevalence of mediated images and representations in contemporary society has influenced the ways culture views women and how women view themselves.¹⁰ Essentially, the media depictions of women define what is appropriate and normal for a woman, which in turn is established as a set of expectations assigned to women.

Ultimately, media depictions of women and the accompanied expectations highlight and disseminate a particular ideology concerning women and their roles in society. Deanna D. Sellnow describes ideology as “a perception shared by members of a particular group,” and she observes that the arguments that challenge or reinforce such ideology can appear in popular culture texts.¹¹ The beliefs and value systems of particular cultural groups are important because they are representative of a particular ideology that can be shaped, changed, and reinforced through rhetoric.¹² For example, a comic book reader may read a comic that sends a pro-gun control message to readers. If the reader is persuaded by the message, they may feel compelled to act within the political sphere and vote on pro-gun control legislation.

The negotiation of the beliefs and attitudes that accompany a specific ideology is often difficult in an atmosphere wherein individuals know they are trying to be persuaded. For popular cultural messages, like those in comics, persuasive potential lies within its ability to entertain a rather than lecture. Individuals are more likely to be guarded against persuasion if they believe that they are being persuaded. Rhetorical messages disseminated as entertainment have a persuasive advantage because they are

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¹² Ibid.
not explicitly trying to persuade an audience and persuasion is more likely to occur because an individual is not guarded against such message.\textsuperscript{13} Popular cultural message are commonly grounded in the experiences of every day human events and such grounding is used to support the message being disseminated. Sellnow explains that popular culture texts commonly center on the social truths of our everyday lives and in doing so, disseminate a message of what is desirable, appropriate, and normal.\textsuperscript{14} In order to define appropriateness, popular cultural messages ultimately empower and disempower certain people with specific definitions and expectations.\textsuperscript{15} As I explain throughout this project, popular culture texts typically depict women in accordance with what men find desirable. That is, women are often portrayed and defined by their sexuality, physically attractiveness, and submissiveness.

Popular cultural discourses can persuade audiences in more implicit ways by informing their judgments of a particular subject. Specifically, popular cultural discourses can provide an audience with a framework for understanding gender expectations and issues like IPV. Julia Wood contends that the media is a central source of information concerning social issues.\textsuperscript{16} For individuals who do not have experience with a particular social issue and/or perspective, they rely on information gathered by their experiences with the media to make judgments.\textsuperscript{17} When individuals do not have first-hand knowledge of a certain perspective or experience, they take from the definitions and expectations assigned by the media to inform their decision on how to interpret and assess a situation.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 7.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Sellnow, \textit{The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture}, 7.
The media can be an important source of information about domestic abuse and such information can contribute to how an individual perceives and makes judgments on IPV. Mary G. McDonald argues that media depictions of IPV reinforce a “hegemonic” ideology whereby females are trivialized as weak, passive, and needing guidance while males are valued for being strong, assertive, and aggressive.\(^\text{18}\) The media often frames IPV in a way that depicts women as weak and powerless; these meanings are problematic because they support a perception that women embody only these characteristics. Additionally, the meanings assigned to women in such framing are further problematic because they advance the harmful image of “pure victimhood.” Caroline Joan S. Picart notes that the media depicts victims of IPV in two ways: 1) as agents empowered enough to leave their abuser and; 2) as the “pure victim” who is unable to protect him- or herself and has been abused at no fault of their own.\(^\text{19}\) The concept of “no fault of their own” is of particular interest to this study because it implies that many victims of IPV are responsible for their own abuse. As stated above, *Gotham City Sirens* focuses on the violent relationships between Catwoman and Batman, and Harley and the Joker.

Following McDonald and Picart’s arguments, this project seeks to discern if these characters can be portrayed as agents or pure victims. If these characters are unable to be placed within the dichotomy, their victimhood may be perceived as less significant and thus, unimportant.

Within the scope of media, including comics, expectations and definitions assigned to women can be problematic. The commonality of sexualized representations


of women has the ability to establish a set of unrealistic expectations whereby women are
supposed to be attractive and sexual but not too sexual. Similarly, such sexualized images
define women by their sexuality, denigrating their other goals, pursuits, and ambitions in
favor of focusing on their body and perceived attractiveness. Kari Lerum and Shari L.
Dworkin observe that the sexualization of women is prevalent in American culture, and
the increasing use of mediated messages further exacerbates the sexualization of human
beings. 20 On billboards, film and television screens, magazines and more, women are
being represented as sexual objects. Lerum and Dworkin explain that the condition of
being sexualized means that a person has been subjected to at least one of four situations:

1. A person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior,
to the exclusion of other characteristics.
2. A person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness
(narrowly defined) with being sexy.
3. A person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others’
sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent
action and decision making.
4. Sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person. 21

When an individual is sexualized, their worth is thought to be derived from their
physical appearance; such emphasis has the potential to denigrate an individual’s
perception about themselves and others. The media has normalized the sexualized body
of women. In comics, writers, illustrators, and industry members sexualize female
superheroes for comic readers. Despite having extraordinary powers, female superheroes
have long been overshadowed by their male counterparts in numbers, diversity, and

20 Kari Lerum and Shari L. Dworkin, “Bad Girls Rule: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Commentary on the
251.
21 Ibid.
ability. I add to these observations positing that the sexualization of female superheroes influences how they are portrayed as subordinate to male superheroes.

**Comic Studies**

Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell Jr., and Ian Gordon assert that comic books are a unique form of media that places images within a narrative to communicate messages.\(^2^2\) As noted above, comic books tell their narrative alongside corresponding images. The interaction of text and images demonstrates a distinct form “with a highly developed grammar and vocabulary based on a unique combination of verbal and visual elements.”\(^2^3\) The visual elements can be used in a variety of ways to influence the way the narrative is read. Bongco argues that both visual and verbal elements serve as a mechanism through which comic creators can manipulate the meaning of the message they seek to convey.\(^2^4\) As narratives, comic books possess themes, plot lines, myths, and characterizations.\(^2^5\) The interaction between the visual and verbal elements manipulates symbols to guide readers towards a preferred interpretation of the text.

The sequential organization of image and text forms the narrative that is communicated to the reader. Comic narratives are organized as a series of panels that give the reader a moment-by-moment perspective of how the story unfolds.\(^2^6\) As if the narrative is “bringing before the eyes,” comic panels invite a reader to experience the story alongside the superhero so that they are privy to the personality characteristics of the hero and the actions that define them. In addition to panels, other conventions are

\(^2^3\) Bongco, *Reading Comics*, 46.
\(^2^4\) Ibid.
\(^2^6\) Bongco, *Reading Comics*, 58.
utilized to bridge the gap between visual and verbal elements. Word balloons serve to express the inner thoughts or emotions of a character, conversations, tone of dialogue and sound, as well as act as a source of description and explanation of an abstract concept.\textsuperscript{27} Certain fonts or colors are assigned to a particular character’s dialogue while word balloons are assigned certain shapes to allow readers to understand aspects of the narrative that are not indicated by a character’s dialogue. For example, word balloons in the shape of a rectangle may represent the setting of the narrative for the entire text while a word balloon in the shape of a cloud will depict a character’s inner thoughts for the entire text. The lettering and typography in the word bubbles serves another visual function in what Carrier calls a “vivid assertion” of that panel’s meaning.\textsuperscript{28} Carrier describes such assertions as “vivid” because they enable creators to convey a character’s emotions or the “feeling” of the setting.\textsuperscript{29} The interaction between these two elements creates a distinct narrative whereby the visual component significantly contributes to the narrative’s interpretation. This relationship is explained in greater detail later in this chapter.

Mila Bongco, David Carrier, Hannah Miodrag, and Brandford Wright all note that comics have been mostly ignored in academia due to the belief that comics are a “low” form of diversionary art meant for children.\textsuperscript{30} Though comic studies were for many years ignored in scholarly research, there has been a recent interest in comic books and comic scholarship. Bongco and Miodrag note that much of the early research conducted on

\textsuperscript{28} Carrier, \textit{The Aesthetics of Comics}, 31.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
comics has had a sociological lens, but the field has increasingly become interdisciplinary. For instance, historian Brandford Wright’s book *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (2001) focuses on the ways comic books serve as a means of understanding history and culture. Both Bongco (2000) and David Carrier’s (2000) works focus on the aesthetics of comic book discourse and the implications for these processes, while Miodrag (2013) focuses on the literary functions of comic book language. Scholar Gretchen Swartz published an article in 2007 in *The Journal of Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education*, in which she argued that comic books served as a useful way in which educators could teach students about social issues, media literacy, and citizenship. In following with the literary functions of comics, the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund released a comic for parents on Free Comic Book Day 2014 (May 3), titled: *Raising a Reader! How Comics & Graphic Novels Can Help Your Kids Love to Read!* by scholar Meryl Jaffee. Lastly, communication studies scholars like Kathleen Turner and Carol Stabile have analyzed the rhetorical processes of comic books. Turner notes the enthymematic arguments in comic discourse whereas Stabile evaluates patriarchal messages in superhero comics. Additionally, several rhetorical analyses of comic books have been presented at communication conferences like the National Communication Association. Though comics have yet to become widespread in rhetorical criticism, the aforementioned research suggests that comics have the rhetorical potential to send persuasive messages.

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31 Bongco, *Reading Comics*, 2; Miodrag, *Comics and Language*, 3.
Comic Books and Rhetoric

Since their inception at the height of the Great Depression, comic book narratives have highlighted social and political events and issues.\(^\text{32}\) The same discursive constructions that shape our reality simultaneously create the alternative reality of comic books, and the same institutions that shape our life inform comic book discourse. Comic book writer Grant Morrison argues that “we live in the stories we tell ourselves” and comic book narratives mirror our real world experiences.\(^\text{33}\) For example, when Captain America appeared on the pages of comic books during World War Two, he and his sidekick Bucky battled the Nazis and sent a message to readers that “America always wins.”\(^\text{34}\) Captain America also encouraged readers to rally in support of the war effort by recycling their comics after they were finished reading them; this call to action is cited as the reason that Golden Age (1930s-WWII) comics sell at auction for extremely high prices.\(^\text{35}\) During the 1970s, the United States saw a continuation of protests concerning environmental issues, the war in Vietnam, drug use, racism, women’s liberation and others. During this time the Green Lantern/Green Arrow comics highlighted real world issues concerning prejudice, environmentalism, and drug use by having their heroes combat these issues in a context that mirrored our own reality. Creator of the Green Lantern/Green Arrow comic, Danny O’Neil, discussed his hopes in illustrating complex social issues by noting, “my theory was that it was probably too late for my generation but maybe I’ll get a real smart twelve year old and get him thinking about racism.”\(^\text{36}\)

\(^{34}\) Goldin, *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*.
\(^{35}\) Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 34.
\(^{36}\) Goldin, *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*. 
Though some creators do not intend to send a political message, other creators have used a superhero’s story as a means of changing readers’ perceptions of real world events/issues. As comic book characters negotiate the meaning to alternative reality events and issues, readers negotiate the meaning of similar real world events in relation to the text.

The similarities between comic book realities and the real world are exceptionally salient and persuasive. According to Morrison, the similarities between the real world and comic book realities allow readers to identify with fictional characters by grounding the narrative in human experience.

Superhero stories speak loudly and boldly to our greatest fears, deepest longings, and highest aspirations […] They’re about as far from social realism as you can get, but the best superhero stories deal directly with mythic elements of human experience that we can all relate to, in ways that are imaginative, profound, funny, and provocative. They exist to solve problems of all kinds and can always be counted on to find a way to save the day. At their best, they help us to confront and resolve even the deepest existential crises.  

Jacqueline Danzinger-Russell notes that comic books enact cultural values and actions that make their message even more relatable. Rhetoric emerges out of events and times that demand utterances and comic books are at their most influential during catastrophic moments. Carol Stabile asserts that superheroes commonly emerge in response to real world moments of crisis, anxiety, and uncertainty. She continues to explain that culturally, a superhero represents a sort of “secular savior” that saves readers and the general public from that from which we cannot save ourselves. Notwithstanding

37 Morrison, Supergods, xvii.
38 Danzinger-Russell, Girls and Their Comics, 37.
40 Ibid.
Stabile’s arguments, I propose that it is not that we cannot save ourselves; rather, we look to these characters and rely on their experiences to make judgments on how we can save ourselves. The narratives that maintain cultural values and reinforce social truths validate a specific expectation for how an individual should address a critical situation. Despite taking place in a fictional reality, the reinforcement of social truths in comics opens up a space of deliberation Stabile refers to as “imagined here and nows.”

By being based in real life human experiences, policies, and emotions, comic books are able to bridge the gap between fantasy and reality and create a space of deliberation known as imagined here and nows. Comic books have the potential to offer readers a new insight about the ills that plague our social and political worlds in a context that is free from the situational distractions of our everyday lives. The imagined here and nows presented in comic books open up a space of deliberation in which readers can assess the impacts of a particular issue and figure out ways in which they can potentially solve that issue. If a comic were to depict a future American dystopia, it could lead readers to assess how American society could fall into disarray. Similarly, if a superhero saves a body of citizens, a reader may question why the citizens needed saving. As comic book characters negotiate the meaning of significant social, political, and personal issues within alternate realities, readers negotiate the meaning of the same issues within the context of their own world. Though Stabile contends that these spaces of deliberation most commonly appear in times of crisis, I extend her argument by observing that imagined here and nows are available whenever a text offers an interpretation of a social truth. Being grounded in human experiences heightens a comic’s persuasive potential

41 Ibid.
42 Stabile, “Sweetheart, This Ain’t Gender Studies,” 87.
because readers are able to connect the narrative to their own experiences. Such connections can make a comic’s narrative salient beyond moments of crises and can be used to inform a reader’s real world judgments in and out of times of crisis. Furthermore, these spaces of deliberation can be accessed beyond moments of crisis to become spaces in which readers make judgments about social truths concerning gender, race, class, and physical ability.

Within the context of twenty-first century society, many individuals base their attitudes and beliefs about gender on preexisting traditional notions that subordinate women to men. Despite the improvements of female civil liberties in the last century, women continue to experience fewer opportunities and more prejudices than men. Female superheroes, being grounded in human experiences, experience similar circumstances to women in the real world. Since the Golden Age, female superheroes have experiences fewer opportunities than their male counterparts and have commonly been relegated to the role of side-kick, auxiliary, and/or love interest. Within imagined here and nows, such representation becomes problematic because readers may rely on this information to make assessments about gender in the real world. In order to demonstrate the possible implications of these representations, I will explain the status of female superheroes.

Through my research, I noticed that above all else, female superheroes were expected to be exceptionally beautiful and physically fit. Such expectations fit within those media depictions of women that highlight and place a woman’s worth in her sexuality. In a field study I conducted at the Amazing Las Vegas Comic Con, Spiral Ink Comics artist Rob Hicks outlined his standards of beauty when drawing female
characters. Hicks explained that common representations of women had to fit a certain standard of beauty featuring high cheekbones, pouty lips, a thirty-eight inch bust size, a twenty-four inch waist, and a hip measurement of thirty-six inches. The standards of beauty in the comic book industry as outlined by Hicks are shocking in the fact that it is extremely difficult to meet this standard. As I explain in chapter two, this beauty standard is not isolated to Hicks’s artwork. Rather, this standard was first conceptualized during the Golden Age of comics and has experienced only minor changes throughout the ages. Because these standards of beauty are unlikely to be obtained in the real world, they raise important questions to how readers interpret these standards and if such interpretation extends into their perceptions about women in the real world.

Despite the diverse readership of comic books discussed earlier in the chapter, many of the most iconic superheroes are white men who have some sort of fortune (whether it be inherited or earned) and act as leaders over their more diverse counterparts, including women. Stabile argues that gender continues to be the “third rail” of comic book superhero narratives and that the underrepresentation of super heroines was still prevalent in 2014, when her study was conducted. Female superheroes are often subordinate to their male counterparts in agility, intelligence, and powers. In addition to these alarming characteristics, female superheroes are often portrayed primarily as a side kick or compatible love interest.

Since the Golden Age, there have been several well-known superheroines, the most iconic being Wonder Woman. Many other super heroines have followed in Wonder Woman’s footsteps: Batgirl, Captain Marvel, Ms. Marvel and several others. Despite the

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44 Stabile, “Sweetheart, This Ain’t Gender Studies,” 87.
emergence of these butt-kicking super heroines, female superheroes remain significantly outnumbered by their male counterparts. Mike Madrid argues when compared to male superheroes, female superheroes have never been able to meet their full potential. Rather, their strengths and agility have been overshadowed by plotlines concerning romance and family.\textsuperscript{46} Nathan Miczo argues that “superheroines fail to reach their potential when they are placed in situations that make salient negative female stereotypes (e.g., that females are fragile, hysterical, and catty) and/or when they are objectified by repeated emphasis on their physical appearance.”\textsuperscript{47} For example, one story arc starting in the mid-1970s features Wonder Woman voluntarily relinquishing her powers so that she can live a life of luxury and fall in love. Another example can be found in DC Comic’s Black Canary. Black Canary is a female superhero who has trained with prestigious organizations and defeated several dangerous villains in her story arcs. Yet many of her narratives focus on her romantic relationship with the Green Arrow. Jean Gray, the most powerful X-Men character, is mostly relegated to being the object of desire for her compatriots Cyclops and the Wolverine. Respectively, these female superheroes have super strength, sonic screams, and the most powerful telekinetic/telepathic powers in all comic book universes, yet these women have been delineated to plotlines that focus on romantic life over their abilities and past heroic acts.

The emphasis placed on the romantic lives of superheroines leaves little room for these women to save the public or act as role models. Sandra Lindow substantiates Miczo’s arguments by asserting that female superheroes are commonly omitted from


hero narratives aside from filling archetypal roles of mothers, virgins, whores, bitches, or seductive goddesses, which only reinforce dominant standards for youth, beauty, modesty, and ability. These subservient roles also position female superheroes as not only incapable of protecting citizens but also needing protection themselves. Stabile’s argument offers a good way of understanding such perceived lack of agency in two ways: 1) the lack of physical superiority and 2) the subversive consequences of disrupting patriarchal values. Stabile asserts that within this scenario, superheroes commonly protect a largely silent and feminized body of people; the protection given by superheroes reinforces patriarchal mores that uphold men as the protector and women as the protected.

Stabile explains that being a heroine implies less agency than that of a hero because comics that focus on the visual aspect of the protagonist depict men as having bodies that are strong, unbreakable, and able to prevail against any evil whereas female bodies are represented as breakable and easily obtainable as an object of desire. In essence, heroes have more agency because the male anatomy is perceived to be stronger than that of a heroine. Following McDonald’s argument explained above, male superheroes are more favorable because they are valued for their strength and aggressiveness whereas women are expected to be passive and weak. Despite being depicted as having less agency than their male counterparts, the physical strength and extraordinary abilities of these women bestows them with an expectation of agency. Though they are depicted as being less than their male counterparts they are expected to

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49 Stabile, “Sweetheart, This Ain’t Gender Studies,” 89.
have the self-determination and physical ability to protect themselves and others. Similar to the pure victim/agent dichotomy explained above, female superheroes can be interpreted as weak and subordinate when they fail to have agency. Another reason that heroines are considered to have less agency than superheroes is because they are situated in plotlines that emphasize their femininity and looks rather than physical strength. Combined, unrealistic body expectations, romantic plotlines, and subordinate physical prowess reinforce McDonald’s notions of hegemonic masculinity whereby men are valued for being stronger and more assertive than women. Within comic narratives, the visual depiction of superheroes combines with their actions in the story to inform readers of the meanings assigned to a character. In what follows, this chapter elaborates on the methods for this study and how these methods offer rhetorical scholars a way for understanding texts like comic books.

**Methods**

**The Narrative Paradigm**

The cultural phenomenon of comic books has been analyzed from a range of disciplinary standpoints. Campbell argues that a critical rhetorical analysis “examines rhetorical acts in order to describe processes of influence and explain how they occur.” Using Campbell’s definition of a critical analysis, this evaluation seeks to understand the processes of influence in *Gotham City Sirens* and explain how these processes occur. Because comic books use narratives to disseminate their message, this project adopts Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm for understanding the rhetorical potential of a superhero’s narrative. A rhetorical perspective offers this project a way in which I can

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understand how the interactions of the visual and verbal send persuasive messages to readers. As mentioned above, text and image work together to form a comic’s message. Because, as Bongco argues, text and images must be analyzed together in order to prevent a misreading of the story, I examine both the narrative and corresponding images of comics for this project. Furthermore, I seek to understand how the visual components influence the overall narrative. For this reason, the narrative paradigm is utilized as the overarching framework for this project. Specifically, I assert that Fisher’s ideas about narrative fidelity and good reasons are particularly significant to this research because they help explain how meanings assigned to characters are justified and persuasive.

Fisher asserts that the narrative paradigm extends Kenneth Burke’s concept that humans are symbol creating, using and abusing creatures that use these symbols to interpret the world around us.52 Fisher asserts that these symbols are commonly communicated through the stories humans tell.53 The stories human beings tell “give order to human experience” through constructions of “faith and fact” that have persuasive potential.54 Stories are incredibly influential on the ways human beings have carried on cultural values for centuries. Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon argue that narratives are especially influential because meaning can be inferred from a variety of perspectives.55 Fisher refers to narration as “a theory of symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them.”56 Fisher argues that the narrative is unique in that it offers a means for “resolving the dualisms of

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53 Ibid.
54 Ibid, 6-7.
modernism” including the dualisms of intellect-imagination, reason-emotion, and fact-value.\textsuperscript{57} Within this paradigm, Fisher asserts that narratives are moral constructs, based on reasoned meanings that resolve the issues of a public moral argument.\textsuperscript{58} Fisher’s narrative paradigm offers this study a framework in which I can understand the persuasive potential of comic book narratives.

Fisher asserts that the moral messages of narratives appeal to personal, cultural, and societal values by being grounded in “good reasons.”\textsuperscript{59} The good reasons that ground narratives in general increase persuasion by providing a significant warrant for acting in agreement to the text.\textsuperscript{60} Good reasons provide justification for the message presented in a narrative and, as Fisher explains, such justification influences the possible ways a reader agrees with or disputes a text.\textsuperscript{61} If a reader disputes a text, it may be due to the lack of narrative probability within the text. Fisher explains that readers are aware of what “constitutes a coherent story.”\textsuperscript{62} If a narrative were to lack narrative probability then it is unlikely that it would be persuasive. Like Morrison’s assertions about the persuasive potential of comics, Fisher asserts that a narrative fidelity can occur when a reader believes that a protagonist’s/narrator’s good reasons are true based on the reader’s experience.\textsuperscript{63} Persuasion is more likely to occur if there are similarities between a protagonist’s narrative and a reader’s experiences.

As stated above, comics as narratives are concerned with human experience. The similarities between comic books and the real world can lead readers to assess those

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid, 8.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
similarities in imagined here-and-nows. Portrayals of human experiences in comics make the judgments derived from this space of deliberation particularly significant because comic books are analogous to the real world. Roland Barthes argues that analogues in which text and image interact are linguistic messages that use certain tropes to reflect “our fundamentally relational understanding of reality.” As analogues of reality, comic books draw on socio-cultural meanings attached to a particular real world person, event, issue, and policy. Barthes conceptualizes his notion around the connotative and denotative messages given by an image, however it also extends to include narratives. Daniel Chandler explains that denotative messages are levels of representation whereas connotative messages are levels of meaning behind the representation. Both narratives and images carry two messages that form together to create an overarching message and/or meaning.

Bortolussi and Dixon assert that because narratives are concerned with human experiences and life events, they have the ability to influence a reader’s behavior. Ellen Peel explains this potential change in behavior by quoting feminist author Ursula K. Le Guin, who says

In reading a novel, any novel, we have to know perfectly well that the whole thing is nonsense, and then, while reading, believe every word of it. Finally, when we’re done with it, we may find—if it’s a good novel—that we’re a bit different from what we were before we read it, that we have been changed a little, as if by having met a new face, cross a street we never crossed before. But it’s very hard to say just what we have learned, how we were changed.

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65 Ibid. 142.
67 Ibid, 16
Wayne C. Booth explains that narratives enact a “point of view” in which readers can experience a character’s thoughts and feelings.\textsuperscript{68} Though readers may not be aware in exactly what ways their behavior has changed, the story has altered a reader’s perceptions about a particular life experience by undergoing the same experiences as a character. Similarly, Peel notes the impact of narratives on behavior by explaining that a culture or an individual’s beliefs are commonly grounded in narrative.\textsuperscript{69} For example, religious texts like the Christian Bible, the Torah, and the Quran are narratives by which millions of people across the globe formulate their beliefs. As discussed above, images work with text to assign meaning in comic narratives. In order to better explain how textual and visual means interact within an overall narrative, this thesis utilizes visual rhetoric to help explain how visual meanings communicate certain messages in a narrative.

Visual Rhetoric

It has been said that a picture is worth a thousand words, yet we do not know how many words a picture is worth within a narrative. Hanno H. Ehses argues “visual communication takes place on the basis of more or less conventionalized signs belonging to many kinds of codes of disparate languages.”\textsuperscript{70} Signs can be a representation of a particular “unit” in reality that only has meaning when an audience understands and “invest them [the unit(s)] with meaning with reference to a recognized code.”\textsuperscript{71} Codes are socio-culturally influenced frameworks that give context to a particular sign, providing

\textsuperscript{71} Chandler, \textit{Semiotics}, 241.
audiences with the proper conventions/devices needed to understand the meaning attached to the sign.\textsuperscript{72}

Comic books are comparisons to the real world, and as such, must utilize certain signs and tropes that reflect “our fundamentally relational understanding of reality.”\textsuperscript{73} Signs are thus represented through visual and verbal means that give the analogue meaning when they are connected to signs in the real world. Viewers understand these signs in relation to socio-cultural meanings attached to those representations that occur in both the analogue and literal world. Comic books use signs that have meaning in the real world to ground the interpretation they are attempting to imply. For example, Marvel’s release of the \textit{Amazing Spiderman} following the September 11 attacks featured an all-black cover. This narrative specifically focused on how superheroes cope with their inability to prevent the attack and their mission to help those still in peril at Ground Zero. The black cover drew on socio-cultural understandings of mourning in order to imply that superheroes were mourning this catastrophe alongside the American people. The similarities that create imagined here-and-nows go beyond being grounded in human experience. The imagined here-and-nows are only accessible because comic books offer a comparison to the real world. By comparing the real world to the comic, a reader is able to assess and judge how they should address a real world problem by analyzing what is done in the comparison. In order to prevent a proliferation of meanings, comics manipulate signs to imply how the narrative should be read. If the analogue is capable of solving a problem the literal world cannot, the text can direct a reader towards a preferred meaning of an event oppositional to the literal world.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid, 225.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, 125.
Barthes argues that linguistic messages are an “art” that imitates the real world and, in so doing, creates two messages that work together and separately to guide interpretation and prevent alternative meanings from proliferating.\(^74\) Denotative and connotative meanings are employed separately but they can interact to form a dominant message of the image. Denotative messages send messages regarding the superficial representations in an image or narrative—that is, they send a message regarding the obvious characteristics of an image. All denoted representations are given partial meaning through the process of being named and categorized as being a part of a certain social group(s).\(^75\) Connotative messages expand on the meaning behind the superficial representations by using certain socio-cultural codes that provide an understanding for how the image should be interpreted. To narrow the scope of my evaluation, this project focuses on how these messages work together to guide interpretation.

Superficial representations of the real world serve to anchor the preferred meaning of the connoted message in order to disseminate a particular socio-cultural meaning for the representation.\(^76\) The socio-cultural meanings associated with the image and the category it is placed in give the representation an initial, partial meaning that is to be developed with the connotative message. Development of the image’s meaning is dependent on the initial meaning attached to the object because it “focuses the gaze” towards the preferred perception one should have when interpreting the image.\(^77\) With the viewer’s gaze oriented in a particular direction, the denotative and connotative messages form together to create one underlying message that often “reflects major culturally

\(^{75}\) Ibid 28.
\(^{76}\) Ibid.
\(^{77}\) Ibid.
variable concepts underpinning a particular world view—such as masculinity, femininity, freedom, individualism, etc.” Because the denotative message is mostly superficial, certain stylistic means, like lighting, are used to signify a preferred meaning.

