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Super or Sexist? The Evolution of Female Superheroes in Comics and Film

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SUPER OR SEXIST?
THE EVOLUTION OF FEMALE SUPERHEROES IN COMICS AND FILM

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INTRODUCTION

      In March of 2019 – on International Women's Day to be exact – *Captain Marvel* became

the first film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) to feature a solo female lead. After

eleven years of Marvel movies, many fans of the epic series believed this moment to be long

overdue. However, despite the excitement, many fans also believed that such an honor should

have been bestowed instead upon the first female Avenger in the MCU, Black Widow. Still more

believed that the media should not have made such a commotion about Captain Marvel; did we

not already have *Wonder Woman* from the DC Universe grace the silver screen in 2017 as the

sole woman among a group of rag-tag World War I soldiers? Some may dismiss the endless

debates, arguments and discussions about these superheroes as a childish waste of time, but the

fact of the matter is that each of these fictitious women play huge roles in American pop culture.

"Superheroes are billion-dollar, transmedia, global commodities," but more importantly, they

have the capability and influence to subvert "stereotypes in ways that empower those who have

been marginalized because of them" (Cocca, *Superwomen,* 1). Each of the women in this thesis,

and many more that fill the pages of comic books and come to life in theaters worldwide, shape

the ways that people – young children especially – perceive the world at large. But only now, in

the 21st century, are we slowly expanding our ideas of heroism to include a more diverse

classification, in an attempt to provide representation of all walks of life in the media that we

consume daily.

      As the popularity of superheroes has grown exponentially in American pop culture in the

21st century, it has also spurred intense discussion about what our heroes should look like and

represent. With the ever growing popularity of superhero comics and movies among women, it is

no surprise that many of the recent discussions have been about the roles and depictions of existing female superheroes, or the general lack of female heroes that play major contributing roles in the narratives of which they are a part. The sheer popularity of Marvel and DC and their foray into the world of film in the past decade has opened a world of opportunity for the most well known and loved superheroes to resonate with all manner of audiences. And yet both franchises are criticized for their lack of diversity, and not just with regard to gender. Marvel has just in the past year, in the MCU's tenth year, created a film (*Black Panther* (2018)) written and directed by black men for a black male lead surrounded by a mostly black cast. This is a major step forward for Marvel, and the female leads in the movie, namely Nakia, Okoye and Shuri, exhibit what could be a new wave of female superheroes. There are many scholars who still condemn the new wave of Marvel and DC comic books and graphic novels for their questionable representation of women. Since superhero films use their respective comic books as templates for many of the characters and narratives that they portray, it is vital for comic books being published now to change the way they treat women in order to further avoid the growing disparity among comic fans. It is not that men are not also sexualized in superhero comic books and movies too – they most definitely are. But on some level, it is not as harmful because men have held the dominant roles on screen for decades. Carolyn Cocca writes in her novel *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation,* "because white males have been so overrepresented, women and people of color have had to identify with white male protagonists" (Cocca 3). It is important that women who have been hypersexualized in demeaning ways for years, and in roles that hardly add anything of importance to a larger narrative, receive not only *more* representation, but also more suitable representation.

There is a divide among those who want superhero movies to be true to their comic source material and film fans who prefer wide arrays of characters that hold true to the growing ideals of diversity, inclusion and gender equality. As Patty Jenkins, director of *Wonder Woman* says, "If you want more diversity in the industry, you need diverse people writing scripts and developing them" (Buckley). Diverse representation does not only happen with the actors and actresses performing, but with the directors, writers, costume and set designers, score composers… every and any aspect of filmmaking. Uncovering the ways that female superheroes are struggling to fit a better model of the 21st century woman is vital to creating heroes that accurately reflect the public sense of what it means to be capable female role models. In the 21st century, following a rebirth of the feminist movement and the promotion women's rights and individual voices in a way never seen before, why are our silver screen female superheroes still struggling to live up to the standards of a 21st century woman? I propose that the answer lies in the origins and histories of these famous heroes, created in the days when comics were written for white males by white males, and women were historically portrayed in stereotypical archetypes that still persist to this day. These stereotypical beginnings may still be affecting the ways in which cinema brings their female heroes to life on the screen.

A large factor in how these women are portrayed in comics, and how they have evolved through film, is the gender role system that has been the foundation of American culture for decades. With the birth of feminism in the 20th century, so came attempts to broaden the limits of gender. Feminist criticism is structured around the desire to challenge gender and racial conventions, effectively undermining the American hegemony: the white male population. Not only do some men effectively play the conventional male role in society, they also force

traditional gender roles on those around them. Even in the 21st century, men are subconsciously taught, through various forms of media and pop culture, that they must constantly prove their masculinity to the world. Some even go so far as to derive power over others through masculine traits in order to appear superior. This sends a message that it is not only acceptable for men to act this way, but that it is important that they assert their masculinity at any available opportunity. The ways in which Americans have traditionally, and culturally, viewed and adopted gender roles is a large part of how masculine and feminine gender tropes are represented in heroes on screen.

Katherine J. Murphy studies female representation in Marvel Comics from the Silver Age, beginning in 1960, to 2014. Through the course of her quantitative studies, Murphy analyzes 788 Marvel Comic books for what she calls indicators of the development of traditional female gender roles. Despite the frequency with which women in comics were, and are still, portrayed as sexual objects, Murphy hypothesizes that in the last ten years, the representation of women in comics has become "less stereotypical and more equitable" (Murphy, "Analyzing Female Gender Roles in Marvel Comics from the Silver Age (1960) to the Present."). Aspects Murphy considers are the composition of the covers of the issues; how the narratives hold up against the Bechdel test[1]; how the narratives treat women; what occupations the female characters hold; any balance of power; female sexualization; and any narrative pattern of violence against women (Murphy). These categories are meant to clarify the presence, or lack thereof, of strong female heroes in Marvel Comics over the last 50 to 60 years. Murphy discerns that since superheroes are largely influenced by the attitudes of the writers, and thus the time periods in which they are written, early comics often adhere to what has been accepted as the

universal perspective, or the perspective which has been dominant in American culture-- that of the white male (Murphy). However, based on her study, there is sufficient evidence to believe that this is changing. The Marvel comics from 2010-2014 that were studied scored higher with regards to her criteria than comics from past decades (for the most part anyway-- it seems that the frequency with which violence against women is present in comics has not changed significantly from the 60s) (Murphy). The alienation of female readership has been a big problem; the only way that representation of women in the superhero realm can be improved, which we have already begun to see, is to have "more diverse creators… not only foreground previously underrepresented groups, but also tell authentic stories" (Cocca, *Superwomen* 6).

For the purposes of this study, I will be focusing on three highly popular and often controversial female superheroes: Wonder Woman, Black Widow and Captain Marvel. My argument is not that these three characters are defined by the stereotypes under which they were created (though many female heroes and villains are purely archetypal and have barely any other defining personality traits, such as Harley Quinn). Instead, Wonder Woman, Black Widow, and Captain Marvel have, in some way or another, all been treated as a villain, victim or vixen at multiple points in their comic histories, which only leads them to continuously fulfill those limited roles within their narratives, even in their respective films. However, newer characters, who have little to no comic book source material to pull from, like Okoye, Hope Van Dyne and Kamala Khan exhibit hope for a future of super-women who are not defined by these negative tropes and instead embody female role models more worthy of 21st century ideals. In order to present the ways in which stereotypical comic book histories are still affecting cinematic

versions of these timeless characters, I will discuss these three characters in chronological order based on when they were created.

Wonder Woman is the product of 1940s World War II America, Black Widow of 1960s Cold War America, and Captain Marvel of late 1970s, which coincides with the Second wave of Feminism and the rebirth of the Women's Lib Movement. Each of these women have varying degrees of comic book history that movie-makers must contend with in order to bring them to life in theaters. In order to prove that characters with more history, and thus more source material that is in many ways instilled with the common ideologies (stereotypes) of the times, are more difficult to translate to a successful hero worthy of 21st century standards, one must consider a few key aspects of those characters. Those aspects are, for both comics and films: costumes, body types, story-arcs (motivations, growths, how they operate to move the plots forward), and in some cases, screentime, and plot dialogue. Writers and directors are also products of the culture in which they were raised, so these female characters have been, for quite some time, neglected in favor of the male ideal. Each character adheres to the prevalent ideals about gender roles and identities at the times they were created, and their roles often change to fit the evolving ideals as time goes by. The main question is, then, are these three characters evolving to fit the 21st century as they have often changed in decades past, or are they stuck with outdated characteristics which are now demeaning and offensive to the merit of women in the 21st century? Has there been any improvement in comics, in film? How can this change?

WONDER WOMAN IN COMICS

Wonder Woman was born out of the brain of well-known psychologist William Moulton Marston. He created her to be the symbol of a new and improved woman, one who embodied all of the traits of "feminism and empathy" (Marston, 6). Known as "the most popular female comic-book superhero of all time," Wonder Woman is also one of the longest lasting superheroes from the Golden Age of comics, alongside Superman and Batman (Lepore, xi). In 1941, when Wonder Woman was introduced, Marston had to convince many people in the comics industry that a female comic superhero was a lucrative market, and he could not have chosen a better time. He wrote to his editor, Sheldon Mayer, in February of 1941: "A great movement [is] now underway-- the growth in the power of women," (Lepore, 196). The lines between gendered roles began to shift in earnest less than a year later as the United States entered the war in Europe and men enlisted in battle and left the homefront, leaving behind a country that still needed to operate normally in war time. Women began working to fill the growing need to fuel the war and the traditional roles of women in American society shifted, at least as long as the war lasted. Marston's Wonder Woman took full advantage of that shift, feeding on a tumultuous time to attempt to plant feminist messages in the youth of America. Marston said that Wonder Woman "is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who, I believe, should rule the world" (Lepore, 191). Marston made a strong case for the type of super woman he wanted to see in comics: "It's sissified, according to exclusively masculine rules, to be tender, loving, affectionate, alluring....not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, power…. Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weak ones" (Lepore, 187). Marston's goal with Wonder Woman was

first and foremost to introduce a woman who would be superior to a man. And by Marston's own

worldview, the ability to be loving and compassionate made women the superior gender, the rest

of the world just had not figured it out yet.

Wonder Woman made her debut in All-Star Comics #8, "Introducing Wonder Woman",

which was printed in December of 1941; she became the star of Sensation Comics in 1942 and

would remain so until 1951 (Marston 6). In Winter of 1943, Wonder Woman became President

of the United States. Her alter ego, Diana Prince, was a secretary for U.S. Military Intelligence,

which would begin a long line of female superheroes who work in military, science and

journalism fields. In short, Wonder Woman was a new cultural icon, and later, she would be

known as a sex icon as well. When Wonder Woman was created by Marston in the 1940s, she

represented what was then a new class of woman. She was strong, independent, intelligent, and

always sought an alternative to combat whenever she had the chance, though that by no means

meant that she was incapable of holding her own (Cocca "Negotiating…"). She was also "as

lovely as Aphrodite" and hopelessly in love with Steve Trevor, who often condescended to her

because of her gender, an occurrence which would only get worse after Marston's death

(Marston, 8). In March of 1942, Wonder Woman comics were put on the list of "Publications

Disapproved for Youth" by the National Organization for Decent Literature, citing as the reason:

"Wonder Woman is not sufficiently dressed" (Lepore 194) Marston had chosen artist Harry G.

Peter to draw his creation, much to the vexation of his editor, who thought that Peter's art was

outdated and not all that good. However, Peter did live through the suffrage movement and had

"experience drawing suffrage cartoons", which was why Marston advocated for him so heavily

(Lepore 194). When the time came for Marston to start planning what Wonder Woman would

look like, Captain America had just made his debut for Timely Comics. Thus, Marston wanted

Wonder Woman to be "superpatriotic", "uncommonly beautiful" and for comic salesman

Maxwell Charles Gaines, she had "to be as naked as he could get away with" (Lepore 196). After

preliminary sketches, Wonder Woman would eventually be modelled after the "Varga Girls",

who were essentially pin-up girls drawn by Alberto Vargas for *Esquire* magazine (Lepore 197).

Wonder Woman would come under the same scrutiny as the Varga girls, attacked for being

overtly "obscene, lewd and lascivious" (Lepore 197).

In 1942, Wonder Woman was the first female to join the Justice Society of America,

though she was only afforded the gender appropriate role of secretary (Lepore 210). She became

a member when Gaines polled comic readers as to whether or not she should be allowed to join.

Out of the 1,801 questionnaires, a total of only 203 children thought she should not be on the

team. Most readers were male, but a staggering amount of readers were in favor of Wonder

Woman joining an all-male group. Justice Society issues were written by Gardner Fox, whose

version of Wonder Woman was unfortunately "useless and helpless" (Lepore 210). Marston was

livid that Fox had so stripped Wonder Woman of any influence in the Justice Society comics. In

Marston's stories, Wonder Woman was "organizing boycotts, strikes and political rallies"

(Lepore 211). But Wonder Woman's 'adventures' as part of the Justice Society include staying

behind to answer mail, recording meeting minutes, and, on the one occasion when Fox writes an

issue about Wonder Woman and the girlfriends of the society members, the women all end up

captured and in need of rescuing themselves. There was a lot of potential in allowing Wonder

Woman to join the Justice Society, but with Fox at the helm of those comics, she was never

allowed any real power with the team.

Marston's initial version of Wonder Woman was progressive and socially disruptive. Wonder Woman would not have been so controversial or concerned with true social issues of the time if not for the influence of her creator. Marston himself lived his life outside the norm: he and his wife had an open relationship and lived with another woman, one Olive Byrne, niece of Margaret Sanger. Marston, his wife Elizabeth Holloway, and Byrne, each had connections to the Women's Rights Movement of the 1910s. And as part of their mutual understanding, the three adults lived together, with their collective children, which Byrne cared for so that Marston could create his comics, and Holloway could work (Marston was notoriously bad at holding down jobs). New York Times writer Jill Lepore's book *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* sheds light on how the life experiences and beliefs of Marston, Holloway and Byrne were great influences on the creation of Wonder Woman as a female superhero whose greatest enemy was inequality. Lepore even goes so far as to say that the philosophy of Sanger's book *Woman and the New Race* became the philosophy of the character of Wonder Woman; "Women should rule the world, Sanger and Marston and Holloway thought, because love is stronger than force" (Lepore 103). Lepore's dense research into the lives of these three, as well as the narratives from their lives that came through in Wonder Woman comics, reveals quite plainly how the beliefs of the Marston family, which were far from acceptable at the time, led to the creation of a new female superhero who was able to rise above feminine stereotypes and – for the first years of her existence – paint a picture of what a strong female could do and be. Wonder Woman was the pioneer of a new era of feminism, and the atypical ideals of her creator allowed her to be the highly progressive character that she was in her first years of existence.

