In the Background:
An Analysis of Female Sex Roles in Comic Books

An Honors Thesis (Honrs 499)

by

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Purpose of Thesis

This analysis of the sex roles assigned to women in comic books since World War II is limited to discussion of three main characters that exemplify the traits and characteristics common in these roles: Wonder Woman, Lois Lane, and Mary Jane Watson-Parker. The purpose of this analysis is to examine and understand how an aspect of popular culture, such as comic books, can serve as links to the collective attitudes and mores of the society it is meant to reflect.
"The least of the comic books cited here probably, in its day, touched more people than any of the classic texts promoting any of the ‘isms’ by which the academy measure the convolutions of the American mind."

-Professor William W. Savage, Jr.  
*Comic Books and America, 1945-1954: x.*

As the previous quotation intimates, the comic book has been unfairly locked into a small niche of the American psyche as a trivial and puerile form of popular culture. However, as a form of popular culture, the comic book appeals to the tastes of several million readers each month. Through this obviously vast and varied appeal it can also serve as a reflection of the culture’s ideals and mores that so easily dismisses comics role in our society.

One of the most compelling and common arguments against the literary viability of the comic book is its often harsh and stereotypical portrayal of women as victims, sex objects or both. “They (comics) reflected male criteria for the ideal woman: long hair, long legs, large breasts, physical agility, and proclivities rather more emotional than intellectual” (Savage, 78).

Despite the appearance of Wonder Woman, though a visibly feminist presence, nearly all women had at least some of these characteristics, especially during the 1940s when American service men became avid readers during World War II.
"The war changed the appearance of comic books . . . by 1945, their artwork had developed a sexual orientation remarkable in a medium ostensibly still intended for juvenile audiences" (Savage, 12).

It was during and after World War II that comic books gained their status as appeals to adolescent prurient interests; yet comic books "would prove to be from 1940 onward, one of our best known and internationally influential forms of popular culture" (Inge, 131). With the appearance of Superman in 1938, the super-hero genre became the trademark subject matter associated with comics.

The war was a blessing and a curse to the comics industry. Though millions of copies of comics were sent to troops overseas, it became a problem about the presence of superheros in the war. A group of superpowered men would have the war mopped up in a few weeks. The answers came in the form of the alter ego.

Though several heroes were sent on brief excursions against the Axis powers, others like Wonder Woman and Superman had secret identities to contend with. These identities defined their involvement in the war; Clark Kent failed his draft physical but kept track of spies and traitors back home. Wonder Woman’s Diana Prince was a part of Military Intelligence.
Since comic books are a form of popular culture they "serve as revealing reflectors of popular attitudes, tastes, and mores" (Inge, xi). Therefore an analysis of the roles women have been historically assigned in comics can determine whether this medium accurately reflects society's changing attitudes about women's roles.

In order to provide a focused analysis, with thousands of comic book characters available for study, I have chosen three of the most popular and enduring characters to serve as examples of three roles women are typically assigned: Wonder Woman, the super-heroine; Lois Lane, the conniving troublemaker; and Mary-Jane Watson-Parker, the beautiful victim.

These characters all come from comics in the super-hero genre. As the most popular and prevailing type of comic book it will reveal the broadest and most common attitudes of the culture or sub-culture as a whole. I must acknowledge that there is a small but growing part of the medium that deals with more adult and realistic subject matter, but their readership is too small to reflect society's prevailing mores.

This analysis is broken into three parts: first the history of how comics developed; second how Wonder Woman, Lois Lane and Mary Jane Watson-Parker's characterization and graphic presentation reflect social norms. Finally, I will
draw some conclusions regarding how these changes relate to major social events and attitudes at the time of their publication.

The comic book was originally just that, a selection of popular syndicated newspaper comic strips collected in book form. In 1933 they were originally used as 'give-aways' to help bolster flagging newspaper sales during the Depression. This is when the 'comic' moniker was attached to the medium, because of their humorous tone and subject matter. At this stage they vaguely resembled their modern descendants since they were only reproductions of several one-row panel stories with little or no relationship to one another.