In his analysis of press photography, Barthes notes that there are specific stylistic devices which function as “connotative procedures.” These devices allude to, highlight, celebrate, and/or shield the connotative message. Connotative procedures are not mutually exclusive to one another; such devices can be used separately or simultaneously depending on what the image needs to provide the preferred interpretation. The way in which an object and other representations are posed can be a key signifier of meaning. Poses are one connotative procedure that has the ability to communicate some abstract meaning in relation to an object. The way in which a character’s body is positioned within a scene can imply how an audience is supposed to perceive a character’s personality. For example, In *Gotham City Sirens*, Poison Ivy is often posed in positions where she is lying down on her side and her curves are accentuated. These types of poses exude a sexual meaning attached to Ivy’s visual representation and help define her personality as a female superhero. Unlike metaphors, poses do not convey or “stand in” for the meaning of the image, they merely communicate a particular connotation of an image based on attitudes and meanings associated with the pose (e.g. sexuality, youthfulness, spirituality, purity). In addition to poses, the lighting of a particular scene elucidates the connotative message of an image. Barthes asserts that the preferred meaning of an image can be elucidated by the lighting, hyperbolized aspects, and other embellishments that direct a viewer’s gaze towards what should be seen and how it

80 Ibid, 10.
should be interpreted. Comic books images have been embellished through lighting and exposure but also lettering, costumes, word balloon shapes and scenery that influence how a reader interprets the narrative and overall meaning of the text.

Though are images assign meanings with connotative and denotative messages, connotative procedures are most persuasive when they evoke visceral emotions. Charles A. Hill argues that an image derives its rhetorical power through the emotion it evokes from viewers. The emotional response provoked by the image brings about a sort of presence (or feeling) that Hill argues brings the image into the consciousness of the viewer. Foss notes that it is generally assumed that viewers construct their interpretation of an image based on their experiences. If an individual were to have a strong emotional response to an image then such emotion may influence that person’s interpretation of the image. The viewer’s emotions are inherently tied to the judgments they make about an image. Such judgments can influence the meaning assigned to an image and possible change in attitudes.

Though the emotional responses of a viewer are linked to their personal background, Hill argues that cultural values also affect these emotional responses. Emotional responses arise out of a concatenation of an image to an abstract value that has emotive connotation through which meaning is assigned; cultural values directly influence how a viewer assigns meaning to an image. Maureen Daly Goggin highlights the significance of culturally defined emotions, asserting that “the cultural, social, and

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81 Ibid, 12.
83 Ibid, 28.
86 Ibid, 34-35.
political expectations for how particular kinds of meaning may be represented […] shapes what kinds of representations are permitted.”

If cultural, social and political expectations give meaning to a particular event, representations reinforcing those meanings become dominant. For example, if social, cultural, and political standards give meaning to women as subservient and objects, images reinforcing women as subservient and/or objects have the ability to provoke an emotional response from a viewer. Following Hill, the emotional response of the viewer has the potential to reinforce that cultural value by influencing the viewer’s interpretation of the image.

To prevent a misinterpretation of the text, this project evaluates comic narratives by investigating how the messages given by images contribute to the meanings assigned to Harley, Catwoman, and Ivy. Additionally, this analysis seeks to understand how images influence the meaning assigned to the overall narrative. To do this, this thesis utilizes the aforementioned criteria to evaluate how the visual images in certain parts of the narrative connote specific meanings to the character and the narrative. The analyses in chapters three and four will first investigate the visual images of a character and then understand the meanings derived from an image in the context of the overall narrative.

Plot Overview and Description of Object

_Gotham City Sirens_ is a comic published in 2009-2012 by DC Comics and written by Paul Dini with illustrations by Guillem March. Following the Batman series _Hush_, _Gotham City Sirens_ highlights the narratives of Catwoman, Harley Quinn, and Poison.

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88 This project focuses on the first five comic issues of the series (2009-2010). The graphic novel from which these issues are cited includes a one-shot (single plotline story) storyline about the Riddler. The actions in this one shot do not inform the actions in the subsequent comic issues. Because that one shot is not included in the story line of the first five single issues, it is omitted from this analysis.
Ivy. In the *Hush* series, Batman abandoned Gotham after the villain Hush disguised himself as Batman and destroyed his reputation as Gotham’s vigilante. The relationship between Catwoman and Batman began during the Silver Age, but *Hush* emphasized a new, more violent aspect to their relationship. As the relationship between the two heroes evolve, Batman became more controlling; when they reveal their true identities to each other Batman demands that Catwoman (Selina) give up her clandestine life in Gotham in favor of being the mistress of Wayne Manor. To add insult to injury, the villain Hush disguises himself as Batman and literally rips Catwoman’s heart from her body just as other Gotham heroes come to her rescue. As Hush is defeated, two other characters cast a spell on Catwoman that not only physically heals her heart but also prevents her from telling anyone Batman’s true identity.

*Gotham City Sirens* begins as Catwoman is returning to Gotham after her heart is “healed.” In the beginning scenes of the narrative, Catwoman acknowledges through her inner monologue that she feels as “weak as a kitten.” Upon meeting a new outlaw, Bone Blaster, Catwoman is defeated and ultimately saved by Poison Ivy, who invites Catwoman to move into her new apartment. Harley Quinn arrives soon thereafter and announces that she too will be moving in. As Catwoman finds out that the apartment is actually owned by the Riddler and only acquired through Ivy’s poison plants that manipulate the Riddler into giving up control of his property, she demands the trio move. Contention between Catwoman and the other two superheroines is then interrupted by Bone Blaster barreling through the apartment walls. After defeating Bone Blaster, the three protagonists gather their belongings and move into an abandoned animal hospital. Alone with Catwoman, Ivy and Harley plot the ways in which they can get Catwoman to

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release Batman’s identity. The first issue of the text ends with Ivy releasing a toxic gas that renders Catwoman unconscious. The last panel depicted Ivy and Harley standing over Catwoman demanding to know, “who is Batman?!”

The second issue starts with a bound Catwoman being interrogated by Harley who holds a gun while Ivy manages from a couch nearby. The scene then flashes back to an interaction between Talia al Gu’l and Catwoman in which Talia stressed that Catwoman must sacrifice her own romantic feelings in favor of protecting Batman’s identity. The scene is then transported back to Harley and Ivy’s actual torture of Catwoman. To protect Batman’s identity, Catwoman begins listing names of characters in the DC Comics universe who, at one point or another, could have been Batman. Ivy and Harley believe Catwoman, and insinuated that she has been romantically involved with several of the suspected Batmans. Harley then shrugs off the torture of her friend and tells Ivy and Catwoman that she is going shopping.

On the streets of Gotham, Harley walks by a kidnapping in progress, in which three masked gunmen are attempting to kidnap who they think is Bruce Wayne. Upon witnessing the abduction, Harley jumps on top of the car and defeats the gunmen, saving who she thinks is Bruce Wayne. After escaping the kidnapping, word balloons in the text inform the reader that Harley did not save Bruce Wayne but the ominous foe Hush. The issue ends with Catwoman rushing to save Harley after receiving a text containing a

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90 Ibid, 25.
91 Talia al Gul is a female superhero in the DC Universe who is best known for having a son with Bruce Wayne. Her father, Ra’s al Gul is the leader of the League of Assassins, a powerful organization in the DC Universe that murders those who they consider as blights to society. Her training as an assassin brings Talia into narratives across the DC Universe and she is commonly presented as a cold-hearted master of deception who uses her skills to assist those in need of deceiving others.
photo of her with Bruce Wayne/Hush. Knowing that Bruce was in exile, Catwoman persuades Ivy to join her in retrieving Harley.

Issue three begins with Harley and Bruce Wayne/Hush’s date at some posh Gotham restaurant. Their date was then interrupted not by Catwoman and Harley but the Joker. The Joker and Harley have a long and violent relationship. In other comics, the Joker has beat Harley, dominated her and on numerous occasions tried to kill her. Like Bruce Wayne, the Joker has also fled from Gotham, so Harley is portrayed as being surprised by his appearance at the restaurant. As the Joker tries to kills Harley yet another time, she attempts to reconcile their romance by saying everything was a misunderstanding. With Harley overwhelmed in trying to dodge the bullets being shot at her, Ivy bursts through the walls of the restaurant to aid Harley. With her vines, Ivy takes control of the machine gun equipped blimp manned by the Joker and stops the hail of gunfire aimed at Harley. Upon defeating the Joker at the restaurant, the three protagonists retreat back to the animal hospital where they discuss Harley’s unhealthy relationship with the Joker. Catwoman and Ivy then persistently tried to reason with Harley that her attachment to the Joker was unhealthy as Harley declared that he just loves her. The visual scene then focuses outside of the window so the readers can see the Joker’s blimp in the horizon. As Harley maintained that the Joker’s violence against her is a form of affection, the blimp breaks through the walls of their home and issue three ends with the Joker bombing the three girls and their apartment.

Despite being bombed, issue four started with the three protagonists recovering from their assault. Both Ivy and Catwoman scold Harley for her choice in romantic partners but then Catwoman felt guilty and decided to comfort Harley instead. Trying to
encourage Harley to end her attachment with the Joker, Ivy and Catwoman devise a plan in which they will find the Joker and defeat him. The trio tracked the Joker down to an old warehouse that served as his clandestine office. Unfortunately for the Gotham City Sirens, the Joker heard them moving in the air vents and in turn, shot a semi-automatic gun up towards the vents. Harley immediately recognizes there is something wrong with the Joker and tries to warn her two team members. Not taking Harley’s warnings seriously, Catwoman and Ivy are thrown off guard when it is revealed that the Joker is actually a small-time follower of the real Joker named Gaggy. The text depicted Catwoman and Ivy as shocked by the revelation which ultimately gave Gaggy the opportunity to release a trapped door from beneath Catwoman as he incapacitated Ivy with “hardening plastic bubbles.” As Catwoman and Ivy fought for their lives, issue four ended with Gaggy holding a knife to Harley’s throat.

The last issue in the plotline focused on Gaggy’s origin to bring closure to the Joker story within Gotham City Sirens. Through a series of scene changes, the reader is invited to understand the narrative through Harley and Gaggy’s perspectives. Having seen Gaggy holding a knife to Harley’s throat, the reader is invited to understand the interaction from Harley’s point of view. From her inner monologue, Harley revealed that she believed that she could out-wit Gaggy. In a series of taunts, Harley convinced Gaggy to partially untie her. The scene then turned to Ivy being assisted by her vines which released her from the suffocating bubbles. Meanwhile, Catwoman climbed out of the trap door. Racing towards Harley, Ivy and Catwoman alerted Gaggy to their presence, leading him to initiate a device that made the walls close in on the two superheroines. Taking Harley as a hostage, Gaggy told her of his first interaction with the Joker, how he had
become the Joker’s henchman and why he had come to take the Joker’s place. What is ultimately revealed is that with the Joker in exile, Gaggy was lonely and believed that impersonating the Joker would ameliorate his loneliness. Gaggy’s confession causes him to be overcome with emotions, and as his guard down, Ivy and Catwoman shatter the walls and apprehend Gaggy. The trio tied Gaggy to a rocket and aimed towards Gotham pier. With Gaggy out of the picture, the trio traveled back to the animal hospital. In the car, Harley asked her companions about their honest opinions about her relationship with the Joker, and they agreed that she was needy and dependent upon him. After assessing their opinions, Harley then reasoned that none of that mattered, because Gaggy was not the Joker and it was possible that the real Joker had changed. The text ends with Harley, Catwoman, and Ivy driving back to the animal hospital.

With this study, I seek to understand how the visual representation of these characters influences the meanings they are assigned. Specifically, this project investigates how the connotative and denotative messages assigned to their visual image contributes to the meanings they are assigned through their actions. As stated above, Catwoman and Harley’s abusive relationships are of significant interest to this study. In support of McRobbie, Wood, McDonald, and Picart’s arguments, comic books offer readers a framework for assessing and judging this issue. I ultimately seek to discern the interpretation of IPV provided in the text and the implications for such interpretation.

Overview of Subsequent Chapters

The title of chapter two is *Origin Story: A History of Female Superheroes*. Using the available critical understandings of female superheroes and gender, this chapter investigates how comic books have offered interpretations of gender that reinforce,
subvert, and negotiate traditional expectations assigned to women. In this chapter, I argue that a female superhero’s narrative exemplifies a distinct tension between the reinforcement of socio-cultural notions of femininity and their status as superheroes. The historical and cultural contexts surrounding the publications of these issues highlight how early gender representation in comic books sparked fear in parents, politicians, and the general public. I use chapter two to explain how female superheroes have challenged, accepted, and negotiated real world gender expectations prevalent at the time they were published. Gail Hawkes argues that changes in gender expectations and representations are resisted through the reinforcement of dominant gender expectations.  

Consistent with this notion, female superheroes that deviate away from dominant socio-cultural gender expectations are often assigned negative meanings. The negative meanings attached to these characters often reinforces dominant socio-cultural gender by positioning them as more favorable than a female superhero’s expectation defying behavior.

In addition to outlining the changes in gender representations of female superheroes, this chapter explores the tradition of female superheroes. This project refers to this tradition as a set standard fulfilled by most female superheroes, including expectations, costume, physicality, powers, romantic interest, and status as non/side-kick. For the purpose of this thesis, I evaluate this tradition through the four ages of comic books to discern how gender representations have changed and stayed the same. The Golden Age of comics began with the release of Action Comics #1 in 1937 and ends as Americans settle into suburban, anti-communist bliss (1955). Because Wonder Woman was the most significant female superhero of the Golden Age, the investigation of this era highlights how her gender representation was a spark in the controversy that initiated the

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Silver Age of comics (1955-1970). In my analysis of Silver Age comics, I look to the gender representations of Supergirl, Wonder Woman, and Sue Storm to assess how comic books maintained and disseminated messages in favor of traditional gender expectations. The third age of comics, the Bronze Age (1970-1985) was emerging as the women’s liberation movement was at its height. Such social activism is particularly significant because feminist scholars criticized the gender expectations of Silver Age female superheroes, and likewise, comic books responded to that criticism. Chapter two appraises the comic book’s response to the second wave feminism by looking at superheroes like Wonder Woman, The Cat/Tigra, and the women of the X-Men. Lastly, this chapter examines how the gender expectations have evolved in Modern Age (1985-present). The modern age of comics is also known as the renaissance of the industry due to the recent growth in popularity. In this section, I attempt to determine how social recognition of the industry has influenced the types of female superheroes being created and published. My goal for this chapter is to provide a historical and sociological context for understanding the potential power of a comic’s narrative. Furthermore, this chapter argues that that gender appropriation in comic books often reflects and responds to real world attitudes about gender.

This project offers a reconceptualization of gender in comic narratives by analyzing how the status of superhero interacts with socio-cultural gender expectations to assign meaning to a female superhero and her actions. Most importantly, chapters two and three seek to address an overarching research question of this project: in what ways does the visual representation of a female superhero contribute to the meanings assigned to her? Chapters three and four attempt to discern they ways gender is appropriated,
portrayed, and negotiated by these three female superheroes. To narrow my focus, the rhetorical analysis will be limited to specific moments in the text that highlight aspects of gender and its influence on the narrative. Additionally, the analysis will refer back to the plot description in this chapter to provide context. These two chapters attempt to address another research question alluded to earlier in this chapter: does a female superhero’s enactment of agency influence her gender portrayal and if so, what are the consequences?

Chapter three is titled *The Kitten, the Lolita, and the Rose- Gender Expectations, Superhero Expectations and Meaning*. In this chapter, I investigate how the visual aspects of Ivy, Catwoman, and Harley’s narratives contribute to the gendered meanings assigned to their personalities. Specifically, I first argue that the partial meaning given by the image pairs with connotative visual procedures to imply a sexual meaning to the character’s personality. These women are often visually illustrated with a hyperbolized body and child-like characteristics that are upheld as attractive. Additionally, the text often shows these characters posed in a manner that conveys sexual connotations and some panels draw a reader’s gaze towards unexpected depictions of genital area, breast, and/or posterior. Within the overall narrative, the initial meanings implying sexuality is negotiated in the narrative whereby these characters also textually (through dialogue and other word balloons) negotiate gender expectations. Overall, this chapter argues that the initial meanings provided by the visual representations of these characters are justified by the actions these women take in the narrative. The narrative portrays these three characters as manipulative, weak, and naïve. Partial meanings given by the visual message are expanded on and justified in a way that assigns negative meanings to Catwoman, Harley, and Ivy. Lastly, this chapter explores whether and how these
characters enact agency and how that influences how gender is negotiated in the narrative. Because comics are analogues of the real world, the meaning assigned to these women in the text offer readers an interpretation of the desirable actions each gender should undertake. Though it is almost impossible to determine if and to what extent comic influence attitudes, these texts nonetheless disseminate messages to audiences that justify interpretations of social truths with reasons that reflect cultural values.

Chapter four is titled “That Just Proves He Wants Me Back:” Pure Victimhood, Agency, and Intimate Partner Violence in Comic Book Narratives. In this chapter, I explore how the gendered meanings assigned to these characters contribute to the preferred interpretation of their IPV focused narratives. Expanding on the question of agency addressed in chapter three, chapter four attempts to discern how notions of agency influence superheroines’ status as victims. The tension between their status as superheroes and socio-cultural meanings of womanhood is particularly problematic when these characters are portrayed as victims of abuse. This chapter argues that female superheroes have an *a priori* sense of agency that automatically negates perceptions of victimhood, yet their enactment of traditional gender expectations also denigrates their status as agents. Chapter four investigates the problematic discourse of the victim-agent dichotomy and how that dichotomy narrows the categorizations of victimhood and agency. Dichotomies ultimately prove to be problematic because they ignore the nuances of a particular phenomenon. With IPV, narrowing the definitions of victimhood and agency results in a broadening of the categorization of actions that assign meanings to victims that ameliorate their abuse. When the “moral of the story” concerns a social problem, it gives order to that experience by justifying certain notions over others. In an
analogue, like comics, giving order to a particular experience provides readers with a
guide for how they should perceive and assess an issue. In chapter four, I seek to explain
how Harley Quinn and Catwoman’s narrative in the text relegates them to the status of
non-victimhood despite already having agency.

Conclusion

For the purpose of this study, I argue that *Gotham City Sirens* is worthy of study
because, as an analogue, it guides readers towards a specific way in which they should
assess and address gender, agency and IPV. Through this evaluation, I hope to
demonstrate that the meanings assigned in the text become even more salient because
they are justified in cultural values and pre-established social notions of what is true. The
way in which these characters negotiate and resolve the tension among their superhero
and gender expectations influences the meanings assigned to a character. The ways in
which these characters resolve this tension suggests that it is preferable for a female
superhero to maintain femininity rather give full expression to their powers. This tension
can be seen in contemporary society whereby women are urged to be empowered and
self-reliant yet also objects of the male gaze. Additionally, the interpretation of IPV
provided by the text suggests that Harley and Catwoman are responsible for their own
abuse. If a reader finds this interpretation to have narrative fidelity, they can use this
interpretation to make assessments about real world victims of IPV. The implications of
these findings are explained in the final chapter of this project. Overall, this project seeks
to discern the rhetorical acts in *Gotham City Sirens* and describe how these acts occur.
Through this analysis, I hope to offer an understanding of comic discourse and the
persuasive potential of these texts.
CHAPTER TWO – Origin Story: A History of Female Superheroes

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to understand how female superheroes have negotiated gender expectations in the four historical time periods of comic books. By being in an analogue of the real world, female superheroes guide readers towards a particular interpretation of gender expectations. As noted in chapter one, female superheroes are important rhetorical artifacts because they help illustrate how gender representations in the media inform and are informed by the socio-cultural perceptions about the appropriate actions male and female characters undertake. This historical analysis works to provide a larger understanding of the gender expectations offered by comic books in order to help discern the gender expectations in later chapters.

Through the research on the history of female superheroes, I have found that female superheroes exemplify a distinct tension between the reinforcement of socio-cultural notions of femininity and their status as superheroes. The way in which these tensions are resolved contributes to the meaning assigned to the female superhero, her actions, and narrative. Specifically, I argue that this negotiation sends a message to readers that provides a troublesome interpretation of gender expectations: masculine qualities (being physically strong and battling opponents) can only be justified if they are enacted in the pursuit of an appropriate feminine goal (romance, domesticity, altruism, etc.). In order to provide a cohesive assessment of this negotiation, this project investigates the tradition of female superheroes, that is, the common standards bestowed on female superheroes concerning their appearance, personality traits, romantic interests, and roles in the narrative. To better understand the socio-cultural notions of femininity in
this tension, this analysis addresses social norms regarding women’s roles and expectations from 1937 until the present day. Comic books reflect socio-cultural attitudes about gender and readers have voiced their discontent about the gender representations in comics. The industry has been known to respond to fan responses by altering the character in some measure, whether it is visually or personality-wise. Though comic scholars have reported the history of comic books, the responses of readers has gone largely ignored. I propose that responses to and from readers is essential to this study because they elucidate the persuasive potential of comic books and their gender representations.

This chapter’s historical assessment contributes to the overall project not only by providing context but also addressing the following questions: how do female superheroes resolve the tension between gender and superhero expectations and what kind of message does that send during times when the real world is also negotiating gender expectations? In this chapter, I investigate these tensions, expectations, and evolving tradition of female superheroes throughout time. Better to clarify this tradition, the chapter is organized chronologically and begins with an analysis of Golden Age female superheroes. During the Golden Age, Wonder Woman was the most notable female superhero and this section predominantly focuses on the documented implications for her gender representation. Following the Golden Age, I explain how the establishment of the Comics Code Authority (CCA) in 1955 marks the start of the Silver Age (1955-1970). The CCA placed severe publication restrictions on the industry and such restrictions influenced how female characters were depicted and the meanings they were assigned.
Analysis

The Golden Age

Like all superheroes, the comic book industry has its own origin story. Starting with the first appearance of Superman in 1938, myths of “American heroes” were disseminated to “resolve the tensions of individuals in an increasingly urban, consumer-driven, and anonymous mass society.”\(^1\) Despite Superman’s Kryptonian power, he constantly battled various foes that represented real life enemies. Bestowed with the power of an ancient alien race, Superman was extraordinary enough to beat the Nazis more efficiently than the U.S. government could.\(^2\) Besides Superman, a History Channel documentary titled *Superheroes Unmasked* lists Batman, Captain Marvel, Captain America, and other male superheroes as iconic Golden Age (1938-1955) superheroes.\(^3\) Weaving a story of security, superheroes acted as secular saviors to a world engaged in global war. Iconic and renowned comic book creator Stan Lee argues that many of the aforementioned superheroes were created to espouse pro-American propaganda to the country’s children and young adults during the Second World War.\(^4\) As noted in the previous chapter, superheroes rallied readers to collect paper for the war effort and to support the troops as much as they supported their favorite superhero. With superheroes like Superman, Captain America, and Wonder Woman continuously defeating America’s enemies, comic books supported a notion that the U.S. would be victorious in the war.

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4. Ibid.
During the early years of the comic industry male superheroes were the norm. With a line-up of masculine heroes, comics have long been associated as with a largely young, male audience. Comic book author Grant Morrison asserts that though comics have been accessible to a universal audience, these texts have been and still are often aimed towards boys and men. Although comic books tended to focus on males, the Golden Age saw nearly as many female readers as there were male readers. One PBS documentary notes that in the early 1940s more than ninety percent of American boys from seven to seventeen and nearly ninety percent of girls in that same demographic read some format of comic books regularly. Though readership was fairly equal among male and female readers, female superheroes were not as prevalent or popular as their male counterparts. As noted in the previous chapter, comic books often mirror the real life world in which they were written.

As the United States advanced its war efforts in Europe, American women were experiencing tensions between old, Victorian ideas of motherhood and increasing access to employment outside the home. In her book *Women in Movement*, Shelia Rowbotham contends that “the wartime state could never decide whether it wanted Rose to be a riveter or a mum.” Though many women left their homes to join the work force, they were subject to speculation about their morality and their motivations. During World War Two, women joining the workforce were experiencing were able to see the limitation placed upon them by Victorian ideas of femininity and WWII gave women the

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opportunity to resolve the socio-cultural limitations placed upon them. Like women in the real world, women in comics also had the opportunity to be more than housewives and mothers. Comic book historian Trina Robbins mentions that during the early years of the Golden Age, women were depicted as damsels who needed rescuing, nagging girlfriends, and anxious mothers. During Second World War, most women in comics were auxiliaries to their male counterparts, acting as moral support because of the perceived inability to assist in actual battles.

Though many of these early female superheroes upheld notions of female submissiveness and passivity, some characters were portrayed as independent and powerful. Morrison notes that the first female superhero, appearing in 1939, was a DC character named Ma Hunkel, aka Red Tornado. Sporting a blanket cape and kitchenware headgear, Ma Hunkel was a middle aged housewife who offered the first counter idea of superhero. Unlike Superman, the Red Tornado wore tattered clothes, lived in a small New York City apartment, cross-dressed, and was not necessarily physically “fit.” Golden Age superheroines were only liberated from the traditional roles placed upon them when they disguised themselves as their crime fighting alter-ego. With a blanket and a pot as her disguise, Ma Hunkel became liberated from her role as a housewife to fight crime as her alter-ego Red Tornado. It was only after her identity was disguised that Ma Hunkel could be who she really was.

Before Ma Hunkel, women in comics served perfunctory roles as damsels, mothers, sisters, and lovers. Though Wonder Woman was not the first female superhero,

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8 PBS, Superheroes: A Never-Ending Battle.
9 Ibid.
10 Morrison, Supergods, 40.
11 Ibid.
Morrison, Wright, Madrid, and other scholars all acknowledge that she was the most notable female superhero to emerge during the Golden Age.\textsuperscript{13} The brainchild of Harvard psychologist William Moulton Marston, Wonder Woman became a way for Marston to provide girls with a positive female role model while countering the traditional mores associated with gender.\textsuperscript{14} Credited as the inventor of the polygraph machine, Marston was also noted to be a “militant” feminist who had previously advocated on behalf of the suffragists as an undergraduate at Harvard.\textsuperscript{15} Though Marston had previously published a scholarly paper on the significance of comics, he later wrote that the heightened focus on “bloodcurdling masculinity,” within comics left many early female readers without a role model. Marston wrote

Not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, power. Not wanting to be girls they don’t want to be tender, submissive, peaceloving as good women are. Women’s strong qualities have become despised because of their weakness. The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman.\textsuperscript{16}

Following his goal, Marston created Diana Prince, a woman who was created to uphold and portray feminine qualities in a positive light. Though she resembled many of the pin-up background characters, Diana’s features were athletic, not petite.\textsuperscript{17} As women were leaving their homes to work in factories, plants, and warehouses, Wonder Woman was leaving Paradise Island to fight injustice with peace, love, and truth. Additionally, Diana was depicted as being equal to her male counterparts by being as strong as

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. Wright, \textit{Comic Book Nation}, 21.
\textsuperscript{14} Andi Zeisler, \textit{Feminism and Pop Culture} (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008), 77.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Morrison, \textit{Supergods}, 40.
Superman and having better technology than Batman. Morrison notes that women in comics have often been scantily clad but Madrid argues that Wonder Woman’s costume was modest in comparison to her later costumes. As Diana left Paradise Island for the United States, her mother Hippolyta designed Wonder Woman’s costume to demonstrate that the Amazons supported America’s quest for democracy. Diana fought on American soil to protect everyday citizens from the needless crime while also fighting abroad to protect American democracy against the Nazis.

Inspired by Wonder Woman’s pursuit to fight injustice with peace and love, other comic book creators took from her story to conceptualize new superheroines adept at saving the world from tyranny, domination, and crime. Appearing in the same year as Wonder Woman, Black Cat emerged as another female superhero who utilized her skills to battle as her alter ego. Hollywood starlet Linda Turner uses her skills as an actor to infiltrate Nazi ranks as a spy under the disguise of the Black Cat. Madrid notes that Black Cat was a “ferocious fighter,” yet her costume of a black swimsuit and buccaneer boots was not necessarily suitable for battle.

Aside from their extraordinary abilities, superheroines of the Golden Age were also glamorous. The idea of the pinup was not unknown to Americans during the Second World War. Joanna Meyerowitz argues that these images often centered on women who were posed sexually, were in lingerie or nothing at all. Meyerowitz explains that despite being gratuitously sexual, these images supported a particular standard for women that

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18 Goldin, *Superheroes Unmasked*.
20 Ibid, 18.
21 Ibid.
suggested a good American woman is not only domestic, but sexual for her husband. Actresses like Rita Hayworth and Betty Grable maintained and perpetuated the pinup standard, suggesting to women across the country that they would find a loving and supporting husband if they resemble this standard. Ultimately, this standard came to reflect the tensions between women’s sexuality and perceived morality.