However, as any progressive figure in popular culture will do, Wonder Woman attracted a lot of negative attention. Marston used bondage symbolism in nearly every Wonder Woman comic. Even as Marston claimed that the main goal of his Wonder Woman comics was to "set up a standard among children and young people of strong, free, courageous womanhood; and to combat the idea that women are inferior to men, and to inspire girls to self-confidence and achievement in athletics, occupations and professions monopolized by men," he was attacked for the excessive use of chains, handcuffs, and other sexually suggestive bonds that would capture Wonder Woman in nearly every issue (Lepore). Even her iconic wristbands, (known as 'Bracelets of Submission') are a reminder to never let herself be bound by a man lest she become powerless (Lepore 101). This is meant to symbolize that a woman's power is stripped from her when she allows herself to be tied down by a man (by marriage, or unwanted pregnancy, for example), but many people questioned the sextual undertones of the frequent images of a chained Wonder Woman, and accused Marston of using inappropriate themes in a children's comic. Marston argued that the symbolism of bondage and chains was not sexual but was direct symbolism of the Suffrage movement in America in 1910s: "Wonder Woman had to be chained or tied so that she could free herself-- and symbolically, emancipate herself" (Lepore). In fact, the suffrage movement did have many political cartoons which depicted women in chains (Lepore 100). However, for as many times as Wonder Woman finds herself gagged and chained (sometimes by her own weapon: the Lasso of Truth), she almost always saves herself, or is saved by her sorority sisters. People who believed that comics were a negative influence on children fixated on the bondage symbolism in Wonder Woman comics, and gave Marston a bad reputation for harboring sexual fetishes with the main character of his comics. Whether or not

Marston simply enjoyed seeing drawings of beautiful women tied up in compromising positions, his message was one that was far beyond its time: women need not always be the victim that needs saving by a heroic man; sometimes a damsel in distress can save herself.

Today, the Wonder Woman comics written by William Moulton Marston read as rather cheesy and outdated, but the feminist message is blatant and unabashed. Despite the bad press, Wonder Woman was front and center in the comic universe. By 1943, millions of people were reading her comics. Marston continued to fight for her, and her progressive message, until his death in 1948. Over the years since Marston's death, Wonder Woman has gone through many transformations, not all of them good for the character, and not all of them sending a worthy message to young people about the ideals for which her character stands. This was surprisingly easy for writers to do, since Marston's Wonder Woman built her strength and popularity largely out of feminine gender roles that were already established and accepted in the U.S. True, she may have the "speed of Mercury and the strength of Hercules" but her powers were also rooted in the feminine ideals of love, compromise and compassion (Marston, 8). Without Marston to preserve her suffragist message, in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, the very nature of what Wonder Woman stood for became somewhat muddled by the end of World War II and the country's return to a male-centric point of view. It was not hard for new writers to use those gender coded character traits to strip Wonder Woman of her power, rather than build up the credibility of the feminine race by claiming, as Marston did for years, that those feminine traits were the *source* of her power.

After Marston died in 1948, Robert Kanigher was hired as Wonder Woman's lead writer. Unfortunately, Kanigher's run of Wonder Woman undid much of the feminist message that was

essential to Marston's version of the character. "Wonder Woman grew weaker every year. In the 1950s, she became a babysitter, a fashion model, and a movie star. She wanted, desperately, to marry Steve" (Lepore 271). For all the years that Wonder Woman had been depicted as valuing her freedom above all else, and fighting for women's rights despite the social backlash, all it took was one "chauvinist" writer (Kanigher) to transform her legacy for the worse (Lepore 289). If destroying her character was not bad enough, Kanigher repurposed the section of the comic formerly reserved to showcase real-life influential women in order to include a wedding section titled "Marriage a la mode" (Lepore 272). In 1972, writers stripped Wonder Woman of her Amazonian powers. Diana gave up her superpowers in order to stay with Steve, ditching her lasso and invisible jet as well. She even had an elderly, male mentor named I-Ching to teach her karate, and she continued to fight crime. Dennis O'Neil and writer and editor for this period of Diana's story said, "I saw it as taking a woman and making her independent, and not dependent on superpowers" (Cocca, *Superwomen,* 32). One might think that having a female comic character, who is by all accounts a normal person, fighting crime is a rather progressive move, but that is debatable. To have a character who was human to begin with and do great things in the name of justice is one thing, but to take away existing powers, costumes and items that are part of a character's identity is quite another. An argument could be made that those comics were not even about Wonder Woman, they were just using her alter ego name, while the true character was stripped from existence.

In the 1980s, her original persona was reborn under the writer/editor pair George Pérez and Karen Berger (who was the first female editor of a *Wonder Woman* comic). It was important for Wonder Woman to be presented as a capable woman who was more than able to throw

punches just in case "compassion and diplomacy" failed her (Cocca, "Negotiating…" 98). Her writers claim that she was the embodiment of both male and female gender roles; proof that a woman can not only run and fight with the best of men, but that she also has her own highly effective skills. They strove to write a Princess Diana who taught the merits of peace and equality but who was also "ready to fight humans, monsters, and gods if compassion and diplomacy fail" (Cocca, "Negotiating…" 98). In this way they created a Wonder Woman who combined traditional traits coded as masculine and feminine, thereby allowing for the possibility of "gender hybridization" (Cocca, "Negotiating…" 98).

However, another writer named Mike Deodato, was well known for hypersexualizing Wonder Woman in the early 1990s. In an interview, Deodato says his run is known as the 'porn Wonder Woman' phase, but he laughs, saying that the less clothes he drew her in, the higher the comic sales became (99). This is hardly a laughing matter, but is an occurrence that is unfortunately not rare in the comic book industry. The frequency with which superheroines, and females in comics in general, have been drawn in compromising poses has led to the coining of the phrase "broke back fashion" (Cocca "Negotiating…" 99). This is when a woman is drawn in such a contorted position that both her breasts and bottom accentuated and are visible on the same plane; a position that is physically impossible but sexually appealing to a fan base which was, and is, largely made up of white, heterosexual, young adult males. With the new 52 DC reboot of the 2010s, there is a marked change in Wonder Woman's comic background, her origin story is under some scrutiny for being more violent and less pure or focused on teaching "lessons of peace and equality" than previously written (Cocca "Negotiating…" 101). Some also claim her new persona is not at all in correlation with who Wonder Woman is supposed to be; they say

that she is quicker to resort to violence. This matters because Wonder Woman's character has been perverted over the years from a suffragette icon to a 1950s housewife to a sex icon that uses her fists to solve problems and whose comics are filled with pages of her half naked body. Cocca notices that Wonder Woman's history is cyclical: a more progressive/feminist age of Wonder Woman comics is typically followed "by more heteronormative, more warlike and 'just one of the guys' and more sexaulized ones" (Cocca, *Superwomen* 51). The problem with Wonder Woman being so remarkably violent and hypersexualized in response to progressive storylines is that if Wonder Woman is "just like Batman or Superman... she's not critiquing our assumptions about gender, but rather, conforming to the male norm" (Cocca, *Superwomen* 50).

What was progressive for Marston to create in the 1940s no longer applies to the 21st century. Marston wrote with the best of intentions at a time when feminine roles were changing, and created a timeless character whose initial run of comics in the Golden Age painted the picture of a female superhero who embraced femininity as the source of her powers. Wonder Woman showed that a woman could exist as a figure of some power in a man's world, and that feminine traits were not useless. However, her early character was still largely built on only feminine gender traits. Those traits coded male that she embodied, such as intelligence and logic, might have been surprising or controversial in 1942, but today, the idea that women are intelligent is nothing revolutionary. With times of peace, and Marston's death, came a shift in ideology, and comics reflect the ideologies of the times in which they were written. Marston, due to his unconventional lifestyle, created a highly progressive character whose achievements were constantly undermined by other writers and people attacking multiple aspects of the plot. When Marston died, the character survived only because other writers changed her, made her weaker

and thus less controversial, and stripped her of her powers to achieve their own ends. Even in the

1980s, 1990s and 2000s when her superhuman powers were restored, it was only an inadequate

trade off. A powerful woman could only be popular if she was hypersexualized. The more

history a particular character has, the harder it is for that character to fully shed their past and

evolve to the standards of a new decade. In that sense, perhaps Wonder Woman is not struggling

to evolve to the 21st century today entirely because of her origins, but mostly because of all of

the history that followed. And out of the three main superheroes discussed here, Wonder Woman

has the most comic history with which to contend. In comics, writers and artists worked hard to

keep her character relevant, and succeeded, sometimes at the price of the integrity of the

character.

WONDER WOMAN IN FILM

Wonder Woman (2017), directed by Patty Jenkins and written by Zack Snyder and Allan

Heinberg, was a highly anticipated release in the early summer of 2017. Today, her film is still

widely regarded among fans as the best in the DC Extended Universe, and has the highest

domestic gross among five other DCEU movies, with a gross of $821 million worldwide

(Setoodeh). In fact, *Wonder Woman* is the first female led superhero movie by DC or Marvel

made in the past twenty years that did not flop at the box office. Having this film, the first

cinematic reveal of Wonder Woman in the 21st century, be directed by a woman "has become a

rallying call for women everywhere" (Setoodeh). Jenkins not only provided an accurate,

feminine vision for the scope of the film, she also fought to be paid what a male director of her

status would have been paid, and is "definitely paving the way for so many other female

directors," according to the star of the screen, actress Gal Gadot, "I think it was very important that she fought to get the best deal" (Setoodeh).

Gal Gadot embodies Wonder Woman's characteristics to a tee, seeming to be the epitome of 'Grace, Wisdom, Wonder'. Gadot was an interesting choice for Wonder Woman, as she is a multifaceted individual in every sense of the word. As an Israeli, she served two years in the Israeli army as a combat trainer, which is how citizens "give back to the state" (Glamour). After she served, she studied law, but she also modelled and was a former Miss Israel 2004 (Glamour). In short, Gadot is absolutely gorgeous, but she is also intelligent and disciplined. She has skills beyond a natural gift of beauty, which lends her credibility in her portrayal of Wonder Woman, making both the actress and the character she plays more than a typical one-dimensional female character. Gadot is a real life role model for the strength of women.

The film pulls its themes from the original iteration of Wonder Woman, recreating the warrior created by Marston to be a new feminine ideal. The movie establishes her personality through a brief childhood scene which presents her as ambitious, slightly reckless, and above all, idealistic about the world. "You expect the battle to be fair, a battle will never be fair," her trainer Antiope says, which perhaps speaks dually about the world in general and about a world skewed to favor one gender over others. The Amazons were created to "influence men's hearts with love" and end the wars between the gods and Ares. Themyscira, the island on which the Amazons live, was created to hide the Godkiller, to save them in the event that men, under the influence of Ares, would destroy the world with war. Diana is led to believe that men are good, but are corrupted by Ares' influence. This implies that beautiful women are meant to be the reasons that men fight, or do not fight, placing a stereotypical role on the feminine race from the

start, though they are also endowed with incredible combat skills. True to the traditional

superhero origin story format, Diana is constantly held back by her mother, Hippolyta, who

seeks to protect her daughter from her destiny for as long as possible. Diana is also kept in the

dark by her family as to her true identity: the strongest of her kind, a goddess in her own right,

the so-called "God-Killer" (*Wonder Woman*). However, in order to discover her destiny she must

rebel and leave her home against her mother's wishes, vowing to help Steve Trevor end World

War I by killing Ares and freeing men's minds from his bellicose influence.

Her relationship with Steve Trevor is an intriguing and rather confounding one. At the

beginning of the film, she reverses expectations established by gender roles when she rescues

Trevor from the sea, and then engages in a bloody battle on the beach with her sister Amazons.

She establishes herself as a force to be reckoned with; one who does not require the protection of

Trevor and even seeks to protect him from the threat of invading Germans. From this point on,

however, she tends to follow his lead. He spends most of the movie condescending to her naivety

about the world of man, even as he acknowledges her skill in battle. He knows her to be

physically powerful, but she is also very naive about the customs of man, and unused to the

social norms of Europe.

Steve constantly corrects Diana's way of thinking, which would not be a problem but for

the fact that many of the customs of that time period placed women on a lower social level than

men, and are outdated to a 21st century viewer. The fact that *Wonder Woman* is a period piece

allows those stereotypes to exist more blatantly than they appear in society today-- though many

of them still do exist today. In London, Steve introduces Diana to a whole new world, which

comes with rules that she has never had to follow. Trevor and his secretary Etta Candy determine

that she needs a new outfit to fit into 1918 London. Diana is a regular fish out of water, though it is prudent to consider the struggle the writers had with bringing a character into the real world who has existed solely in a mythical realm up until that point. It was perhaps easier to translate her origin story to a time that is now history for the average viewer, than to immediately bring her to the 21st century. As Cocca astutely notes, "as an 'outsider' she (Diana) questions and comments on norms about gender that Americans take for granted (Cocca, *Superwomen* 27). The writers use humor in this scene to draw attention to the absurdity of a superhero (or any woman) being able to function properly in such an outfit; they essentially dress her like Mary Poppins with glasses, while she admonishes with lines like "It's itchy. It's choking me," and "How can a woman possibly fight in this?" (*Wonder Woman*). Luckily, she does not have to dress like this for long, but her costume is one that has garnered debate for years. In the film, Wonder Woman wears an outfit that is very similar to the original outfit approved by Marston and drawn by Harry G. Peter. Her battle outfit is reminiscent of a Greek Warriors garb, which does not leave a lot of skin to the imagination. She wears a short skirt and a stiff metal braissare. But for an origin story, especially one of a hero who is such a cultural icon, the character is inseparable from the costume. Once they establish the character as people expect, and have success, they have some liberty to make alterations, which they have done with her costume for the second film. Photos released from the second film show a skin suit of golden metal, which leaves little to no skin exposed.

Many of these rules are based on gender roles that society often forces people to adopt at a young age. For example, the Women's Rights Movement was gaining momentum during this period, but women were still not allowed many of the liberties, especially concerning jobs, that

they are today. As a result, even though Diana traveled to Europe to aid in the war, she is not allowed in the war room while the generals are discussing battle strategy. When Diana barges in and shows her knowledge of world languages to the room, Steve must pass Diana off as his secretary. This is still highly irregular and the men in the war room are caught off guard by her audacity and presumption to speak her mind without being asked. However, Wonder Woman only appears so strong willed in her defying of gender roles because she was raised outside of those constructs. She literally does not know that a woman should act a certain way, and should be "ladylike." So the question becomes, is it more admirable for Wonder Woman to step into a world defined by gender roles and act as she has her entire life, even though that is against the norm, and not be quite aware that she is being judged. Or is it more admirable for a woman who was raised *within* the gender constructs, and then chooses to live outside the norm, knowing full well that she will be judged, held back, and her journey will be harder.

On the warfront, Diana proves repeatedly that she is torn between compassion and duty. Just prior to the most riveting scene in the movie, where Diana crosses no-man's land alone in order to reach a local settlement that is under German occupation, Steve attempts to convince Diana that not everyone can be saved. In this argument, we see the most common gender roles brought to the forefront: logic vs. compassion. Steve argues that duty and logic takes precedence over the individuals in need. He tells Diana that they have to stay on their mission, and focus on the bigger picture. Diana, on the other hand, feels the pain of the occupied citizens and allows her emotions to dictate what needs to be done. Diana places compassion for the individual over the larger duty to the mission, and to the war effort, which Steve is distinctly against doing, although he does aid her when she goes against his wishes and attacks anyway.