In 1935, stories expressly written for this new medium appeared (Inge, 140). Yet, in keeping with the successful tone of the original stories, they were mostly humorous shorts that "belied the newspaper trend toward adventure comics" (Savage, 5). The modern comic book began to take shape after these original stories appeared in regular installments.

Yet even here problems for women began almost immediately. "The trouble is that the comic book performers of such superhuman feats . . . are almost always heroes. Literally" (Steinem, WW). Girls were forced to watch as burly heroes flew, climbed, swung and generally beat the bad guys senseless; but not a single woman got near the clouds,
walls, or ropes unless a hero was there to help them. Women at this stage were relegated to the role of pretty victims, giving the hero someone to rescue and appreciate how good he looked while doing it.

Ironically, 1938 marked the beginning of what is commonly called the “Golden Age” of comic books. However, it wasn’t until 1940 that women would be given their own heroine to save them from the machinations of a man-ruled world:

“As lovely as Aphrodite—as wise as Athena—with the speed of Mercury and the strength of Hercules—she is known only as Wonder Woman!”

Though her creator William Moulton Marston, under the pen name Charles Moulton, created her “as a counter to the bloody ‘masculinity’ of most American comic books” (Chesler, WW), she still carried many of the stereotypes that plagued other female characters such as the Harlequin and Miss America. Yet, she proved to be a force fighting for good and democracy, especially during the war years.

Wonder Woman played an important role in keeping the morale of America’s women up by teaching them that “the better you can fight, the less you’ll have to.” Marston’s stories stress “the need for women to be ‘strong’—physically, morally, and scientifically” (Chesler, WW).
Following the war the comics industry was in a quandary; they still had years worth of war scripts left. So, the war continued for about two more years in the comics.

After they had finally exhausted their supply of surplus scripts, and sales had begun to flag precariously, the industry turned to the problems of a post-war America. After floundering for a few years, the "Golden Age" began to turn into one of the most controversial times in the history of the comics with the advent of E.C. Comics.

In 1950, E.C. Comics, led by William Gaines, released a horde of horror comics with titles like Crypt of Terror, and The Vault of Horror. These almost instantly began a long standing battle about the suitability of comic books for children. With characteristic graphic violence, they often dealt with violent crimes, cannibalism and necrophilia as well as war stories as in Frontline Combat and Two-Fisted Tales that gave personal and moving accounts of the horrors of war.

Because these comics fed on violence they came under the scrutiny of parents and consumer groups nationwide. Though they have been touted as among the most innovative works in comics to date, their portrayal of women as virgin sacrifices, witches, vampires, or helpless victims aroused feminine ire.
The response to the unregulated freedom that Gaines and his collaborators had enjoyed came to an end with the printing of Dr. Fredric Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent*. He presented a scathing and dubious study reporting how the minds of young children were warped into committing depraved crimes by the comics they read: “I have found the effect of comic books to be first of all anti-educational . . . [and] promoting moral disarmament” (Wertham, 89-91). The uproar this report caused among parents, aided by the general hysteria of the communist witch hunts of the early 50s, resulted in the creation of the Comics Code Authority in 1954.

The code is self-proclaimed to be “the most stringent code in existence for any communications media” (Comics Code, preamble). It prohibited showing corrupted authorities, successful, happy criminals, use of illicit drugs, sexual relations, and the use of words such as crime, horror and terror in the title of any comic. The change to this last stipulation was aimed directly at E.C. Comics. After the code, when no newsstand would buy comics without the code’s seal of approval, E.C. went rapidly into bankruptcy.