As “pinup bombshells and no nonsense dames,” female superheroes exuded sex appeal in their crime fighting. Sandra Knight, better known as the Phantom Lady, was a debutant who turned to vigilantism after an assassination attempt on her senator father. Bearing a large bust and a slinky costume, the Phantom Lady often attempted to save women from sadistic men by placing herself into the male foe’s literal and figurative bondage. Protecting innocent victims, the Phantom Lady would often take the place of the victim and allow herself to be tied up, ruthlessly beaten and verbally degraded. Debuting in 1947, DC’s Black Canary was reminiscent of a mystery film vixen, innocent by appearance but deadly upon interaction. Her real life identity of Dinah Drake was that of a smart career-oriented woman who owns a florist shop. With fishnets, black bodysuit, bolero jacket, boots and a blonde wig, Dinah transformed into Black Canary. Unlike the auxiliary women that appeared before her, Black Canary was the constant rescuer of detective and future husband Larry Lance.

Despite themes of female empowerment, many of these female superheroes sent mixed messages. Plotlines concerning their romantic lives forced many of these

26 Ibid.
characters from a world of crime fighting and back into a domain where they were fighting for men’s affections. Though Dinah Drake often saved Larry from imminent doom, she also used her sexuality as Black Canary to charm him. In addition to being relegated to the domestic sphere, female superheroes were also placed in roles that denigrated their powers and success. For instance, Wonder Woman was the only woman to join the Justice League of America, and her voice was often overshadowed by Superman. Superheroines like Bulletgirl, Flame Girl, and Doll Girl were “helpmates” to their male counterpart and are the auxiliaries discussed by Robbins.

Throughout the Second World War, comic book superheroes and their narratives were available to millions of readers across the country. The economic boost experienced during World War Two extended beyond industrial goods to include comics, with sales in 1943 reaching up to $30 million. Morrison argues that “during the Second World War, the superhero concept spread like wildfire, but then died as rapidly and mysteriously as it had begun.” With the Axis powers being defeated, soldiers returned home, women began to leave the workforce and superheroes suddenly found themselves without a major foe. Out of the changing landscape of post war America arose moral concerns over the messages sent to children and the consequences of those messages. Threats of communism, delinquency, homosexuality, violence, and sexual promiscuity became themes deemed inappropriate for youth. In order to shield the youth of America from those themes, parents and politicians alike attempted to censor any popular culture outlet that perceptibly perpetuated those themes. Comics scholar Carol L. Tilley notes that

27 Ibid, 43.
28 Ibid, 11.
29 Wright, Comic Book Nation, 31.
30 Morrison, Supergods, 52.
scholars and cultural pundits like Stanley Kunitz and C. Wright Mills had declared the violence in comics was detrimental to the psychology of young Americans. During the late forties and early fifties, public suspicion over comic books had led several cities and municipalities to pass legislation banning the sale of comics. The concern over comics was so intense that in 1954, the United States Senate created a sub-committee to investigate their effects on adolescents and delinquency.

Though suspicion had already begun to rise, the decline in comic readership has been largely attributed to German psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham. In his 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent*, Wertham called for comic sales to youth be restricted. Through his clinical work with juvenile delinquents, Wertham noted that despite coming from various backgrounds, all of the delinquents he was treating read comic books. Making a false cause argument, Wertham asserted that in most of his patients, “criminal behavior in children was directly attributable to the comic books they read.” In his critique of Wonder Woman, Wertham vehemently declared her comic to be pornographic, casting Diana as the “outrageous lesbian,” he declared her as sexually promiscuous and an unfit role model to girls and boys. Additionally, titles like *Superman* and *Batman* influenced boys to be violent while *Wonder Woman* inspired girls to a life of promiscuity and homosexuality.

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32 Ibid.
33 Public Broadcasting Service, *Superheroes*.
36 Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 93.
37 Morrison, *Supergods*, 55.
Attempting to manage this backlash, various publishers within the comic book industry created the Comics Magazine Association of America, a new editorial code, and a set of severe restrictions. Before being published, all comics had to be approved by the editorial code, the Comics Code Authority. Generally, these restrictions outlined that crime could only be depicted negatively, there could be no excessive violence, societal conformity needed to be encouraged, government authority could not be questioned and monsters could no longer be published. Female superheroes were limited by plotlines that only focused on their romantic interests. As the women were stepping down from their roles as workers and getting married to their stranger sweethearts, Wonder Woman was spending less time as a hero and more time courting a young man named Steve. Additionally, female superheroes were overshadowed by an influx of young adult romance comics. These comic books told cautionary tales associated with youth dating and offered advice that “urged restraint, self-denial, and accommodation on the part of the female.” Setting up virgin/whore characterizations, romance comics often depicted sexually active young women as broken, depressed and damned while the young women who abstained from sex were happy and well cared for. For the next two decades, the CCA significantly restricted the type of material published. Like the women going back home after the war, the restrictions placed on female superheroes took them out of the line of vigilantism and into more traditional female roles.

39 Public Broadcasting Service, Superheroes.
40 Wright, Comic Book Nation, 129.
The Silver Age

During the early years of the Cold War, politicians, community leaders, parents, and other citizens quickly distanced themselves from anything that could be considered communist or immoral. According to Ruth Rosen in her book *The World Split Open*,

The fifties was an age of cognitive dissonance: millions of people believed in ideals that poorly described their own experiences. The decade quarantined dissent and oozed conformity. On the pages of *Life* magazine, on the new television screens, Americans—the white and well-fed variety—radiated wholesomeness, cleanliness, fecundity, and fidelity. Liberated by shiny new appliances, apron-clad mothers played with their boisterous broods. Rosy-cheeked fathers jauntily swung their briefcases as they strolled off to work.\(^{41}\)

Despite trying to assure parents of their morality and patriotism, Silver Age (1955-1970) comics were often met with scrutiny and judgment. Though Wertham’s critique was particularly significant for the comic industry, it was only one piece of a larger criticism against American popular culture and the perpetuation of supposed immorality. Between 1955 and 1956, comic sales dropped by half, largely due to cultural suspicion and restrictions enforced by the CCA.\(^{42}\) Though some creators had previously attempted to develop more mature comics, the CCA made that evolution nearly impossible by mandating that comic books be only for children.\(^{43}\) The Senate committee and Wertham’s work placed the comic industry in a position where they had to conform to wholesome societal standards to stay in business. To fit within the new moral code, women were often forced back into roles that conformed to hegemonic mores. Wright explains that

The primary function served by women was to resist the romantic advances of the superhero’s alter-ego, pine for the superhero, scheme to

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\(^{42}\) Public Broadcasting Service, *Superheroes*.
\(^{43}\) Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 181.
get close to him, screw things up, get captured by the bad guy, and await rescue by the hero, who usually scolded her for being so bold in the first place.\textsuperscript{44}

As noted above, during the fifties and sixties, romance and teen comics were often favored over superheroes. For example, Archie comics were extremely popular during the fifties. Archie and his friends lived in a small town called Riverdale where the characters were concerned with dating, grades, extra-curricular activities, and friendship. For Archie’s two love interests, Betty and Veronica, dating meant little more than holding hands and a shared milkshake. Betty and Veronica appealed to teenage girls because they represented two opposite dynamics that were equally desirable; one was rich and privileged and the other was sincere and compassionate.\textsuperscript{45} Perpetuating conformity and wholesomeness, the Archie comics were loved by teens, parents, and the CCA alike.

In order to appeal to teen readers, DC comics published \textit{Supergirl} in 1960. The cousin of Superman, Supergirl was the stereotypical good girl who often engaged in whimsical adventures that serve no support to her extraordinary abilities.\textsuperscript{46} Despite having the same Kryptonian powers as Superman, Madrid argues that Supergirl “has no real personality to speak of” because her “primary goal is to be of aid to the Man of Steel [Superman], but lacking in life experience or, presumably, common sense, she impulsively flies into danger, causing more damage than good.”\textsuperscript{47} Supergirl was innocent and her innocence was depicted as virtuous. Supergirl rarely fought alongside her cousin

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 184-185.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 72.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, 185. Madrid, \textit{The Supergirls}, 81.
\textsuperscript{47} Madrid, \textit{The Supergirls}, 81.
and her early narrative mostly consists her engaging in normal teenage activities like shopping.

Madrid notes that though comics of the Silver Age never explicitly asserted that single woman were undesirable, they did imply marriage and children were a more appropriate life choice than fighting crime. Madrid’s argument aligns with Rosen’s assessment of fifties political culture, in which she explains that “even marriage and childbearing became politicized. A majority of Americans judged men or women who did not marry as ‘sick,’ thinking them either immoral, selfish, or neurotic.” To appease both the CCA and the American public, female superheroes moved from fighting villains to courting potential husbands. The Amazonian princess who had been a feminist icon during the Second World War was downplayed as she approached her twentieth anniversary. In a 1964 issue titled “The Revolt of Wonder Woman,” Diana voluntarily goes into seclusion, relinquishing her powers. Driven by depression and loneliness supposedly derived from being Wonder Woman, Diana runs away to the forest and temporarily acts as a caretaker to a blind girl lost in the woods. In 1968, author of the popular Green Arrow/Green Lantern team-up, Danny O’Neil, took over writing for Wonder Woman. O’Neil cast Wonder Woman as a stereotypical young woman by having her voluntarily relinquish her powers and iconic costume to jet set across the world. Wonder Woman’s makeover angered early feminist leader Gloria Steinem, who had read and been inspired by the character as a child. The first issue of Ms. Magazine in 1972

48 Ibid, 29.
49 Rosen, The World Split Open, 13
50 Madrid, The Supergirls 104.
52 Public Broadcasting Service, Superheroes.
featured Wonder Woman on the cover and critiqued O’Neil’s revamping of the superheroine icon. Responding to Steinem and other feminists, DC Comics attempted write the feminist movement into Diana’s story line. For instance, DC comics took Diana away from jet setting to once again protect civilians. Although Wonder Woman had her powers back, Madrid explains that this change was not what feminists like Steniem had expected. The reconceptualized Wonder Woman had her powers back, yet she was depicted as an overly aggressive misandrist. Instead of the white jumpsuit she donned when she was powerless, Diana was given a “smaller” and “sexier” version of her iconic red, white, and blue costume. In order to fit within her smaller costume, Wonder Woman was reconceptualized as thin model instead of an athletic Amazon. Rosen explains that fashion was a significant influence in constructing femininity in the fifties and sixties. Explaining that the image of a woman was like “armor,” Rosen contends that “a style that exaggerated feminine curves and a womanly silhouette” often protected women from perceptions of immorality. Notwithstanding the thinner body and smaller costume, Madrid explains that Diana’s character was further degraded in one 1973 cover where she was “hog-tied to a giant phallic missile, a clear indication that this comic would not be a primer on feminism.” Despite Steinem’s response, feminists in the Silver Age Wonder Woman comics were depicted as misandrists. Mitra C. Emad argues that, “by 1979, for instance, Wonder Woman had become a ‘menace’”— female power

unleashed, uncontrollable, ‘gone beserk.’” Wonder Woman’s perceived misandry sent a message to readers that indicated that feminism came at the cost of reason and virtue.

As the Cold War progressed, concerns about morality and communism extended outside of our world into space. For the real world and comics, the space race was more than an attempt to support technological superiority; it was a means to reinforce moral superiority over the other. For Marvel comics, moral and technological hegemony for the U.S. included moral and appropriate roles for women. Public anxiety concerning the race to the moon between the Americans and Russians was printed on the pages of Marvel Comics 1961 title *The Fantastic Four*. This title depicted four scientists who acted as astronauts, gaining information on behalf of the United States government. The group included leader Reed Richards, his fiancé Sue Storm, Sue’s brother Jonny, and fellow scientist Ben Grimm. After being exposed to high levels of radiation in space, the group became endowed with super powers. Sue was granted the power to be invisible, and like her power, Sue was often placed in plot lines that ignored her powers in favor of her male team members. Madrid notes that female superheroes like Sue Storm are “token females” of groups who serve as proverbial mothers and secretaries of the group, emphasizing by contrast the power of their male counterparts. For instance, Sue designs and sews the group’s costumes and disguises her femininity by making the costumes modest and unisex. Although the creators of the *Fantastic Four* have never explained the reasoning behind the unisex costumes, it is the only representation of equality among the team. Additionally, the plotlines that focused on Sue often revolved around a love

58 Morrison, *Supergods*.
60 Ibid, 110.
triangle between Reed and a smitten supervillain.\textsuperscript{61} Though Sue experienced the same radioactive incident as her male counterparts, she was cast as little more than an intelligent damsel.

Like Sue Storm, Janet Van Dyne, better known as the Wasp, was often depicted as subordinate to her sire, Ant-Man. Wasp did not receive her powers by herself or through circumstance, Hank Pym (Ant-Man) gave her the same serum he used on himself.\textsuperscript{62} Upon being transformed into a superhero, the Wasp relentlessly pursued a romantic relationship with Ant-Man.\textsuperscript{63} When Wasp and Ant-Man were inducted into the Avengers hero team she became “the Tinkerbell of the team, buzzing around villains’ faces and shooting them with her irritating but essentially ineffective Wasp’s stings.”\textsuperscript{64} Despite gaining her powers from the same source as Ant-Man, Wasp was not as powerful as her counterpart. Female superheroes were continuously depicted as less worthy of recognition in comparison to their male counterparts; their actions and roles within groups and as heroes placed them in subordinate roles without completely putting them in the background.

Tensions between women’s liberation and traditional values led women across America to question their relationship to society and the roles forced upon them. The questioning of femininity and traditional roles rarely entered the comic book universe. Superheroines and the creators (mostly men) reinforced mores that focused on a woman’s roles as mother, damsel, vixen, pest, good girl, and bad girl above all other qualities. As women in comics continued to fit within the Comics Codes Authority of what was

\begin{footnotes}
\item[61] Ibid.
\item[62] Ibid, 115.
\item[63] Ibid.
\item[64] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
considered appropriate, male superheroes and their creators began to subvert the code and its standards.

**The Bronze Age**

During the early 1970s, Americans were still experiencing the political and cultural changes wrought by the counter-culture. As the country’s youth were continuing to “tune in, turn on, and drop out,” soldiers returning home from Vietnam with heroin addictions were staggering. Hindered by the Comic Code Authority, comic writers during the Silver Age were prevented from publishing stories concerning drug use; even those with anti-drug messages. Danny O’Neil’s Green Lantern/ Green Arrow team-up rejected the Comics Code Authority’s restriction by covering heroin abuse in the now iconic issue *Green Lantern #85*. The cover of this issue shows Green Lantern and Green Arrow walking in on the Arrow’s sidekick, Speedy, injecting heroin. With the Arrow proclaiming “My ward’s a junkie!?,” this issue demonstrated that drug abuse could affect anyone, including superheroes. Beyond reflecting the seriousness of drug abuse, O’Neil’s *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* series confronted political issues concerning “racism, poverty, political corruption, the ‘generation gap,’ the plight of Native Americans, pollution, over population and religious cults.”65 Morrison argues that the same writer who turned Wonder Woman into an average female, Danny O’Neil, was ironically a pioneer in establishing progressive messages in comics.66 Though O’Neil was hardly progressive in his casting of Wonder Woman, his groundbreaking title featuring male superheroes further inspired other writers to break the Silver Age standard of conformity in what would become known as the Bronze Age (1970-1985) of comics.

Although more writers began to defy the restrictions set upon by the CCA parents were less likely to buy the self-published comics in comparison to those published with the Code’s seal of approval. As a compromise between writers and the CCA, liberal provisions were set in place that thus allowed comics to question government authority and societal conformity.\textsuperscript{67}

Nonetheless, female superheroes of the time were still less prevalent and noteworthy than their male counterparts. Similar to the depiction of Wonder Woman during the sixties, superheroines like Thundra and Man-Killer demonstrated that female superheroes aligned with the feminist movement were portrayed as hating men.\textsuperscript{68} With the categorization of feminism as misandry, titles like Wonder Woman failed to attract either male or female readers.\textsuperscript{69} Madrid argues that the lack of readership of these titles can be derived from the casting of these female superheroes. He notes that “due to their aggressive natures and unorthodox personalities, many of these women were initially presented as threats.”\textsuperscript{70} For example, iconic comic writer Stan Lee introduced \textit{Spiderman}, in which teen Peter Parker gets bit by a radioactive spider and turns that event into a new life goal. His girlfriend, Gwen Stacy, is a young scientist who works for Oscorp Industries while in high school.\textsuperscript{71} Gwen has a better job than Peter and is depicted as more intelligent. Gwen is cast as Peter’s intellectual equal, yet he constantly saves Gwen from multiple kidnappings. Because Gwen is a threat to Peter’s superiority, she is often placed into situations where she must rely on Peter for her survival.

\textsuperscript{67} Wright, \textit{Comic Book Nation}, 240.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid, 250.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{70} Madrid, \textit{The Supergirls}, 161.
\textsuperscript{71} Oscorp is a fictional multi-billion dollar industry in the Marvel comics universe started by supervillain Norman Osborn (the Green Goblin) and later run by his son Harry (the later Green Goblin). Oscorp Industries specializes in scientific advances in biological modifications.
Continuing the Silver Age notion that superheroines would not be a preface to feminism, Bronze Age creators found interesting ways to denigrate women’s liberation under the guise of empowerment. Comic creators relied on popular opinions about second wave feminists to disseminate their anti-feminist messages. Rosen explains that the aggressive nature of books like Germanie Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* and events like the Miss America protests publically positioned the women’s liberation movement as volatile and vociferous.\(^\text{72}\) Despite being viewed as aggressive and explosive, feminist activists were raising the public’s awareness of issues that affected women. One of the most important efforts established by feminists of the time was the organization of community resources used to help battered women. During the early seventies, feminist activists sought to raise awareness of Intimate Partner Violence and provide resources to women who needed help leaving abusive partners.\(^\text{73}\) Notwithstanding the significant impacts these women were making, the American public viewed their strident commitment as aggression. Taking women out of the designated sphere of domesticity was difficult enough for most Americans to comprehend. Women who attempted to ameliorate their situations were often met with skepticism and believed to be aggressive misandrists hell-bent on subverting men’s power.

Both Wright and Madrid describe the Marvel’s 1972 title *The Cat* as the most liberated female character to appear in the Bronze Age.\(^\text{74}\) Unlike previous female focused titles, *The Cat* had a female writer, Linda Fite, and artist, Marie Severine.\(^\text{75}\) After the death of her husband, the Cat, aka Greer Nelson, takes a job with her former mentor, Dr.

\(^{72}\) Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 100 and 186.
\(^{73}\) Ibid, 186.
\(^{74}\) Ibid, 163. Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 250.
\(^{75}\) Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 163.
Tumolo, a female scientist who has a device that would “make it possible for any woman to totally fulfill her physical and mental potential.”\textsuperscript{76} As the Cat and another alter-ego, Tigra, Greer brutally defeated any foes that came in her way. Despite being extremely progressive, \textit{The Cat} faced the same problem as many other female superheroes; she was cast as too aggressive.\textsuperscript{77} Upon the murder of her mentor, Greer performs a secret magical ritual that turns her into Tigra, a slender cat-like woman who dons a shredded bikini. Tigra, fueled by hatred, massacres the Hydra agents that killed her mentor Dr. Tumolo. Tigra therefore becomes aggressive and violent towards any foe in her path. As the Cat, Greer is an empowered scientist who fought off evil villains that sought to use women and their sexuality as weapons. As Tigra, Greer was too overcome by emotions of revenge to restrict her aggressive and violent act towards men.

The sixties and seventies were a time in American culture where citizens were polarized by their differences. As individuals across the country were exiled from certain social groups, Chris Claremont’s \textit{X-Men} title was published, and this publication appealed to those who may have felt alienated and marginalized. Claremont’s reconceptualization of the Silver Age title “made \textit{X-Men} the best-looking superhero comic in the world—and the first in a long time that could also appeal to young women.”\textsuperscript{78} Athletic and stunning, Claremont’s female X-Men were reminiscent of old Hollywood glamour with a punk edge. Physically fit yet not proportionately exaggerated, these women also donned unnatural hair colors and costumes that ranged from fully clothed to almost nude. Notwithstanding their diverse physical appearance, female X-Men were also diverse in their power, ability, and roles within society and the mutant

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{77} Ibid, 165.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Morrison, \textit{Supergods}, 179.
\end{itemize}
community. As a group of mutants who had been bestowed extraordinary powers at birth, the X-Men were alienated from society. This group of “talented youngsters” featured a cast of diverse women from all backgrounds, all with powers equivalent to their male counterparts. The teen mutants Rogue and Kitty Pryde can kill anyone with their touch and walk through walls, respectively. Storm is haughty, intelligent, and capable of creating a severe storm in a matter of seconds. Mystique can mimic any person’s appearance. Dangerous and determined to fight for mutant liberation, Mystique is the mutant not to be messed with. This group of powerful and diverse mutants could appeal to a reader who may have felt alienated and alone.

Forty years after the first issue of Action Comics #1 was published superheroes were experiencing the tensions between old standards and new directions. Bronze Age characters faced the expectations to fit within the Comics Code Authority’s editorial code and the desire to address real world issues in a more provocative manner. Though characters like Green Lantern and Green Arrow pushed the limits of what was appropriate for comics to cover, female superheroes of the Bronze Age mostly continued to walk to down the path paved by their Silver Age counterparts. Comics published during both eras have depicted feminism as aggressive and therefore undesirable for women. Breaking from this tradition, Claremont’s female mutants paved the way for a complete reconceptualization of female superheroes in the following age. The Bronze Age was marked by the tension between creator expression and editorial code standards; such tensions inspired what readers experience in comics today.
The Modern Age

As the seventies transitioned into the eighties, the U.S. was faced with a series of dark issues. The AIDS virus killed thousands of gay men, crack cocaine was ravaging largely impoverished areas, and “greed was good.” As Reagan was restructuring economic policy, the comic industry began to completely reconceptualize their goals and means of creative expression. Changes to the characters of superheroines during the Modern Age (1985-present), have been both progressive and regressive. During the period surrounding the change of the millennium, the status of the superheroine has been questioned and continuously altered.

Women living in the eighties were the proverbial daughters of second wave feminism. Though the women’s liberation movement was given negative meanings, its achievements solidified opportunities for women in later generations. Interestingly, women in the eighties compared empowerment to superheroism. According to Rosen, the American public began to recognize the nuances and idiosyncrasies to womanhood and by 1980, “most Americans imagined a feminist as a Superwoman, hair flying as she rushed around, an attache case in one arm, a baby in the other.”79 Though the conceptualization of the female superhero feminist was groundbreaking it also reinforced a more regressive idea: “the Superwoman could have it all but only if she did it all.”80 Regardless of the attainability of achieving “feminist superheroism,” women who did not do it all, could not have it all or be conceptualized as extraordinary.

Gone were the days of Claremont’s X-Men. The late eighties saw Storm abandon her mohawk for long, wavy hair. Rogue was no longer a punk death princess but a

80 Ibid.
brunette bombshell. Dazzler looked more like Malibu Barbie than an actual superhero, and “the women of the X-Men didn’t look as hard and angular as they had a few years earlier. They now had slim shapes, long limbs, and perfect pretty faces.”

Instead of being the strong empowered superheroes they were in the seventies, the women of the X-Men in the eighties were more supermodel than superhero. The increased emphasis on sex appeal was not limited to mutants, but extended to all women in comics.

Mike Madrid argues that the increased sex appeal of female superheroes in the nineties could be largely attributed to the creation of Image Comics in 1992. Image creators were not only rebellious against Marvel but also the Comics Code Authority. By self-publishing their comics, Image ignored the code and released whatever they wanted. Madrid credits the “sexpot” super heroine and Image with a “blurring of lines between mainstream entertainment and pornography.” He continues to note that “women in comics had always provided eye candy for male readers, but Image took it a step further.”

Blurring the lines between pornography and entertainment was simple for a superheroine like Lady Death. One of Image’s first comics, Lady Death was characterized by “chalk white skin, a massive head of silver hair, and empty emotionless eyes. Oh, and giant breasts, held up by bikini tops made of skeletal hands.” Lady Death was a self-assertive female who, in her narrative, overthrew Lucifer for the throne of Hell. Yet she was drawn in a way that emphasized her bust size over her determination.

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81 Madrid, The Supergirls, 243.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid, 277.
85 Ibid, 279.
86 Ibid, 282.
Depicting female superheroes as Baywatch babes was not solely resigned to the Image women. Stephanie Crawley argues that Wonder Woman was presented in a way that was typical of women in comics in the 1990s. At this time, women in comics tended to be represented as hypersexualized objects of male fantasy, even if they were also represented as strong and independent.87

Goldin notes that that the nineties were a time in which comics entered a sexual revolution, in which it was almost exclusively the female superheroes being sexualized.88 The trend of the hypersexualized superheroine can be observed in Marvel comics whose artists and creators released *Sports Illustrated* like “swim-suit” issues that depicted female superheroines in barely-there bikinis on the beach. As female superheroes began to resemble swim-suit supermodels, male superheroes started to make their presence known on the silver screen.

Though superhero movies have been released since the fifties, Morrison notes that the “renaissance” started with the release of the *X-Men* movie in 2000.89 In the following years, summer superhero films blew up the box office. Like the comics, female superheroes in movies acted as auxiliary characters to their male counterparts. In the *X-Men* movies, Jean Gray, Storm, Rogue and other female mutants were not as powerful as Wolverine or Cyclops. Although she had appeared in comics since the sixties, Elektra’s only mainstream appearance was in the 2003 *Daredevil*. Marvel’s Pepper Potts and Back Widow are both female superheroines in their comics, yet on-screen these women are angry career women or lowly spies.

87 Crawley, “Comics and American Feminism: Wonder Woman.”
88 Goldin, *Superheroes Unmasked*.
89 Morrison, *Supergods*, 322.
The superhero summer flick brought millions of dollars to the box office. However, such interest was not reflected in the actual comic book sales. In an attempt to revitalize its age old superheroes, DC released the *New 52*’s project. This project centered on reinventing and reconceptualizing superheroes such as Superman, Wonder Woman, Batgirl, and Batman. The new Wonder Woman was interested in a romantic relationship with Superman. In one issue, Superman physically beats Wonder Woman during an argument. It is not until much later that the reader discovers that Superman’s domestically violent acts were the result of being possessed. The *New 52* titles were not solely reserved to female denigration. Superman’s abuse of Wonder Woman is significant because it helps illustrate a pattern of Intimate Partner Violence in comics. Similar to Wonder Woman, *Gotham City Sirens* reveals that both Catwoman and Harley Quinn are abused by men impersonating their romantic partners. Though Superman is supposedly possessed during this incident, it demonstrates that comic books have portrayed IPV in a way that absolves the abuser of responsibility for the incident. In addition to Wonder Woman’s reconceptualization in the *New 52*’s, DC also reconceptualized other characters to be more diverse. Forgoing Batgirl’s long time desire for Batman, creators ditched her heterosexuality in favor for a lesbian love interest. Harley Quinn, a character from the animated series, was given her own comic and also placed within the female superhero team of *Gotham City Sirens*.

Following the major companies such as DC and Marvel, independent comic companies released comics centering on the sexy superheroine. Originally published under a new independent company, IDW, *Hack/Slash* depicted a “slasher killer” by the name of Cassie Hack. Dressed in visible thong underwear, a short plaid skirt, and combat
boots, Cassie was a character who unflinchingly defeated terrifying villains in every issue. Zenescope Entertainment, started in 2005, almost exclusively released titles focusing on women. Despite the prevalence of female superheroes in Zenescope, these characters were and continue to be explicitly sexualized and purposefully represented that way. Taking from the storylines from old fairytales, Zenescope places women as the ultimate protagonists. However, with weak character development, it can appear that these women are celebrated for their gratuitous breasts and small waists instead of their empowerment.

Market research in 2014 indicated that despite the underdevelopment 46.67% of comic book readers were women. Although women make up nearly half of comic sales, there are still concerns over women in the industry. Over the past few years, readers of comics have voiced their concerns over the lack of diversity in comic books. Articles in outlets from Buzzfeed to The Atlantic have noted the discontent among comic readers. As noted in the previous chapter, some female comic readers have attributed the amount of sexual harassment at comic book conventions to the lack of female protagonists and the sexualization of women in comics. Additionally, such concerns have sparked comic creators to speak out both in favor of and in objection to diversity.

In 2014, Marvel was the main leader in both objectification and empowerment. In response to the highly sexualized cover of the new incarnation of Spider Woman, Marvel’s CEO Axel Alonso asserted that female sexualization was something needed in

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comics. Notwithstanding Alonso’s assertion, releases like *Ms. Marvel*, *Captain Marvel*, and *Thor* have changed what it means to be a superheroine. Giving up her title as Ms. Marvel, Carol Danvers gives her powers to young Pakistani-American teenager Kamala Kahn. Kamala is a particularly significant figure for several reasons. Kamala is portrayed as the child of immigrants who is desperately attempting to assert her independence while simultaneously respecting her Islamic roots and enacting her desire to save New York City. Written by an Islamic woman, G. Willow Wilson, Kamala represents an all-too-real tension between old worlds and changing times. After giving her powers to Kamala, Carol takes the place of the male Captain Marvel, leaves her boyfriend, and goes into space. In another example of growing female prominence, Thor is found to be unworthy of his famous hammer and the power is bestowed to a new, female Thor.