The harder question to answer is whether Steve truly holds all the power in the relationship or Wonder Woman is even progressive in its romance plot line. The reason that this is such a difficult question is due to the traditional ways that women are often used to advance a male plotline, the "woman in a refrigerator" syndrome, which is when a female character is killed or disabled as a plot device to advance the male story arc (Gianola 261). The instance that this phenomenon is named for involves Green Lantern, whose girlfriend was murdered by a villain and shoved into a refrigerator for him to find and avenge, but this has occurred to many other female characters, including Barbara Gordon (AKA Batgirl/Oracle) in *The Killing Joke* (Moore)*,* and Gwen Stacy in *Amazing Spider-Man* #121 (Conway, Lee)*.* One could argue that Steve is actually put 'in a refrigerator' when he sacrifices himself at the end of the movie. His sacrifice allows Diana to tap into an enhanced power born of the realization that love is her most powerful weapon. In that sense, Steve is a mere tool for Diana to unlock her true capabilities as the godkiller, and his death is the event that brings about the possibility of her defeating Ares. His death unleashes Diana's fury at losing a lover, which allows her to have an epiphany, and gives her the ability to defeat Ares through the power of love. "It's not about deserve, it's about what you believe. And I believe in love": her love for humanity despite its flaws, her desire to see the world a better place, her sense of duty that this is her job to do (*Wonder Woman*). She believes that she can do it alone, and she is capable of doing a great many things alone, but in the end she needs Steve and her love for him to defeat Ares. At the climax of the film, Diana comes to terms with her misconceptions about humanity. She has changed in the world of man. When she first arrived she was naive, idealistic, innocent, and after her experiences she is a more worldly hero. She realizes that all humans are capable of being corrupted by war, but as a

Goddess and protector at heart, her relationship with Steve allows her to also see the potential good in humanity and still feel the need to fight on their behalf, despite all the "darkness that lives in between the light" (*Wonder Woman*). The end of her origin films sees her learning of the dual nature of humanity, and declaring with certainty that "only love can save this world" (*Wonder Woman*). By staying in the world of man, and fighting for this cause, Wonder Woman effectively makes herself the living symbol of love as a balm for the world's evils. However, it is not a far stretch for the theme of 'love is a woman's greatest power' to be perverted into 'love is a woman's *only* power'.

However, Steve holds more power over Diana than it may seem, not by being a mere tool to advance Diana's narrative, but by providing the means necessary for the main tension of the film to be resolved. Furthermore, *Justice League* (2017) reveals that Steve's death has had a lasting effect on Diana's ability to be a leader. In *Justice League*, Diana is still one of the only female main characters in the movie, and *is* the only other female to have superpowers. What is even more important is that her character has not evolved. Only a few months separate the cinematic release of *Wonder Woman* and *Justice League*, but one hundred years of story time has elapsed. From Batman, the audience learns that Diana has been struggling under the weight of Steve Trevor's death for all those years. She says that she has fought when she was needed, but has never led for fear that she will lead more people to their deaths. Bruce Wayne questions her motives coldly when he asks her why she was not more of a beacon of hope to the world the way that Superman was. Steve's death has rocked her to her core, and she has been in hiding for the better part of a century because of it. She realizes her mistakes throughout the course of *Justice League*, and it is actually implied that she is willing to lead the team… that is, until Superman

shows up. But the effect that Steve Trevor has had on her character development is incredibly substantial; he has hindered her from any progressive evolution for one hundred years. Considering the fact that *Wonder Woman 1984* somehow revives his character and occurs thirty plus years before *Justice League* is a plot development which could have ramifications for the analysis of her character that remain to be seen. And perhaps the main reason that Steve is not exactly a 'man in a refrigerator', is the fact that he will somehow be returning from the dead to be a part of *Wonder Woman 1984*, which is set to release in July of 2020.

In many interviews Patty Jenkins defended her decisions for bringing the "first ever Marvel or DC movie to be directed by a woman" to life (Hoby). Jenkins is consistent in her interviews about the overarching themes of love which drive *Wonder Woman*'s narrative forward. Her interviews are informed and impassioned; even in print, a reader can tell that Jenkins cares about this character, this project, and the meaning it holds for the future of female superheroes in film. For Wonder Woman to be such a loving, peaceable character was essential to the message of the film, according to Jenkins:

> I wanted to talk about the fact that we can't defeat the evils upon us by slaying one
>
> villain….if we're going to come to a world of peace in the future, we have to lay down
>
> the past and become responsible heroes ourselves. Often what that requires is love and
>
> peace instead of battle (McIntyre).

Jenkins also reiterates the importance of *Wonder Woman* being, above all, a universal hero. Jenkins says, "I wasn't directing a woman, I was just directing a hero…" (Buckley). At the same time that Wonder Woman's femininity has, in the past, been a detriment to her character and projections of her popularity and success in film, Jenkins claims to be operating beyond concepts of gender in her work. She says she always strives to operate on what she calls "last-wave

feminism," in which "you're so feminist, you're not even thinking about it at all" (Setoodeh). This is the ideal progression for feminism, in film and in the world, where gender norms are not the building blocks for behavior and Wonder Woman can simply be known as a great hero, not a great *female* hero. However, there are those who believe that *Wonder Woman* was not the great step forward for female superheroes that it appears to be. James Cameron, director of such films as *Titanic* (1997) and *Avatar* (2009), made a statement denouncing what he calls Hollywood's "self-congratulatory back-patting" over Wonder Woman, saying that she is nothing more than "an objectified icon" (Fernandez). For her part, Jenkins replied by saying that she will not attack anyone for their opinions, but that feminism dictates that a woman can be, do, and wear whatever she pleases.

Jenkins says that it was also important that Wonder Woman appear as a "childhood fantasy," including her traditional costume and flawless appearance even in the thick of battle (Fernandez). Jenkins' vision for her cinematic creation was that Wonder Woman's physical appearance would recall the ideals and dreams of little girls: "My fantasy is that I could wake up looking amazing, that I could be strong and stop the bully but that everybody would love me too. I think that's intrinsic to fantasy – fantasy is fantasy" (Hoby). Of course *Wonder Woman* is fantasy, no one would argue otherwise, but as Cocca points out, since Wonder Woman is so sexualized, "her portrayal has not necessarily foregrounded the idea that women in general are equal to men, but just that this particular, exceptional, beautiful, bathing suit clad white woman is as physically powerful as a man" (Cocca, *Superwomen* 25).

Wonder Woman, who has had the most history out of any of the characters discussed in this paper, has had a very tough journey to get where she is today. Things have not always been

great for Wonder Woman, but she has always been popular (sometimes for the wrong reasons) and with someone like Jenkins at the helm, her character is in good hands, and the origins may not be perfect but they are a great jumping off point for what Wonder Woman could be in the future. The film ends up exemplifying the character that Marston dreamed of, one who would embrace feminine traits and make them the source of her power, not a detriment to her strength. In an interview with Glamour, Gal Gadot puts that sentiment to words when she says, "And it's all her heart—that's her strength. I think women are amazing for being able to show what they feel. I admire women who do. I think it's a mistake when women cover their emotions to look tough. I say let's own who we are and use it as a strength" (Glamour).

However, *Wonder Woman* may have been entertaining, empowering and the showcase of a competent female lead, but its theme is still largely predicated on the stereotypical idea that the greatest power a woman can wield is the ability to love. Wonder Woman is strong, capable and even at times rebellious (even as she might not fully grasp that her actions lie outside social, gendered norms), but she is not threatening to the accepted ideals of femininity. At the end of the day, her actions often reinforce feminine gender stereotypes. She still fits inside a box that dictates what a female superhero should look like and how they should act; she is not threatening the established patriarchal gender ideal. Even as she seems to be motivated by a personal responsibility to humanity, driven by an affection for mankind and a need to protect them, her story is still told through a medium of the romance plotline. Many films struggle to create good, meaningful narratives without including a romance plot, and Wonder Woman is no exception. Even as she has strong, independent tendencies, her motives must also be intrinsically tied to her romance with Steve Trevor in order for audiences to identify with her. She, much like her comic

book version, embraces female gender traits and uses them as the source of her powers. This is not necessarily a bad thing, it is just quite different from a character like Captain Marvel, who intentionally subverts traditional gender roles (and does not include a romance plot), and thus disrupts the white male hegemony and is more blatant in paving the way for a time when the gender of a hero is inconsequential to the narrative of the film.

All of this is not to say that Wonder Woman or her film are distinctly negative. On the contrary, her film is beloved by many (including me), many things that Wonder Woman achieves in her film are quite empowering, and her financial success paved the way for future female led movies to be produced. *Wonder Woman* is not detrimental to the future of women in film, but it does ignore a lot of its potential by creating a period piece that takes place in 1918, when Women's Suffrage had not yet made much headway. At most, its themes, taken nearly directly from the comics written by Marston, are outdated, and its themes may seem old fashioned because she is an old character, with a lot of history. Love as the greatest weapon is an outdated moral as it pertains *only to women*, but as a society perhaps it is something we should be striving to revive for the future. At the end of the day, *Wonder Woman* was a first, and in that sense her film and its collaboration of creators had immense pressure to prove that female led movies could be popular. In order to be a mixture of crowd-pleasing and progressive, *Wonder Woman* had to be recognizable and acceptable to long time fans and also had to embrace a can-do personality that may foreshadow a more progressive character for her future in film.

BLACK WIDOW IN COMICS

Black Widow, a.k.a. Natasha Romanoff, was created by Stan Lee, scripted by Don Rico, and inked by Don Heck for her debut comic: *Tales of Suspense #52*, released in April 1964 (Marvel Unlimited. Marvel Worldwide Inc, 2020. Version 5.3.1. *Apple App Store*. https://apps.apple.com/us/app/marvel-unlimited/id607205403)[2]. Her character has operated in much the same pattern for her whole existence. Natasha is the best of the best, a Russian KGB operative trained as a super spy, conditioned to be a sleeper agent for the Russian government. Trained in the Red Room, Natasha has false memories of training as a ballerina, which were meant to provide her with some fond memories of her homeland to ensure lasting loyalty. Natasha was injected with a Soviet version of the Super Soldier Serum similar to the one that created Captain America. This means that she has enhanced human strength and stamina, as well as disease resistance and decelerated aging. She is also equipped, on each wrist, with the "Widow's Bite, a high frequency electrostatic bolt with a range of 20 feet" ("Black Widow (Natasha Romanova) In Comics Powers, Villains, History: Marvel."). Natasha is trained in martial arts like "aikido, judo, karate, savate, and boxing", and is fluent in Russian, English, German, French and Chinese ("Black Widow (Natasha Romanova) CPVHM).

She is described as "ruthless, efficient, and exceptionally skilled" ("Black Widow (Natasha Romanova) CPVHM). After she falls in love with Hawkeye and renounces her Russian roots she later becomes the leader of multiple superhero groups, including the Avengers. Perhaps her most memorable character trait is her unending guilt over her past. Black Widow is a character who has been defined by the ill deeds she committed during her time as a KGB operative. Her storylines are filled with villains from her past, who come back to remind her of

who she was and punish her for defecting to America. For her questionable beginnings, she is

plagued by the need to redeem herself, though (at least in the comics) that redemption seems

always out of reach. No matter what she achieves in the name of all that is good, writers

continually drag her back to her more base, violent, manipulative nature. Thus, no matter how

much she strives to "eliminate her superiors and the havoc they have wreaked on the world", she

is condemned to a "a lifelong path of redemption" ("Black Widow (Natasha Romanova)

CPVHM).

In her first appearance, she is drawn as a lithe woman dressed in green, wearing furs and

a veil and taking the name Madame Natasha. She seduces Anthony Stark (Iron Man), not once

but twice in the course of her first two appearances, eventually using Stark's own anti-gravity ray

to drop a building on Iron Man. Although Madame Natasha is thwarted by Iron Man, she escapes

yet again (*Tales of Suspense #53*) (*Marvel Unlimited*). She returns in *Tales of Suspense #57*

(Sept. 1964) as the love interest of a new character, the misunderstood marksman Hawkeye.

Following her debut in 1964, Black Widow proves herself to be a formidable and popular

character in the Marvel Universe. "Daring, dazzling and dangerous," Black Widow initially took

on Iron Man as her mortal enemy and teamed up with Hawkeye in order to destroy him (*TS #57*)

(*Marvel Unlimited*). As a 'team', the lovestruck Hawkeye agrees to attempt to put Iron Man out

of commission while Black Widow watches from the sidelines. The battle is over, however,

when Hawkeye's object of affection is caught in crossfire, and he scoops her into his arms and

runs off to fight another day. Poor Hawkeye is heavily smitten from this day forward, as Natasha

herself puts it "strong as he is, he is putty in the hands of the Black Widow!" (*TS #60*) (*Marvel

Unlimited*).

Their next appearance together in *Tales of Suspense #64* (April 1965) reveals Black Widow in a costume for the first time: a black leotard, studded belt, cape, fishnet bodysuit and "a mask… to resemble yours Hawkeye… for you shall again be my partner!" (Tales of Suspense #64) (*Marvel Unlimited*). The duo kidnap Pepper Potts and Happy Hogan to lure Iron Man to them, but despite her new costume, Black Widow again mostly spends her time on the sidelines, yelling things like "Hawkeye, hurry! He's over here!" and "Hawkeye! After him! He must not escape!" (*TS* #64) (*Marvel Unlimited*). Unfortunately, after so many failures, the Black Widow's past comes back to haunt her, and she is gunned down by Red Room operatives. Hawkeye delivers her to a hospital but is too distraught to see if she will pull through. In *The Avengers #16* (May 1965), Hawkeye claims to have been misled by the seductive influence of the Black Widow, and he is accepted as an official member of the Avengers. But that is not the end of the Black Widow. After she escapes back to America, Hawkeye brings her to the Avengers to apply for her membership. The members are understandably hesitant, but after she fights alongside them to rescue Pietro Maximoff (a.k.a. Quicksilver) they are more receptive to her becoming an Avenger (*The Avengers #36* and *#37*, *Marvel Unlimited*). There is only one problem: Nick Fury and SHIELD get to her first. She agrees to carry out a secret mission for SHIELD to secret plans for the U.S government, and must return to Hawkeye only to tell him that she can no longer be with him, she is leaving America and has no desire to be an Avenger (*The Avengers #37*). Against all odds, Natasha has fallen for Hawkeye for real, but she must leave him with no explanation. For Black Widow, duty must always trump emotion. And in 1965, Black Widow would lie to new friends in order to carry out a solo mission of her own. This was the first, but

not the last time that Natasha Romanoff would resort to her covert past and deceive those who thought they knew her into believing that she was a traitor.

From here it is a tumultuous ride for Natasha. She succeeds in her mission for SHIELD but is captured by the enemy. Hawkeye, after being distraught at her betrayal, realizes that he wants to believe that she would never do such a thing without reason, and he sets out to rescue her. When he arrives, he is captured by the Red Guardian, the Soviet version of Captain America and the long lost husband that Natasha believed to be dead (*The Avengers #43)*. By the end of this storyline in 1967, Natasha renounces her name as Black Widow and vows only to be a normal girl, Natasha Romanoff, and girlfriend to Hawkeye (*The Avengers #45* and *#46*). This does not last for long, however, and Black Widow pops in and out of the comic scene over the next three years, at which point she comes to Hawkeye and says that they "must never see each other again" (*The Avengers #76*).