With the code in place, the subject matter of comics turned to watered down versions of past heroes and romance stories for young girls and teenagers. The first of these, *Marilyn*, came about in 1955 and heralded the teen romance comic’s brief existence. These often had young women
prowling for a man in a socially driven need to make her complete. They followed a "set pattern in which a girl meets a boy, a quarrel or misunderstanding follows, then a reconciliation which ends in a chaste kiss and the implication that marriage will follow in the near future" (Pumphrey, 13).

With comics artificially limited in subject matter the stories and material being produced created a literary desert for both men and women alike. Heroes continued being heroic and addlebrained. Women in need of rescuing were in constant supply. From this "Silver Age" of comics would arise few memorable moments or books. Not until the late 1960s and the underground movement would comics receive new stimulation and artistic growth.

Like everyone else, the 1960s comic creators found they had had enough of the 1950's restrictive tone and wanted to break a few rules.

What developed in love-burdened San Francisco became known as the underground comix, and they did everything the Comics Code said they couldn't.
“The comix [as they called themselves] creators cultivated an outlaw image, and their works systematically flung down and danced upon every American standard of good taste, artistic competence, political coherence, and sexual restraint” (Witek, 51).

Women did advance socially during this period of civil rights, often shown being in charge of their own sexuality, and rebelling against the ‘daddy’s little girl’ image of the 50s. However, comix were largely still done by men, most of whom lived out their own sexual frustrations, inhibitions and stigmas they had about women.

It was only a matter of time before the country grew tired of rebellion for rebellion’s sake. The underground comix industry faded in the mid-1970s and with it, the majority of sexual freedom women had gained. However, the super-hero began to achieve a revival at this time (Kurtzman, 66), and women would find new changes in their roles.

Because the majority of writers and artists, as well as readers, were men, women often found themselves once again portrayed as sexual objects. “Criteria for male conduct in comic books were established by artists, writers, and editors who were men—the same ones who establish criteria for the appearance and behavior of comic-book women” (Savage, 78).

However, this period produced many a character that endure today such as: Spiderman, the Fantastic Four, and many more. The 1960s and 70s helped set the stage for the
1980s and 90s which have seen more ambitious works that deal with mature themes.

With a brief understanding of the comic book’s history and some of the roles women have been traditionally assigned, it becomes necessary to study those roles more in-depth by examining characters that typify the three roles most women were most commonly given: Wonder Woman, the superheroine, Lois Lane, the conniving troublemaker, and Mary Jane Watson-Parker, the beautiful victim.

It’s ironic that the first role, the superheroine, was started by a man. Yet, in the male dominated world of comics, perhaps only a man could have brought Wonder Woman to the public. A woman character developed by a man would be accepted because no matter how adamant and independent she was depicted, a man still pulled the strings.

Wonder Woman is an interesting mix of both vice and virtue when it comes to sex roles. She was created as a symbol that women could be and were strong if they only believed in themselves. “It (Wonder Woman comics) clearly portrays the fact that women have to be better and stronger than men to be given a chance in a man’s world” (Chesler, WW). Though she promoted the idea that no woman should be slave to any man, she was infatuated like a school girl over a weak and two-dimensional character like Steve Trevor.
However, at a time when young girls were given few role models that expressed individuality and strength of character, Wonder Woman and her Amazon sisterhood demonstrated that a woman, any woman, is just as good as any man.

Marston created Wonder Woman and her Amazonian sisters out of myth and folklore. He used highly visible images, such as the bracelets all Amazons must wear “as reminders of the slavery in store for women if they submit to men” (Chesler, WW), to reinforce the messages his stories told. These messages sprung from Marston’s deep seated belief that women “represent love; men represent force. Man’s use of force without love brings evil and unhappiness” (Steinem, WW).

Marston’s portrayal’s of men were never subtle. Mars, god of War and Aphrodite’s, goddess of Love’s, arch enemy. He was the evil in men’s hearts made real. He kept slave girl secretaries to do his bidding, and thought of women as less than cattle, to be traded as he saw fit.