The drastic change in female representation in comics over the past several years has caught the interest of readers and non-readers alike. Mallory Yu from NPR highlights the issue of diversity within the comic industry by noting the lack of female talent in Marvel and DC. Despite females making up nearly half of readership, “women made up less than 10 percent of the creative teams for all books published by DC or Marvel.” To make up for the lack of female writers and artists within the industry, former DC editor Janelle Asselin created an online initiative called Hire This Woman. Partnered with popular comics fan site ComicsAlliance, Asselin notes that Hire This Woman “shines the spotlight on female comics pros on the ascendence. Some of these women will be at the

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very beginning of their careers, while others will be more experienced but not yet ‘household names.’”93 The recent focus on female superheroes has translated to the big screen, where both Marvel and DC plan to release the first films solely featuring a female superhero.

**Conclusion**

Throughout their history, female superheroes have had to move beyond being an auxiliary in order to demonstrate their own power. Although these women have often fought alongside their male counterparts, they have commonly been depicted as weak, needy, or pesky. In the past several years, female superheroes have tried to subvert the tradition established by Golden Age superheroines and assert themselves as self-empowered and powerful. Understanding the way in which female superheroes in previous ages resolve the conflicts between gender and superhero expectations helps this project interpret the implications of Harley, Catwoman, and Ivy’s expectation-fulfilling or breaking actions in Gotham City Sirens.

Despite the heightened focus concerning female superheroes, superheroines still have many uphill battles to fight. The future is never certain but female superheroes do have bright futures. Finding new voices from the unrelenting calls of readers, female superheroes in the twenty-first century have the ability to become more than Baywatch babes and damsels too dumb to know they are in distress. With changing tides, these female superheroes use their logic, credibility, and emotions to protect and preserve truth, justice, and the American way.

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CHAPTER THREE: The Kitten, the Lolita, and the Rose — Gender Expectations, Superhero Expectations and Meaning

Introduction

Since the Golden Age, the roles and characteristics of female superheroes have evolved in some ways and remained static in others. This chapter starts the rhetorical analysis of this project by expanding on the tensions between the expectations derived from the role of superhero and socio-cultural gender expectations. Roland Barthes argues that characters are defined more by “what they do” in relation to “who they are.” That is, a character’s actions are judged and assigned meaning based on expectations appointed to who they are (gender, race, class, roles). The way in which a character attempts to fulfill both set of expectations conveys a particular message about women. Feminist scholar Julia Wood argues that popular culture is a key source of information for the public to obtain information about social issues, like Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). The actions Poison Ivy (Pamela Isley), Harley Quinn (Harleen Quinzel), and Catwoman (Selina Kyle) undertake fulfilling or failing to meet these expectations guide a reader towards a particular interpretation for how they should assess and understand Catwoman and Harley’s experience with IPV and Ivy’s abusive actions towards others.

This chapter offers a more nuanced understanding of how characters are defined: characters are defined by how their actions meet or fail to meet expectations. According to Gail Hawkes, predominant socio-cultural expectations of women dictate that females

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act passive, subordinate, altruistic, and selfless. Though Hawkes contends that these expectations have changed in some aspects, they continue to influence how individuals perceive and make judgements about women. As female superheroes, these characters are not only expected to act in accordance to socio-cultural gender expectations but also the expectations derived from their role as superhero. Peter DeScioli and Robert Kurzban argue that the most overarching expectation is that superheroes, regardless of gender, have a moral high ground in all situations. Such moral high ground is significant because it motivates their actions in narratives. Jeph Loeb and Tom Morris explain that superheroes are presumed to be moral exemplars that “pursue justice, defend the defenseless, help those who cannot help themselves, and overcome evil with the force of good.” Though superheroes have extraordinary abilities imparted to them, they can only use their powers for the betterment of others. If a superhero uses their powers for their own self-interest they are considered selfish and therefore not moral. For the majority of superhero narratives, taking the moral high ground means not killing, making sure justice is carried out through legal means, and being selfless at all costs. Despite this pattern, some superheroes have different understandings of morality that they attempt to justify in their narratives. Though past female superheroes have fit archetypal gender roles, the women in Gotham City Sirens cannot be placed in any particular archetypal role. Unlike the superheroines of previous ages, Poison Ivy, Harley Quinn, and Catwoman do not fit

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7 Ibid.
8 Refer back to chapter two.
within one specific label that gives sense to their actions, behavior and overall narrative. Ultimately, these characters are superheroes and are expected to meet certain expectations associated with that role. This chapter does not advance that these characters are solely situated in the role of superhero. Rather, I contend that it is the expectations associated with being a superhero that conflict with their gender expectations in a way that assigns meaning to a character and their experiences with IPV. The way in which a character is defined is particularly important in two ways: (1) characters are assigned positive and negative meanings based on if they meet expectations and; (2) the way characters are defined indicates the “moral” argued in the narrative. If a character is defined negatively, the reader can then interpret that their expectation defying actions cause their undesirable actions. Informing readers of the text’s preferred interpretation of “appropriate” female behavior.

The text illustrates that these characters cannot simultaneously meet both gender and superhero expectations. Catwoman conforms to gender expectations, but not superhero; whereas Ivy’s and Harley’s actions suggest that these female superheroes satisfy either set of expectations. This chapter addresses how mediated messages concerning women typically disseminate appropriations of what is desirable for women to undertake and embody. Nicolas J.G. Winter argues that such gender framing has serious implications because it polarizes an audience by forcing them to choose either “traditional” or “egalitarian gender arrangements.” Winter’s claims suggest that gender framing in media forces an individual into accepting one interpretation while denigrating other attitudes regarding women and the actions they undertake. Female superheroes are

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polarized by the expectations derived from their role as superhero and the gender expectations assigned through the partial meaning derived from socio-cultural meanings of femininity. Because their expectations are polarized, it is difficult for a female superhero to fulfill either part of the dichotomy.

The actions these characters take fulfilling or neglecting certain expectations suggests how a reader should interpret their abusive situations and their status as victims and/or abuser. As explained later in this chapter, superheroes are bestowed a certain set of expectations based on their physical abilities. Due to their strength, superheroes are expected to be adept in protecting themselves and have an *a priori* meaning of agency. Understanding the actions of these female superheroes is particularly important because it helps illuminate their perceived agency in negotiating their abusive situations and their status as victims. Therefore, this chapter focuses on the expectations of Poison Ivy, Catwoman, and Harley Quinn, and chapter four will evaluate how their expectation conforming/denying actions influence the meanings assigned to their violent domestic situations and experiences. Overall, this chapter argues that these characters undertake actions that define them as weak, manipulative, and naïve. Their actions often break both superhero and gender expectations and such defiance serves as “good reasons” to the meanings they are assigned as victims of IPV. Because comic books are analogous to the real world, the meanings assigned to these characters give readers a framework for assessing and perceiving moral concerns regarding women that they can then draw from in the real world.

In this chapter, I seek to understand the visual representations of these female superheroes depicted and the messages accompanying those illustrations. Understanding
the visual component is important to this project for two reasons: 1) it illuminates how the sexualization sends a message through visual representation alone and; 2) it expands on how the visual sexualization of a female superhero pairs with her narrative to define her. This chapter begins with a brief overview of the narrative paradigm followed by an explanation of the denotive and connotative messages disseminated by images. A critical analysis is utilized to understand how these characters are individually defined and the connotative messages behind those definitions.

Following this explanation, this chapter contends that these characters’ inability to meet expectations is good reasons in a myth that supports the subordination of female superheroes. Because this takes place in an analogue, it has the potential to inform readers about the expectations of women in the real world. In what follows, I analyze how the actions of the three protagonists situate them in a myth of female subordination.

**Literature Review**

**Narrative Paradigm**

Narratives lose persuasive potential when they are organized haphazardly. For this reason, most narratives are organized with a beginning, middle, and an end. Daniel Chandler calls this organization the linear temporal model and notes that the event(s) surrounding the beginning cause the events of the end and so on. As discussed in chapter one, the visual and textual elements of a comic’s narrative can be combined in various ways that influence how the narrative is read. Some comics *flashback* to a character’s past or jumps forward to the future, yet most story lines demonstrate an explicit beginning, middle, and end. In addition to organizing how the plot should unfold,
the sequential ordering of panels guides the reader towards a particular path in which the narrative should be read and how the events should be interpreted. In comics, visual means help readers discern instances in which comics break the linear temporal model by putting the narrative text in different visual fonts or word balloon shapes. For example, some comics could differentiate scenes in which a character “flashes back” to their past by putting the narrative text in a bolder font than the narrative text representing the present. *Gotham City Sirens* represents a linear temporal model of narrative by demonstrating a clear beginning, middle, and end to the narrative. In the framework of Stabile’s imagined here-and-nows, a linear temporal model of narrative allows the analogue to have even more persuasive potential if the ending is met with a solution to a chaotic event. If the comparison resolves an issue favorably, a reader may be more inclined to use the information given in the text when making real world judgments.

Similar to the denoted and connoted messages within images, narratives guide readers towards a preferred reading by providing structure and coherence to something in the literal world that can be strange, unfamiliar, taboo, dangerous, etc.\(^\text{12}\) That which could be constituted as strange and unfamiliar fits within Fisher’s idea that narratives are utilized to resolve public moral arguments. Within narratives the superficial characteristics of a particular character represent denotation in that it is a representation of an object/person in the literal world. As discussed in chapter one, categorizations of race, gender, ethnicity, and abilities give a character partial meaning based on socio-cultural perceptions of those categories. Connotation in narrative occurs when there is a particular socio-cultural meaning attached to the representation. Similar to the connotative messages within an image, the representations in narrative analogues carry

\(^{12}\) Ibid, 90.
with them personal associations that refer to ideological and socio-cultural meanings 
attached to the representation.

Combined, the denotative and connotative messages in a narrative analogue
“reflect major culturally variable concepts underpinning a particular world view—such
as masculinity, femininity, freedom, individualism, objectivism, Englishness, and so
on.”13 When these particular world views are disseminated, they become cautionary tales
that dictate and reinforce what is culturally appropriate. Chandler argues that some of
these world views are so culturally ingrained that their appearances within society often
go unnoticed and/or unquestioned. If the linear temporal model guides the interpretation
of the narrative analogue to reinforce certain attitudes that are pervasive, such guidance
can pair with a reader’s familiarity of the attitude in a way that upholds the preferred
interpretation of the narrative.

Narrative analogues assumed that most readers have similar experiences and are
aware of prominent social meanings. In doing so, narrative analogues heighten their
persuasive potential because they are more likely to support what a reader knows to be
true. Fisher explains that narrative fidelity involves a reader’s acceptance of the preferred
interpretation. Essentially, a narrative must justify the preferred interpretation in good
reasons. These good reasons use a character’s actions in the narrative to support how they
should be interpreted. In order for the interpretation to be persuasive, such justification
has to ring true to a reader’s experiences and what they know to be true. Even if a reader
has no first-hand experience with a particular issue and/or attitude they can rely on
prominent socio-cultural attitudes and the media to determine if a narrative’s
interpretation has fidelity. Within narratives, meanings have to be highlighted through

13 Ibid, 145.
procedures that elucidate to the preferred interpretation of the story. Like images, narratives rely on socio-cultural conceptualizations to ground and forward the meanings assigned to characters and the overall message. Readers have some sense of experience with the socio-cultural values given in a narrative and this improves the likelihood of narrative fidelity. The reader’s experience with socio-cultural values acts as a source of information whereby they can assess the narratives truthfulness. Additionally, a reader’s experience with knowing/challenging/reinforcing a specific socio-cultural attitude influences how they view the narrative’s good reasons as pragmatic and justifiable.

Because comic books are analogous to the real world, they rely on real world beliefs and attitudes in forming the moral constructs of their narrative. Though comic books communicate through narratives, Grant Morrison notes comics are mythic in the sense that they resolve what is unpredictable in the analogue as a comparison of how to resolve unpredictability in the real world.14 *Gotham City Sirens* disperses a message that is not necessarily “cautionary” but it does serve to resolve the “unpredictability” of female power. I am not contending that female power is unpredictable in the sense that women should not be afforded equal power. Rather, the unpredictability of female power concerns an unknowingness of the implications of full gender equality. Female superheroes have all the same resources to be considered men yet, they are still portrayed as subordinate to their male counterparts. Male superheroes still outnumber female superheroes, are not nearly as sexualized, and are not depicted as needing saving. Comic book readers have not seen gender equality among superheroes and all female teams like *Gotham City Sirens* threaten to disrupt the predictability of male superhero narratives.

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There have not been many female superheroes that break from the tradition started in the Golden Age, therefore it could be difficult for readers to assess a narrative wherein female superheroes did not need saving, did not fulfill archetypal roles and/or did not pursue romantic interests. *Gotham City Sirens* do not fit archetypal roles but the narrative does center on the consequences of Catwoman and Harley’s romantic interests and Harley is depicted as in need of constant saving. Within the overall narrative, the actions these characters carry out expand on their partial meaning. Though their actions define these characters, the way in which they are visually portrayed during those actions contributes to the meanings they are assigned. In what follows, this project provides a brief overview of visual rhetoric and the messages sent by visual representations of women.

**Visual Rhetoric and Woman in Media**

As previously discussed in chapter one, images are often analogous to the real world and as such, offer audiences an interpretation of the real world. Sonja K. Foss argues that the meaning assigned to an image can only be understood in relation to what the object likely means to a viewer. Because this project focuses on female representation in a mediated form (comic books), this project will draw on common media depictions of women to discern what these images could mean to a reader.

Mass media representations of women use certain tropes to visually signify what it means to be a woman. Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon argue that representations of

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women in popular culture often reinforce socio-cultural attitudes about women.\textsuperscript{16} Media depictions of women commonly portray these characters as fulfilling some sort of role (mother, virgin, whore) in a way that upholds the desirability of female passivity and submissiveness. In addition to the roles they portray, women in media frequently fit a desirable body standard similar to that outlined by Hicks in chapter one. Angela McRobbie posits that “the media has become the key site for defining codes of sexual conduct. It casts judgment and establishes the rules of play.”\textsuperscript{17} When different forms of media disseminate similar messages regarding gender and sexuality, they are providing the public with a particular standard for what they are supposed to desire and/or want to achieve. The expectations assigned to a particular gender are commonly reinforced, defined, and disseminated through mediated means; if a viewer identifies with the denotative representation of biological sex, he or she is more susceptible to accept the connotative gender norms associated with that representation. Upon receiving and accepting gendered messages, an individual then uses that message to inform their assumptions of the acceptable social roles for men and women.\textsuperscript{18}

Like the archetypal roles noted by Miczo in chapter one, female visual representations in the media are depicted as fitting a certain role. Each role carries a set of expectations, and women who do not meet expectations can be viewed as failing to fulfill the role for which they were intended.\textsuperscript{19} Sarah Wright explains that the expectations assigned to specific roles often relate to socio-cultural notions of what is virtuous.\textsuperscript{20} That

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\textsuperscript{17} Angela McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” \textit{Feminist Media Studies} 4, no. 3 (2004): 25.
\textsuperscript{18} Jordan and Weedon, \textit{Cultural Politics}, 181.
\end{flushleft}
is, gender roles are often fulfilled in relation to what is socio-culturally considered moral and appropriate. As analogues, comic narratives give partial meaning to characters based on socio-cultural expectations assigned to their gender, and this base supports the overall meaning assigned to a character in the narrative.

The denotative message provides the reader with a partial meaning of the image whereas connotative procedures elucidate and expand on that partial meaning to assign a specific meaning to the image. As discussed in chapter one, denotative messages have partial meaning attributed to character’s real world comparison. That is, women in analogues are expected to act similar to women in the real world. Because real world females are subject to socio-cultural gender expectations of femininity, women in analogues are met with similar expectations. These gender expectations provide a character with partial meaning, and a character’s actions develop the overall positive or negative meaning assigned to them. Because women are assigned certain meanings based on their actions, connotative procedures are used to indicate what exact meanings should be assigned to the character.

Based on the partial meaning given in the denotative message, specific connotative procedures highlight and expand on the intended meaning of a character. The orientation of a reader’s “gaze” acts as one connotative procedure that expands on the intended meaning of a character, their roles, and their expectations. If the full meaning is to be accurately interpreted, an image must catch and maintain an audience’s gaze until the message is received. A viewer’s gaze is not necessarily their literal eyesight but how they are supposed to see an image. According to English scholar Beth Newman, the gaze
is a way in which an image is framed within a particular viewpoint.\textsuperscript{21} The gaze draws on a subject’s perceptions about the image (or the comparison it represents) to highlight the preferred meaning of the image. The image relies on socio-cultural meanings assigned \textit{a priori} to that image to guide a viewer’s interpretation. Images assume that viewers have similar shared experiences and are aware of prominent social meanings. The socio-cultural meanings used to guide a viewer’s interpretation not only guides how the image should be understood but also the persuasiveness of the preferred interpretation. Similar to Fisher’s narrative fidelity, the interpretation of an image can only be persuasive if it is consistent with a viewer’s experience and what they determine as true. Using socio-cultural meanings attached to the image narrows a viewer’s interpretation of the image while also heightening the image’s persuasive potential.

Media depictions of women disseminate messages about the socially appropriate behaviors and characteristics a woman is expected undertake and embody. Nicole R. Krassas, Joan M. Blauwkamp, and Peggy Wesselink contend that though these messages are grounded in what is “socially desirable,” they are almost always framed by what is preferable to men over women.\textsuperscript{22} That is, the male gaze upholds traditional notions of gender expectations whereby women are subordinate to men and, as Newman asserts, such subordination commonly relegates female to the status of “object.”\textsuperscript{23} Though the “status of object” could be assumed to mean sexual objectification, Newman explains such status assigns meaning to women that they are “less than” their male counterparts.

\textsuperscript{23} Newman, “‘The Situation of the Looker-On,’” 1031.
and therefore more likely to be controlled. This project does not claim that *Gotham City Sirens* is completely framed by the male gaze. Based on Krassas, Blauwkamp, Wesselink, and Newman’s characteristics, Harley Quinn, Poison Ivy, and Catwoman cannot be completely framed by the male gaze because they are not represented solely as objects. Though it is evident that these characters are partially framed by the male gaze, focusing the analysis exclusively on this characteristic would ignore other mechanisms used to guide a reader’s interpretation of the text. For this reason, this project seeks to investigate the various connotative devices utilized to guide interpretation. Following the explanation of the above information, this chapter contends that these characters’ inability to meet expectations serves as good reasons to support the subordination of female superheroes. Because this takes place in an analogue, it has the potential to inform readers about the expectations of women in the real world. In what follows, I analyze how the actions of the three protagonists defy expectations and assign them negative meanings.

**Analysis**

Before I begin, it is imperative that I clarify certain terminology and the scope of my analysis. When I refer to a character’s narrative, I am referring to the part of the story that concerns the character’s experiences whereas references to the overall narrative indicate the overall story of the text.

In addition to explanation about terminology, it is important to make clarifications regarding the scope of this analysis. Female superheroes as analogues of women are given a partial meaning associated with socio-cultural notions of gender. Additionally, each character easily fits within the beauty paradigm outlined by Hicks in chapter one. The partial meaning of the denotative message is significant but it is further elucidated

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24 Ibid.
through the connotative procedures. For this reason, the following analysis of visual representations will focus on the connotative messages of these female superheroes.

Lastly, this analysis only briefly highlights the good reasons used to justify each character’s particular meaning. As discussed earlier in my argument, the overall narrative concerns Catwoman and Harley’s experiences with IPV. This chapter analyzes how each character’s expectation-breaking actions defines them positively or negatively whereas chapter four expands on how those actions serve as good reasons justifying their status as non-victims.

**Poison Ivy**

Like a rose with thorns, Poison Ivy is both beautiful and dangerous. As noted in the introduction of this analysis, Ivy’s representation has partial meaning based on socio-cultural attitudes about her gender. Because superheroes are defined mostly by their actions, it is essential to understand the connotative messages behind a female superhero’s actions. For Pamela Isley aka Poison Ivy, the connotative messages conveyed by her actions circumvent the expectations bestowed upon her. As I explain later in this analysis, the connotative messages regarding Ivy’s identity informs a reader of how they should interpret and assign meaning to Ivy based on her expectation fulfilling or breaking actions. This section explores how Ivy’s supposedly good actions (actions that conform to expectations) are almost always counteracted by other actions that depict Ivy as manipulative, coercive, and shrewish.

Ivy’s first interactions with other characters in the overall narrative complied with her expectations as a superhero. Ivy’s protection of Catwoman demonstrated that she occupies the moral high ground in two ways: (1) by protecting Catwoman, Ivy was
defending the defenseless and; (2) by defeating Bone Blaster, she was overcoming the “evilness” of her foe. In addition to her morality in saving Catwoman, Ivy again acted altruistically when she invited Harley to live with her and Catwoman. Following *Hush* and the Joker’s self-impose exile, Harley was essentially homeless. Though it can be perceived that Harley had the resources (super powers/physical ability) to not be without shelter, her actions illustrate that she was in need of guidance. Ivy’s invitation to Harley was a demonstration of moral superiority in that she was helping the helpless. These actions fulfilled the expectations of superhero but it did not necessarily fit expectations of womanhood. Theresa L. Thompson and Eugenia Zerbinos argue that media-related gender depictions commonly emphasize a woman’s kindness to demonstrate favorable personality characteristics associated with being a woman. Ivy’s physical ascendancy over the Bone Blaster did not fit the characteristic of being subordinate to a man. While not being subordinate, Ivy’s initial actions were altruistic and indicate a feminine quality in which she is almost being motherly. Ultimately, Ivy’s first actions in the text met her superhero expectations and decreased the need for her to satisfy gender expectations. Specifically, acting altruistically as a superhero satisfied her gender expectation of being kind. Despite her initial interactions in the overall narrative, the actions that followed did not conform to superhero or gender expectations.

The partial meaning assigned by her gender is expanded on in the visual text in a way that supports the sexualization of women in the media. In regards to her body, Ivy is depicted as less clothed than her team members. In addition to being less clothed, Ivy was also illustrated in more sexual poses and her image was embellished in a way that

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25 Harley’s need for guidance is discussed later in this chapter.  
hyperbolizes parts of her body related to sexuality (breasts, posterior, genital area).

Though scholars like Barthes have identified stylistic devices that allow a critic to understand the types of messages in an image, yet few have provided a clear framework for evaluating the images in comics in relation to gender. Cecelia Baldwin argues that the way in which a woman is depicted in the media often connotes a sexual message behind the representation.27 Baldwin’s research focuses on the sexual poses of models and notes that pose is significant in understanding the message; however Baldwin’s argument does not highlight the various aspects that influence representations in comics.28

Female superheroes are often posed in a way that explicitly disseminates a connotative message regarding their sexuality. As such, these sexual messages contribute to the overall meaning assigned to a character. Adapted from post-WWII era pin-up girls, “cheesecake” superheroines are seminude women, in erotic poses that connote messages of the desired sexuality assigned to a character.29 The poses amplify and highlight parts of a superheroine’s body that have some sort of sexual connotation (breasts, genital area, back-side). Joanne Meyerowitz argues that the focusing on particular body parts helps a viewer define what is sexually appropriate and desirable for women.30 Though women are mostly scorned for their sexual acts, if they are going to be sexual, it is preferred that they be like a “cheesecake” model. Meyerowitz asserts that cheesecake images visually

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28 Ibid. Baldwin’s research does not necessarily focus on models in advertising. Her analysis centers more on the visual representation of portraits of women nineteenth century in comparison to the twentieth century. These models did not advertise products and were more like precursors to the mid-twentieth century pin-up girl.
30 Ibid.
appeal to both men and women through the demonstration of beautiful women who are supposed to be perceived positively based solely on their apparently normalized sexuality.\textsuperscript{31} For this project, the term “cheesecake shot” will refer to a particular visual device that draws on the normalized sexualization of the female superhero and uses pose, photogeny, and hyperbole to amplify such sexualization. Cheesecake shots are meant to disrupt the narrative and guide the reader’s attention towards the sexualized image and meaning connoted by that image. Within the text, the superheroines most often appear in these cheesecake shots when sexuality and sexual activity is not relevant to the narrative plot. The overall narrative does not support that these characters meet Kari Lerum and Shari L. Dworkin’s categories of sexualization: their value is not based on their sex appeal, they are not objectified, and it is hard to determine if sexuality is inappropriately imposed on them. Despite not fitting into these categorizations, these women are sexualized in that their visual depictions illicit and emphasize the sexual aspects of these women’s personalities. That is, the visual portrayal of Ivy, Harley, and Catwoman directs a reader’s gaze towards the sexual parts of their body. The direction of the reader’s gaze indicates that there is a sexual meaning assigned to these characters.

Poison Ivy appeared in more cheesecake shots than her team members. Out of the twenty-six cheesecake shots throughout the text, Ivy appears in seventeen of them.\textsuperscript{32} The repetitive appearances of these shots within the texts suggest that Ivy’s sexualization is normal and thus a characteristic assigned to her personality. Additionally, these shots most often occur when Ivy is controlling and dictating how an issue should be solved. In twelve of the cheesecake shots, the gaze is oriented to her backside which is exaggerated.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 17.
\textsuperscript{32} Dini, \textit{Gotham City Sirens}, 7, 8, 11, 17, 21, 22, 29, 30, 35, 78, 87, 89, 105, 119, 123, 125, 126.
in size and shape. Additionally, the shots depicting her derriere intensify the focus of the
gaze through photogeny; the lighting of the panels specifically emphasizes her posterior
above all other units in the panel. The shots hyperbolizing this body part most often occur
when she is in battle against a male foe. In these panels, it is not Ivy’s strength and
determination that a reader is invited to focus on but the sexualized connotation of that
body part. The lighting and hyperbolizing of the body part guide the reader to define Ivy
not on her empowering actions but on her sexualization. Ivy’s cheesecake shots
materialized when she was both in and outside of battle, directing a reader’s gaze towards
her body above the narrative text. The reader’s gaze is directed towards the sexual
connotation of the pose whereby she uses sexuality as a means of defeating her enemies.
One scene in the second issue of the text directs a reader’s gaze towards another
interpretation of Ivy that denigrates her physical prowess. When Ivy uses her vines to
burst through the restaurant and save Harley, she is physically strong and capable of
overcoming her opponents.33 Despite this feat, several panels of this scene show Ivy from
the back, emphasizing her rear-end and long legs over her ability.

Also distracting from Ivy’s strengths are images in which Ivy is sexually posed.
Ivy’s sensual poses comprise of three of her cheesecake shots and only occur when she is
controlling someone else. In these poses, Ivy is often depicted as lounging seductively on
a bed of leaves or straddling over someone, emphasizing her hips and thighs.
Specifically, these shots occur in the first issue when she has drugged the Riddler and
manipulated him into relinquishing his apartment and in the second issue when she has
drugged and tortured Catwoman.

33 Ibid, 87.
In the first two issues of the text, Ivy conforms to both superhero and gender expectations by acting altruistically. Following these initial noble actions, her narrative was disrupted through a sequence of manipulative and coercive actions. For instance, Ivy misrepresents her living arrangements. The apartment she invites Catwoman and Harley to live in does not belong to her but to the Riddler. Drugging the Riddler with a toxin that made him complacent, Poison Ivy shrugged the issue off by saying that he was more “agreeable” drugged.34 When she drugged the Riddler, she is depicted as lying on her side, on a bed of leaves, in a way that accentuated her exaggerated curves. The disagreement about the Riddler’s kidnapping and intoxication caused a struggle in which Ivy and Catwoman compete for control over the situation and what should be done. Assuming the moral high ground, Catwoman insinuated that Ivy was being immoral and careless in her actions. When Catwoman insinuated that they had enough money to leave the Riddler’s apartment, Ivy informs Catwoman that she does not have money but she can obtain it:

IVY: Money is easy to come by – for me, anyway. A little wink, a little kiss, and anyone I chose opens up for me like a blossoming rose. Right, Eddie?
THE RIDDLER: Whatever you say, Pamela. 35

In these panels, Ivy was not only using her sexuality (and super powers) to be deceptive but she was also acknowledging that she can continue to do so. Though her initial actions supported her acceptance of superhero and gender expectations, her following actions defied them both. In terms of her role as superhero, Ivy is taking advantage of others for her own personal gain: she drugged the Riddler for his apartment and mentions that she can use her sexuality later on for similar benefits. Ivy is not being

34 Ibid, 7. See Appendix A.
35 Ibid; The Riddler’s real name is Edward Nigma. See Appendix B.
kind or nurturing. The fact that she is being dominating over a man also breaks expectations whereby she is supposed to be subordinate to men. Notwithstanding her actions with the Riddler, she also commits these actions against women—specifically, her own team mates.