In July of 1970, Black Widow has a run-in with Spider-Man, hoping to find out more about his web-swinging abilities (*The Amazing Spider-Man #86*). It is in this issue that Black Widow ditches the blue fishnets and dons the black leather ("more in keeping with the swinging seventies", she says) for which she is better known (*Marvel Unlimited*). Following her encounter with Spider-Man, Black Widow shares a comic run with the Inhumans for a brief period of time from 1970-1971 in *Amazing Adventures*. Although they were in the same publication, the characters' stories were separated, which allowed Natasha her first solo comic run. In this run, which only ran for eight issues, Black Widow truly turns a corner in her history. At this time, the U.S. was experiencing a rebirth of feminism, and Natasha's solo comic sets her on a path to become a stronger character in the future, though they also pit her against less than cosmic foes.

Her storylines always draw attention to the guilt that she cannot escape. After the accidental death of two teenage boys, and many other foes that Natasha faces, she begins to think that "to know the Black Widow is to die" (*Amazing Adventures #6*) (*Marvel Unlimited*). Natasha is also attacked for being Russian on two occasions, in which one villain tries to frame her for influencing young people with Communist propaganda, and another attempts to murder her to take revenge for the things the Russians did to the Germans in World War II (*Amazing Adventures #2* and *#8*).

For a woman who was raised and conditioned to overlook emotions, she certainly has many dalliances with male superheroes, first and foremost being Hawkeye, but also at varying times Daredevil, and the Winter Soldier. The official Marvel website credits Hawkeye with Natasha's eventual joining of the Avengers in *The Avengers #111*, in April of 1973 (*Marvel Unlimited*). Without Hawkeye's "idealism and strong moral compass," Natasha would never have defected from the KGB in the first place, which would eventually set the stage for her joining of the Avengers nearly ten years after her creation. This implies that Natasha found fault with her past only through the medium of a love story ("Black Widow (Natasha Romanova) CPVHM). Following her brief solo comic, Natasha finds herself on the West Coast, where she meets her future love interest, Daredevil. She is a part of his comic run from November of 1971 to August of 1975, at which point Natasha breaks up with him in order to go solo again. In October of 1975, Natasha becomes a member and then leader of the West Coast version of the Avengers, called the Champions (*Champions #2*, *Marvel Unlimited*). She also teams up with many superheroes over the years, including The Thing, Spider-Man and Captain Marvel (male), in which the pair fought a Communist robot.

Over the course of her sixty year history in comics, Natasha's plotlines expand on her more questionable character traits over the decades. Those traits have only become more apparent, and more dominant of her nature. Any storylines that may allow her some character growth run the risk of being redacted by future comic book writers who have different visions of what the character's role should be. Her origins in the mid-1960s are actually rather tame compared to where she progressed from there. If she was violent, ruthless and deceptive from the start, she has only become more so today. If she was, at the very least, *described* as a beautiful, provocative woman, today she is *drawn* as such. Beginning in the 1990s, comic sales for superhero titles were floundering, so "reliance on the loyal customers of the direct market and local comic shops was high" (Cocca, *Superwomen* 39). This meant that comic creators were playing it safe, creating comics for their highest demographic, the older white male. This, in turn, meant that women in comics began "fighting criminals in a hyperviolent and hypersexualized manner" (Cocca *Superwomen* 39). This is especially observable for Black Widow during this period.

Black Widow is a character whose narrative has been manipulated by both her writers and all of the fictitious forces which act on her in her comics. In each of the storylines she is either the manipulator or the manipulated. She is either the one who is condemned for her logical yet cold evaluations of duty, or the one left reeling from yet another example of how her life is not her own. In the run by Nick Spenser called *Secret Empire*, Natasha breaks off from the main group of heroes in order to fulfill her own goal of killing the evil HYDRA version of Captain America before he can do any more damage. Even though the main group, including Hawkeye, Sam Wilson and Tony Stark, believe they have a way to bring the real version of Steve Rogers

back, Natasha follows her instincts and attempts to go straight for the kill. Always cold and

calculating, she does not hesitate even when it is one of her best friends on the other end of her

deadly fists. She ends up being killed by Cap's shield when she jumps in front of it to save

Spider-Man. Again, we see Black Widow offering herself as sacrifice for a greater cause. In this

case, after the end of this run, the Avengers find a clone of Natasha and convince her to defect

from the KGB just like her original. Again and again, Natasha is manipulated by both friend and

foe, even after death.

Through the early to late 2000s, Black Widow seems to only show marginal

development in the rare occasions when she has female writers. Early Black Widow standalone

comics, such as *Black Widow* (1999) by Devin Grayson and *Black Widow: Right to a Life* (2004)

by Richard K. Morgan merely build her character off of the previously established KGB past;

she is rarely allowed to develop new character traits based on new comic material. She is ever

the lone wolf, always trapped in storylines which highlight the effects of her past. Not to suggest

that her past is not important to who she is as a person, but her writers do not seem to want to

allow her any storylines that are not in some way connected to her Russian past. Those comics

that affect her character most negatively are ones where her sexuality is exploited and her origins

are simply reinforced and strengthened. After 60 years of existence, Natasha Romanoff is still

never able to forget where she came from. Any of her solo comics from the last 20 years either

tell her story through needless sexuality, as in the 1998 Daredevil/Black Widow crossover *The

Widow* by Brian Michael Bendis and illustrated by Alex Maleev and/or through gruesome,

coldhearted violence as in the 2019 Black Widow solo run by Jen and Sylvia Soska. In Bendis'

run of five comics, she played the role of Matt Murdock's (a.k.a. Daredevil) returned

ex-girlfriend. She is featured on three out of the four covers of the Daredevil crossover clad in leather and lounging sexily, and throughout the pages of the comics she is near-naked in multiple places for no real reason. The drawings accentuate her breasts and bottom above all else (the broke-back pose), even in fight poses. And one particular kick pose portrays her stretched languorously back as if in the midst of an intimate moment (*Daredevil* #61 *Marvel Unlimited*). Even in those comics where her physical appearance is not manipulated for the viewer, she is bound by the violence of her teachings to be emotionally damaged, and eternally questionable. In *Widowmaker* by Jim Mccann and Duane Swierczynski, Natasha has a run in with her dead ex-husband (i.e. the Red Guardian) *again.* And even in the comic run by Mark Waid, where she is truly loyal to SHIELD (*Black Widow* (2016)), she must steal from them in order to protect them, leading to their renunciation of her from their ranks and their hunting of her throughout the narrative until she is able to prove that she had their best intentions in mind.

The long and short of it is that Natasha Romanoff is a character who has been manipulated for her whole life. Whereas Wonder Woman started with progressive (though slightly flawed) intentions, Black Widow starts mildly but with definitive stereotypical traits that grow wildly over time until even in her solo comics she is little more than a pinup girl who seduces villains and then beats the hell out of them. Whether or not you see merit in the fact that she is always strong enough to beat up the men, or the fact that she uses her body deviously to get what she wants, she is largely a character whose heroism is based on manipulation and deceit. Her motives are questionable at best, and her benevolent qualities are not nearly as accentuated in her comic books as they are in the films. She uses people to advance her own needs, like in the Yelena Belova storyline in *Black Widow* (2001) by Devin Grayson, where

Black Widow decides to have her face surgically swapped with that of her Red Room nemesis,

Yelena Belova. She claims that she only wants Belova to understand just how expendable she is

to the Russians, something that she claims to have learned on her own, even as she is

continuously used by characters and organizations around her. However, while she looks like

Belova, she manages to get intel from the Russian enemy that she would not have been able to

access otherwise.

Her narratives are overrun by blatant and unnecessary displays of her sexuality, so even if

the storyline is decent, there is nearly always a still frame or two of her near-naked body, or of

her contorted in her signature skin-tight, black leather suit. There are frequent instances of men

making comments on her body, and scenes where she is drawn provocatively without sufficient

clothing for no other reason than that is what she has always done. She is introduced by Stan

Lee, and then written by many other writers over the years, as a vixen who seduces men to get

what she needs, but as the times changed, she became more and more sexualized, to the

detriment of her character, but to the increased popularity and secularization of her audience.

Young white males enjoyed looking at pictures of her drawn in these compromised positions,

and the artists enjoyed drawing them.

You may be wondering why it matters that writers and artists prefer to accentuate

Natasha's physical femininity, after all, as the Black Widow she is known to be a dangerous

beauty. You may think that without her inherent sexuality, and without her violent tendencies,

she is not truly Black Widow. Perhaps to an extent that is true. However, there is a difference in

acknowledging her sexuality and exploiting it, a concept that Laura Hudson writes in her essay

"The Big Sexy Problem with Superheroines and Their 'Liberated Sexuality.'" The problem

raised in her essay is the idea that depicting these superheroines in sexual ways or engaging in sexual activities is promoting their sexual liberation. As Hudson presents it, the way that this idea is actually being fulfilled in comics is fundamentally false. The author argues that there are certain scenes that either imply or show sexual activity between two characters which are unnecessary to the plot of the comic and also undermine the idea of a "sexually liberated" female character (Hudson 2011). Hudson adds that she doesn't criticize the overt sexuality of these characters, just the ways in which that sexuality is tailored to a male audience and is actually offensive to female readers. Hudson discusses body proportions and contortions, going so far as to say that the female characters in these sexual poses are not even posing for their male partners, but for the male readers themselves: "News flash: Starfire isn't being promiscuous because this comic wants to support progressive notions of gender roles." She is posing in such a way so that readers can look at pictures of her drawn in so-called sexy positions (Hudson 2011). Again, Hudson qualifies her claims by saying that there is nothing wrong per say with male readers wanting to look at half clothed women, but one must consider who those images are serving and at whose expense (Hudson 2011). The fact is that the images of these women in comics send explicit messages to female readers about who those comics were written for, and how the writers/illustrators/editors regard women. Even more, they send a message to the female readership that hasn't been completely deterred from reading comics about the qualifications that society places on their independence and power.

Based on her character evolution over the past sixty years, Black Widow has perhaps not evolved in her comics but rather devolved. It must be acknowledged that where she began was stereotypical in and of itself, since for many years she was just an object of affection for

Hawkeye, and was rarely drawn doing anything physical in battle. However, then those traits were made increasingly worse over the years leading to the late 90s and early 2000s where her storylines were gruesome, her manipulations cold and calculated, and her character unrelatable and one-dimensional. Even as writers throughout the years have fleshed out her character, giving her a painful past, and thus true intrigue in her eternal redemption plot, the true damage to her character is when writers use that checkered past to present cheap opportunities to justify her hypersexuality in ways that are not realistic or respectable for the character. All of this not to say that there was not some improvement in the mid to late 2010s, especially in those solo Black Widow comics such as *Black Widow* (2010) by Marjorie Liu, and *Black Widow* (2014) by Philip J. Noto. Now more than ever, the essence of her character is shifting to depend on who is writing and inking her stories. It is true that Natasha was, and still is, a popular character in the Marvel Universe. However, one must question the source of that popularity, and which group of people her character targets for that approval. Each comic that she is a part of expands on her story and gives her more history. But it is that very history that has damaged her transition into the 21st century.

BLACK WIDOW IN FILM

Black Widow's arc in film has been quite interesting to observe. She was the first female Avenger on the team in 2012, and along with Clint Barton one of the only Avengers not afforded an origin story prior to that ensemble film. She features in seven of the twenty-two films that make up the MCU to date. In November of 2020, Black Widow's first solo film is set to release, starring Scarlett Johansson, who has played Black Widow for over ten years. Johansson is an

accomplished actress and has been successfully cast in very diverse roles ever since she broke

into the business at the age of thirteen. Perhaps most well known for her role in the MCU,

Johannson has also starred in movies such as *The Prestige* (2006), *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008),

The Girl with the Pearl Earring (2003) and the indie *Ghost World* (2001). Johansson was

nominated for two academy awards at the 2020 Oscars: Best Actress in *A Marriage Story* (2019)

and Best Supporting Actress in *Jojo Rabbit* (2019). Though she unfortunately was not awarded

for either performance, her double nomination places her in an "elite club" of seven other "actors

who have been Oscar-nominated twice in the same year" including Al Pacino and Jessica Lange

(Vary).

Black Widow* will take place in between the films *Captain America: Civil War* and

Avengers: Infinity War; before her unfortunate, but universe saving sacrifice in *Avengers:

Endgame.* Many have wondered why the studio is bothering to go back and tell more of the

mysterious spy's history posthumously, especially when fans have wanted a Black Widow solo

film for years. Successes like *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* have made it possible for

Black Widow, but it is interesting that it would seem Black Widow was not the right choice for

the first female led film in the MCU. Johansson herself was hesitant to pursue a solo film for

quite a while, citing as a reason her personal philosophy as an actress: "I have to feel like I'm

challenged. I don't want to do the same thing that I'd already done before," she said in an

interview with Entertainment Weekly (Coggan). Regardless of her personal feelings, Johansson

also claimed that had Black Widow been granted a solo film ten years ago, like many fans

desired, it would not have been as substantial or effective. She believes that this is the right time

for this film to be released, and hopes that "this film continues pushing that boundary, so that we

can actually have more female superheroes who are inherently female, and aren't just Batman in heels" (Coggan). However, the history and character arc of Natasha Romanoff could be part of the reason for the delay as well. Her comic history made it impossible to tell any other story about Black Widow other than one of a redemption arc. For her to be a hero and to also retain some of the traits that identify her character, she had to spend her time on screen atoning for past mistakes. Her morals had to be questionable at best, and her history had to be hazy at most. Only now, after she has proven to herself and to the world that she has finally achieved redemption and wiped "the red out of her ledger," can the writers go back and reveal more about her past (*The Avengers*).

In her interview with *EW*, Johansson mentions a feature of the cinematic Black Widow that is the biggest alteration from her comic origins: her lack of superpowers. As previously mentioned, the comic book Natasha was injected with a similar superserum as Captain America received. But the MCU Black Widow is not enhanced in any way. Why strip her of superpowers? Does that make her more impressive for the feats that she achieves in the films? Or less effective for being less physically powerful? Johansson believes that Natasha's "strength really lies in her vulnerability and her acceptance of that" (Coggan). Perhaps in her solo film, the audience will be able to see more of who the Black Widow is underneath, rather than the bits and fragments that have been revealed about her slowly over ten years. Of the films she is featured in, Natasha has very little screen time, and therefore minimal character development compared to the 'Big Three' heroes: Iron Man, Thor and Captain America. A pattern that develops for her character is that her character is made vital for about *one* major scene per the films where her presence alters the course of events. In other words, for about one scene per film, Black Widow

actually has something to do that makes her character important to the team. For the remainder

of her screen time, she is mainly a background fighter at best. That is not to say that what she

does in the background is not important or, frankly, wicked cool to watch… she does have some

admittedly awesome skills in hand to hand combat. But obviously, as the first female Avenger, it

is disheartening to see, when you really pay attention, just how little screen time she is afforded.

For example, according to The Digital Spy, Natasha has around 9 minutes of screentime in *Iron*

Man 2's total runtime of 2 hours and 4 minutes, around 12 minutes in *Civil War*'s 2 hours and 27

minutes, 18 minutes out of 2 hours and 21 minutes in *Age of Ultron*, and around 24 minutes for

Avengers and *Winter Soldier,* which both clock in well over two hours (Longridge, Chris). For

the final appearance of Black Widow in film thus far, she has a paltry 5 minutes of screentime in

Infinity War, and a more substantial 33 minutes in *Endgame* (Waters, Lowenna). Still, for a film

that consists of just over three hours of screen time, one might expect that the sacrificial

character would get more recognition than she was afforded.