The origin of the Amazons is closely related to this struggle between the sexes, because Wonder Woman’s mother, Hippolyte, was a central figure. Marston presented a picture of brute male force attempting to overcome the peaceful civilization that women had created.
Hippolyte and her Amazons ruled their land and all was well until Hercules, the strongest man on earth, challenged her to personal combat. With the help of Aphrodite’s magic girdle, Hippolyte easily defeated him. So, humiliated at being bested by a woman, Hercules turned to treachery and made love to Hippolyte. While she slept, he stole her girdle and enslaved the Amazons. After a time of humiliating service to the men, Aphrodite agreed to help and the girdle was regained and the men routed.

However, Aphrodite’s help came with the price that they could remain free and unaging if they hide from the world and never allow themselves to be tricked by men again or they would be lost forever. So they founded Paradise Island and all was good.

This is the origin of the Amazon’s as described in All-Star #8. In it Marston uses the Amazon’s enslavement as an analogy for women being enslaved by a male-dominated society. At a time when society said that women could only be successful through a man (Steinem, WW), the idea of a world where women could not only be equal but superior carried incredible appeal.

Wonder Woman’s powers carried messages themselves, because, according to her, they weren’t powers at all, only fulfilled potential. In “The Icebound Maidens,” Wonder Woman is recalled to Paradise Island to help some young Amazon
girls who are taking their tests to become full-fledged Amazons gain confidence. After showing the girls how she can easily accomplish every test she tells them: "You see girls, there's nothing to it—all you have to do is have confidence in your own strength!" The girls immediately respond and pass each test with ease.

Her other abilities, beyond strength, were telepathic powers, a correlation to the supposed "woman's intuition." She carried a series of objects, like her bullet-proof bracelets, and magic lasso which could make anyone obey the holder. She also had an invisible jet, which could travel in time as well as across dimensions. All of these items required great skill to use. Wonder Woman always claimed to be an ordinary woman in that any woman could be like her if they believed in themselves. Her accouterments depended on her skills, not her powers which was a common theme in Marston's stories.

Marston's creation of the magic lasso, which Wonder Woman uses to make people tell the truth, might have a two-fold origin; the idea of women being in a position of control and because he was the inventor of the lie detector. Perhaps because of this she often found herself on the receiving end of her lasso as an example that the truth can often be turned against you.
Her greatest weakness was as symbolic as her powers; if she allowed a man to chain her bracelets together she would lose all her strength and be as weak as a normal woman. This was a call for women to realize that they were weak because they'd allowed themselves to be shackled by a male run society. If they were to be free, as Wonder Woman demonstrated, they would regain their lost strength and independence.

However, Wonder Woman wasn't perfect. Despite being ahead of her time in many areas, she was still trapped by the conventions of society. Not as Wonder Woman, but as her alter ego, Diana Prince. Here she plays "The classic feminine role: secretary, nurse and worshipful, unrequited sidekick to Steve [Trevor] (Steinem, WW).

The alter ego presents several metaphors: the Wonder Woman hiding inside every ordinary woman, or that strong women can only be accepted by hiding beneath a veneer of 'accepted' femininity.

This was often the case with super-heroines of the day. They couldn't be accepted as strong in their everyday lives, but only if they dressed up in a flashy costume and hid their true identities. Wonder Woman, the Blonde Phantom, Miss America, and the Harlequin (Steranko, 65, 71-72), all had mousy alter-egos that they showed the rest of the world. As Molly Maynee, the Harlequin, said, "I never had a date
because I was too athletic, no man could beat me in sports. I had to hide my talents and become a mousy secretary."

Over time women have seen their talents come and go: Wonder Woman, for a brief period, lost her powers and become Diana Prince full time. Miss America kept losing her powers until she could only fly, whereas male characters like Superman often got stronger. To be fair, this isn't always the case as Superman did have a great deal of his power removed and is currently dead.