Following Bone Blaster smashing into the Riddler’s apartment and his subsequent defeat, Ivy was again depicted sexually when she attempted to betray Catwoman. After moving into the animal shelter, Ivy and Harley poison Catwoman to obtain Batman’s true identity. Because Selina was romantically involved with Batman, she knew his true identity; Ivy and Harley wanted that information. The first issue of the volume ends with Ivy shouting at Catwoman “WHO IS BATMAN?”36 The second issue continued with the illustration of Catwoman bound to a chair while Ivy and Harley interrogated her.37 As Harley stood in front Catwoman, Ivy was illustrated in a similar pose when she drugged the Riddler. Despite offering protection, Ivy was quick to beat and torture Catwoman for Batman’s identity. Ivy’s sexual poses occurred predominantly in the first two issues of the text where she is being coercive. Her sexual poses are not as apparent in the last three issues and her coercive actions against others also decrease at this time. Following the second issue, the plot moves towards resolving the issue of Harley’s violent relationship with the Joker and his attacks on the sirens. The prevalence and ordering of these two dominant images guides the reader towards a conflicted and negative message regarding Ivy.

Adding to the connotative message, derived from her sexual portrayals, levels of subordination indicate that she was not only coercive, but also dominant. By dominant, I

36 Ibid, 22.
37 The sexual imagery of Catwoman’s bondage is explained later in the chapter. See Appendix C.
mean that the visual text infers that she occupied a position of authority over her team mates. As a way to heighten the attention paid to a particular image, connotative procedures like levels of subordination are utilized to demonstrate what features of an image are more significant than others. T.R. Gill explains that “levels of subordination” deliver visual signaled orders whereby one part of an image is dominant over another.\textsuperscript{38} Subordinate objects can appear to be smaller than the dominant image and/or serve as the subsidiary image behind the dominant image on the grid of the scene. As a means to catch attention, some images demonstrate grossly exaggerated features of a real world representation; hyperbolizing the image to direct the reader’s gaze towards what is important.\textsuperscript{39} In levels of subordination, the connotative meanings of messages can be expanded by how the denotive representations are organized and emphasized. The parts that are meant to expand more connotations will be amplified in comparison to units of the image that are not as important and/or are not attached to connotative meaning.

Ivy was never depicted as being subordinate to another character and she is demonstrating a level of dominance. When Catwoman attempted to assert a sense of moral superiority over Ivy, Ivy is still portrayed as larger in scale. The enlargement of her image suggests that Ivy has more power in the interaction than Catwoman. In addition to being larger in scale, Catwoman was commonly delineated as the subsidiary image. Catwoman is often in the background in the panels she shares with Ivy, and she is less embellished with lighting and hyperbolized body parts. Ivy’s visual domination extends beyond Catwoman to include her interactions with Harley. When Ivy reprimands Harley

for wanting to continue a relationship with Joker, she was not only larger in scale but she is actually portrayed as screaming at Harley, adding to her perceived authority over her team members. In her interactions with men, Ivy only demonstrated levels of domination when she was in control of men. For instance, the only time she is dominant over a man was when she drugged the Riddler and forced him into relinquishing his apartment. In this scene, Harley is the dominant image but she is also posed sexually. Straddling the Riddler, Ivy was larger in scale and sexually posed, implying that she used her sexuality to control others.

Ivy’s good actions continued to be overshadowed by her malevolent actions throughout the narrative. When Ivy saved Harley from Hush and the Joker in the third issue, she simultaneously reprimands Harley saying, “you just can’t stay out of trouble, can you.”40 As discussed in the plot description, the three characters return to their sanctuary following the battle with Hush. Upon returning to their home, the Joker bombs the three women. Assuming that the man who has just bombed their home was the real Joker, Ivy and Catwoman attempted to rationalize with Harley about her combative relationship. In a moment of sincerity, Ivy confesses that her experience in manipulating enables her to better perceive the manipulation experienced by others:

IVY: I know something about human hearts – I’ve spent my life manipulating them.41

Though this moment serves to highlight an important brief moment of realization for Harley, Ivy’s self-proclamation only serves to reinforce her past abusive actions as being intrinsic to her character. In addition to her manipulation, Ivy negates superhero expectations when she argues that the Joker needs to be killed:

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41 Ibid, 103.
IVY: Joker’s been the cause of more misery than we can bear. Let’s end this!
HARLEY: End? You don’t mean, like, dead end?
IVY: I’ll bring the lilies – gladly.

After the three female superheroes decided to take action and defeat the Joker, Ivy leads the team to the warehouse doubling as Joker’s center of operations. When Ivy, Catwoman, and Harley infiltrate the Joker’s lair, Harley notices that something is wrong about the Joker. Instead of listening to Harley, Ivy wraps vines around her mouth to prevent her from talking. This action ultimately proves detrimental to their goal in defeating the Joker mostly because the person they were fighting was not the Joker. In the ensuing battle, Ivy and Catwoman become distracted when make-up and prosthetics fall off of their opponent to reveal a side show clown instead of the infamous Joker. Noting that she is larger in size than her new opponent, Gaggy, Ivy underestimates her foe and loosens her defenses. When she conquers one of Gaggy’s tricks, she is soon caught off guard by his “hardening plastic bubbles” that attach to her face and smother her.\(^{42}\)
Despite acting powerfully and taking the lead in most of the fighting situations, Ivy is over-confident in her battle with Gaggy. The stereotype met by Ivy in *Gotham City Sirens* is similar to the stereotype applied to empowered female superheroes in the Silver and Bronze ages; empowered female superheroes are aggressive, controlling, and manipulative.

Because characters are defined by what they do, Ivy’s actions categorized her as malicious, near-sighted, and aggressive, rather than empowered. Poison Ivy’s visual portrayal directs the readers gaze towards an interpretation of Ivy’s character wherein she uses sexuality to deceive others. Though it is difficult to discern if her visual image

\(^{42}\) Ibid, 119.
disseminates what is desirable only to men, it is evident that her visual depiction is assigned sexual meanings. She appears in more cheesecake shots than Catwoman and Harley, and her body is more amplified. Based on Meyerowitz’s argument, the cheesecake shots are alone significant connotations of a preferred sexual meaning. By upholding beauty norms, Ivy’s visual representation achieves a gender expectation of having the “appropriate” body. Despite having the desirable body, she does not exhibit socio-cultural gender appropriate actions. She was not subordinate to anyone (including men) and was only momentarily caring. These sexual images typically occurred when she was being deceptive, thus pairing her coercive actions with sexual meanings. Combined, the sexual meaning and manipulative actions form an overarching meaning associating her sexuality with dishonest actions, guiding a reader to interpret that she uses sexuality for self-gain.

In using her sexuality for self-gain, Ivy is also breaking the expectations designated by her role as a superhero. Acting in self-interest subverted the expectation of acting on behalf of others. Additionally, her position on killing the Joker/Gaggy also goes against what is expected of her as a superhero. Male superheroes like Batman and Superman have continuously upheld moral superiority by not killing a villain or arguing to do so. Ivy on the other hand had no qualms about ending the Joker’s life and justified that it was actually needed. Ultimately, Ivy’s break in expectations (both superhero and gender) assign meanings to her associated with dishonesty, aggressiveness, exploitation. Her actions defy both superhero and gender expectations and her actions are used good reasons to justify her negative meaning. Because Ivy does not act in accordance to gender expectations, she is too aggressive to be a superhero. Such meanings prove to be
problematic because it denigrates Ivy’s potential meanings of empowerment. Ivy led her
team, defeated adversaries, and was vehemently determined to achieve her goals, no
matter the costs. When she is assigned meanings corresponding to self-interest and
coercive sexuality, she cannot be empowered, female superhero.

**Catwoman**

Selina Kyle, aka Catwoman, began her narrative by confessing that she was “as
weak as a kitten.” This confession grounded Catwoman’s actions and defines her role
within the text. Although Barthes notes that characters are defined by what they do,
Catwoman is unique because she is not only defined by what she does but by others’
opinions on what she does. In what follows I explain how Catwoman defines herself and
how others contribute to that definition. Because this narrative took place directly after
the *Hush* story arc, much of Selina’s narrative highlighted her romantic relationship with
Batman and having her heart ripped out by Hush.

Within eleven panels of proclaiming that she was “as weak as a kitten,” she is
overpowered by Bone Blaster when she attempts to save a young couple from being
mugged. The once undefeatable female superhero was easily overpowered by her
enemy. After Ivy saves Catwoman, Catwoman attempts to establish some sense of
morality among the three women by arguing that Ivy’s actions were coercive and
undesirable. Catwoman’s argument against drugging the Riddler demonstrated that she
was concerned for those who could not help themselves. Despite being a
superhero/supervillain, the Riddler was unable to protect himself from Ivy’s intoxicating
poison. Similar to Ivy’s gender conforming actions at the beginning of the overall

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43 Ibid, 1.
44 Ibid, 3.
narrative, Catwoman’s unselfish actions meet both gender and superhero expectations. Notwithstanding such conformity, Catwoman is defying a predominant yet underlying assumption about superheroes: they are not supposed to be psychically or emotionally weak.

Further elucidation of Catwoman’s weakness occurred right after her good actions against Ivy. Using Ivy’s power to control plants, Ivy and Harley conspired to communicate with Zatanna about the spell she cast to heal Selina’s heart in *Hush.*

Zatanna’s explanation continued to define Catwoman by her weakness:

IVY: Harley Quinn and I are concerned her heart operation was not as successful as it seemed. Selina’s acting uncertain, weak, like she’s lost her nerve. That’s fatal in our line of work…

ZATANNA:  All my potion did was strengthen her heart and remove a few scars. Selina was attacked in the most vicious way imaginable. She was made to feel abused and completely vulnerable. That leaves scars NO magic can erase.\(^{45}\)

Zatanna’s words alluded to the levels of abuse experienced by Catwoman. Selina’s relationship with Batman became the central means by which others defined her. Following the first two issues of the overall narrative, the text focused attention to Harley and Catwoman’s narrative became stagnant. The analysis of Catwoman’s narrative focuses on the first two issues of the overall narrative because her narrative became stagnant after those initial comic issues. Outside of those issues, Catwoman became more of a subordinate character who followed Ivy’s lead in saving Harley and defeating the Joker. Although Catwoman’s identity was formed out of the context of her abusive relationship with Batman, Catwoman downplayed the abuse by not acknowledging it. The only instance in which Catwoman referred to her abuse is when the narrative flashed back to her interaction with Talia al Ghul in which Ghul trains Selina never to release

\(^{45}\) Ibid, 14,
Batman’s true identity.46 When Catwoman referenced her own abuse, the visual representations of her and Talia, similar to that of Ivy, are highly sexualized. However, unlike Ivy, Catwoman’s cheesecake shots in this interaction highlighted her genitalia through lighting that orients the gaze towards the genital area. The sexually connotative meanings associated with crotch led the reader to focus their gaze, not on the conversation between the women but on Catwoman’s sexuality. This scene is a flashback in response to Ivy’s abuse of Catwoman, and Ivy initiated her abuse because Catwoman was weak from her abuse with Batman/Hush. The panels that demonstrate the two genital area cheesecake shots occur when Talia and Catwoman reference their past romantic relationships with Batman. Combined with the conversation their common romantic interest, these shots abruptly direct a reader’s gaze from her abusive experiences.47

Selina’s reference to the abuse with Batman continued to define her character in significant ways. In the interaction with Talia, Selina was instructed that she had to be concerned with protecting Batman’s secret identity above all else. When she was training herself to hide his identity deep within her memory, Selina gave justifications for why it is necessary to forget Batman. Citing past experiences where she was deceived by Batman and almost murdered by Hush, Selina told herself that forgetting the past is necessary to help her move on with her life. Protecting Batman’s identity then becomes grounded in good reasons because she is doing so to help herself.

Selina’s actions are further justified through vivid details that expand on her good reasons through visual devices. Visually, the background colors of the scene were underlined with black swirls that encompass Catwoman and all of the past experiences

47 See Appendix D.
she references. Charles Hill explains that the vividness of a text does will not “make a bad argument good” but it will enhance the persuasive potential of an already consistent and “reasonable” message.48 These vivid details draw on assumed experiences to elicit emotions that frame the image in a particular way. The vividness enhances a reader’s identification with the text through both visual and verbal means utilized to convey emotionally salient feelings needed to persuade the reader towards accepting the preferred interpretation of the text.49 The background color and accompanying black swirls darken the comparison and heighten the salient feelings of pain associated with her relationship to Batman and experience with Hush. As noted earlier in the chapter, Hill argues that such visual vividness enhances the persuasiveness of an already justifiable act. Because Selina’s actions in protecting Batman’s identity are grounded in good reasons, the pain that she experiences only adds to the reasons as to why she must displace her feelings towards Batman and Hush.

What is interesting to note is that every instance in which Catwoman was or was referencing to being betrayed/abused, her body is posed and/or emphasized by some sexual connotation. When Talia and Catwoman discussed withholding Batman’s true identity, embellishments with lighting direct a reader’s gaze towards Catwoman’s genital area. When she was being tortured by Ivy and Harley, she was posed in a manner that almost immediately brings up connotations of bondage and submission. As Ivy and Harley interrogated Selina, she was tied to a chair with her hands tied behind the back of the chair, her legs spread and ankles tied to the feet of the chair.50 Ivy’s vines are what

49 Ibid.
50 Dini, Gotham City Sirens, 28-29.
bound her to her chair, indicating that Catwoman was most submissive to Ivy. The appearance of these images when she referenced or was being abused normalized Catwoman’s sexuality and denigrates the seriousness of the situation. Additionally, Ivy’s continuous levels of domination reinforce the notion that Catwoman is submissive to Ivy. When Catwoman contested against Harley’s actions against the Riddler, her moral superiority threatened Ivy’s narrative authority. The visual aspects of the following scene indicated that Ivy’s levels of domination over Catwoman circumvented the threat. After Catwoman’s torture and bondage, Ivy was the main authority. For issues three through five, Catwoman acts mostly as a subsidiary to Ivy, backing her up in protecting Harley.

Ultimately, her perceived weakness at the beginning of the overall narrative was reinforced through others’ perceptions of her. Beyond being physically weak when she battled the Bone Blaster, Catwoman was also depicted as being mentally weak. Zatanna supported Ivy’s notion that she was unable to recover from her abuse in *Hush* while Talia perceived she would be unable to keep Batman’s secret. Her weakness became a means by which others dominated her: Ivy became the main authoritative force despite being less virtuous and Talia commanded and taught Catwoman to protect Batman’s identity. Notwithstanding these perceptions, characters are defined by what they do, not what others think about them. What is interesting to note in terms of Catwoman is that she reinforced those perceptions through her actions. She believed that she was weak and was not strong enough to overcome Ivy’s poison or torture. Zatanna confirmed Ivy’s suspicion that Catwoman was not healed and the text never resolved that issue. It is up to the reader to determine if Catwoman was adequately healed but her continued submissiveness suggests that she displaced her pain. After Ivy releases Catwoman from
her bonds in the second issue, Harley leaves and the two women agree to dismiss the
torturous incident in an almost humorous way:

    IVY: One time only and never again, I promise. Let me make it up to you…Breakfast?
    CATWOMAN: All right. You and Harley can stay, but you’re doing the cooking. 51

Following this interaction, the overall narrative dropped any mention of the
torture or Catwoman’s experience with Batman. The overall narrative after this incident
also directs the reader to assume that Harley is in control of the team. Though Catwoman
is the one who determined Harley was on a date with Hush instead of Bruce Wayne, it
was Ivy who figured out a way to save Harley and it was Ivy who stormed the building.
Ivy was also the one to determine the Joker should be killed and how to infiltrate his
hideout while Catwoman accepted and supported her initiatives. The narrative following
the torture illustrates an interesting tension between Catwoman’s superhero and gender
expectations.

    Catwoman’s weakness undermined her expectations of a superhero yet her
submissiveness conformed to socio-cultural gender expectations regarding women. She is
submissive to Batman, Talia, and Ivy and such submission circumvents the requirement
that superheroes be strong. Unlike Ivy, Catwoman does conform to one set of
expectations. Though Catwoman is too weak to defend the defenseless, pursue justice,
and protect herself, she is altruistic and submissive. Chapter four expands on how this
tension influences the meanings assigned to her status of victimhood.

51 Ibid, 32.
Harley Quinn

Blonde, blue eyed, and bubbly, Harley Quinn is a superheroine whose entire identity is based on and defined by her romantic relationship. Unlike Catwoman, who justifies her actions by arguing they will improve her life, Harley’s actions almost entirely center on the acquisition and/or continuation of a new or previous relationship. In fact, Harley’s action in dating Hush/Bruce Wayne initiates the middle of the narrative while the defeat of the Joker/Gaggy marks the last stage of the narrative. Because Harley’s romantic pursuits cause the actions in the middle and the end, her narrative is highlighted in issues three through five.

Harley was introduced in the early nineties television show *Batman: The Animated Series*. Journalist Abraham Riesman notes that Harley Quinn was created by comic writer (and writer of *Gotham City Sirens*), Paul Dini as a “silly little sidekick” to Joker in the show.\(^5\) Her romantic relationship with the Joker in the television show was admired by fans despite the prevalence of violence in their relationship.\(^5\) Though their relationship has been marked by violence, Harley’s relationship with the Joker has been the key source defining her character.\(^5\) Notwithstanding being separated from the Joker in *Gotham City Sirens*, that relationship continued to influence her actions and the meanings assigned to her.

It is important to note that Harley’s relationship to the Joker was different in the animated series than it has been in the comics. Because *Batman: The Animated Series* was intended for children, the violence was downplayed. Appealing to an older

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\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^5\) Ibid.
demographic, comic book characters were typically more violent than television show recreations. The change in medium altered their relationship and the meanings assigned to Harley. Reisman’s article quotes comic essayist Chris Sims who contends that “comics Joker has killed a million people. He’s a sadistic, torturing murderer. You can't sympathize with her when that's the Joker she likes.”55 Despite the increase in violence, separating Harley from her relationship is problematic. Reisman explains that “if you move her away from the Joker, you remove her defining relationship. It would be like writing years’ worth of Joker stories that didn't involve Batman: empty and confusing.”56

*Gotham City Sirens* supports the definitions assigned to Harley through her relationship with the Joker while also expanding new interpretations of their relationship.

Harley’s first appearance in the *Gotham City Sirens* referenced her relationship to Joker. Though the Joker/Gaggy has yet to appear in the overall narrative, her initial actions concern him. Catwoman is the first character to reference Harley’s relationship, when she insinuated that Harley would be spending the money she acquired after *Hush* on the Joker. After protesting that she was “over Mr. J,” Catwoman and Ivy challenge her declaration:

CATWOMAN: Oh, please. He’ll be calling for your money the second he hears about it.
IVY: Then you’ll be skipping out the door for another round of abuse, humiliation and regret.
HARLEY: HAS he called?!57

This suggests that despite the past abusive actions, Harley still sought to rekindle a relationship with the Joker. Harley then attempts to counteract her excitement by proclaiming: “Oh. Well, like I said, I’m over Mr. J.58”

55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
Although Harley argued that she was over the Joker, she was not averse to obtaining a new relationship. When a set of kidnappers abduct who they thought was Bruce Wayne, Harley fights the kidnappers and saves who she thinks is Bruce Wayne. After defeating the kidnappers and saving the infamous billionaire, Wayne invited Harley to join him on a date only for the narrative text to reveal that the man was Hush disguised as Bruce Wayne. As Hush plotted a way to kill Harley, she envisioned a life as Mrs. Bruce Wayne. The narrative text that depicted her inner monologue notes that despite being interested in what she thinks is Bruce Wayne, she is still highly sensitive to the Joker’s feelings with her referencing that “Mr. J would kill him.” Harley’s prediction ultimately proved correct when the Joker sees a picture of her with Hush/Bruce Wayne and comes to kill them. As the Joker crashes his blimp into the restaurant, Harley excitedly yells “PUDDIN?!?” at the sight of the Joker.

After saving Harley from both Hush and the Joker, Ivy and Catwoman attempted to persuade Harley against trying to continue her relationship with the Joker. Harley’s attachment to the Joker supersedes her own victimization and is demonstrated in issue three in the following conversation:

IVY: But he tried to kill you.
HARLEY: That just proves he wants me back!

For Harley, every action of violence inflicted by the Joker gave her justification as to why she should continue a romantic relationship. This interaction suggests that Harley perceived his violent actions to be manifestations of affection. Accordingly, she

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58 Ibid; “Mr. J” is also the nickname given to the Joker by Harley and is often used in comics where Harley is a character. See Appendix E.
59 Ibid, 45.
60 Ibid, 81.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid, 93. See Appendix F.
maintained that Joker was not necessarily trying to kill her as much as he was trying to
deter her away from other men. As she justified his actions textually, the visual
depictions of these panels connote that her justifications are invalid. After proclaiming
that the Joker loved her, Harley could be seen standing before a window and the Joker’s
blimp could be seen in the background. Despite being in the background, the Joker is not
less significant but more sinister. The panels depicted the blimp getting closer to the
window as Harley continued to justify her perceptions. These visual representations
indicated that Harley was incorrect in her assumptions, and that the Joker was determined
to kill her. Following Reisman’s argument, these panels guide the reader to believe that
Harley’s perceptions are unjustifiable: a reader cannot sympathize with Harley and her
experience with violence if she does not perceive the violence to be significant. Though
the narrative guides the readers to interpret Harley’s actions as unjustifiable, she is still
portrayed as actively seeking this relationship. *Gotham City Sirens* reinforces the
meanings assigned to Harley in past texts. The overall narrative alters that definition
slightly when it is revealed that the Joker is actually Gaggy.

After Joker bombed the animal shelter, Ivy proposed that the team go forth and
kill the Joker. It is only after infiltrating the warehouse that the narrative text reveals the
Joker was actually Gaggy. With Catwoman and Ivy incapacitated, Gaggy took the vines
that Ivy previously wrapped around Harley’s mouth and bound her in a similar fashion to
Catwoman in issue two. Additionally, her image is embellished with lighting to
accentuate her curves as Gaggy can be seen dragging her by the vines. In this scene, Ivy
is incapacitated and she is no longer in control of her vines. This panel suggests that
Gaggy was momentarily replacing Ivy as the authoritative force. With Ivy momentarily
displaced, Harley’s bindings indicate that her subordination has been transferred from Ivy to Gaggy.

As Gaggy tells her the story of how he and the Joker met, she tried to conceptualize a way out of her bondage but was only saved after Ivy and Catwoman defeated Gaggy. As the overall narrative concludes, Harley is portrayed as again justifying her relationship with the Joker. Harley uses Gaggy’s impersonation as evidence that the Joker did not want to kill her. In response to Harley’s argument, Ivy used her vines to again cover Harley’s mouth to prevent her from speaking. Ivy’s rebinding of Harley’s mouth placed her back as the authoritative force and Harley was again submissive to Harley. Unlike Catwoman, Harley was in bondage three times and by two different characters. The back and forth between Ivy and Gaggy’s control over Harley demonstrates that she is almost always submissive to another character. In past texts and part of this text, the Joker commands and influences Harley’s actions. After the bombing at the animal shelter, Ivy was the one in control and Gaggy was authoritative at the warehouse. Harley is only independent in the first two issues, but she was still being defined in relation to the Joker in that part of the narrative. Ultimately, Harley’s narrative suggests that Harley is unable to act independently; it is not her relationships that define her but rather her submissiveness.

Harley’s visual depiction adds to the meanings assigning her as subordinate. She has no explicit cheesecake shots because she essentially is a cheesecake shot. Harley is depicted as having pig tails, big blue eyes, and blonde hair. When she is not dressed in her costume, she dons a school girl outfit or daisy dukes with a spaghetti strap top. The visualization of Harley as both sexual and innocent is significant because it conveys a
meaning that child-like attributes are attractive and desirable in regards to sex. Though Harley has the physical strength to protect herself and others, the narrative significantly downplays her ability to be a superhero. Harley only fights a foe in the first issue when she helps her team mates defeat the Bone Blaster. Following that incident, Harley is in constant need of saving.

In their analysis of child sexualization, Egan and Hawkes posit that contemporary American culture has become infiltrated with images that connote girlhood with sex.\textsuperscript{63} Their argument fits within the characteristics of what Shari L. Savage calls the “Lolita effect.” Savage asserts that such an effect has appropriated and repurposed meanings associated with childhood (innocence, purity, naivete, etc.) with sexual activity.\textsuperscript{64} Images that demonstrate the Lolita effect have serious implications because they disseminate messages that reinforce passivity, innocence, and submissiveness as preferred characteristics for women.\textsuperscript{65} Based on the controversial book by Vladimir Nabokov, Savage’s analysis notes that like Dolores in \textit{Lolita}, innocence and passivity is preferred because it allows a male viewer to take \textit{possession} of the female sexualized image.\textsuperscript{66} Possession implies an object whereas innocence implies a sense of vulnerability/passivity. As an object of desire, a Lolita’s innocence implies that she easily conforms to her possessor’s will.\textsuperscript{67} Once a female gains self-awareness and owns her own sexual desires, her worth is devalued and she is not as preferred as the unaware “nymphet.” Savage explains that “popular culture’s Lolita is a girl ready-made for

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid, 110.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid, 103.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
pursuits, a girl who will be sexually desired while at the same time condemned for her sexuality.”

For Harley, her naivete and sexual passivity are both upheld and denigrated. Harley is often depicted as childlike; her pigtails, school girl outfit and dialogue lead a reader to direct their gaze towards her naivetés. Additionally, she is often posed in a way that directs a reader’s gaze towards her body and sexuality. The prevalence of these depictions normalizes Harley’s innocence as inherent to her sexuality. Sexuality as part of her personality was only reinforced when such sexuality was amplified in moments when she was not passive. In battle, Harley commonly opened her legs and wraps them around a male opponent, throwing them from wherever they stood/sat. The leg-spreading tactic draws the reader to focus their attention on her legs and genitalia smothering the men’s faces. Even in battle, Harley acted in some sexualized way. Though Harley’s sexualization was normalized, it also contributes to the negative connotations assigned to her character. Following Savage’s arguments, Harley as a Lolita is possessed by the Joker; he is behind all of her actions and he reinforces her identity as auxiliary to his. Though Harley is an auxiliary to the Joker, she is not completely an object. She is defined in relation to the Joker but her actions in the first two issues suggest that she has some sense of independence. She reinforces childishness as sexually desirable despite not being completely passive.

Within her narrative, Harley’s actions and inherent sexualization defy both gender and superhero expectations. Because her actions are motivated by her desire to continue her relationship, she acts in her own self-interest, not in regards to her team mates.

Though Harley joined Ivy and Catwoman in fighting the Bone Blaster, she does not

68 Ibid, 110.
actually save anyone in the text. In fact, it was her selfish actions contributed to her needing to be saved. Harley is not altruistic which also breaks an expectation assigned to her gender and role as a superhero. Her submissiveness to the Joker, Ivy, and Gaggy does fit with a socio-cultural expectation that women are subordinate to men however, she was not submissive to all men or only men. Her fights with Bone Blaster and Wayne/Hush’s kidnappers suggest that she was capable of controlling herself yet she is easily controlled by Ivy. Harley’s submissiveness contributes an interesting dynamic to her meaning because it does and does not meet gender expectations. This tension could lead to an obscured interpretation if it were not for her sexualization. Her inherent sexualization does not just direct the reader’s gaze, but encompasses it. Because sexuality is inherent to her personality, those meanings explicitly inform the reader to interpret her actions through that trait. Like Ivy, Harley does not meet gender or superhero expectations. Their narratives offer a counter interpretation to Catwoman’s narrative: a female superhero cannot challenge gender expectations without denouncing their expectations as superheroes. The meanings assigned to these characters through their actions influence meaning disseminated by the overall narrative.