When we first meet Natasha Romanoff, she is posing as a notary who was 'hired' to aid

Tony Stark in passing control of his company over to Pepper Potts. Her alias is Natalie, and

Natalie has most definitely commanded Tony's attention. Her fake background story establishes

her as a model from Tokyo, whose resume is full of lingerie photoshoots. On the surface, her

alias is largely underestimated by the other characters around her. Tony's slip of the tongue

admits that he was "ogling" her instead of 'googling' her, Pepper is suspicious of her out of

jealousy, Happy makes a joke about "booty boot camp" during the scene where they square up in

the boxing ring against each other (*Iron Man 2*). Natasha has no trouble taking the unwitting

Happy down. And Pepper has a right to be suspicious, since Natalie *does* turn out to be the

renowned spy: Black Widow. But the way that she makes her big break into the MCU is very much reminiscent of her comic history. No one would suspect a busty redhead with a modelling career of being a deadly international spy. She plays the role well, flirting with Tony and throwing out innuendos at any opportunity, which allows Tony to fall into his "genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist," character type (*The Avengers*). Tony, Pepper and Happy are all guilty of underestimating her because of her body type, and her naive facade. Admittedly, this is a beneficial cover for a spy trying to stay under the radar, but it runs the risk of coloring the rest of the Black Widow's character. Since she is introduced and treated as an object of desire for over half of the film, even when we see that she has more exceptional skills, our perception of her is still influenced by the ways that the other characters have interacted with her thus far. Her costumes are (and remain throughout her many cinematic appearances) inevitably zipped just low enough to reveal cleavage, though there is the possibility that the skin tight black leather get-up is primarily beneficial to her stealth and fighting style.

In the set of films that she features in before *Infinity War* and *Endgame*, there is a pattern established through her main roles in the narratives. As in the comics, she is the product of the KGB and SHIELD, though when the audience meets her, she is firmly on the side of justice and works for Nick Fury. *Avengers* allows her to show even more of her full scope of ability than she did at the end of *Iron Man 2*. Ever the devious damsel, her first scenes in *Avengers* cement the idea that she prefers men to underestimate her abilities. She dresses either skimpily or simple with a decided feminine touch; she acts scared, weak and ditzy, though in reality she is the one in charge of the situation. Seductive and alluring, she preys on men who underestimate her intelligence because of her outward appearance. This, in itself, is not a bad quality; though it is

much more demeaning to her character in comics than it is in the films. In the comics, one gets the impression that Natasha uses her nakedness to get what she wants, but in the films, the Black Widow shows off her cunning wit more than any physical exposure.

It is in this film that she shows her skills in hand to hand combat with no super powers. She goes up against the Hulk and survives, though Thor must ultimately save her. She exhibits her devotion to SHIELD and to the team, most prominently her best friend Clint Barton (Hawkeye) who she credits with saving her from her past with the KGB. She rescues Barton from Loki's mind control. She may not have the most substantial dialogue: "We gotta stop him," she tells Barton, referring to Loki, and "How do we do this?" she asks the group on the ground in the middle of a battle ravaged New York City. However, she *is* the one who retrieves and uses Loki's scepter to close the portal that the invading aliens are coming through. This action ends the onslaught and saves the city from further destruction, even though Iron Man trumps her heroic action by sacrificing himself to the portal in order to destroy the missile headed for the city. This film builds the foundation for what her role in most of the films is: she has perhaps one major action to perform in each film she is a part of, and other than that, she is largely a background presence. All of this not to say that she is not amazing in the films simply because she is a regular human with exceptional skill holding her own with superhumans against a killer alien race. That in and of itself is a testament to the strength of Black Widow.

Ultimately, *Avengers* goes a long way to establish Natasha as a more distinguished and respectable character than in the comics. This was, after all, the film that left fans wanting a solo Black Widow film that would not be announced until nearly 8 years later. Yes, she has done terrible things. Yes, she is still struggling with her past and, as we see in later films, her moral

choices are not always the best, but already she shows major improvement from even some of

her most recent standalone comics, with no substantial detriment to the essential aspects of the

character. *Winter Soldier* and *Age of Ultron* take her character a few steps further. Regardless of

the fact that in both films, she must be saved by her male counterparts more than once, these

movies build the audience's understanding of her character, and actually begin to diverge slightly

from her comic book version. Filmmakers make use of her limited screen time to highlight her

often duplicitous behavior and her inner struggles with trust and friendship. As a Russian spy,

Natasha was not trained to make lasting emotional relationships or have the skills necessary to

work as part of a team. In *Winter Soldier*, Natasha makes the first steps toward realizing how

much she actually wants more from her life than being a lone wolf covert spy can offer. She is

not in the film very much-- after all, it is a Captain America film-- but when she is on the screen,

she is either ruthlessly kicking ass, lying to Steve about how much she knows, or asking him

about his love life. Here we see the three sides of her character: violence, duplicity and romance.

At her lowest moment, when she finds out that the organization everyone thought was SHIELD

was actually a front for HYDRA, she questions her role as a hero. "I thought I knew whose lies I

was telling, but I guess I can't tell any more," she says to Captain America (*Captain America:*

The Winter Soldier). She thought that she was working for good this whole time, wiping the red

out of her ledger, but instead all she did was "trade in the KGB for Hydra" (*Captain America:*

The Winter Soldier). However, she finds that the institution of SHIELD was not as important to

her as the relationships she had begun to forge with the Avengers. Toward the end of the film,

she asks Steve if he would trust her to save his life and he says now they have been through this

together, he would. She is starting to make more meaningful relationships built on trust: something that is not natural to her.

Avengers: Age of Ultron brings Natasha to what is the peak of her emotional growth in the MCU thus far. It is during this movie that she recognizes a need to connect with others, even as she simultaneously views herself as being unworthy of affection because of her upbringing. *Age of Ultron* also gives us the first opportunity to see two female Avengers interact… but they actually never get a scene together in the entire film, and Scarlet Witch is manipulated by Ultron for most of the movie. The beginning of this film introduces the romance between Bruce Banner and Natasha. Natasha's role after their group battles is to confront the Hulk and give him a "lullaby" in order to coax him back into his human form. Natasha is the only one who can achieve this feat. Throughout the film, Natasha is drawn to him because she feels they have something in common: they are both living with their monsters. Through conversations with Bruce, Natasha reveals that her body and mind have been manipulated for most of her life by the people who raised her to be a killer. She views herself as a monster because the Red Room graduation ceremony was sterilization; "It makes everything easier," she says, "Even killing. You still think you're the only monster on the team?" She feels a kinship with the Hulk, someone who also cannot have a normal future, and wants to run away with him. In this scene she seems desperate for Bruce's acceptance, and even tells him her deepest secrets. She confides to Bruce that she feels like she has been living a lie. She had a dream that she was an Avenger. That she was "anything more than the assassin they made her to be" (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*). It is her inability to have children, more than her tendency for violence, that leads her to think of herself as a monster. This plays largely on the societal concept that a woman who either cannot or will

not have children is defective, because 'a woman's first and best job is to procreate'. It also

implies that all women *want* children, and do not feel complete without motherhood, which is

also not considered a universal truth anymore (Cocca, *Superwomen* 47). There are a few different

ways to interpret this scene. Was she just choosing Banner because he was the most

unpredictable of the group? Was choosing Banner a form of self sabotage, as he is the most

unpredictable of the group and a relationship that would most likely not work out? Or when she

calls them both monsters is it more likely that she sees herself in him? Since neither of them are

able to have a 'normal life,' perhaps this is director Joss Whedon's way of taking the sexuality

out of a Widow relationship for once.

Even as she shows emotional growth, Natasha is the only Avenger to not attempt lifting

Thor's hammer, Mjolnir. Thor's hammer is famous for being impossible to lift unless the wielder

is truly worthy. At the Avengers' afterparty in *Age of Ultron*, each member has a go at lifting the

hammer, but Natasha does not, saying "Oh, no, no. That's not a question I need answered"

(*AAOU*). Even after all that she has done in previous movies, including being a part of the group

that saved New York, she still views herself as unworthy. Granted, not many people *are* worthy

enough to lift Thor's hammer, but Natasha is the only one who knows enough not to try.

Natasha's one big role in *Age of Ultron* is that she is the one who steals valuable tech from

Ultron at a critical moment. However, that success leads to her being kidnapped by Ultron, and

taken to Sokovia, where the final battle takes place. She has to be rescued from Ultron in

Sokovia, *but* she is the one to signal to Clint that that is where she is so that they can come to

rescue her and stop Ultron. It is this moment when Banner asks her to run away with him, and

she kisses Banner, says, "I adore you, but I need the other guy," and pushes him into a crater to

bring out the Hulk; her emotional needs go out the door when duty calls (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*). At the end of the day, running away from the Avengers life was a nice dream, but this is who she is. She cannot give up on the team.

Black Widow's role in the next two films in the MCU is not as substantial as her previous films, although those were not really huge roles either. Again, she is more a background character who achieves one specific goal in the course of a two and a half hour movie. In *Civil War*, she chooses to support Iron Man and is in favor of the Sokovia Accords, which would regulate the actions of all superheroes. This is in accordance with her character; as someone who is highly guilty about the actions of her past, it makes sense that she would want transparency in the future and would want to comply with government law where she has not in the past. However, in the middle of the film's massive airport battle, she decides to betray her own side in order to allow Captain America and the Winter Soldier to escape the battle. Thus she shows that her loyalty has become more to individuals than to institutions; she and Steve are close friends, so she gave him a chance to achieve his goals. Her role in *Infinity War* is even less substantial, mostly because she has a much larger role in *Endgame*. All that we know of her is that she has been with Steve Rogers after the events of Civil War, and they return to defend Wakanda from Thanos and his invading forces.

After the events of *Endgame*, in which Natasha sacrifices herself to retrieve the Soul Stone, many fans are up in arms about Natasha's death, claiming that it was unjustified and even sexist. Admittedly, her death, which occurred roughly mid-movie, could have been handled better as part of the plot. It was not addressed as much as it could have been, and as much as she deserved-- being the first female Avenger in the MCU. Looking back at what they chose to cut

from the film, getting to see a tribute to her death is a moment that could have been swapped for Hulk dabbing or Thor playing Fortnite. On that front perhaps fans' indignance was justified, but as for the sexist claims? There are two ways to interpret those claims.

Many claim that Black Widow died so that a man could survive, and so that the plot could move forward for the male characters, that she fell victim to the frequent occurrence known as "fridging" in comic lore. Perhaps I am putting too much faith in those in charge not to treat another female character like this, but her sacrifice was not without great cause, and she did not save Clint because he was a man, she saved him because he was her best friend. Natasha has been seeking redemption for her past as long as the audience has known her. To save half of the universe-- to give the Avengers a chance to reverse Thanos' snap by getting the Soul Stone? That is the ultimate redemption. Johansson thinks that in her death, Nat finds her purpose after eleven years of searching.

Both Natasha and Clint were willing to do "whatever it takes" in that pivotal moment on the cliff's edge on Vormir (*Avengers: Endgame*). But Natasha, as a character, needed the redemption more. *Endgame* presented Avengers fans with character arcs that came full circle from the first movie. Tony, the eternal egotistical playboy, became humbled, settled down, and eventually became a selfless man whose sacrifice saved the universe. Steve, the super soldier, was given the opportunity to pass his shield to another, and finally live a normal life with his love, Peggy. Natasha's ending comes full circle as well, as her sacrifice not only assuaged her of the guilt that has plagued her from the beginning, but also made her the ultimate hero. She may not be the most popular Avenger, or even the most powerful one, but in the end she did everything she could to protect the person who saved her from her horrible deeds, and to take the

first steps toward saving the Vanished. Anthony and Joe Russo refer to Natasha's sacrifice as the single most heroic action in the history of the MCU. She did all she could to bring back those that had been lost and to bring the Avengers-- her *family*-- back together. They were her life. And in her eyes, they were worth her life as well. In this sense, she is not a victim of blatant sexism. She is one of the greatest heroes of the movie.

As the first female Avenger, Black Widow was bound to show some growth over the ten year she was a part of the MCU. From her beginning in *Iron Man 2* as little more than a segue for Tony (and the audience) into the larger world of SHIELD, and the beginnings of the grand ensemble that is *Avengers*, she has evolved into a vital member of the team, though her growth has most definitely been influenced by her comic book past. She is perhaps the most interesting character to review because she is the one who has been around the longest in the cinematic world. Therefore we are able to trace her growth in both the comic and cinematic sense. In the same way that she has been fairly stagnant in her comic storylines, so her film iteration is trapped by the past that has been written for her. Black Widow thus remains a tragic character in every sense of the words. She is always questioning her own motives, always seeking redemption but finding it in the wrong places, always seeking to be a hero but being attacked by the very government she serves. She attempts to atone for past mistakes and be a person worthy of love, even as she feels that she is less than human because of what has been done to her. And then, just as her character seems to have evolved in an interesting way, she dies for the cause she most believes in.

Ultimately, it is plain to see that Black Widow has improved in film more so than she has in comics. Part of the reason for that is due to the medium. The many writers, directors and

producers who worked on films with Black Widow created for her a linear storyline that begins

and ends very neatly. In comics, writers over the generations do not necessarily have to write in

such a linear manner. Part of the reason why comics can be so frustrating is because it is

completely acceptable to retcon (trash and rewrite) a character or a storyline, completely

ignoring some things that have 'happened' to that character in the past, even death. Whereas the

Black Widow of comics is doomed to repeat storylines riddled with Soviet Russians, Red

Rooms, and reminders of all of the horrible acts she has committed, the Black Widow of cinema

truly grew and retained that evolution until the very end.

The films, being for a wider audience, also found a 'happy medium' for Black Widow's

affinity for violence. Facing the facts, it would be impossible to have a Black Widow if she was

not in some way attractive and violent. But the MCU has managed to write a version who is true

to the essence of the character without demeaning the name of that character. At the end of the

day, Natasha Romanoff has been around for sixty years; her character is pretty well ingrained.

She is who she is. But does she reinforce stereotypes? Yes. Does she threaten the patriarchal

norms of our society? No. Is she the best feminine role model that she can be in film? No, but

similar to Wonder Woman, she has been perhaps the best she *could* be considering her

substantial history. Not all representation is good representation, just as not all evolution is good

evolution. As I mentioned with Wonder Woman, there is only so much about a character that you

can change before that character is unrecognizable, even if it is a change for the better.

Therefore, the best thing that the writers and directors of these films can do is introduce a

character that comic book traditionalists can accept, and then slowly alter the character through

plot points over the course of multiple films. This is something that has worked with incredible

success for Thor. However, Scarlett Johansson's Natasha Romanoff did more justice to her

character than many of the comic books do. She is undoubtedly the Black Widow, but she is a

version of that hero who does achieve the long sought redemption in the end, and who is (at least

so far) allowed the closure that the comics have not yet granted her.

CAPTAIN MARVEL IN COMICS

Carol Danvers has been known by many names over the years, the latest of which is

Captain Marvel. Carol's history is in some ways difficult to trace because of all of the times she

disappears from the main scene for years at a time, and for all the times she has changed her

name over the years. She has been Ms. Marvel, Binary, Warbird, Ms. Marvel again, and finally

Captain Marvel in 2012. Over the years, she has been a member and leader of the Avengers,

Alpha Flight, and A-Force, a member of the X-Men, Starjammers, Ultimates and the Guardians

of the Galaxy. Her history in comics is the shortest of the trio discussed in this thesis, but in

many ways it is the most disturbing. Based on her character history, it is no wonder that her

cinematic version is based largely on comics dating from 2012 forward-- but more on that later.