Though women were written as weak and insecure, physically they were far from it. Often presented with large breasts and impossibly perfect curves, the women of the comics "catered to what passed for prurient interest among adolescent male readers," (Savage, 78). Since they were written by men for men, it seemed only natural to present something as mysterious as female sexuality in an almost stereotypical extreme. The standards for the perfect female body have changed according to society's definitions of beauty. Wonder Woman started out as curvy, but with human proportions, because large bodies overall were considered beautiful during the 1940s. "Amazon's obviously never dressed in 'sexy' costumes covered with United States emblems," (Chesler, WW.). Yet today, she and most female characters practically fall out of ever-shrinking costumes.

Physical characteristics, especially in a graphically oriented medium like comics, has an incredible impact on the
audience’s perception. Women drawn bound to stakes, or walls with ropes crisscrossing enormous breasts provides titillation for the male reader and diminishes the woman into a two-dimensional character. Such sexual interplay permeated most comics and was a strong factor in the Marston Wonder Woman books: “No [Wonder Woman] story ever finished without ample helpings of shackles, chains, discipline, subjugation and bondage, enough to please even the most hardened S&M disciple” (Steranko, 72).

A prime example would be the jungle comics of the 1940s and 1950s. Characters like Sheena the She-Devil, Princess Panthia and others all helped carry the image that women, even if they seemed strong, were there “primarily for cheesecake” (Savage, 78). The jungle queens were always dressed in bikini-style, animal hide outfits, designed to show ample leg and cleavage. Though the argument could be made that these women were shown in positions of strength, though more often than not they got in trouble over their heads and had to be saved by a male or animal side-kick.

Women in comics have physically changed little over the last two decades, with breast and hip sizes showing the most dramatic change; from the waif-thin Twiggy style of the late 60s and early 70s to the hard and huge proportions which are currently popular in the 1990s from publishers like D.C. Comics, Marvel Comics, and Image Comics. “The artists turning out the product were fascinated not only with
breasts, but also with buttocks, thighs, and just about any other portion of the female anatomy that could be thrust excitingly” (Goulart, 163).

In modern comics there are many super-powered women who have as much or more power than many male characters, such as Storm, a black woman with control over the weather; Sue Richards, the Invisible Woman (at one time the Invisible Girl), who, though a wife and mother, wears a very tight and revealing costume which has received mass criticism as sexist. The innovations and freedoms that these characters display and their impossible proportions present an oxymoron that only the physically beautiful can have power. This contradiction actually gains impact because it corresponds directly to society’s views of women’s roles: “Thus comic books tended to define America as much by what they did not present as by what they consistently offered to their audiences” (Savage, 75).

Modern women still need a male counterpart to be successful. This is related to the predominantly male audience that comics cater to. This dependence upon a male factor is another contradiction to the explicit message that women have equal rights. However, this does have a corollary with the real world where women often have to fight for their equality. There are still very few female characters with successful solo books of their own; the majority are part of a team or group that provides support and guidance.
While the super heroine is a major part of women in the comics, perhaps holding as much impact are the other two roles, the conniving troublemaker, and the beautiful victim. They have more impact because they are often in the background playing the supporting roles.

Lois Lane, perhaps Superman’s greatest love and worst nemesis, has played the conniving troublemaker since her introduction in *Action Comics* #1. Her creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, originally conceived of Lois as “nothing more than a bitch—a conniving, self-seeking, self-serving, egotistical reporter with few ethics and fewer morals” (Horn, 460). Ironically, though enamored with Superman, she couldn’t stand his Clark Kent persona and went to any lengths to humiliate and degrade him.