Conclusion

Breaking from the tradition established in Golden and Silver Age comics, the three protagonists of *Gotham City Sirens* do not fit archetypal roles of mother, vixen, bitch, or virgin. The role that these women enact is the role of superhero and that role carries expectations of altruism, justice, and moral superiority. Notwithstanding those expectations female superheroes have to also fulfill expectations assigned by gender. Catwoman is able to conform to gender expectations but she not able to conform to
superhero expectation. Harley and Ivy cannot yield to either set of expectations. The conclusion of the narrative suggests that the reader interpret Catwoman as more favorable than Harley and Ivy. Though she does not meet superhero expectations, she does fulfill gender expectations. Catwoman was acting in accordance to what was appropriate in one sense or another whereas Ivy and Harley challenged appropriateness. Following Catwoman’s torture, her narrative was mostly silenced in the overall narrative. Such silence did not give Catwoman the opportunity to break gender expectations. By fulfilling at least one set of expectations, Catwoman is guided to be interpreted as more favorable than the characters who cannot meet any expectations.

Catwoman is not assigned purely favorable meanings but she portrays as better than Ivy and Harley. The meanings assigned to these characters influences the preferred meaning of the narrative. *Gotham City Sirens* disseminates a myth that advances a message concerning female strength and self-determination. This myth reinforces two notions about female superheroes derived from past ages: 1) female superheroes are incapable of adequately conforming to both set of expectations simultaneously and; 2) it is more appropriate to conform to gender expectations over superhero expectations. Harley and Ivy’s meanings are similar to the meanings assigned to Wonder Woman and Tigra in the Silver and Bronze ages. Harley and Ivy defy both set of expectations and their actions are used as good reasons to justify the negative meanings assigned to them. Though Catwoman does not conform to superhero expectations, her fulfillment of gender expectation leads a reader to assign more favorable meanings to Catwoman over her two team mates. *Gotham City Sirens* provides an interpretation whereby it is more preferable to be a woman than a superhero, reinforcing socio-culture gender expectations of
submissiveness and sphere. Additionally, this interpretation suggests that breaking gender expectations renders a female superhero less virtuous and moral which in turn counteracts her role as a superhero.

As a comparison to the real world, this interpretation could be used as a source of information regarding the roles and actions deemed appropriate for women. The good reasons used to justify the negative meanings assigned to these characters are also utilized as good reasons to justify meanings of non-victimhood they are assigned in relation to their experiences with IPV. The implications of the domestic abuse narrative are discussed in chapter four, but this chapter indicates that comic books prefer gender norms over extraordinary abilities. As a source of information, this interpretation could be utilized in a real world situation whereby a reader assesses how a woman should act or what type of women can deal with situations. In his article, Riesman interviewed Harley Quinn fan, Tara Strand who noted “she’s [Harley] maybe a little masochistic, but the Joker needs somebody who can deal with the Joker, and Harley’s it.”69 Though Strand was attempting to explain what qualities she admired in Harley, it highlights a problematic interpretation. Strand perceives that Harley likes her violence in that she is “masochistic,” and then associates that meaning to the Joker. It is what the Joker needs and Harley is the only one can meet those needs. If Strand was to use Harley’s narrative as a source of information to make a judgment about domestic violence, she could have a different interpretation of victimhood. In the chapter that follows, this project highlights how the expectations discerned in this chapter influence the meanings assigned to victimhood and agency in regards to Intimate Partner Violence.

69 Riesman, “The Strange, Hidden Story of Harley Quinn.”

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to uncover and discern the rhetorical messages concerning domestic violence in *Gotham City Sirens*. As discussed in the plot description and briefly discussed in Chapter Three, both Harley Quinn and Catwoman have experienced abusive relationships. Their experience with intimate partner violence (IPV) and their relationships with these partners become the main information source the narrative gives regarding the agency of these two female superheroes. The characters differ in the ways in which they understand and cope with their abuse, yet their actions guide a reader towards a particular interpretation of IPV. Because characters are defined by what they do, the actions these women take to resolve their violent situations define how readers view them as individuals and the issue of IPV. Catwoman rarely discusses her abusive past and most of the information gathered comes from other characters’ speculations and confirmations. For Catwoman, protecting Batman’s identity is her main motivation for remaining silent about her past abuse, and characters like Talia al Gul reinforce this action as necessary. Harley Quinn rationalizes her abuse differently from Catwoman in that she barely recognizes her abuse as an issue. Although Poison Ivy and Catwoman attempt to intervene and save Harley from her relationship with the Joker, Harley justifies his violent actions and constantly seeks his attention. Despite approaching their abuse in two different ways, both superheroines attempt to resolve their abuse in ways that reinforce attitudes that denigrate the seriousness of IPV.
In the third chapter, I examined how the visual representation of these characters combined with their actions in the narrative to assign particular meanings. Harley and Ivy defied both gender and superhero expectations as were defined as selfish, manipulative, and naive. Catwoman adhered to gender expectations and was given a more favorable meaning of being altruistic despite being weak. In this chapter, I seek to explain how their gender breaking/conforming actions influence how Harley and Catwoman are viewed in regards to their experience with IPV. Specifically, the meanings assigned to these characters based on their expectation conforming/defying actions contribute to the meanings assigned to their perceived victimhood. The meanings assigned to these characters are then used as good reasons to define these characters as non-victims and their abuse as insignificant. As I discuss later in this chapter, notions of agency conflict with Catwoman and Harley’s actions in the narrative in a way that denigrates the seriousness of their abusive relationships and their status as victims.

Catwoman and Harley rationalize and assess the violent relationships differently. Despite acting in different ways, the overall narrative reveals that both Catwoman and Harley are unable to resolve their violent situations by achieving independence. Catwoman’s domestic abuse narrative abruptly ends after her torture by Ivy and Harley, leaving it unresolved and overshadowed by Harley’s narrative. Ultimately, the majority of the text focuses on Harley’s relationship with the Joker and how Ivy and Catwoman attempt to save Harley from more abuse and even death. Despite the repeated attempts to end her life and the arguments from her friends, Harley commonly rationalizes her abuse as love and explicitly makes note of her desire to continue her relationship with the Joker.
Therefore, Harley’s narrative is the main source of guidance towards the preferred interpretation of IPV.

In order to better understand how the overall narrative assigns particular meanings to Catwoman, Harley and IPV, I use Donileen R. Loseke’s evaluations of socio-cultural meanings assigned to victims to explore how victimhood is framed. Loseke explains that the term “victim” is most often applied to individuals who are perceived as “good people” who were abused “at no fault of their own.”1 If a victim returns to their abuser or is portrayed as having provoked/wanted their abuse, the individual can be considered less of a victim and their abuse is downplayed. Caroline Joan S. Picart argues that the perceived agency of the abused also influences their status as a “pure victim.”2 Picart clarifies that mass mediated messages often disseminate narratives that position women as either agents who change their situation or victims who are/were unable to change their predicament. Essentially, meanings attached to the idea of “pure victim” influence the perceived lack of agency in the abused. Scholars like Loeseke, Julia Wood, and Nancy Berns note that these attitudes concerning victimhood align with prevalent public understandings of IPV that blame victims for their own abuse. Although the text illustrates, and I believe, that there are more nuances to victimhood than the victim-agent dichotomy, Picart and Julia Wood argue that mass media depictions of IPV often heighten and exaggerate that dichotomy.3

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Scholars like Loseke and Wood have noted that agency is the preferred outcome of IPV relationships because it indicates that a victim found the strength to leave an abuser. Even though agency implies empowerment, agency also validates that an individual’s abuse was significant enough to warrant separation. Though researchers have determined that agency is important, few scholars have sought to understand the meanings of victimhood assigned to women who are physically capable of defending themselves. Female superheroes have extraordinary abilities that make them physically powerful. Their inherent ability to protect themselves gives female superheroes a priori meaning of agency whereby they are expected to be able to defend themselves. Because superheroes have the physical prowess to defend and protect others, they are also expected to be able to save themselves. This expectation provides superheroes with a preexisting notion of agency where they are expected to protect themselves against an attack. *Gotham City Sirens* offers an alternative meaning assigned to agency and victimhood in which readers are encouraged to assess the nuances of the ways characters are not/able to enact agency. The story of Catwoman and Harley Quinn offers readers a unique narrative of IPV in that it depicts two women who have the physical capability to defend themselves yet do not do so. Having a priori notions of agency gives these characters the “capacity to act” against an abuser which thereby counteracts their ability to be a pure victim. Notwithstanding her expectation of agency, Catwoman’s submissive actions and Harley’s awareness and desire to continue her abusive relationship with the Joker subvert their expectation of agency. Though Catwoman and Harley’s actions challenge their expectation of agency, their extraordinary abilities delineate them as unable to be interpreted as pure victims. As I explain later in this chapter, the overall
narrative makes Catwoman and Harley responsible for their abuse which also circumvents meanings of pure victimhood.

In this chapter, I contend that the meanings derived from their negotiation of expectations contributes to how these characters are interpreted as being a part of or outside of the pure victim/agent dichotomy. Overall, this chapter argues that Catwoman’s and Harley’s actions in the narrative surrounding leave them unable to be defined as part of the agent/pure victim dichotomy. Being defined outside of the dichotomy designates Catwoman and Harley to a status of non-victimhood where they are not viewed as victims of IPV and their abuse is considered insignificant and therefore, not an issue. I begin this chapter by examining the socio-cultural context concerning IPV during the time in which *Gotham City Sirens* was released. Although attitudes regarding IPV have changed in terms of recognizing it as a legitimate social issue, certain ideas about pure victimhood have persisted through the changes. Discourses of pure victimhood are problematic in two ways: (1) they narrows the public’s definition of what victimhood is and; (2) narrowing victimhood allows for a narrowing the experiences the public can classify as abusive. The analysis that follows investigates how Catwoman’s and Harley’s actions do not define them as pure victims. Secondly, this chapter explores how the status of superhero influences the expectation of agency against their IPV. This chapter concludes with an evaluation of these actions and the preferred meaning given by the narrative.

**Literature Review**

Before I begin the analysis of this chapter, it is important to clarify how I evaluate the meanings assigned to these characters in regards to their IPV experiences. The actions
that define an individual as either victim or agent are narrow, leaving an individual unable to be placed within the dichotomy. When a victim is unable to be designated as part of the dichotomy, they are delineated to a status I call “non-victimhood.” Within the frame of the pure victim/agent dichotomy, individuals are rarely perceived to be a victim of legitimate abuse unless they fit into part of this division. Non-victimhood insinuates that an individual is partially or fully responsible for their abuse and their actions provoke the abuse. These individuals can be depicted negatively for continuing a relationship with their abuser and/or to provoke the abuse. IPV discourses that center on agency highlight that individuals become agents when they resolve their situation by finding the strength to overcome their abuse. In order to be considered an agent, a victim must resolve their situation by ending the abuse, most often by leaving their abusive partners, and such notion often frames how the public conceptualizes IPV agents.\(^4\) Contrary to attitudes about agency, an individual can only be assigned meanings of pure victimhood if they are not considered to have provoked the abuse and/or are incapable of removing themselves from the violent situation. The narrow categories that define an individual as either pure victim or agent results in a broad array of actions that can be categorized and defined as non-victimhood. When a narrative narrows the meanings of “pure victim,” it also narrows the definition of IPV and such narrowing denigrates the seriousness of the issue. This narrowing is problematic because it disseminates a message upholding specific notions about IPV and victims that ignores the nuances of a violent romantic relationship. When scholars and the general public ignore these nuances, we ignore potential victims of IPV who could be in need of help. As I explain later in this chapter, women in the twenty-first century have more access to resources that would allow them to be agents than women in

previous generations. In addition to these resources, contemporary women have greater expectations to protect themselves than women in previous decades. Though women in the twenty first century have greater opportunities for agency, few scholars have examined the meanings assigned to a victim who has the physical ability to protect themselves against an abuser. Comic books offer scholars a way of understanding the meanings assigned to victims who have the ability to be agents yet do not leave their abusers. In what follows, I evaluate how the actions Catwoman and Harley undertake in the narrative positions them as non-victims. Additionally, I investigate how meanings of non-victimhood contribute to the overall narrative’s interpretation of IPV.

**Intimate Partner Violence and Pure Victimhood**

Attitudes and perceptions regarding IPV have drastically changed in the past forty years. The United Nations defines intimate partner violence as “behavior by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviors.”

According to Loseke, IPV was not a cause of public concern until the mid-1970s. Since then, discourse on domestic abuse has grown and legislation has been passed to protect victims from their abusers. Despite the growing discourse on IPV, violence among intimate partners continues to occur and the general public is often divided on how to perceive and assess this issue. Attitudes about IPV in twenty-first century America reflect tensions between old ideals and new policy changes. Although researchers like Loseke acknowledge that IPV was not considered by the public to be a

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significant social issue until the mid-1970s, domestic violence legislation like the Violence Against Women Act (1994) has attempted to ameliorate the problem. Finding that there has been a 64% decrease in domestic violence incidents reported to police between 1993 and 2010, Shannon Catalano’s study on behalf of the U.S. Department of Justice suggests that intimate partner violence legislation is successful.\(^7\) Notwithstanding these positive numbers IPV commonly goes unreported and Picart contends that such legislation often upholds socio-cultural standards of victimhood which ultimately makes these cases harder to “prove” and prosecute.\(^8\) With IPV cases being commonly dismissed by the courts, some victims may not report their violence due to the belief that it will not change the situation. Lastly, Catalano’s study provides no information about the domestic violence reported to police between 2005 and 2010. For this reason, Catalano’s positive findings do not necessarily indicate a shift in incidences.

Robert F. Bornstein argues that IPV is larger in scale, effecting between 20 and 25% of the American public.\(^9\) In the year before *Gotham City Sirens* was published, intimate partner violence accounted for “14% of all homicides, with 70% of intimate partner victims being women.”\(^10\) Although half a million women reported domestic violence in 2008, others sought help from domestic violence agencies. In their annual survey in 2009, the National Network to End Domestic Violence found that 65,321 adults

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\(^8\) Picart, “Rhetorically Reconfiguring Victimhood and Agency,” 118.


and children sought help from an agency. Despite being able to help those individuals, agencies were understaffed and unable to help 9,280 individuals in violent situations and had to turn them away. Though these numbers allude to the alarming amount of individuals who experience IPV, it does not explain the socio-cultural attitudes that hinder victims from reporting and ending their abusive relationships.

Despite the increasing awareness, Nancy Bern asserts that IPV is an issue that has been largely framed by socio-cultural attitudes disseminated through the media. These mediated messages “play an important role in how the public understands social problems,” by categorizing what is normal and appropriate. Conceptions of normal and appropriate are largely derived from myths about IPV that have been reinforced throughout generations. Similar to rape myths, IPV myths define what is to be considered appropriate. The reinforcement and/or negotiation of appropriateness becomes troublesome when the “public recognizes a broad definition of domestic violence that encompasses a wide range of behaviors from verbal abuse to physical assault.” Due to the broad definition of IPV, members of the public make judgments on victimhood and IPV by judging the violence’s “legitimacy.” Loseke explains that violent actions that cause injury and possible death to a victim are categorized as “illegitimate” acts of violence because they have no justification, whereas legitimate violence does not cause severe bodily harm and the victim is often perceived to have provoked the abuse.

12 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
16 Ibid, 332.
Loseke’s evaluation suggests that the general public is more likely to recognize extreme cases of IPV where the victim is severely physically abused than there are incidences where a victim is psychologically and/or sexually abused. Berns, Loseke, Julia Wood and Christina Policastro and Brian K. Payne note that these four attitudes represent popular myths that continue to be reinforced. These four popular myths include: (1) IPV is not a common issue and should be dealt with privately; (2) victims are responsible for solving their abuse and in some instances cause it; (3) responsibility of the abuser can be obscured if they are thought to be mentally ill and; (4) the public focuses more on the psychological characteristic of an abusive relationship over the socio-cultural contexts that influence the situation.17

Attitudes about IPV in twenty-first century America reflect tensions between old myths and new assessments. Highlighting this tension, Alissa Pollitz Worden and Bonnie E. Carlson explain that the public’s recognition of IPV as a serious issue has changed the first myth but not the other three predominant myths. Their study evaluated the IPV myths held by 1,200 residents in six different New York communities. Their research found that two-thirds of their respondents were “complacent” (apathetic) about intimate partner violence and/or “unaware of its many consequences for victims.”18 The responsibility placed upon the abused has slightly changed and suggests that victims are assigned blame if they are thought to have provoked and mistreated their partner.19

19 Ibid.
Worden and Carlson claim that this shift is indicative of a more “nuanced interpretation” of IPV,

Many people understand that violent relations are not all the same: Although violence is most commonly a manifestation of individual failings, weaknesses, or excesses, sometimes abuse is triggered by partners’ behavior. Furthermore, to the extent that respondents place some responsibility on women, they may hold them more responsible for tolerating continued abuse than for causing their partners to become violent.\textsuperscript{20}

Within contemporary society, the public acknowledges that IPV is a significant issue that requires some extent of social intervention. However, it is not that these myths have completely changed as much as they have evolved with time. Though victim blaming attitudes are still enacted, women are now assigned more blame for staying with abusers rather than provoking it. In addition to a more “nuanced” interpretation of victimhood, public opinions concerning the abuser uphold the notion that the abuser is assigned less responsibility if they are considered to be mentally ill. The abuser is also less responsible if they are under the influence of drugs. Research by Loseke indicates that previous opinions on the abuser did not diminish responsibility if they were under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol. Current opinions broaden the scope under which abusers are not responsible for their actions. Nonetheless, these attitudes serve to illustrate how IPV myths evolve and further attenuate intimate partner violence as a serious issue.

Public depictions of IPV perpetuate the idea of what Picart calls the “pure victim,” and this representation reinforces attitudes that assign responsibility to the victim. The idea of the pure victim “promotes a stereotypic depiction of victimhood, and

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
fails to ‘get at’ the nuances of what being a ‘victim’ entails.”21 Picart explains that pure victimhood entails “one who must be protected from ‘evil’ and predatory forces because she is incapable of any acts of agency to defend herself.”22 Depictions of pure victimhood entail that the abused be portrayed as weak, passive and without self-esteem.23 This discourse is problematic because it likens victimhood to childhood: a victim can only be free from responsibility when they are delineated as powerless and incapable of making rational decisions. Discourses of pure victimhood in the twenty-first century are particularly significant because they are persistent in a time in which IPV has become recognized as a serious social ill and information about victim-blaming has been widely circulated. Despite such recognition, there is still speculation about the purity of a victim’s abuse that can make it difficult for that victim to receive assistance and support, legal or otherwise. Discourses of pure victimhood align with greater expectations of a victim to have agency, thus resulting in a broadening of attributes that designate a victim into the “non-victim” status. Because individuals rely on media representations to understand social issues they have not experienced, it is important that scholars understand how mediated interpretations of reality reinforce these attitudes.

As discussed above, the general public largely frames victims of IPV through the lens of the pure victim/agent dichotomy. In order to understand the attitudes the public may have held during the time Gotham City Sirens was published, I investigate the public’s judgments about one famous IPV case from 2009. In the months immediately preceding the release of Gotham City Sirens one case of intimate partner violence caused a media stir and provoked public judgment. During the 2009 Grammy awards, rapper

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22 Ibid, 97.
23 Berns, Framing the Victim, 25.
Chris Brown was arrested after beating his then girlfriend Rihanna. This case, now infamous, caught the attention of the American public and such attention continues to define both Rihanna and Brown. In the wake of this incident, unauthorized police photos of Rihanna’s bruised and bloodied face leaked to the media. Kristen Rodier and Michelle Meagher argue that the police photos had the opportunity to encourage women to recognize signs of violence. Instead of raising awareness to the issue of IPV, these photos were sensationalized through reports of Brown and Rhianna’s actions that preceded the abuse and what could have caused such brutality. As reports speculated about the “cause” of Brown’s actions, most failed to mention the socio-cultural attitudes that justified Brown’s actions.24 Although Rodier and Meagher do note that these photographs and their accompanying report have some measure in creating awareness, media stories that did not speculate about the “cause” of the violence focused on Rihanna’s failure to leave Brown after his arrest. Media executive and editor-and-chief of Hollywood Life, Bonnie Fuller, wrote a scathing article about Rihanna’s failure to leave Brown in which Fuller recounted second hand information from alleged friends of the music icon. Likening Rihanna to Tina Turner, Fuller proclaimed that Rihanna needs to ask herself “do I want to spend years of my life, like Tina, trapped in a relationship so controlling that I could lose all my self-esteem and control over my own finances?” 25 Although Fuller vehemently vilifies Brown, she places equal responsibility on Rhianna. As she attempts to uphold IPV as a serious issue, she continuously makes assumptions that Rihanna lacks self-

esteem or believed that the violence was only a one time deal. While she attempts to place blame on Brown, she is also assigning blame to Rihanna for not recognizing her situation and not leaving Brown. Fuller’s article is only one of thousands that berate and reprimand Rihanna for her decision to continue a relationship with Brown. For the media and the public who consumed those reports, Rihanna failed to garner substantial sympathy because she did not meet the characteristics of pure victimhood. Successful, self-confident, with the available resources to leave the situation, Rihanna could not be depicted as a pure victim because she was/is not weak, powerless, and/or incapable of making rational decisions. Although media reports disseminated perceiving favorable messages advocating for IPV protection, they also reinforced notions of pure victimhood and belittled Rihanna’s experience as a victim.

The tensions among pure victimhood, agency, and non-victimhood are represented in Gotham City Sirens. Though these characters are defined by the actions they undertake in relation to their abuse, their status as superheroes carries a connotative meaning associated with strength and agency. Because superheroes save innocent people from imminent doom, it can be assumed that they have the agency to enact self-determination in their own lives. The tensions between superhero and victim, victim, agency, and non-victim in Gotham City Sirens are manifested in a way that undermines the seriousness of Harley’s and Catwoman’s abuse.

Analysis

This chapter explores the ways in which Catwoman and Harley’s narratives assign particular meanings to IPV. The differing approaches taken by these two superheroes highlight the multitude of actions that assign non-victimhood to a character.

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26 Ibid.
To enact agency in an “appropriate” manner, these characters would have to resolve their situation by willingly leaving their abusive partner and/or finding strength in the experience. Neither Catwoman nor Harley Quinn willingly leave their abusive partners: Batman goes into self-induced exile while the Joker is thought to be in hiding.

Catwoman’s declarations of her weakness undermine her potential strength, and her motivation in protecting Batman’s identity indicates that she is more concerned about him than herself. Opposite of Catwoman, Harley Quinn openly expresses her desire to continue a relationship with her abuser and repeatedly justifies his actions against her. In *Gotham City Sirens*, I noticed that the actions these women take situates them within a category of non-victimhood. The actions that define these women as non-victims are highly influenced by their perceived failure to *sustain* agency throughout the narrative. These women defeat any villain they meet yet they are unable to recognize, resolve, and physically protect themselves from their abusive situations. Feminist scholars have argued that narratives enable individuals to cope with IPV, but few have evaluated how narratives in popular culture perpetuate and reinforce victim blaming attitudes. Within the text, the actions of these characters guide the narrative towards an interpretation of how a reader should assess victimhood and IPV. Though these characters fail to fulfill their superhero expectations, their extraordinary abilities automatically give them some notion of agency whereby they have the capacity to act against their abusers. When these characters do not act in the way expected of agents, they cannot be defined as agents in their IPV situations, regardless of powers. The preexisting notions of agency place these female superheroes in a double bind because their powers automatically determine that they have the capacity to act and are therefore not pure victims. Though IPV is largely
framed within the pure victim/agent dichotomy, meaning is also assigned to individuals who fall outside of that division. Essentially, not fitting in the dichotomy assigns meanings of non-victimhood whereby these characters are perceived to have contributed to their abuse. When a victim is viewed as provoking/wanting their abuse, the seriousness of the IPV incident is downplayed as legitimate and unproblematic violence. What follows is an investigation of these tensions and how they become enacted in the narrative text.

**Assigning Victimhood – Catwoman**

*Gotham City Sirens* begins with Catwoman’s monologue alluding to the events in *Hush*. Her inner narrative gives readers context for understanding the events that preceded the narrative. The last two lines of her inner monologue offer readers an understanding of Catwoman’s predicament:

CATWOMAN: I was stitched back together by the greatest doctors in the superhero community. My restored heart was even rejuvenated by a magic elixir. So why am I still weak as kitten?²⁷

The beginning of the narrative immediately guides the reader towards a contradictory meaning of Catwoman’s character. The reader is not guided to believe that having your heart ripped out is not a serious issue, but the resources she mentions suggests that she should be able to at least feel healed and somewhat strong. When Catwoman asks herself why she is as “weak as a kitten” she is essentially telling readers that she feels a sense of powerlessness. Mentioning her previous abuse with her perceptions of weakness guides the reader to become aware of Catwoman’s abuse. Though Catwoman can be initially viewed as a pure victim, her actions throughout the narrative challenge the characteristics of that definition.

The term victim carries a set of predetermined meanings dependent on cultural context. Like the definition of abuse, victim is interpreted in a variety of ways, but Loseke argues that the term victim is mostly assigned to people who are perceived to be good in that they were “greatly harmed through no fault of their own.” Additionally, victimhood is also conceived based on set notions of what is appropriate violence. Though one may contend that “appropriate violence” is morally reprehensible, Loseke asserts that most Americans tend to base their judgments of violence on the perceived severity of the incident. Pushing, slapping, and actions that have been “provoked” are often considered normal and not worthy of concern.

Regardless of the context, having one’s heart forcefully removed would not be considered a normal degree of abuse/violence. Though superheroes are expected to experience violence, the abuse inflicted on Catwoman went beyond the “normal occupational hazard.” In *Hush*, Catwoman’s heart was ripped out by a man who she trusted and loved. Though her abuser was not actually Batman, she perceived their relationship to be romantic and did not see her abuser in the same way she would a normal foe. Additionally, though Hush was the one who ripped out Catwoman’s heart, the *Hush* story arc reveals Batman’s controlling actions prior to Hush taking over Bruce Wayne’s identity. In this story arc, Batman is portrayed as not trusting Catwoman, can be seen spying on her, and even has Talia watch over Catwoman to prevent her from telling his secret. The *Hush* story arc suggests that Batman fears Catwoman will expose his true identity. Because his actions are protecting himself, Batman’s actions could be interpreted as justifiable. Notwithstanding this potential interpretation, Bruce Wayne’s

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29 Ibid.
initial actions established a pattern whereby Batman asserts control over Catwoman and the information she gives to others. Though Catwoman was unaware of Hush’s disguise, his physical abuse against her does not necessarily mitigate the significance of Batman’s controlling actions. Catwoman believes that she is in a romantic relationship with one man and her narrative is grounded in that one relationship. In that sense, Catwoman’s severe abuse emphasizes her status as a victim. Her victimization even becomes cause of concern for her two counterparts when they agree to become a team. Before Ivy and Harley agree to live with Catwoman, they have to confirm that she is physically and emotionally healed from the incident. The following narrative highlights the level of severity of Catwoman’s abuse and is they key information source for understanding her experience. Interestingly, outsiders speculate about how Catwoman is coping with her abuse more than she acknowledges her experience. According to Loseke, we only know what the narrative tells us; the narrative tells you what it wants to say and in doing so, gives a framework for understanding the violent situation.\textsuperscript{30} The overall narrative tells us that Catwoman thinks she is weak and other people confirm that belief. When other characters confirm Catwoman’s weakness, the narrative is telling a reader to perceive her as such.

Taking Catwoman’s status as a superhero into account, Harley and Ivy also discuss her new-found weakness when battling villains.

HARLEY: What, you mean her heart? I thought she was all healed up.