She was not the first (or even the second) superhero to adopt the title Captain Marvel, a fact

which has recently garnered much debate since there was a character who had two solo runs and

a spot on the Avengers in the late 80s and 90s-- Monica Rambeau-- a female African American

character who took the name Captain Marvel long before Carol did. Monica was a long time

member of the Avengers, and the first female African-American to join the team. She had two

solo comic runs which were each only afforded one issue, though her character has a large

fan-base and even dealt at one time with the issue of violent race relations on a college campus

(*Captain Marvel #1* (February 1989). Monica eventually dropped the mantle of Captain Marvel and instead adopted the name Photon in the late 1990s.

Carol Danvers made her debut in comics in *Marvel Superheroes #13* in March of 1968. The character was transferred to Captain Marvel's (male) solo comic run which began in May of the same year. *Captain Marvel* was a comic about a male superhero on earth who was an undercover alien of the Kree race. Disguised as the scientist Dr. Walter Lawson, Captain Mar-Vell struggles with his orders as a Kree spy once he strikes up a friendship with humans, namely the Head of Security at NASA, a woman named Carol Danvers. Danvers is simultaneously suspicious of Dr. Walter Lawson, and incredibly smitten with his alter ego Captain Marvel. In the midst of her duties, Carol finds herself the damsel in distress in the midst of a battle between Captain Marvel and his nemesis Yon-Rogg. During this battle she is exposed to the Psyche-Magnetron, "a Kree device that could make imagination into reality" ("Captain Marvel (Carol Danvers) Powers, Abilities, Villains: Marvel"). Captain Marvel rescues Carol from the scene of the battle, and she is largely written out of his comic run. Carol does not manifest her powers until nearly a decade later, when Gerry Conway writes her solo run *Ms. Marvel* (1977). This run lasted #23 issues, from 1977 to 1979 and ended abruptly, leaving her future unclear.

Much like Wonder Woman, the first version of Carol Danvers in her solo comic from 1977 was progressive for her time. Carol was a champion of the rebirth of Women's Liberation. She has been, over the years, a hero of the Air Force, a Head Security Officer at NASA, and the editor of 'Woman', a magazine out of the office of J. Jonah Jameson which tells the real life stories of women on the front lines of feminism. Carol must juggle her life as a superhero with

her job, with a misogynist boss to boot. The catch is that for the first three issues, Carol is actually two identities living in the same body. Carol turns into Ms. Marvel (a tall, scarf-wearing blond, with short hair and a red and blue costume that cuts off below the breast, leaving her belly button exposed, and connects to bikini bottoms leaving her thighs exposed) when danger is nearby. When Ms. Marvel fulfills her heroic duties, Carol lapses into a faint and remembers nothing of her time as the costumed heroine. Carol also suffers from terrible migraines, and both sides of her personality are disturbed by their lack of cohesion. Many female heroes at the time were known to fall faint when overusing their powers, which, as Cocca points out, can imply that "she is not strong enough to deal with them" (Cocca, *Superwomen* 187). Luckily, in *Ms. Marvel* #3 (March 1977), the two personalities become one, and Ms. Marvel declares, "After all these months of searching, of agony… I know who I am!" (*Ms. Marvel* #3). But the trouble is not over for Carol Danvers. Although she now knows the reason for her ailments, Ms. Marvel continues to take over her body and make choices in battle that Carol has no control over. It is plain to see that Ms. Marvel embodies heroic traits which were/are seen as exclusively male traits, while Carol Danvers embodies the feminine. The problem with Carol's split personalities is that they could suggest that the 'feminine' and the 'feminist' cannot be one. Carol's two selves constantly fight for control over her body and mind, even as they teach each other things outside of their unique natures. Carol has "memories of love and beauty" while Ms. Marvel "had only memories of violence and hatred" (Cocca, *Superwomen* 188). During battles with the Elementals, Deathbird and M.O.D.O.K. Carol is frequently beaten to a pulp and often believed to be dead by her enemies, followed by her inevitable reappearance to win the day. Throughout her many battles, Carol has many meaningless dalliances with male characters, such as her psychiatrist, her

coworker, and even with Captain Mar-Vell, though the two decide it is best to remain friends. Carol's love interests are fleeting and not even truly chronological. By the time Carol has moved on to kissing a guy named Sam Adams, (who is barely a blip in the course of the story), her psychiatrist Michael Barnett is still hung up on her and declares possessively, "by hook or crook, I'll have you as my wife… and then I'll end this Ms. Marvel craziness forever!" (*Ms. Marvel #22*). Throughout her first run, her femininity is brought up in nearly every issue, and she must deal with men in her life trying to push her down, or tie her down in marriage. To her credit, she does not allow any men to depower her.

It is not until *Ms. Marvel* #13 that Carol comes to the realization that she and Ms. Marvel are not two separate entities. From her first realization of their connection the two have still wrestled for control, when really Carol has been Ms. Marvel all along. In order to remain sane, Carol's mind separated herself from the Kree powers, but truly, due to the Psyche-Magnetron, Carol is now half human, half Kree. "No matter what I wore, or who I **t**hought I was. I was always Ms. Marvel and she was me" (*Ms. Marvel* #13). With her identity sorted out, Carol is given more of a family history, which eventually becomes a massive aspect of her character. In her first solo run, the information is minimal, but important to her character development moving forward. In *Ms. Marvel #14*, Ms. Marvel goes home to Boston, where she is reminded about her rocky relationship with her father. "Nothing has changed. Not one blessed thing," she says when she visits Boston and ends up saving her father from a villain posing as Steeplejack, "As far as Dad's concerned-- I'm still his 'kitten', his darling little girl" (*Ms. Marvel #14*). Later in *Ms. Marvel #19*, Carol tells the story of how her father refused to send her to college, choosing instead to use the money he had saved to send her younger brother, Steve (*Ms. Marvel #19*).

"Besides, you don't need college to find a good husband" her father says when he refuses to loan her money for school (*Ms. Marvel #19*). Carol and her father have always butted heads, since Carol is just as headstrong and ambitious as he is, while her father is of the mindset that women are meant to be nothing more than housewives. Carol, not about to submit to her father's will, joins the AirForce right out of high school, "without a word to her parents or a backwards glance" and had her education paid for by the U.S. government (*Ms. Marvel #19*). Carol has wanted nothing more than for her father "accept me as I am, not as he wanted me to be" (*Ms. Marvel #14*). Unfortunately, in later issues, Carol's father dies of cancer, leaving her feeling lost about their relationship. The two never reconciled their differences, and he never knew that his daughter was Ms. Marvel. Kelly Sue DeConnick, a comic writer whose 2012 update of the character brought Carol to the forefront of the Marvel Universe, says that "Carol's need to prove herself, despite her immense power, is the key to understanding her character" (Polo). "'Carol falls down all the time,' DeConnick says, 'but she always gets back up — we say that about Captain America as well, but Captain America gets back up because it's the right thing to do. Carol gets back up because 'Fuck you'" (Polo). Her familial insecurities crafted a hero who is one of the most powerful characters in her universe, and whose motivation is to do better, and be the best version of herself, simply because she is too stubborn to be anything less.

After a team-up with her old friend Captain Marvel, who she had not seen since her powers manifested, Carol decided to ditch the carbon copy of Mar-Vell's costume and opted for a costume of a different color that still shows quite a lot of skin (*Ms. Marvel #20*). The Carol of the late 70s is powerful, flirty and complete with witty mid-battle banter. Unfortunately, the abrupt ending of her first comic series left her future rather choppy. By the end of her comic run,

she is fired from her job as editor due to her double life continuously getting in the way, and her very identity has been threatened on multiple occasions. More than one villain has attempted to strip Ms. Marvel of her loyalties, to make her a blank slate essentially, in order to "remold her mind and soul" for their own benefit (*Marvel Unlimited*). She is a force to be reckoned with, and this is not the first time that Carol's very identity is put in danger for malicious purposes. Fortunately, Ms. Marvel succeeds in her early comics, fending off the mind invasion and maintaining her very being. Unfortunately, the pattern of Carol being attacked by stripping her of her memory and soul continues to plague her over the next three decades, and more than once, those attacks succeed.

Carol has not been treated kindly by her writers, in nearly the same ways that Natasha's past has been repeated relentlessly, Carol's past has been stolen from her multiple times. What is worse than stealing her memories, her powers and even her body have been manipulated for the benefit of a 'shocking' storyline, even when she was not a well known or even popular member of the Avengers team. As popular as she is today, Carol Danvers was not highly popular in the 80s and 90s. In fact, "she was made a superhero explicitly to tap into the feminist movement of the 1970s" and to retain the name "Marvel" during trademark disputes with DC (Polo). Following her solo run, Carol was an on-again, off-again member of the Avengers until the early 1980s. For a female character affiliated with the Avengers who was not nearly as popular as Wanda Maximoff (a.k.a. Scarlet Witch), or Janet Van Dyne (a.k.a Wasp), Carol's storylines were often interwoven randomly with the stories of other characters, where her storylines were overshadowed by the title's character's precedence.

In what is the most controversial storyline of any Avengers comic to date, *Avengers #200* (October 1980) crossed a very disturbing line in what was meant to be a celebratory issue. In *Avengers #198* Carol learns that she is three months pregnant, "when I shouldn't even be pregnant at all!" (*Avengers #198)*. She yells frantically to her fellow Avenger, "Blast it, Wanda, there isn't a father!" (*Avengers #198)*. Carol carries a baby boy to term within *three days*, and delivers in Avengers mansion in *Avengers #200*. Carol is bewildered, scared and hesitant to see the child, feeling that it is not her baby. Carol's fellow Avengers are less than supportive of her disturbed feelings, they are actually thrilled at having a baby around, and even congratulate Carol on her delivery. At first Carol seems rightfully disgusted by this reaction: "Lucky? Wasp, think about what you just said! I've been used!" (*Avengers #200*). But her later reactions do not coincide with this one. Much like the pregnancy was accelerated, so is the growth of the baby. The child grows within hours, until he is a young man named Marcus who explains himself to the Avengers. It is revealed, in sugar-coated language, that Carol was abducted, raped and impregnated against her will by Marcus (now in his 20s). He abducted her from Earth and transported her to Limbo, where he grew up as the son of Immortus, a future version of supervillain Kang the Conqueror. Marcus's plan tried to woo Carol, but ultimately used mind control to seduce Carol in Limbo, imbuing her with his essence so that when she returned to Earth, Marcus could be reborn outside of Limbo. If possible, the situation gets even worse. Marcus's arrival from another dimension has negatively affected the time space continuum, and he realizes he must return to Limbo. Carol decides that, despite the fact that this man is at once her rapist and her son (in some freaky interdimensional incest story) she still has feelings for him

and wants to go back with him to Limbo (*Avengers #200*). *And none of the Avengers attempt to stop her.*

This whole issue stinks of explicit messages, intentional or unintentional, I cannot say, but regardless there are explicit meanings that are damaging to the way that young readers perceive women. The plot, dialogue and illustrations all reinforce the ideas that it is not only *okay* to rape, but that women often *enjoy* it, and that "all pregnancies are cause for joy no matter the circumstances" and "women can come to love a rapist" which of course is just completely false (Cocca, *Superwomen* 192). Obviously, this is a storyline that would never happen today, but at the time it was approved by the editors at Marvel *and* by the Comics Code Authority, whose sole purpose was to prevent comic content from being published if it was inappropriate for children. As an overview: Carol Danvers was kidnapped, raped, was shown *enjoying* the assault, had her memory wiped, returned to Earth pregnant and distraught, had a child who then grew up into her rapist, and then decided that she loved him all along and allowed herself to be abducted by him again while all her friends smiled and waved goodbye.

Carol comes to the forefront again following her return to Earth in *Avengers Annual #10* (1981). Writer Chris Claremont saves Ms. Marvel in this issue by transporting her out of the Limbo after Marcus dies of accelerated old age. However, she ends up being attacked by the mutant Rogue– a young woman working for Mystique who would later find the error of her ways and become a member of the X-Men– leaving Carol stripped of some of her powers, all of her memories, and dumped in the water beneath the Golden Gate Bridge and left for dead. Luckily, Spider-Woman (a.k.a. Jessica Drew) comes upon the unconscious Danvers and takes her to Charles Xavier to have her memory restored. Unfortunately, though Carol's memories were

restored, she had no emotional connection to them, leading her to feel as though she was an intruder in her own life. Even after Rogue becomes a good-guy, she and Carol have a strained relationship from this incident. Carol sings a very different song with regard to what happened to her in this issue. In an attempt to redact what occurred in *Avengers* #200, writers had Ms. Marvel blame her friends for not seeing the signs: she was being manipulated, she was a victim of Marcus, and she yells, "I never wanted to see you-- any of you-- again. I *hated* you. Because when I needed you most, you *betrayed* me"... "The Wasp thought it was great, and the Beast offered to play teddy bear. Your concerns were for the baby, not for how it came to be-- nor of the cost to me of that conception" (*Avengers Annual* #10). Thus a year after the controversial issue, Ms. Marvel's dignity is somewhat restored. That does not change what writers did to her however, and how they crafted a story at her expense in such poor taste.

During Carol's recovery from Rogue's attack she joins up with the X-Men in late 1982, at which point she is captured by the alien race known as the Brood, and experimented on in a painful manner. The Brood connected Carol's powers to the energy of a cosmic white hole and became an uber powered version of herself renamed Binary (*Uncanny X-Men #164*). Yet again, Carol's body is manipulated for the benefit of others, though she "single-handedly wipes out much of the Brood that had experimented on her" to save the day (Cocca, *Superwomen* 193). As Binary, she has the ability to manipulate and absorb large amounts of energy, a power which she later loses in the 1990s within the storyline "Operation Galactic Storm". Once Carol's connection to the white hole is severed in this storyline, she still retains some energy absorption powers, but for the most part reverts back to the abilities of the original Ms. Marvel.

In the late 1990s, Carol, still reeling from the loss of emotional connection to her

memories due to Rogue's attack and her physical and mental violation by Marcus, Carol is voted

onto the new lineup of Avengers heroes under a new name: Warbird (*The Avengers #4* (May

1998)). Carol makes the team despite the fact that Tony Stark holds reservations about her

mental state at the time after seeing her indulging in too much drink. Through a series of four

issues called *Live Kree or Die*, which are told as sub-stories in the middle of four solo run

comics *Iron Man #7, Captain America #8, Quicksilver #10* and *The Avengers #7*, Carol is

revealed to be suffering from severe alcoholism. After her induction to the team, her struggles

only grow more apparent, as she struggles to cope with her drained powers and attempts to cope

with the aid of alcohol. Her drinking damages her decision making and brings out a nasty side to

her character which thrives on pure ego and as Captain America says, endangers the team since

she is "not a team player" (*Captain America #8*). Her rampant alcoholism leads to her being put

on probation by the acting members of the Avengers after she attacks Tony in a drunken rage,

and does equally detestable, dangerous and embarrassing things in the pursuit of proving herself

worthy to the team. Carol's inherent need to prove herself is perverted by these storylines where

her character becomes a toxic and belligerent liability. She is filled with such shame and rage at

the accusations of her fellow Avengers that she quits the team rather than let them put her on

probation (*The Avengers #7)*. Up until the dawn of the 21st century, Carol Danvers has been

thrown through the ringer. As a background character to begin with in the Avengers, she is

drawn to the forefront to be impregnated and then her identity is stolen from her by Rogue,

which leads to her downward spiral of alcoholism. Furthermore, her storylines with Rogue and

Stark served to further the heroic arc of those characters. Rogue would later redeem herself and

become an X-Man, and writer Kurt Busiek wanted Stark (a long-time struggling alcoholic) to "become an AA sponsor to another alcoholic" (Cocca, *Superwomen* 195). While it is true that Carol's struggles with alcohol make her a 'human' character with 'human' flaws, Cocca points out that since Carol is one of the few female characters of any influence in comics at the time, "each female carries more representational weight than each male such that she virtually stands in (impossible) for all women (Cocca, *Superwomen* 195).