This love triangle defined how all future super-heroes related to women: “Lois Lane became the model for all comic book love interests” (Horn, 460). Unfortunately, this role was marked by abject adoration, fainting spells and clownish appeals for attention. “Lois Lane, of course, demonstrated that it was perfectly all right for a professional woman to behave like a moron while mooning over the man of her dreams” (Savage, 78). Though she was a working woman at a time when they were rare, she found herself unable to become successful unless she either found a man stronger than herself, or one she could control.
This was society's expectations of women, that they could be turned to jelly by the charms of a handsome man. It was all well and good for women to get jobs, another thing entirely for them to be entirely independent from men. In this male-dominated medium, the presentation of professional women often left them open to depiction or would discover their mistake and marry. "Women were out to marry, or else they were not virtuous—and if that were the case, they were out to take advantage" (Savage, 78). Marriage for men, however, was out of the question; they were the heroes and couldn't afford to be tied down, but women had their place in society.

As far as marriage went, Lois became the eternal bride-to-be. She was given her own comic book in March of 1958 and subsequently began marrying nearly every member of the Superman family: Superman, Clark Kent, Batman, Lex Luthor and others. They all turned out to be dreams, as were most episodes where she received superpowers, or fought alongside Superman. This was a common plot device in the comic, because Lois could only be allowed adventures and control in her dreams.

Her comic, "though entertaining . . . didn't exactly elevate the image of the female sex; jealousy and cat fights were familiar story elements" (Goulart, 163). Lois's character and temperament did change over time, softening from a hard-edged vixen into a curious scatterbrain. This
transformation added a certain comic appeal to her character. She would often be shown failing at even the most common household tasks, especially cooking; one Superman cover has Superman holding his foot in pain after one of Lois’s ‘fresh’ muffins falls on it.

This airhead approach to women became a common occurrence in comics. They were often depicted as so stupid that they probably wouldn’t live long if a man wasn’t there to help. Yet, as comics progressed, and the women’s rights movement began asserting its presence, the heroes’ love interests have developed into fully fleshed, three-dimensional characters. Lois Lane has developed into a strong, sensitive, caring woman who no longer looks at Superman as a distanced ideal, but as a loving equal. In the most recent sequence of events, Superman had proposed to Lois (who now knows he’s Clark Kent) but was then killed by the villain Doomsday. However, D.C. Comics, which publishes Superman, is in the process of bringing him back.

From World War II’s Rosie the Riveter to the single mothers of the 1990s, professional women in comics have changed according to the times through which they lived. Within the last ten years these women have been forced to deal with the darker and more tragic side of their loved ones powers and lifestyle.
Beyond the super-heroine and conniving love interest lies the staple woman in comics; the beautiful victim. This is the figure that has adorned countless comic covers, wearing nothing more than her unmentionables. Without a pretty, and appreciative, victim to rescue from mortal danger, there wouldn't have been a need for the super-hero. Like the knights of King Arthur, these shining knights would swoop down to rescue some nameless, but gorgeous, fair maiden.

For many heroes, rescuing damsels became a full-time occupation; "The rescue of attractive young women who had fallen from windows became a familiar part of Superman's daily routine" (Goulart, 75). These women were rarely given names, or if they were, that was about all the personality they were allowed.

These stark portrayals weren't entirely the result of sexism and stereotyping, rather a necessity of sales. After World War II, the comics had to rediscover their audience. They now had a more sophisticated group to satisfy and the super-hero was wearing thin so, "one way to appeal to a young male readership is to offer pictures of young, voluptuous females" (Goulart, 162). Unfortunately, comics offered it in mass quantities. Bondage became a regular feature on comic covers in the 1950s, as well as torn clothing, beating, and perilous situations.
Covers alone weren’t the only place to find these endangered women. The stories inside were designed to get voluptuous women in dangerous situations; in fact, the more dangerous, the more opportunities for torn clothing. These overtly sexual scenes drew critical attention and morality groups against the comics. However, until the Comics Code, they were standard fare.

One of the most famous, and long running, of these characters is Spiderman’s girlfriend/wife Mary Jane Watson-Parker. She was introduced in the 1960s to be one of Peter Parker’s, alias Spiderman, supporting characters. She was pretty, book smart, yet had no common sense. She would always stumble into the middle of one of Spiderman’s fights and distract him by becoming a hostage.