IVY: That’s what I thought, until I saved her from a beating by a third-rate goon. She was moving way too slow, and hitting with almost no strength.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, 12.
\textsuperscript{31} Dini, \textit{Gotham City Sirens}, 11.
This panel subtly hints at a unique contradiction of Catwoman’s status and her actions. Because she is a superhero, she is expected to be able to defeat most adversaries. When she demonstrated weakness battling Bone Blaster, she was not living up to her expectations. Harley and Ivy’s concern for Catwoman’s weakness has a subtle negative connotation. They are concerned about Catwoman’s ineptitude because they receive the consequences of her perceived weakness. If Catwoman is unable to protect herself, she will be unable to protect them in battle. Though she meets a characteristic of pure victimhood by being weak, her weakness is viewed as an anomaly and thus negatively. Ivy confirms her interpretation of Catwoman’s vulnerability as she talks to the character who healed Catwoman, Zatanna:

IVY: Harley Quinn and I are concerned her heart operation was not as successful as it seemed. Selina’s acting uncertain, weak, like she’s lost her nerve. That’s fatal in our line of work.²

When Ivy confirms that Catwoman’s weakness is potentially dangerous, the narrative is suggesting that her status as a superhero bestows her with the ability to counteract being a pure victim. Ivy acknowledges Catwoman’s expectation of agency when she expresses her disappointment in Catwoman’s inability to defeat Bone Blaster. Despite being unable to achieve agency, Ivy knows that Catwoman has the ability to protect herself and therefore, is not necessarily a pure victim. Zatanna attempts to ground Catwoman’s pure victimhood by reinforcing the legitimacy of her abuse:

ZATANNA: Selina was attacked in the most vicious way imaginable. She was made to feel abused and completely vulnerable. That leaves scars no magic can erase.³

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² Ibid, 13.
³ Ibid, 14.
The interaction between Ivy and Zatanna demonstrates how opposing attitudes about abuse define the violent experience as contradictory and thus less legitimate. Ivy assumes that Catwoman should have been able to enact agency while Zatanna reinforces her pure victimhood by grounding the experience in legitimacy. Such contradiction could guide a reader to interpret IPV ambiguously. However, the visual levels of subordination in these panels suggest that Ivy’s argument is narratively favored over Zatanna’s. In these panels, Ivy is illustrated as overpowering Zatanna and forcing her to communicate. Ivy’s representation is being bigger in scale and is designated as the dominant image in these panels. Ivy’s levels of domination over Zatanna indicate that Ivy’s interpretation of Catwoman’s abuse is preferable. As such, the reader is guided to interpret Catwoman’s abuse in accordance to Ivy’s perceptions. Because Ivy believes that Catwoman’s expectation of agency dictates that she should be able to resolve her violent situation. Even though Catwoman is too weak to be an agent, she is too strong to be a pure victim. Although Ivy views Catwoman’s weakness as unjustifiable, she takes advantage of Catwoman’s weakness when she tries to obtain information about Batman’s identity. Knowing that Catwoman is weak, Ivy takes advantage of that weakness, and Catwoman’s trust when she poisons her with a plant gas. As Ivy and Harley tie Catwoman up and demand to know Batman’s real identity, Ivy’s actions tell the reader that Catwoman cannot protect herself from abuse, whether at the hands of villains or friends.

Despite Catwoman’s perceived weakness, it can be interpreted that she has some levels of agency. Though the first two issues of the text focus heavily on Catwoman’s past abuse, she is separated from Batman *Gotham City Sirens* and has left her violent situation. Stacey Sowards argues that “agency exists in relationship to other subjects” and
a victim’s perceived agency is assigned meaning based on the relationship. Similar to characters being defined by their actions, characters enact agency based on their actions. According to Loseke, victims of IPV are perceived to have agency when they achieve independence from their abusive relationships and obtain happiness in strength. The concept of independence is particularly significant when framed with an understanding of pure victimhood. Because pure victims are often likened to children who cannot obtain independence, gaining independence from the relationship signifies that the victim is no longer childlike and has matured out of their inability to protect themselves. Furthermore, the comparison of pure victimhood with childhood insinuates that a victim is incapable of making rational decisions whereas agency is based in a person’s “knowledge that their actions are their own.” In spite of Catwoman’s perceived agency gained from leaving Batman, Ivy takes control over Catwoman and Catwoman’s submissive to others suggests that she is unable of making rational decisions for herself.

As Catwoman is being tortured, she has flashbacks to her interaction with Talia al Ghul wherein she is taught how and why she should protect Batman’s identity. These panels explain having Batman’s love and affections meant that his significant others were obligated to protect his secrets over their well-being. In these panels, Talia tells Catwoman that being an object of Batman’s affection meant that she was obligated to protect his secrets:

TALIA: I’ll be direct. There have been many women in Bruce Wayne’s life. But only two he has truly loved—you and I. It is inevitable that his enemies will strike at him through us. They will do everything in their power to make us betray him. Therefore, I offer you a gift, Selina. The method of burying the knowledge of his dual identity so deeply that no coercion will force out the truth. For even with his eventual death, there are secrets of the Batman that must remain forever untold.  

What is interesting to note is that when Catwoman is being abused by Harley and Ivy, she is remembering her abusive relationship with Batman. Batman’s/Hush’s abuse made her weak and thus, more likely to be victimized again. She uses the “method of burying knowledge” Talia bestowed on her and begins listing names of people who could be Batman. She then explains that that Batman is merely a mask that many men have tried to wear. Disappointed with Catwoman’s believable argument, Harley and Ivy release Catwoman and Batman’s true identity continues to be protected. Though she is somewhat agential in being separated from Batman, she is not free from abuse. When Ivy binds and tortures Catwoman, Ivy is becoming Catwoman’s abuser.

The torture of Catwoman goes beyond depicting Ivy negatively; this scene transfers Catwoman as being a victim of Batman/Hush to also being a victim of Ivy. Though these women are not necessarily intimate partners, they are domestic partners and the following narrative indicates that Ivy is Authoritative and domineering. After Ivy releases Catwoman from her bondage, the narrative reveals that Catwoman will forgive Ivy for her actions only if she cooks breakfast. Following her torture, readers are not privy to Catwoman’s thoughts and perceptions, and the reader only knows that she acts in accordance to Ivy’s judgments. The overall narrative merely replaced Catwoman’s abuse with a different type of abuse.

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38 Dini, Gotham City Sirens, 25.
The reader is guided towards a contradicting interpretation of Catwoman’s abuse. The “illegitimate” abuse Catwoman suffered guides the reader to feel sympathy for the superhero. However, failing her expectations as a superhero and having her actions guided by Batman lead the reader towards Ivy’s interpretation of Catwoman: she is an individual who is too physically strong to be a victim yet too weak to be an agent.

Being a superhero limits Catwoman’s ability to be placed in either pole within the victim-agent dichotomy. The extraordinary physical and mental abilities of superheroes have connotative meanings associated with strength and invincibility. If/when a superhero is defeated and portrayed as feeble, their credibility as a superhero is diminished and their weakness can be portrayed negatively. Essentially, superheroes are supposed to be *a priori* agents based on their abilities and actions. Because Catwoman is unable to be either agent or victim, she is assigned to non-victimhood. Unlike Catwoman, the narrative does not, at any time, place Harley Quinn in the realm of pure-victimhood or agent. For Harley, her entire identity is defined by her Joker-centered actions and it is those actions that influence the ways she is not assigned as pure victim or agent.

**Assigning Victimhood – Harley Quinn**

In the previous chapter, I explained how Harley has been and continues to be defined by her relationship with the Joker. Like Catwoman, Harley is largely defined by how other people view her experience with the Joker. Villains in the text like Bone Blaster, Hush, and the kidnappers refer to her as “Joker’s chick” and her friends’ perceptions of the abuse lead the three sirens to attempt to resolve the problem (Harley’s abusive relationship).
Similar to Catwoman, Harley is separated from the Joker at the beginning of the narrative. Although it can be perceived that being detached from Joker’s abuse is agential, Harley’s actions suggest that their separation is a matter of force rather than independence. Early on in the text, Catwoman and Ivy express skepticism when Harley asserts that she and the Joker are over:

CATWOMAN: (to Harley) Oh, please. He’ll be calling for your money the second he hears about it.

IVY: Then you’ll be skipping out the door for another round of abuse, humiliation and regret.

HARLEY: HAS he called?! 39

In these panels, readers are guided to initially interpret Harley’s abuse by understanding her friend’s perceptions. If Catwoman and Ivy do not trust Harley to have agency, readers cannot assume that she has the capacity to act. Because the narrative tells us the extent of what we know about a violent situation, the reader can assume that Harley gives little consideration to the benefits of being separated from that relationship. Instead, the narrative suggests that Harley provokes and wants the abuse.

Loseke argues that a victim who has the resources to leave but instead continues an abusive relationship is almost always publicly designated as a non-victim. Relating back to Rihanna’s violent incident with Chris Brown, we can see that the public condemned her and blamed her for the abuse when she sought to continue her relationship with her abuser. Like the negative perceptions placed on Rihanna, Harley is assigned similar negative meanings through her actions. Similar to Catwoman, Harley’s physical ability to protect herself automatically disqualifies her from pure victimhood. Although almost being killed by her partner fits within the characteristics of illegitimate

39 Ibid, 10.
violence, Harley does not consider her situation to be abusive. In fact, the narrative explicitly expresses Harley’s justification for the abuse.

After the Joker tries to kill Harley for going on a date with Bruce Wayne/Hush, Ivy and Catwoman discuss the previous situation. As Catwoman attempts to explain to Harley that Bruce Wayne was actually Hush, Harley diverts the attention back to the Joker:

HARLEY: I don’t need Bruce Wayne, especially now that Mr. J is back.
IVY: But he tried to kill you.
HARLEY: That proves he wants me back!⁴⁰

Though readers are invited to interpret Ivy’s perceptions as more reasonable than Harley’s, these panels are particularly concerning because they perpetuate a myth that designates violence as a measure of affection. Although Ivy attempts to reason with Harley, she insists that Joker’s action in finding and shooting at Harley was evidence of his want to continue the relationship. Ivy’s attitudes are more reasonable but Harley’s perceptions and actions concerning her relationship inform the reader of how they should assess her abusive situation. If Harley believes his abuse is a measure of affection and therefore insignificant, the reader is guided to interpret her abuse as illegitimate. Harley continues to rationalize the Joker’s violence as a measure of affection:

HARLEY: I made him so jealous that he pulled out all the stops to get my attention! He hasn’t use classic shtick like giant balloons and wacky henchmen in years! My puddin’ loves me. Really. I know he gets a bad rap, but beneath the madness he’s nothin’ but a puddy tat.⁴¹

Immediately following Harley’s justification, Joker sneaks up on the three super heroines and starts to shoot at them inside their dwelling. Joker’s action following Harley’s definition is somewhat ironic; though she is justifying his actions, he is

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⁴⁰ Ibid, 93.
⁴¹ Ibid, 94.
reasserting his aggressive and controlling behavior. Within the overall narrative, Harley’s justification of violence is particularly significant because it completely removes her from the realm of victim. Niwako Yamawaki et al. argue that justifications for violent situations provide outsiders with negative meanings associated with not leaving the partner. Additionally, Policastro and Payne contend that victims who stay in their relationships and justify their abuse are viewed as liking/wanting the abuse and/or liking the attention of the abuse. For Harley, her desire to continue her relationship with the Joker guides the reader to interpret her experience as insignificant and not even abusive. Essentially, the narrative text guides the reader to victim blame Harley for her abuse. Harley is not a victim because the abuse is portrayed as being her fault. Yet she is not an agent because she is not independent from Joker’s victimization. Although Harley’s action set the reader to have a victim-blaming interpretation of Harley’s abuse, Joker’s actions further heighten the responsibility placed on Harley.

The Joker’s controlling behavior in the text is particularly distinctive because it upholds Harley’s abuse as illegitimate while also decreasing the responsibility placed on the Joker. The text tells us that the Joker is controlling by alluding to his past controlling actions and illustrating his current actions against Harley. When the kidnappers notice that Harley is “Joker’s girl” they indulge in a little anecdote whereby one kidnapper warns the other of Joker’s vociferous behavior:

KIDNAPPER: Buddy of mine was doing a stint in Arkham. He whistled at her [Harley] once. That night they found him hanging from a drainpipe with his lips cut off.

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44 Dini, Gotham City Sirens, 37. [Emphasis added].
Even if a reader was not already aware of Harley and Joker’s relationship, the text often alludes to the severity and the prevalence of violence. Utterances of Harley being “Joker’s girl” insinuate that Harley is essentially *owned* by the Joker. When the kidnappers explain Joker’s actions against another man who simply whistled at Harley, he is telling the readers that the Joker is controlling and unwilling to even allow another man to look at her. Harley considered Joker’s controlling behavior when she contemplates a prospective relationship with Bruce Wayne. On the balcony during their date, Harley attempts to dissuade herself from being romantic with her date by referencing the Joker’s controlling behavior:

HARLEY: Aw, come on. Me and BRUCE WAYNE? I couldn’t do that to the poor sap. Somehow, some way Mr. J would kill him.45

The text tells readers that the Joker sees a newscast reporting on Harley’s date with Bruce Wayne. Upon seeing Harley with Wayne, the Joker embarks on a mission to prevent the two from forming a romantic relationship. When the Joker interrupts their date, he admits his perceived betrayal:

JOKER: My, My! When I saw it on TV, I just couldn’t believe it! But here’s my proof my one and only squeeze Harley Quinn making hey-hey with Bruce Wayne.46

Despite being shot at after this sentence, Harley attempts to rationalize with the Joker:

HARLEY: Puddin’! WAIT! Would it help if I said this is all a **big misunderstanding**?47

Although Harley is attempting to deter the Joker from killing her and Bruce Wayne, he refuses to be deterred. The next panels highlight the true extent of the Joker’s

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46 Ibid, 84.
47 Ibid, 86.
controlling behavior. However, such demonstration also depicts him as mentally ill and therefore not responsible for the abuse:

JOKER: I suppose I should be big about it. After all, what can I offer her in the long run but a life of crime and maybe a honeymoon cell for two in the Laughing Academy? Anyone else would be happy to see her moving on and forming such a promising relationship. But I’m really a small, vindictive soul beneath this smile, and nothing would give me greater pleasure than to see her die in agony!48

Joker’s scene in which he attempts to kill Harley and Bruce Wayne offers the reader a particular interpretation of the Joker. His narrative on this page seems almost self-deprecating. When he talks about his “small, vindictive soul” the reader is guided to assume that the Joker is experiencing some sense of mental illness that makes him unable to control his actions. Supporting Loseke’s evaluations, the Joker’s responsibility for the abuse is mitigated due to his perceived mental illness. Due to his obvious insanity, the Joker is not necessarily responsible for his abusive actions because they are a result of his insanity. Furthermore, Wood argues that such denigration of abuse is consistent with long held romance narratives that position an abuser as a misguided protector.

Wood explains that romance narratives are pervasive and are constantly being repurposed and bolstered in popular culture.49 These narratives take a once strong heroine and turn her into a character that comes under the protection of an abusive prince. It is difficult to interpret the Joker’s actions as protection however, they do repurpose a narrative whereby Harley is weaker than Joker and submissive to his demands. The Joker openly discusses his controlling behavior and other characters confirm it, yet Harley continues to justify his actions and continue their relationship.

48 Ibid, 85.
It can be argued that Harley’s abuse is void when the Joker is actually identified as Gaggy. However, I argue that this scene actually amplifies Harley’s assigned responsibility. Essentially, Harley uses Gaggy’s disguise as a means to justify the real Joker’s affections towards her. Because Gaggy is the one who tries to kill her in the text, she dismisses the Joker’s past abusive actions when she expresses her desire to continue her relationship at the end of the text. When Harley believes that Gaggy is the Joker, she does not fight back and merely dodges his fatal advances whereas she fights back once learning that Gaggy is the real assailant. Her feelings and attitudes conveyed to Gaggy reveals that she wishes to please and continue a relationship with the real Joker. These actions indicate that Harley is willing only to battle against people who she knows are not Mr. J. When the text ends, the Joker’s true identity becomes the focus of Harley’s attention. After the three characters defeat Gaggy, Harley expresses that desire to return to the Joker. Because Gaggy disguised himself as the Joker, it was Gaggy who tried to kill her, not Mr. J. This makes Harley begin to fantasize about their life together until the narrative ends with Ivy wrapping her vines across Harley’s mouth.

Conclusion

There are very fine lines drawn between agent and victim. The outlining of this narrow dichotomy ultimately leaves most individuals who experience abuse to be considered as neither victim nor agent. Interestingly, this dichotomy makes it extremely difficult for an individual to be placed in either pole, leaving most IPV experiences to be considered as legitimate and thus normal. Readers of IPV narratives are only privy to information that the narrative gives. When a narrative does not offer concrete solutions to
a victim’s abuse, the reader must use socio-cultural meanings associated with IPV to make sense of the character’s actions and abusive situation.

For both Catwoman and Harley, their status as superheroes automatically assigns them to a position of expected agency. Their expected agency is problematic because it simultaneously relegates them to non-victimhood. When these superheroes fail to achieve agency, it is hard for them to be recognized as pure victims. Even when Catwoman is weak and perceivably powerless, her status of a superhero gives her too much agency to be considered a victim. Unlike Catwoman, Harley Quinn’s narrative almost insinuates that Harley wants to be abused. Ultimately, when victims of domestic abuse are assigned to non-victimhood, they are considered part of the abusive problem.

The designation of abuse to non-victimhood negotiates and repurposes gender schemas that depict men as powerful and women as weak.\textsuperscript{50} When narratives ground a victim’s abuse in non-victimhood, illegitimate violence is not enough to ground their IPV narrative in good reasons. Catwoman and Harley’s actions in the narrative act as good reasons for the meanings assigned to their character. Those actions and meanings are then used as good reasons to justify their status as non-victims. Based on the physical prowess, Catwoman and Harley are expected to be agential. Catwoman is too weak to be an agent. Her submissiveness to Ivy indicates that she is unable of making rational decisions for herself, yet she has the aptitude to assist Ivy in saving Harley from the restaurant and in Gaggy’s hideout. Though Catwoman is unable to protect herself and the couple in the first issue of the text, she does have the physical ability to help her team mates. Catwoman’s conflicting actions do not place her inside of the agent/pure victim dichotomy and serve as good reasons to assign her meanings of non-victimhood. Like

\footnote{\textit{Ibid}, 241.}
Catwoman, Harley has preconceived notions of agency due to her ability to protect herself yet does not resolve her situation by ending the abuse. In fact, the text guides a reader to interpret that Harley wants and is responsible for her abuse. Harley’s justifications of Joker’s abuse demonstrate that she is naïve to the seriousness of her abuse. Despite being naïve to the consequences of her relationship, Harley is aware that the abuse exists and seeks to continue her relationship with the Joker. Harley’s actions justify the meaning assigned to her character that she is naïve while also grounding her status of non-victimhood in good reasons. Harley knows about her abuse, but puts herself and others at risk to continue that relationship. The actions motivated by her longing to continue her relationship act as good reasons to justify her status of non-victimhood. She is not an agent because she has not resolved her situation but she is not a pure victim because she is considered at fault for the abuse.

In the overall message of the narrative, the meanings assigned to these characters and their abusive situations do not support IPV as a socially desirable action. Rather, this analogue disseminates an interpretation of IPV that minimizes the significance of the issue. This interpretation provides readers with a way of understanding victimhood that can be used to make real world assessments. If a reader has no first-hand experience with IPV, they could use this text to discern what is and is not considered victimization and IPV. By narrowing the definitions of agency and pure victimhood, individuals are more likely to be placed as non-victims who are not in urgent need of resolving their violent circumstances. Additionally, the narrowing of the definition of victimhood resulting from Catwoman and Harley’s narrative opens up the possibilities for a reader to interpret the violence against them as illegitimate. If a reader were to use this narrative as a framework
in the real world, they could interpret misinterpret similar actions as illegitimate IPV. In reinforcing that most individuals who experience IPV are non-victims, media portrayals of this social issue reproduce a belief that “women must be accommodating and to seek and please men; men are taught to be dominant and to regard women as inferior.”51

Lastly, it is interesting to note that both Catwoman and Harley Quinn are experiencing violence at the hands of men disguised as their romantic partners. Both Catwoman and Harley experienced some measure of abuse in their relationships with Bruce Wayne and the Joker but their abuse in the text is perpetrated by other men. Though the abusers in the text are disguised as Catwoman and Harley’s intimate partners, they are not initially aware of this impersonation and their narratives are grounded in their relationships with the real partner. The fact that both women’s abusers were impersonators of their partners offers this project an interesting understanding of meanings of victimhood. If Gaggy and Hush were average villains in a different story arc, Catwoman and Harley may have been more likely to protect themselves against Gaggy and Hush’s violent actions. By disguising themselves as Catwoman and Harley’s romantic interests, Gaggy and Hush were able to assert the same authority over these women as Bruce Wayne and the Joker. This dynamic suggests that female superheroes are able to be agential against opponents but not necessarily romantic interests who act violently towards them. Additionally, this dynamic insinuates that female characters may not perceive an individual to be a villain if they are a romantic interest. Ultimately, Gaggy and Hush’s impersonation of Catwoman and Harley’s love interests tells readers that these characters are less likely to respond to violence by romantic interests and enact agency in those situations. Because the reader only knows what the narrative tells them,

this aspect tells readers that a female superhero can downplay their ability to be an agent if they are enacting agency in response to a romantic interest’s actions. Overall, *Gotham City Sirens* provides readers with a preferred interpretation of IPV that disseminates a particular definition of intimate partner violence and victimhood. The text’s interpretation is similar to prominent socio-cultural IPV myths that absolve an abuser of responsibility and places that responsibility on the victim. These myths place the burden of proof on the victim, and if they are unable to be placed within the agent/pure victim dichotomy, the victim is then assigned blame for their abuse. Additionally, this narrative upholds a prevalent socio-cultural myth that supports a notion most cases of violence between intimate partners are illegitimate and legitimate IPV is rare. When texts continue to support this notion, they continue to diminish the importance and seriousness of IPV.
CHAPTER FIVE: Siren Song – Comic Book Analogues and Interpretations of Reality

Introduction

On January 30, 2015, three year old Sophia Sandoval had her last day of chemotherapy sessions after being diagnosed with a cancerous brain tumor eight months earlier. To celebrate the occasion, Sophia donned a Wonder Woman costume while her mother took pictures. With one arm held one up like she was flying, her other hand held a sign reading: “my last day of chemo. It was tough, but I was tougher!”1 Her mother, Rossi told reporters that Sophia gained inspiration from Wonder Woman, and would watch Wonder Woman movies during chemo sessions. For Sophia, Wonder Woman was someone she could look up to. Despite being a child, Sophia discerned parts of Wonder Woman’s narrative that gave order to her experiences. Notwithstanding Sophia’s reverence for Wonder Woman, other fans have voiced their criticism about what they think Wonder Woman should mean. After DC revealed their casting of actress Gal Gadot for the role of Wonder Woman in the *Superman v Batman* film (2015), fans took to Twitter to express their criticisms of Gadot’s body. For many fans, it was not that Gadot was too big but that she was too small.2 Believing that Gadot was too thin and not strong enough to play Wonder Woman, many fans took to their internet to voice their discontent with DC’s casting of the iconic superheroine. Actors in the real world are expected to look like and act exactly like the character they are portraying, regardless of the


attainability of those expectations. The meanings assigned to these characters throughout the comic ages have become ingrained and salient among readers, and challenging those meanings has been known cause outrage. For example, one of the founders of Image Comics, Erik Larsen argued the need to maintain the standards of female beauty in comic books. In a series of tweets, Larsen explains that he is “tired of the “big two” [DC and Marvel] placating a vocal minority at the expense of the rest of the paying audience by making more practical woman outfits.” For Larsen, the “unattractiveness” of the costumes was a concern, notwithstanding the fact that many female superheroes have been in costumes that would certainly hinder battle. Though these concerns may seem insignificant, they illustrate the potential these texts have to inform us on our everyday lives. If female superheroes are popular enough to evoke response, they are powerful enough to become a source of information we can use to make real world judgments.

It would be unwise to make a causal argument asserting that certain comic books changed opinions in this way, but the responses of individuals like Gloria Steinem, Sophia, Larsen, and other fans illustrates that individuals can draw on these meanings to make judgments in the real-world. If a reader were to find narrative fidelity in Gotham City Sirens, they can use that information in their deliberation of real-world issues like Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) or the status of women. The overall narrative concerning IPV highlights a problematic dynamic whereby Harley and Catwoman are neither agent nor victim. The meanings of non-victimhood applied to these characters delineates their abuse as legitimate and therefore, not significant. The breaking of superhero and gender expectations contributes to the way in which meanings of non-victimhood are bestowed.

upon Catwoman and Harley Quinn. Additionally, the negotiation of gender and superhero expectations creates a myth that suggests women cannot adequately and equally fulfill these separate expectations. In this final chapter, I first advance claims for how the finding of this thesis project contributes to the larger society. Specifically, I assert that this project offers scholars a way for understanding how gender is portrayed in different forms of media and how those depictions can inform a reader’s real world judgements. Overall, I hope to demonstrate that popular culture texts, like comic books, provide interpretations of human experience that have the potential to be persuasive. Specifically, I seek to advance a new understanding of how popular culture rhetoric assigns specific meanings to women that ultimately prove problematic. Following this discussion, this chapter summarizes the findings of chapters three and four. Lastly, I conclude this project by offering a direction for future study.

Contributions to Society

As discussed in chapter one, little research has been conducted on comic studies and there has been even less research on rhetorical messages in comics. Though it could be argued that this project has merit based on the “newness” of this study, I believe that this project offers much more to society, scholarship, and the comic industry.

Since the Golden Age, the portrayal of female superheroes has revealed that comic books have sent and continue to send messages about gender and issues surrounding gender. Body measurement standards, actions, and plot lines indicate that it is more important for a female superhero to meet her expectations as a woman before her expectations as a hero. Though it could be assumed that the perceivably small audience of comics downplays its significance, superheroes are growing in popularity and their
narratives are increasingly being disseminated in films, television, and video games. The appearance of these narratives in film, games, and television shows is especially important because they are commonly being marketed towards children and families. Notwithstanding the growing popularity among families, children, and women, Rebecca-Ann C. Do Rozario argues that comic books have been and still are conceptualized as being for men. Rozario explains that to appeal to male readers, female characters are juxtaposed between notions of the aggressive bitch, the ultra-feminine princess, and the hypersexualized vixen. These notions reinforce socio-cultural notions of femininity and gender expectations whereby it is more appropriate to be hypersexualized and submissive rather than strong and perceivably aggressive. Previous chapters have highlighted that comic readership extends beyond the target demographic of males ages 16 – 35 to include readers from all ages, races, classes, gender identity, and ethnicity. Though past scholars have dismissed comics and comic studies as ‘kids’ stuff,’ recent studies suggests that readers can and have formed their attitudes based on a superhero’s narrative. J.F. Martin’s research evaluated a child’s knowledge of a superhero’s actions and their own prosocial behavior. According to Martin, his research supports “the idea that children may learn values from superheroes, and that superheroes can be used as a tool to educate children on how to cooperate with others.” Following Martin’s research, these depictions of women could inform a child’s understanding of desirable gender actions. It is extremely important that scholars understand the various ways gender is appropriated and assigned meaning in mediated messages. The meanings assigned to female superheroes

5 Ibid.
based on their expectation fulfilling or breaking actions gives readers a preferred interpretation of how they should perceive and assess women and femininity in the real world. Similar to narratives in the Golden, Silver, and Bronze ages, the female superheroes in *Gotham City Sirens* support a notion that it is more favorable for a female superhero to uphold gender expectations over superhero expectations. Catwoman conforms to gender expectations and is not defined as negatively as her team mates who subvert both set of expectations. As discussed in chapter two, real world empowered women have been referred to as “supergirls.” These women are thought to “have it all”, but they have to be able to “do it all.” A reader of *Gotham City Sirens* may view real world supergirls more favorably if they maintain their expectations as wife and mother over the expectations derived from their careers. By focusing on female superheroes, this thesis demonstrates that under researched texts, like comic books, send specific messages about what is appropriate for women to undertake. With the recent controversy surrounding the diversity of comic characters, the comic industry could utilize this research as a means for determining what messages are unfavorable to women and how those can be changed in future comics.

When I initially started this project, my focus was purely on the visual and textual gender representations within a narrative about female superheroes. In the prospectus of this project, I hypothesized that the relationship between text and image sexualized female characters in a way that was either empowering or objectifying. This hypothesis set up a false dichotomy that limited the scope and advancements of my investigation. After I switched my artifact to *Gotham City Sirens*, I discerned that female superheroes were portrayed in a variety of different ways and such portrayal influenced the
interpretation of gender provided by the comic analogue. As I started my analysis of *Gotham City Sirens*, I came to realize that the text explicitly concerned IPV and how characters rationalized abuse. This text gives an interpretation of IPV by comparing real-world relationships to that of Harley/Joker and Catwoman/Batman. Following Caroline Joan S. Picart’s argument discussed in chapter four, victims of IPV are commonly framed as either pure victim or agent. Framing IPV in a dichotomy ignores the nuances of what victimhood entails. As discussed in chapter four, agents are typically assigned positive meanings because they had the power to overcome their partner’s domination and liberate themselves from abuse. Unlike their real-world counterparts, the extraordinary abilities and physical strength of female superheroes gives them preexisting notions of agency. The ability to protect one’s self automatically negates the status of victimhood while the failure to resolve an IPV experience circumvents meanings of agency. The interpretation of agency derived from female superheroes suggests that individuals who are physically capable of protecting themselves are rarely assigned meanings of pure victimhood, regardless of the severity of the abuse.