In April of 2000 the Avengers decide it is high time for some new members… more importantly *diverse* members. The new team is made up of three men and four women, including the African American Triathlon, the green-skinned She-Hulk and Carol Danvers, given a second chance after her struggles with alcohol. Janet Van Dyne (a.k.a. The Wasp) is made the leader of the team in this issue as well (*The Avengers #27*). She is a member of the team, but her character was hardly vital to any storylines. Carol is a member of the Avengers until October 2003, when she receives a job offer of Chief Field Leader of Homeland Security (*The Avengers #70*). She takes her leave from the Avengers in this issue in one frame with one sentence.

Carol has her first solo run since her debut in 1977 in Brian Reed's *Ms. Marvel* (2006-2010). This, her solo debut into the 21st century, lasts for 50 issues and really allows Carol to come into her own. In *Ms. Marvel #1*, Reed wrote a letter to his readers to outline his goals for the run: "I get the honor of helping her become the person she knows she can be -- the best of the bes -- a pretty good goal for anyone" (*Ms. Marvel #1).* Carol returns to her old name, and keeps the scanty black and yellow bathing suit, but this run takes the time to delve into Carol's personality, and affords her both plotlines and dialogue that are worthy of her character. This is her first step toward becoming a stronger female superhero. Admittedly, the illustrations

on the covers of these issues (especially the ones by Greg Horn) are unnecessarily oversexualized, and inside the issues, she is not necessarily drawn to be un-sexy, but she is at least her own character unlike how she was with the Avengers. She is taken seriously, she is competent, she becomes the leader of the Avengers, and even though she recognizes that she has had issues in the past, she is not like she was as Warbird where she only ever made mistakes and then she was perpetually in the background. Carol has been such a cameo character in her first decades of existence that it was hard to trace what was happening in her life and her storylines were often left hanging, leading to a disjointed story and character. Despite a rather improved storyline, certain artists take advantage of Carol's bathing suit uniform to accentuate her breasts and bottom. In many places this is a noticeable difference from issue to issue when the artists change. It is remarkable that the Reed run lasted so long considering it features a female lead, and even though the first dozen issues are strong, Carol is soon tested to her limits again. In Brian Reed's *Ms. Marvel #36* Carol reveals that she cannot use her superpowers without intense pain. She uses her powers anyway in order to destroy Ghazi Rashid, the man who kept Danvers captive and tortured her in Afghanistan during her Air Force years. She knows that using her powers will kill her, but does so anyway and is presumed dead in the explosion. At the end of Reed's run, the Ms. Marvel name is taken by the supervillain Moonstone, who uses the power ruthlessly. Carol is split into multiple personalities, one powered and one normal, and has to meld her two selves together again to remember who she is yet again. Brian Reed's run, despite its flaws, sets the stage for where Carol goes from there, and also accounts for many fans' distress over her upgrade in 2012.

Finally, in 2012, Carol Danvers takes the name of Captain Marvel after her original mentor Walter Lawson died of cancer, and recreates her image. This run, written by Kelly Sue DeConnick (the first female writer of the character in her history) and drawn by Dexter Soy, is the beginning of a new era for Carol Danvers. She is given a new red and blue suit, reminiscent of an officer's military uniform, a new haircut, and a confident attitude to back it all up. From the very first issue it is abundantly clear, this is not the Ms. Marvel of the past. Not everyone was pleased with the change, especially with regard to her upgraded costume. One particular man, Eric Apfel, was incensed by the change, saying that Ms. Marvel "was strong-willed, powerful and sexy… You've given her a hideous new costume… Sales are going to be bad for this title" (Cocca *Superwomen* 204). It is hard not to read comments like this as blatant attacks on women who are portrayed as powerful before beautiful. Of course a woman can be both powerful and sexy, but problems arise when physical appearance is not as important as physical ability, even in comic books. "The old outfit was "an attention getting outfit to be sure-- and it served its purpose well for 35 years," *Captain Marvel* Senior Editor Stephen Wacker writes in the letter printed with the comic, "but it wasn't always the attention we wanted for arguably our strongest female character" (*Ms. Marvel #2*). The first issue, released in September in 2012, sold out immediately, and spurred the writing of a script that would later become *Captain Marvel*, propelling the character-- the strongest in the MCU-- to the silver screen (Polo).

However, even DeConnick's run, which is widely known as Carol's rebirth into a truly formidable superhero, subjects Carol to a loss of her powers and eventually her memories. DeConnick's run even brings back old enemies from the 70s for Carol to fight, jokingly referred to as Carol Danvers' greatest hits. Of course, something has to happen to a character in order to

keep the story interesting and fresh. The character must be challenged in some way, must be put through trials and grow as a character, however, Carol's storylines inevitably turn to the tried and true plot points. Carol's powers are always threatened, and often her memories and emotions are compromised. At first glance it may appear that DeConnick is not doing Carol any justice by repeating *yet again* the same old struggles that have plagued her character since her inception: memory loss, power loss, and confused identity. However, DeConnick mirrors Carol's origins for an important reason. Carol, through a time travel incident, is given the choice of whether or not to become superpowered, and she *chooses* not to change anything. And Carol, when her powers are threatened by a Kree implant in her brain, *chooses* to use her powers anyway, resulting in memory loss. But "she was not a victim who had her memories ripped away by a villain but a hero who made the choice herself to allow it to happen as a consequence of saving millions (Cocca, *Superwomen* 203). And instead of struggling with this loss alone, Carol has a sturdy female support system of friends who help her remember who she is. DeConnick makes Carol's motivations to heroism into an *active* choice rather than a response to loss as it has been for most of her storyline.

Ultimately, Carol's storylines in comics were not very kind to her character. She's been stripped of her identity, her freedoms, and her powers more than once, been raped and impregnated, struggled with alcoholism, made bad choices, but finally came around to her full potential in the 2010s. This shift is largely thanks to DeConnick, the creative team, and a fan base that was given the power to demand more diverse characters thanks to new technology that made comics more widely accessible (Cocca, *Superwomen*). Similar to Wonder Woman, her origin and first solo comic run, despite the costume and some of the stereotypes inherent in those

comics that adhere to the time period, was actually a decent template for the kind of rip-rearing, assertive and confident woman that Captain Marvel would later become. A similar phenomena occurs with Carol over time as has plagued the character of Black Widow. Early comics were quite fantastical in how they were written; they were meant to entertain children, they were meant to shock and awe, they were intended to sell no matter the quality. Modern day comics may have evolved since then, but that still did not stop many writers from stripping Carol of her memories time and again. How can a character, especially a female character who is called "the most popular female superhero in the universe", ever experience growth in this medium when she is constantly battling to even remember who she is ("Captain Marvel (Carol Danvers) Powers, Abilities, Villains: Marvel"). Perhaps she is given a dilemma that is the polar opposite of Black Widow. Instead of Carol Danvers being plagued by a checkered past, she consistently forgets the events that make her who she is. The tragedy here is that Carol *wants* those memories, and *needs* those memories to root her identity, and is constantly denied them, but Natasha Romanoff wants nothing more than to move on, and she is never allowed to do so. It is important to have a history that drives the hero forward but there is a difference between a painful past and a past that recurs, demeans and manipulates. Superheroes seem to have a painful past to drive them, whether a man or a woman. In comics, those histories are extorted over and over again, but with the movies it is linear: struggle and growth in equal conjunction.

The 2012 run by DeConnick served as preparation for her updated character by having her deal with her past, hopefully for one last time. In 2014, DeConnick wrote a brand new plotline for her. Carol has also become the hero and role model of the new Ms. Marvel, a teenage Muslim-Pakistani-American girl named Kamala Khan. The *Ms. Marvel* comics were "Marvel's

top digital seller" and "top international seller", and helped to "hold the door open for hopefully

more stories that speak to a broad range of people" (Cocca, *Superwomen* 210-11). A retcon of

Carol's past reveals a surprise: Carol's mother is Kree too, meaning that Carol was actually *born*

with powers which were activated by the Psyche-Magnetron, rather than gifted them by the alien

device. In 2016, Carol dukes it out with Tony Stark in the comic event *Civil War II*, which draws

the dozens of heroes into battle against one another for the second time in the Marvel Universe.

Carol's choices are again questionable during this event, though she ultimately defeats Iron Man

and is redeemed in Kelly Thompson's *Captain Marvel* run, which began in 2019 and is ongoing

at the time of this writing. Thompson's run is a hit with fans, especially in how it continues to

offer new plot for Carol, often with jabs at the unruly fanboy response to her film in 2019 (more

on that later), and turns her "identity into a more cohesive whole" (Century). In the last eight

years, Carol Danvers has become an even better version of herself, in what Sara Century calls "a

plethora of material where once there was little or none at all" (Century). Despite her long,

tumultuous, and disjointed history in comics, she has managed to become one of the most

powerful and popular female heroes today. As Captain Marvel said to her best friend

Spider-Woman in *Captain Marvel #16*, "I'm sorry… sorry I'm a badass."

CAPTAIN MARVEL IN FILM

  Captain Marvel's debut into the MCU was wrought with fanfare and controversy alike.

Both Wonder Woman and Black Widow's film versions have improved upon, if not necessarily

perfected, their characters based on the histories they each carried. Carol Danvers is different

however, because her film version chooses comics from 2012 onward for source material,

despite 35 previous years of history. Of course, the Carol of 2012 is a product of the 35 years of earlier works concerning her character, but the film benefits from choosing an iteration written by a woman and born under 21st century standards of a strong female superhero. Many were excited to finally see such a powerful female superhero headline her own film, but unfortunately, prerelease events colored her character in a very negative light months before her film was even released to the public.

Brie Larson, much like Gal Gadot and Scarlett Johansson, is both an accomplished actress who has played diverse roles and a woman who is not afraid to get involved in society through her public support of feminism and diversity in the movie industry. Larson received the Academy Award for Best Actress in 2016 for her performance in *Room*, and is also known for her performances in *The Glass Castle* (2017), *Unicorn Store* (2017) and *Just Mercy* (2019). A specific event that primed such volatile discourse on the film was Brie Larson's speech at the Crystal & Lucy Awards where she received the Crystal Award for Excellence in Film in the summer of 2018. The purpose of her speech is ultimately to reveal the gross disconnect between the ratio of racially diverse people who live in the U.S. and the dominant group of people who are currently reviewing movies: "67% of the top critics reviewing the one-hundred highest grossing movies in 2017 were white males" (SorrelGum). Larson repeats three times during her speech that she does *not* hate white men, but only that she wants to see more diversity in the industry, and wants to know that her work "will be discussed by a variety of people, not just a singular perspective" (SorrelGum). Phrases from Larson's speech were used out of context by internet trolls on the popular movie review website Rotten Tomatoes in the months before *Captain Marvel*'s release. One user commented that Larson was "sexist and racist," while

another wrote that "Larson has made it clear… men need not attend this movie." This led to the widespread and largely false notion that Brie Larson hates white men and that they should not see her newest movie because it was not intended for them.

A discussion on how Carol breaks down stereotypes in her film is quite different from the discussions about Wonder Woman and Black Widow from earlier in this paper. More so than any other character, Carol breaks the mold of what it means to be a female superhero, and instead embodies a universal superhero. This is largely due to the source material that the film was drawn from. Rather than being bogged down by her forty plus years of history like Black Widow and Wonder Woman, *Captain Marvel* is, "unlike many of (its) cinematic counterparts" because it is "arguably based on less than a decade of storytelling, primarily from one writer": Kelly Sue DeConnick in 2012 (Polo). Directors Ryan Fleck and Anna Boden (the first female to direct a Marvel movie) took their inspiration, and the tag-line "higher, further, faster" from Kelly Sue DeConnick's 2012 Captain Marvel run. About the hiring of a woman to co-direct a movie starring a female lead, Kevin Fiege, the President of Marvel Studios, said,

> People have asked me, 'There's a lot of diversity in front of and behind the camera — was that a one-off, or will you continue that?' Well, of course we're going to continue that," he said, "because that is the shape of the world, the representation of the world, and that's what we want up on our screens (Yamato).

This statement suggests that a real shift has begun in the MCU for the future of female superheroes, and the future of more diverse heroes in general. Viewers tend to respond positively to heroes who they can relate to based on their gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality. Thus it is not unreasonable to speculate that should the MCU expand its characters as they plan to over the next ten years, we will see a corresponding shift in the fanbase. This very possibility may be part

of the reason Captain Marvel's film came under such scrutiny, as you will remember that the initial shift to the 2012 Carol was met with both vehement opposition and monumental praise. Those in the fandom who wish to see more diversity are threatening to the overrepresented group (older white males), which feels and has felt for the last few years that comics and CBMs are being 'taken away from them' and changed for the worse. Her comics have evolved to a great place in the 21st century that Wonder Woman and Black Widow still seem to be trying to come to terms with (notice that neither Wonder Woman or Black Widow's cinematic iterations have caused such an amount of hate as Captain Marvel has). Essentially, in the past ten years, Carol Danvers has been a character that has broken the mold of what a female superhero looks like and acts like, and for that she has lost many traditional comic fans, but gained a brand new generation of comic book lovers. *Captain Marvel* challenges the ways in which audiences have viewed female superheroes on the big screen by creating one who does not dress or act according to patriarchal norms, though this is by no means the sole focus of the narrative. The main tension of the movie is the domination of the Skrull race by the superior Kree. The Kree believe that any cell of Skrulls in the universe is a threat to Kree everywhere, and thus make it their mission to wipe the Skrulls off the face of the universe. The Skrulls are refugees seeking a safe homeworld who are viewed as murderous vermin by the Kree, who are seeking to protect their borders at all costs: "for the good of all Kree" (*Captain Marvel (2019)*). The Kree never stop to consider that, in their pursuit of protection for their own people, they are condemning another innocent race to unjust genocide.

The main character, then known to the audience as Vers, is forced to the center of this alien conflict which comes to a crescendo on Earth in the 1990s. However, within the framework

of this alien conflict lies a more important tension for the main character: Vers' struggles to recover her past and uncover her true identity, Carol Danvers. The film opens with Vers, introduced as the main character and a member of an alien race of "noble warrior heroes" called the Kree (*Captain Marvel (2019)*). Vers is part of a Kree Special Forces team led by Yon-Rogg, who serves as her trainer and mentor. Her first memories are of waking up on Halla, the Kree home planet, six years prior to the opening of the film. She has absolutely no knowledge of her past before Halla, but suffers from vivid nightmares which she cannot explain. The truth, which Vers slowly learns when she is captured by Skrulls and then escapes only to crash land on Earth, is that she has a past on Earth as Carol Danvers, an Air Force test pilot. Carol spends most of the film struggling to piece together who she was before she was Vers.