This penchant for bad timing, coupled with her decidedly flighty personality, instigated a love/hate relationship between her and Peter. As Peter Parker, he found her annoying and a bit of a scatterbrain; as Spiderman he found her a downright menace. However, unlike the nameless victims of the crime and horror comics, Mary Jane was a constant presence and had to be given a real personality; one could only keep a two-dimensional character interesting for so long.

This doesn’t mean that she was a real person over night, or even in a few years. As she attempted to become closer to
Peter, he still kept her at a distance. This is part of the victim's traits and her job. She is there to place herself in situations, such as trying to see a fight closer, or help foil a criminals plans, that were beyond her capabilities. Then the hero must come and rescue her, making himself look and feel superior and causing her to feel inadequate and insecure.

Yet, since she was created during the women's rights movement, she constantly sought independence unknown in previous victim figures. Mary Jane lived by herself, went to college, got a job and supported herself the whole way. She even supported Peter in recent issues. She has gradually developed into a fully independent woman, revealing the reasons behind her earlier behavior. It wasn't until the last 10 years that this aspect of her personality was given more than a passing treatment. She revealed that she was an abused child and hid behind the campy flightiness to cope with the rest of the world.

Such revelations are becoming more and more common; not necessarily abuse, but events that comic companies use as an attempt to explain their earlier treatment. This use of deep characterization is a recent occurrence and a direct response to the current social climate that desires complex, realistic characters. This creates demands on the writers to provide stories that rely heavily upon characterization rather than plot.
As changes like these catch up to the comic creators, one-time victims, such as Mary Jane, will have more opportunity to demonstrate that they have more to offer on an emotional and intellectual level, than the purely physical.

The three roles I have examined all began with traits that reflected the common attitudes society had toward women. As a popular culture medium they "serve as revealing reflectors of popular attitudes, tastes, and more" (Inge, xi). Like every form of popular culture, comics are a highly commercial form of media and have to respond quickly to consumer demands; therefore, any stereotypes were influenced by a desire for profit. However, profit doesn't explain everything. Since the early comics were mainly fantasies, deep and three-dimensional characters were unwarranted; the stock, monotraited figures more were designed as backdrops for the central hero.

Wonder Woman was an attempt to break into the male dominated world of the super-hero. She presented a strong and fanciful image for young girls to look up to, and she had a figure that young boys enjoyed looking up and down. This type of female empowerment was atypical, practically unique, for its day. Her physical form has been standard fare for all women in comics; even the professional Lois Lane had a figure that was worth a second look.
Comics deal with simplifications; this way it has broad appeal to a diverse audience. With commercial considerations having a large affect on their creation, the comic creators sought to create an image that would sell the most books. For women, that equated into voluptuous curves that pleased the adolescent male readership. This also meant little to no characterization beyond common stereotypes. Unfortunately, though this sold books in the millions, it also only served to reinforce these stigmas.

By studying how women have been presented in comics books since World War II, we discover that despite the criticism laid against them, they were merely responding to the will of the consumer. The roles women have been assigned in the past and present correspond directly to societies dictates. However, that doesn’t forgive their creators from a large share of the responsibility for reinforcing these stereotypes.

The characters of Wonder Woman, Lois Lane, and Mary Jane Watson-Parker represent the three main sex roles women have been assigned; the super-heroine, the conniving troublemaker, and the beautiful victim. Through them, the evolution of female characters in popular comics can be traced and studied. Their physical presentations also provide insight into American societies current standards of beauty.
Though comics have been berated in the past for being puerile and too simplistic, it must be noted that they did find a responsive nerve in the American consciousness that created a huge and thriving popular culture industry. To view them as attempting to supplant literature is a mistake; they provide an accurate and constant link into societies' beliefs, morals and attitudes. By studying how they depict women, we can learn the unconscious perceptions that we as a culture follow and reinforce.

Rather than berating comics, more people should be giving them a second look to discover what society thinks of itself.
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Bibliography