When agency is expected, actions that assign meanings of pure victimhood are narrowed. As a result of such narrowing, greater responsibility is placed on the victim than the abuser. Messages that assign responsibility for a violent incident to the abused are problematic to not only the comic industry but society as a whole. Because comics are analogous to the real-world, the interpretation of IPV in the text can inform readers how to make judgments about victims, victimizers, and IPV in real life. Messages that blame a victim and absolve the abuser of responsibility reinforce myths that propose IPV is a result of a psychological abnormality and such, not a serious issue. If scholars are unable
to recognize the various ways in which these myths are maintained, we are unable to find ways to counteract these myths. Additionally, the way in which these myths are appropriated through various forms could help scholars better understand how IPV myths evolve and the extent to which they are socially salient.

The following anecdotal example illustrates the extent to which Harley’s narrative is culturally salient. In early 2015, DC Comics announced that February would be Harley Quinn month and urged readers to celebrate Valentine’s Day 2015 by buying their loved ones an “insanely beautiful HARLEY QUINN/JOKER KISS statue.”⁷ This marketing specifically emphasized the “insanity” of their relationship as something favorable, thus perpetuating the notion that their violence is insignificant. The desirability of their insane and violent relationship was further upheld as desirable in Hot Topic’s “Mad Love” Valentine’s Day 2015 campaign. Hot Topic is a retail store oriented towards adolescents, teens, and young adults. This company sells products relating to popular culture and “alternative” style clothing, and brought in annual revenue of $741.7 million dollars for 2013.⁸ For the month of February 2015, Hot Topic stores displayed large displays at their entrances featuring Harley and Joker paraphernalia, including images where Joker holds a knife to Harley’s throat. In today’s consumer driven society, the seriousness of this IPV situation is denigrated as nothing more than fashionable and desirable.

The meanings assigned to Catwoman, Harley Quinn, and Poison Ivy through their negotiation of gender and superhero expectations informs a reader as to how they should interpret their experience with IPV. As a comparison of the real world, this narrative is a

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specific interpretation for how one should understand and assess gender expectations and IPV.

Summary

Superhero Expectations

As female superheroes, these characters are held to the expectations derived from their role of superhero and the expectations assigned to their gender. As discussed in chapter two, female superheroes throughout the ages have typically favored their gender expectations over their superhero expectations. Both sets of expectations establish that a character should be selfless and altruistic. Both sets of expectations share the requirement that a female superhero act altruistically but female superheroes are commonly unable to adequately conform to both sets of expectations. Catwoman, Ivy, and Harley all break their superhero expectations yet they all do so in different ways. Despite defying their superhero expectations, each of these characters upholds the visual standard of female superheroes established in the Golden Age. Like female superheroes in the previous ages, Catwoman, Ivy, and Harley are portrayed in revealing costumes and easily fit with in the beauty paradigm outlined by Rob Hicks and discussed in previous chapters. Additionally, the visual representations of these characters are embellished in a way that directs a reader’s gaze towards a sexual meaning behind their actions. Ultimately, the visual representations contribute to the meanings they are assigned based on their expectation fulfilling or defying actions.

As discussed in chapter three, the role of superhero carries a set of predetermined expectations that have been maintained since the Golden Age. As explained by Peter DeScioli, Robert Kurzban, Jeph Loeb and Tom Morris, superheroes are expected to take
the moral high ground, not act in self-interest, be physically strong, and help those who cannot help themselves. Throughout the Sirens narrative, these characters break one or more of these expectations, and are assigned a certain meaning based on the expectation they defy.

When Catwoman acknowledges that she is “as weak as a kitten,” she implies that she is unable to fulfill the expectation that superheroes be strong. For superheroes, strength is both physical and mental, and Catwoman’s actions demonstrate that she is neither. Catwoman’s physical weakness against the Bone Blaster is problematic to her role as a superhero because she is unable to protect the couple being harassed or herself against her foe. In the overall narrative, Catwoman’s physical weakness leaves her vulnerable to others who want to take advantage of her. For instance, Zatanna’s confirmation of Ivy’s suspicion ultimately leaves Catwoman vulnerable to Ivy’s deceptive actions. As discussed in the previous chapters, the overall narrative largely ignores Catwoman’s narrative following her torture. After her torture, Catwoman is visually and textually depicted as being subordinate to Ivy. Chapter three highlighted that Catwoman was morally superior to Ivy yet, she is later portrayed as subordinate. Catwoman’s actions following her torture indicates that she is not physically strong enough to break Ivy’s binds and she is easily manipulated by Ivy. Ultimately, being assigned meanings of weakness are problematic for her narrative because it demeans her ability to be a superhero. In the first issue, Ivy even acknowledges that weakness is “fatal in our line of work” and Catwoman’s meanings of weakness depict that she is not fit to be a superhero. Catwoman does partially fulfill superhero expectations by acting altruistically and attempting to defend the defenseless. Though she engages in these
actions, she is not always successful in carrying them out. For example, Catwoman meets expectations when she tries to save a couple from being mugged by the Bone Blaster. She does ultimately save the couple but not because of her physical prowess. Catwoman was too physically weak to protect the couple but she distracted Bone Blaster long enough for the couple to get away. Catwoman acts in accordance to her superhero expectations but her weakness prevents her from adequately maintaining this set of expectations.

Ultimately, Catwoman’s weakness implies that characters can only be interpreted as legitimate and successful superheroes if they are physically strong. Gender expectations conflict with this expectation because it is difficult for a woman to be interpreted as physically strong if she is passive and submissive. Out of the three protagonists, Catwoman is defined more favorably than her two team mates and she is the only one to fulfill gender expectations. Combined with the conflict in expectations, Catwoman’s narrative provides readers with a preferred interpretation that it is more desirable for a woman to act feminine than it is for them to act like and be a superhero.

Unlike Catwoman, Ivy is depicted as being too strong. Early in the narrative, Ivy does fulfill superhero expectations by saving Catwoman and inviting Harley to live with them. Notwithstanding these initial expectation fulfilling actions, the rest of Ivy’s narrative completely breaks superhero expectations and contributes to the meanings she is assigned. Specifically, her actions that manipulate others are a significant violation of her superhero expectations. Additionally, Ivy’s frequent sexual poses and cheesecake shots indicates that she uses sex as a means to accomplish her coercive actions. For example, Ivy is sexually posed when she drugs the Riddler and tortures Catwoman. Jeph Loeb and Tom Morris explain that superheroes are expected to save individuals from
evil, sometimes at the expense of their own lives. Central to this concept is the idea of self-sacrifice and superheroes are never supposed to act in self-interest. Ivy is not only depicted as engaging in less than virtuous actions, she is doing these actions in her self-interest. Lastly, Ivy further challenges her superhero expectations when she urges that she and the team kill the Joker/Gaggy. For a superhero to have moral superiority, they cannot kill like their enemies do. When a superhero argues that an opponent has to be killed, they can be interpreted as violent, irrational, and unable to carry out justice through the legal system. Ultimately, Ivy is assigned meanings associated with being devious and domineering, and Ivy only solidifies that meaning when she confesses to her past manipulative actions. Similar to the Wonder Woman and Tigra in the Silver and Bronze ages, Ivy is portrayed and assigned meanings of being too aggressive, selfish, and calculating. If a superhero is expected to work on behalf of the betterment of society, they are unable to do so if they engage in “evil” actions for their own self-interest.

Similar to Ivy, Harley Quinn predominantly acts in her own self-interest. Specifically, Harley is motivated to act by her desire to continue her relationship with the Joker. Harley is not calculating like Ivy so much as she is naïve. Harley’s naiveté makes her unable to save those who cannot save themselves. This may have been circumvented if Harley saved individual citizens but the only person she saved was the villain Hush who was disguised as Bruce Wayne. Regardless of the disguise, either man would have been able to protect themselves. Similar to Catwoman, Harley counteracts superhero expectations by being visually and textually submissive to other characters. There are two instances in the text when Harley is depicted is being bound by Ivy’s vines. After Ivy

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10 Ibid.
asserts authority over Catwoman (through the torture) she establishes authority over Harley when she berates her in issue three. From that point on, the narrative text reveals that Catwoman and Harley follow Ivy’s commands and are subsidiary team mates to Ivy. When Gaggy takes control of the vines after Ivy is incapacitated, it suggests that Ivy’s dominance over Harley is being transferred to Gaggy. In addition to her submission to Ivy and Gaggy, Harley is always defined in relation to her subordination to the Joker. As noted by Riesman in chapter three, Harley has been defined by her volatile relationship with the Joker and it is unlikely that such definition will change in the near future. Essentially, the continuation of this definition has made submissiveness inherent to Harley’s character. When comic issues reinforce this relationship as normal, it further negates Harley’s ability to be defined independently from the Joker. Though some new comic issues portray Harley separately from the Joker, he is almost always referenced and fans rarely conceptualize Harley as independent from the Joker. Similar to both Catwoman and Ivy, Harley defies her superhero expectations. Despite defying their obligations as superheroes, this role determines that these characters have some measure of agency.

Gender Expectations

As discussed in chapter three, female superheroes are assigned partial meaning through their gender representation. Using Barthes’s notions of denotative and connotative messages, this project discerned that the partial meaning assigned to characters through the denotative message is consistent with the expectations assigned to women in the real world. The way in which these women are visually posed interacts with their actions in the narrative to formulate a specific meaning relating to gender. In
the overall narrative, Ivy and Harley challenge their gender expectations whereas Catwoman conforms. Catwoman is the only character to explicitly adhere to socio-cultural gender roles but that does not mean that Harley and Ivy are not assigned meanings consistent with socio-cultural meanings of gender. Harley and Ivy are portrayed in a way that emphasizes stereotypes placed on women who undermine gender expectations. For example, women who take control of situations and are not submissive to anyone are frequently viewed as overly aggressive and assigned negative meanings.

Chapter two noted that feminist activists in the sixties and seventies were assigned similar meanings to strong, independent female superheroes in the Silver and Bronze ages. Female superheroes and real world women were assigned negative meanings because they deviated away from socio-cultural gender expectations. Characters like Tigra, Wonder Woman, and Ivy are depicted as the stereotype of the aggressive woman who is too forceful to be considered both empowered and feminine.

With two-thirds of the team defying expectations, Catwoman is ultimately interpreted more favorably than Ivy and Harley. The way in which these characters resolve the tensions between expectations reinforces two underlying myths.

Despite not conforming to superhero expectations, Catwoman does fulfill gender expectations by being subordinate to a “masculine” counterpart and being altruistic. As discussed by Thompson and Zerbinos in chapter three, women are expected to be kind and thoughtful whereas Hawkes notes that women are also supposed to be submissive to men. Catwoman is separated from Batman in the text but that does not mean that she is not subordinate. Though Ivy is a woman, she enacted more masculine actions by being authoritative and urging for violence. Catwoman is not necessarily subordinate to a man.
so much as she is to a more dominant character. Contributing to Catwoman’s submissiveness is the silence of her narrative after issue two. As the overall narrative shifted focus to Harley, Ivy took charge and determined the issue was resolved and Catwoman was portrayed as simply following Ivy’s lead. In addition to being subordinate, Catwoman also meets the gender expectation of being kind and altruistic. Catwoman’s narrative and the overall narrative begin with her trying to save a couple being mugged by Bone Blaster. She continues to act in accordance to gender expectations by comforting Harley after Ivy berates her. Catwoman’s kindness contributes to her favorable interpretation because it also somewhat meets superhero expectations. By being kind and seeking to help others, Catwoman is putting others before herself. Catwoman’s selflessness is further validated when she protects Batman’s identity under torture. Even under duress Catwoman does not act in her own self-interest, making her feminine and somewhat heroic.

Aside from her visual representation, Poison Ivy challenges her gender expectations. As noted in the previous paragraph, Ivy is the character who demonstrates the most “masculine” actions. Ivy’s visual portrayal is the most sexualized out of the three female superheroes and such sexualization contributes to the negative meanings assigned to her character. Like her dismissal of gender expectations, Ivy’s sexualization contributes to the meanings assigned to her character when she breaks gender expectations. Acting in accordance to Ivy’s superhero expectations, acting in self-interest also breaks gender expectations because it is not indicative of altruism. Though Ivy saves Catwoman and Harley, she also dominates over them, binds them with her vines, and silences their voices when necessary. The sexualized nature of her visual representation
suggests that she uses sexuality as a means of achieving self-satisfying goals. The meanings suggested by her visual representation pairs with her manipulative actions to formulate a meaning that Ivy is neither feminine, nor a perfect superhero. As noted previously, Ivy’s depiction is similar to the depiction of “feminist” female superheroes in the Silver and Bronze ages. These women are aggressive and unfeminine despite upholding the visual standard of female superheroes. Because these women are too aggressive, they are unfit to battle evil while also upholding moral superiority.

Lastly, Harley challenges gender expectations in ways that are often contradictory. Ultimately, Harley is defined by meeting the gender expectation of being subordinate (first to the Joker, then to Harley, then to Gaggy). However, her submissiveness is not maintained throughout the text. Though her submissiveness is prevalent in the text, she breaks that expectation when she fights Bone Blaster and defeats Bruce Wayne/Hush’s kidnappers. When Harley makes her own decisions, it tells the reader that she chooses when and who to be subordinate to. Unlike Catwoman, Harley’s submissiveness is not indicative of her kindness. Almost all of Harley’s actions in the overall narrative are motivated by self-interest; she is easily convinced to be immoral and violent against others. Specifically, Harley is violent when Ivy instructs her to be so. For example, Harley followed Ivy’s lead when they decided to torture Catwoman and when Ivy argues it was necessary to kill the Joker. Harley’s violence when she is not submissive pairs with her willingness to be violent when she is dominated, and she is portrayed as unable to act altruistically.

In the overall narrative, the way in which these characters resolve the tensions between gender and superhero expectations upholds and overarching myth about female
superheroes that can be traced back to Silver age. As noted above, Catwoman is interpreted more favorably than Ivy and Harley. All three characters disobey their superhero expectations but only Catwoman fulfills gender expectations. The inability to balance their obligations disseminates an underlying myth that female superheroes are unable successfully to be both women and superheroes. This message carries two additional meanings assigned to female superheroes and the preferable actions they should undertake: 1) it is more preferable for characters to fulfill gender expectations than superhero expectations and; 2) a female character who defies gender expectations is too aggressive to be a superhero. Specifically, this message upholds that socio-cultural notions of gender are more favorable than being a superhero. Catwoman’s narrative follows a pattern of other female superheroes who uphold gender expectations over superhero expectations. Sue Storm’s narrative in the Silver Age illustrates this notion by acting as her team’s motherly figure that rarely fought in battle. Like Catwoman, Sue was altruistic and defended others but she was often too weak to successfully save others from peril. Neither one of Catwoman’s team mates offers a competing interpretation of gender where they fulfill gender expectations but not superhero expectations. Readers only know what the text tells them and Gotham City Sirens informs readers that there are only two ways female superheroes can resolve the tensions between gender and superhero expectations: (1) either defy superhero expectations and conform to gender expectations and; (2) defy gender expectations and also subvert superhero expectations. Combined and separately, these two notions support an attitude that suggests women are unable to be superheroes. Notwithstanding the underlying message illustrated by these characters breaking expectations, their actions contribute to how meanings of victimhood are
assigned. These meanings of victimhood are then used as good reasons to justify their status as non-victims and their abuse as insignificant.

**Gender Expectations and Assigning Victimhood**

As highlighted in the previous chapters, Catwoman and Harley Quinn’s experience with abuse is the overarching plot focus of the narrative. That is, most of the narrative focuses on how these characters rationalize and cope with their abuse. Using Caroline Joan S. Picart’s explanations of “pure victimhood” and agency, this project examined how the pure victim/agent dichotomy displaced the perceived legitimacy of these characters’ abuse. As discussed in chapter four, Picart argues that IPV is typically framed by attitudes that establish the characteristics of who is considered a pure victim and who is considered an agent. Picart notes that the dichotomy ignores the nuances of domestically violent situations, and this project hopes to offer the larger society a way of understanding how ideas about agency and pure victimhood are changed depending on the individual being abused. Because these characters have the extraordinary ability to protect themselves against violence give them a preexisting sense of agency which automatically delineates these characters away from being categorized as pure victims. When these characters do not enact agency they cannot be considered pure victims, therefore they are placed into a category I call “non-victimhood.” Characters assigned the status of non-victimhood are not perceived to be victims, in fact, it could be perceived that non-victims contribute to their violence. The status of non-victimhood carries meanings that associate their violence as insignificant and/or not worthy of intervention. If scholars and the larger society continue to accept the pure victim/agent dichotomy than we will continue to ignore the various ways in which abuse is experienced. Ultimately,
these characters are unable to be placed within the agent/pure victim dichotomy and such delineation actually provides readers with a more nuanced interpretation of IPV.

*Gotham City Sirens* offers readers an interpretation of IPV that suggests physically strong women can also fall victim to violent relationships. This text challenges the notion that characters who have the capacity to act against a perpetrator can and will take agential measures against an adversary. Both Catwoman and Harley are assigned *a priori* meanings of agency however, neither character enacts agency in their violent relationships. Though Catwoman is separated from Batman, she is defined as being weak. As highlighted in chapter three, Catwoman does not validate her weakness, other characters do. After Zatanna confirms Ivy’s suspicions of Catwoman’s weakness, Ivy uses Catwoman’s weakness to her own benefit. Ivy’s bondage and torture of Catwoman was transference of abuse. Instead of separating from Ivy and Harley after the torture, Catwoman shrugs the incident off with the suggestion that Ivy makes breakfast. As explained in previous chapters and above, Catwoman’s narrative is largely silent after her torture and she is mostly subsidiary to Ivy. Catwoman’s submissiveness to Ivy validates that she is simply replacing one abuser with another. Regarding her abuse with Bruce Wayne, Catwoman cannot be considered agential because she did not voluntarily remove herself from their relationship and she continues to preserve his secrets. However, she is too physically strong to be considered a pure victim. Concerning her abuse with Ivy, Catwoman cannot be considered agential because she is too weak to protect herself from Ivy’s advances and she does separate from Ivy following the violent incident. Despite having preexisting meanings of agency, Catwoman is not an agent. Additionally, she cannot be considered as a pure victim to Ivy’s abuse because she does have the capacity
to act against it. Catwoman may be weak, but she had the resources to remove Ivy from the animal shelter. Though Catwoman was abused at no fault of her own, her extraordinary ability and resources give her the available means to combat her situation. Lastly, pure victimhood entails that the abused is child-like and unable to make rational decisions. Catwoman is the one who suggests the team move out of the Riddler’s apartment, and it is Catwoman who notices Harley is in danger before even Harley knew. Catwoman demonstrates that she is capable of making rational decisions and she is thus unable to be assigned meanings of pure victimhood. Because Catwoman is unable to be either agent or victim, she is assigned to being a non-victim. This text offers readers a more nuanced interpretation of victimhood but these characters are still assigned meanings of non-victimhood. There are times in the text when Catwoman’s actions support her being delineated as a pure victim but her preexisting meanings of agency prevent her from being conceptualized as a pure victim. Ultimately, these meanings guide readers to interpret Catwoman’s abuse as insignificant and not needing of intervention.

Contrary to Catwoman, there is no way in which Harley can be assigned meanings of pure victimhood. Catwoman could be interpreted as a pure victim that that her abuse was depicted as being as “no fault of her own.” Unlike in the case Catwoman, the text directs the reader’s interpretation to assign blame to Harley for her abuse. As discussed in chapters three and four, Harley has been portrayed as being in a relationship with the Joker since her inception. Despite the violence, fans and comic creators continue to love and define Harley by her abusive relationship with the Joker and such definitions position her abuse as insignificant. Like Catwoman, Harley is separated from the Joker but it was not her decision to separate from the Joker. Regardless of the separation,
Harley actively and continuously expresses her desire to continue her relationship with the Joker. Even after the Joker/Gaggy tries to kill Harley in the text, she continues to negate his violence as a serious problem. When Harley proclaims that the Joker’s violence “just means he loves” her, she is stopping the reader from proliferating other meanings of her IPV.

Though Harley is unable to be an agent, she is less likely to be considered a pure victim. Harley’s selfish actions sustained throughout the text are not indicative of her being a “good person.” Additionally, Harley’s abuse cannot be considered as being “no fault of her own” because she actively pursues her relationship. There are times in the text when a reader can be invited to challenge Harley’s viewpoint of her relationship but the text defines Harley’s abuse in relation to the actions she undertakes within the text. Because Harley is depicted as wanting to continue her relationship, the reader is left with little option but to interpret that Harley openly seeks out and wants her abuse.

Similar to Catwoman, the latter part of the overall narrative depicts Harley as being submissive to Ivy’s control. Though Harley is submissive to Ivy, it is not in the same ways Catwoman is. Both Catwoman and Harley are controlled and held in bondage by Ivy but only Catwoman is controlled by Ivy. Following Joker/Gaggy bombing the animal shelter, Harley is subordinate to Ivy and follows her lead. However she is first and foremost submissive to the Joker. After Gaggy’s revealed his true identity, Harley again expressed her desire to be with the Joker. If Ivy was truly controlling over Harley, she would not express her desire to pursue a different albeit more violent relationship.

The overall narrative provides readers with a message about IPV whereby they are guided to interpret what categorizes as legitimate and illegitimate violence. This
interpretation reinforces prevalent socio-cultural myths that establish that IPV is not an issue, in addition to attitudes that determine IPV is the result of severe psychological problems, and that the victims typically provoke their abuse. Catwoman and Harley Quinn’s actions determine that they cannot be agent or pure victim. Not fitting into the pure victim/agent dichotomy serves as good reasons to justify their abuse as insignificant. Catwoman’s submissiveness to other characters acts as good reasons to circumvent meanings that she is agential. Despite not being strong enough to be an agent, Catwoman is too strong to be a pure victim. She is able to counteract her perceived weakness when she is helping Harley but cannot successfully save herself from characters like Bone Blaster, Hush, and Ivy. Catwoman’s protection of others suggests that she has the ability to leave violent situations and her preexisting notions of agency dictate that she does so. Catwoman’s inability to leave abusive relationships serve as good reasons to not view her as an agent whereas her actions saving others act as good reasons displacing her from pure victimhood. In order to be considered a victim of legitimate abuse, an individual has to be assigned as either agent or victim. Because these characters fall into the status of non-victimhood, they are perceived as having no good reasons to justify their abuse as legitimate.

The overall narrative provides readers with an interpretation that IPV is not a legitimate issue. Because these characters do not stop their abuse, they are viewed as contributing to their violence. The interpretation that these characters contribute to their violence serves as good reasons to believe that IPV is not serious because victims want to be abused. Though the text provides readers with a more nuanced interpretation of victimhood, the text would not be persuasive if it did not ring true to a reader’s
experiences. The text heightens its likelihood of having narrative fidelity though the agent/pure victim dichotomy. Because most individuals assess IPV in relation to the agent/pure victim dichotomy, the message of this text has the potential to ring true to a widespread audience who can then perceive these characters IPV situations as insignificant. By perpetuating socio-cultural salient myths that denigrate the seriousness of domestic violence, the overall narrative is also increasing its chance of having narrative fidelity. Because these myths are ingrained and widespread, a reader is more likely to determine these messages as truthful based on their knowledge.

Future Directions

Expanding on the contributions argued above, this project contributes to scholarly knowledge in a few important ways. As evidenced by my analyses in chapters three and four, rhetorical theoretical lenses are effective tools for understanding comic book discourse and how these texts send gender specific messages. I have noted past research concerning the representation of women in media. Previous researchers have discerned the implications of gender representations in specific forms of media, but it is imperative that scholars understand how gender representations change in different types of media and the implications for those changes. This project offers a way for understanding how gender is appropriated in comic books, the messages of those representations, and their implications. These texts do not necessarily change beliefs but they do provide an interpretation of gender appropriate behavior.

The comic analogue leaves researchers with several opportunities for future research. This project did not discuss how connotations associated with race may influence the meanings assigned to a character. Though Paul Dini wrote Harley Quinn as
having Jewish heritage, that aspect of her personality is not recognizable or referenced anywhere in the text. Aside from Harley’s ancestry, Catwoman, Ivy, and Harley are all white women. Characters of minority classes and races are less likely to appear in their own independent issues than female superheroes are, and these characters continue to be under represented among superheroes. Regardless of the small numbers, scholars could benefit from an understanding of how meanings of race are appropriated through various forms of media. This could help scholars discern how attitudes regarding race are negotiated in texts like comics. Next, *Gotham City Sirens* was published by DC Comics, one of the “big two” companies. Although Marvel and DC continue to dominate comic sales, independent comics like Image and Dark Horse comics are extremely popular. Future comic scholars could compare female characters published by the big two against female characters in independent comics. If the representations of these characters are largely similar, it could highlight an overarching standard in which all female comic character must fulfill. Additionally, this project offers an avenue of research outside of the scope of comic books. Though my analysis of chapter four indicated that Ivy took over Catwoman’s abuse, this project did not focus on socio-cultural attitudes regarding IPV in same-sex relationships. Though it may be difficult to argue that Ivy and Catwoman are in a same-sex relationship, they do have a platonic relationship with one another. If individuals in the larger society do not view IPV in same sex relationships as problematic, then readers may not be able to recognize Ivy’s abuse of Catwoman. At this point in the research, I am unaware of any other comic characters/texts that resemble Ivy and Catwoman’s relationship in *Gotham City Sirens*. However, future research could
benefit from understanding if same sex IPV incidences are portrayed to the media. If they are, what message does this send to viewers’?

Lastly, this project would like to argue the expedient need to understand representations of women in comics. Comic books fit into the larger framework of ‘geek culture’ whereby individuals collectively identify as fans to comic books, video games, films, and television, among others. The characters of these texts are often intertextual in that they appear in multiple mediums. For example, both Harley Quinn and Ivy are characters in video games and all characters appear in films and television shows. Recently, this subculture has experienced a wave of controversy concerning how fans treat women and minorities. The amount of sexual assaults at comic conventions has led some conventions, like Emerald City, to post flyers telling patrons that “costumes are not consent.” Initiatives like “We are Comics” have urged the comic industry and larger geek subculture to diversify, but such efforts have been met with vitriolic and violent criticism. For example, Feminist Frequency founder Anita Sarkesian was sent death and rape threats after she released a video condemning the largely sexualized roles women played in video games. The threats against Sarkeesian were so severe that she was forced to cancel a speaking event out of fear that the Utah’s open carry laws would leave her more vulnerable to attack. Though I cannot make an argument that such threats are isolated to the industry or representative of the larger public, the way in which these fans are treating women in the real world is cause for concern. If comic readers are drawing on these interpretations to make real world decisions, their attitudes about women could be informed by these texts.
Conclusion

As I noted above in regards to Sophia, female superheroes have the ability to inspire fans of all ages. However, I cannot help but wonder how Sophia and other young girls might perceive and interpret Catwoman, Harley, and Ivy’s narratives. Throughout this project, I have come to understand that female superheroes are simple, yet unbelievably complex. They follow certain traditions and reinforce certain roles, but are also redefined and reconceptualized in each age. Though they share common characteristics, no two female superheroes are identical. Notwithstanding these complexities, female superheroes continuously provide readers with a siren song: their physical beauty and sometimes spunky personalities makes these women hard to resist but also unpredictable and potentially dangerous. Female superheroes have been and continue to be representations of what women are expected to be. Women in the real world and comics are perceived as being weak and submissive, but if those women gain control, they are dangerous. If a reader finds this interpretation to have narrative fidelity, they can use the narrative to make real world judgments about women.

Furthermore, comics that highlight issues like IPV have the potential to raise awareness but do not when they denigrate the issue. The meanings assigned to Catwoman and Harley through their negotiation of expectations provides readers with good reasons for not recognizing their victimhood or perceiving their abuse as legitimate.
SEDUCING A MAN AND KEEPING HIM DRUGGED WHILE YOU TAKE OVER HIS HOME?

RIDDLE'S MUCH MORE AGREEABLE THIS WAY, ISN'T HE?
Appendix B: Ivy’s Sexual Poses in Scenes with the Riddler, pg. 8

YOU DON’T EVEN REMEMBER?

MONEY IS EASY TO COME BY--FOR ME, ANYWAY. A LITTLE WINK, A LITTLE KISS, AND ANYONE I CHOOSE OPENS UP FOR ME LIKE A BLOSSOMING ROSE, RIGHT, EDDIE?

WHATEVER YOU SAY, PAMELA.
Silent as the fog, you enter on little cat feet.

You insisted I meet you here, Talia. You can’t say I wasn’t expected.

True, though I did anticipate warning of your arrival from my guards.

Oh, these guys? Yeah, I thought it best I slip in unannounced.
Appendix E: Harley’s Initial Interaction with Team Mates and References to the Joker, pg. 10
Appendix F: Harley Arguing that the Joker “Wants Her Back,” pg. 93.
Appendix G: Harley Outside of Costume – The Lolita, pg. 36.
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