Through short interludes showcasing the past of Carol Danvers the film establishes her personality; she is ambitious, driven, rash at times, and prone to be overcome by her emotions. One of her strongest personality traits is her obstinate determination in the face of any struggle. Carol's flashbacks, which are brief snapshots of defining moments in her life, include instances of a younger Carol being told repeatedly what she cannot do. Her brother tells her she should not speed on the go-cart track while proceeding to pass her by; she speeds anyway and crashes, but stands back up. Her trainer in Basic tells her that she will never fly after she cannot complete the ropes course amidst the jeers of her peers; she falls from the ropes, but stands back up. A male pilot condescends to tell her that she is a decent enough pilot but she is too emotional; he smirks as he asks her, "You do know why they call it a cockpit?" (*Captain Marvel (2019)*). This is perhaps the most blatant moment of sexism in Carol's flashbacks, and yet it realistically draws

upon a "Top Gun" culture and exhibits the ways in which ordinary life is permeated by gendered words.

The messages being argued in Carol's flashbacks are steeped in gender inequality, overflowing with the idea that women are constantly oppressed and yet find the strength to stand back up, but that message does not dominate the plot of the film. Each of these flashbacks comprise less than a half hour of the film's length. They provide a glimpse of the kind of obstacles that Carol has had to overcome in her life and her chosen field, thereby giving her the typical 'ordinary hero' background. They are enough to show the audience what kind of person Carol is: determined, strong, sometimes reckless. Rather than place the focus on Carol's femininity, the film instead chooses to highlight the idea that Carol is half human and, in the eyes of the superior Kree race, is therefore highly flawed. But Carol, in the climax of the film where she releases herself from the Supreme Intelligence's clutches, proves that her humanity is what makes her a hero. When the Supreme Intelligence is chastising her for being weak and helpless, Carol does not stand up defiantly and say, "I am woman!"; no, she stands and says, "I'm only human" (*Captain Marvel (2019)*). The most important aspect of the flashbacks is not that she is female, but that she is *human.* The film itself is more about Carol's struggle to regain her identity (which has been stolen by the Kree) than about her femininity.

Captain Marvel, through the character Carol Danvers, attempts to reconceptualize traditional hegemonic thought by placing a woman into the role of hero, a role which has historically been held by men. Carol's relationship with the Kree, especially Yon-Rogg and the Supreme Intelligence, showcases a dominant/subservient relationship, even though Carol is unaware of her own oppression. Yon-Rogg consistently tells Carol in her training that she gives

into her emotions too much, and that she should think with her head and not her heart. Furthermore, Yon-Rogg and the Supreme Intelligence have forced a sort of 'training device' onto Carol which keeps her powers in check. She is unaware that the Kree are holding her back physically and have essentially stolen her from her life on earth to become a weapon for their own needs. They view her as a weapon that needs to be controlled, and also as a massive threat to their goals if they allow her access to her full potential. "What is given can be taken away," Yon-Rogg tells Carol repeatedly, meaning that he has the ability to strip her of her photon powers at any time (*Captain Marvel (2019)*). This is a classic example of men (representative of a dominant group) bestowing limited powers on women (or the subservient) while still being in a position to control the threat that that power entails. In her last interaction with Yon-Rogg, Carol rejects his patriarchal worldview when she refuses to fight with him on his terms.

Instead of discussing the ways in which Carol Danvers falls short of the standards of a 21st century woman in film, as I have previously with Wonder Woman and Black Widow, it is more prudent to analyze the ways in which Captain Marvel is condemned and how that may in fact point to the fact that her character is the *most* successful female role model in the MCU thus far. It should be plain to see the ways in which *Captain Marvel* adopted many of the themes of her comic history (memory loss, Kree background, her struggles with male authority figures) and rewrote her character for a new generation, and a new century, with higher standards for accuracy and equality in representation. Despite the great negative discourse about the film, the movie was by no means a failure with all fans in the general audience either. On the contrary, *Captain Marvel* was a great success in the box office and has a loyal and ardent fanbase. Captain Marvel has inspired many young girls and women since her introduction into the MCU, and

many people– male and female alike– look forward to seeing her evolve as a main character in the next phases of the story. It is important to note that the people that are quoted in the following analysis should not necessarily be construed as being staunchly sexist or misogynist; their responses are interesting because many of them did not seem aware that their comments showed evidence of their internalization of white male dominance, and shed light on the gender question that surrounds the character of Captain Marvel.

Negative observations also populate the general audience discourse that takes place on the social media platform Twitter. While there are a vast number of Twitter accounts dedicated to 'stan' (an obsessive fan of a specific celebrity or character) Brie Larson and/or Captain Marvel, there are just as many accounts who were all too eager to respond to a tweet (created by the author of this paper) regarding why they disliked the film. The tweet in question was viewed 11,911 times and received 179 replies (@Jaywalker_9)[3]. Many of the replies to @Jaywalker_9's tweet, which asked for reasons as to why some people did not like the movie *Captain Marvel*, showed a similar pattern of complaints about the film that were nearly identical to the observations of the movie critics. Some of these dislikes concerned the plot, acting, or execution of the movie as a whole. However, a majority of the reasons why those who responded to the tweet disliked the film had much to do with Carol Danvers and Brie Larson's portrayal of her.

Many of the people who spoke out about Captain Marvel with disdain tend to agree that she is 'overpowered' (or as many comments said "OP"), too arrogant, and does not have enough flaws or development to be an interesting character (@Jaywalker_9). Many comments reiterated the same complaints: declarations that Danvers "doesn't struggle or go through an arch [sic] during the film," and is "unrelatable" because she is "stoic and rude" (@Jaywalker_9). Still more

thought that the movie was just plain boring, not at all living up to "the hype", which is directly related to how the marketing of the film as a remarkable step forward for women led some fans to enter the theater with higher than average expectations (@Jaywalker_9). Others thought that it was a tasteless effort to "capitalize on feminism," even as some thought that the message of the film was not true feminism, but "one of those 'women empowerment' movies" where they don't display "equality but superiority" (@Jaywalker_9). Part of the issue that led to this fundamental misunderstanding of the message that Captain Marvel embodied was the lack of understanding on the part of some male fans who could not reconcile Carol's struggles as worthy or character building. These fans tended to dismiss Carol's flashbacks as inconsistent with the events necessary to make someone a hero and their comments suggest that Carol's standing up to the people in her life that attempted to oppress her was not a legitimate struggle. This is perhaps the most blatant trend of comments that points directly to a dismissal of the female experience in a male dominant society. These people are ignoring the idea that in a dominant society, those who are in power have some role to play in the continued existence of the hegemony. Wonder Woman asks, "Why is it that people feel that a belief in women equals a hatred of men?" (qtd. In Cocca, *Superwomen* 44). This is the type of mindset that fans of Captain Marvel have faced after her movie was released, and a strong indication that the 'typical' fans of Comic Book Movies (CBMs), the middle aged white male, are threatened by more diverse fans 'encroaching' on their territory. It is about time, though, that the overrepresented groups "live in a world where not every single book is made for them" and underrepresented groups finally get to see characters that they can truly relate to (Janelle Asselin qtd. In Cocca, *Superwomen* 219).

Even more interesting, the most common complaints concerning Danvers' physical power and her personality are positive attributes when applied to heroes like Thor and Iron Man/Tony Stark respectively. Thor, as a Norse God, is practically immortal, and in the recent films, has proven himself to be one of the strongest characters in the MCU... yet no one complains that he is unbeatable. Tony Stark's trademark quality is his arrogant narcissism, and while Danvers is known to exhibit a similar trait of confidence to the point of flaw, Stark is allowed to embrace his less than heroic traits and grow from them, whereas Danvers is criticised and denounced from the start.

Some of those problems may have been caused by the fact Carol's movie debuted in the middle of Phase 3 when thematically it resembled Phase 1, with other origin movies. Of course, her film was not made earlier because female leads were not seen as marketable due to previous failures. Really we have seen so little of her compared to Captain America, Iron Man and Thor; they have had eleven years and countless movies of character development. But since it feels like a Phase 1 origin film, people may feel like they have to compare her with a group of characters that has been far more fleshed out over far more years. Furthermore, the common complaint about a lack of character arc and flaws is simply an assumption that because Danvers does not seem to struggle with her physical powers (though her physical strength is oppressed by the Kree for a majority of the film), she is not interesting and does not follow a traditional hero's journey. However, Danvers *does* have inner struggles, such as trying to discover her past and come to terms with how she has been used as a weapon under false pretenses for the past six years of her life. It is worth considering what struggles qualify as worthy of an interesting hero, since some

people dismiss Carol's inner struggles because they are not the 'typical' struggles of a traditional male hero.

Based on the mixed reviews of *Captain Marvel* it would appear that some audiences were less prepared to see heroism represented as what Lee Edwards refers to as "an asexual or omnisexual archetype" than others (Edwards 13). Considering Edwards' theory, Danvers exemplifies an archetypal hero who is less concerned with the telling of her tale in terms of her femininity, but rather in terms of her *humanity*. Edwards grapples with the idea of male and female coded traits of heroism in her article "The Labors of Psyche: Toward a Theory of Female Heroism," and suggests that one must not "define heroism by action alone and limit those actions we call heroic to those marked by unusual physical strength…" (Edwards 8). To do so would be to ignore a vital aspect of heroism, which lies in the consciousness, and would deny women the ability to be heroes based on the standards set forth under the definition of the word itself. Edwards suggests that heroism in itself is a human trait, and can be exemplified in true form by any gender. From here one must consider how American society perceives the word 'hero', and why Carol's embodiment of that term has led to such controversy.

The cultural understanding of the word heroism is deeply connected with mythical examples of heroes, most of which are males. Traditional heroes are figures like Hercules, King Arthur, and Beowulf– all men who were known for their valiance, courage and brute strength. The problem is that heroism is historically associated with maleness, and society has developed an entirely separate concept of what it means to be a heroine. For example, Wonder Woman, a heroine constantly being compared to Captain Marvel, is highly praised by male fans who believe her to be a better role model for women. However, her traits– including her

overwhelming compassion, kindness and tendency to negotiate before a fight– are typically

coded as feminine. When Wonder Woman first came out, similar discussions took place on the

internet, criticising her character and the movie. Interestingly enough, those complaints have

paled, and nearly disappeared, in the presence of Captain Marvel. Wonder Woman is preferred in

many places over Captain Marvel, and the women are even pitted against each other. Kate

Gardner, in her article for The Mary Sue, a website dedicated to "the geek girl's guide to the

Universe" prudently points out, "no one said 'step aside, Iron Man,' when a new male hero was

introduced in either franchise" (Gardner). But many tweeted that it was Wonder Woman's turn

to step aside for Captain Marvel, as if there could only be one popular female superhero at a

time.

Of course, to claim that Wonder Woman is generally preferred by some people, including men,

because she does not undermine the traditional gender roles that place white males at the apex of

power is a reinforcement of the problem in and of itself. The problem lies in the state of our

society, which cannot comprehend heroism as separate from masculinity and consequently

constrains individuals to act and react in conjunction with their gender constructs. The subsection

of the audience that expresses dislike of Danvers, giving reasons that connect to her personality,

is reacting primarily to her mixture of gender traits that are not generally mixed in current

American culture.

Carol Danvers attempts to overcome those prejudices by fulfilling gender norms on

opposite sides of the gender spectrum, which garnered mixed results. In her femininity she is

criticized for pushing a message, in her masculinity she is denounced for seeking superiority

over those who once oppressed her. Many in the audience seem to be subconsciously reacting to

the fact that Danvers has many traits that are typical of a male superhero, but does not share the same physical struggles that male superheroes usually face. In this sense, Danvers is a hybrid: she has masculine coded personality traits, and feminine coded struggles overcome (which are internal rather than external/physical in nature). Despite the fact that Danvers exhibits some masculine traits that coincide with the traditional concept of heroism, which some may interpret as her reinforcement of the idea that a 'traditional' female does not harmonize with what it means to be a hero, the fact that so many are unsettled by her lack of adherence to gender traits shows that her character in fact undermines convention. Even as she must act in a way that is socially identified as 'manly', in some cases, to be the hero that she is, her acceptance of that role without question (and the overwhelming negative response to it) shows just how restricting the general concept of 'heroism' is. Our traditional cultural understanding of the word 'hero', and the personality traits which are included in that title are very narrow, and nearly entirely divided by gender. Synonyms for the word 'heroic' are words like valiant, bold, gallant, chivalrous, Herculean; no one has ever said that women cannot exhibit these traits, but they are words that are almost always associated with the male gender. The responses to her character that express dislike because of her embodiment of traits like stoicism and arrogance reinforce the idea that personality traits can be coded as masculine or feminine, which is the very root of the problem.

It is the cultural misunderstanding of the word heroism, and audiences' internalization of gender norms that has led to the controversy of *Captain Marvel*. When an audience expects to see a 'feminist' film, due to pre-release marketing, and is met with a female character who embodies the traits of a hero… but not specifically a *female* hero, confusion and aversion run rampant. Captain Marvel is able to reveal gender biases among a wide audience, and in her

adopting of masculine traits she conforms to the traditional role of 'hero' in order to reveal the ways in which this narrow view of gender and humanity must soon be undermined. The word hero has long been a masculine word, to the point where audiences automatically expect that a female hero should and must act differently (and dress differently) from a male counterpart. Perhaps the aversion of some audiences to Carol's character is due, in part, to this cultivated distinction between how male and female heroes (and characters in general) act differently. Until there is no prejudice against female heroes, and the definition of a hero becomes widely applicable to people who do not necessarily fit traditional definitions of that word, the phenomena surrounding *Captain Marvel* will only plague the next blockbuster whose lead character may attempt to redefine heroism.

At first glance, *Captain Marvel* appeared to be an aggressive feminist movie, and many people were adverse to having what they perceived as a 'Social Justice Warrior' message 'jammed down their throats'. What the movie itself does *is*, in many ways, feminist: but only because it was a movie about a woman who acts as any hero would, regardless of their gender, and succeeds. Not to mention that the term 'Social Justice Warrior' should in no way have negative connotations; superheroes "ARE social justice warriors!" (DeConnick qtd. In Cocca, *Superwomen* 219). While the film successfully exhibits a strong, independent woman in a way that celebrates her strength, it is much more about her struggle to reclaim her past, her life, her identity. It is much more a conventional superhero film in that it is about an average person who chooses to do extraordinary things with her life and happens to fall into extraordinary circumstances; one who struggles with morality and good/evil and deciding what kind of person she wants to be. The search for identity and the need to discover where one lies on the morality

spectrum are struggles that nearly every hero goes through regardless of gender, especially in origin films. In this sense, it is successful in portraying a positive female role model while not allowing the feminist aspects to overwhelm the plot of the film.

Captain Marvel, though met with some opposition from more traditional CBM fans, represents the first steps toward a more conscious and diverse age of storytelling. The film may have seemed mediocre to some who focus on the mechanics of filmmaking, but it was nonetheless wildly effective in generating a wide range of discourse, and a new generation of fans. Regardless, *Captain Marvel* is something new, something that challenges traditional thought, which shares something worth saying and yet is profoundly difficult to say; and since when has something of this nature *not* caused tremendous upset? Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "well behaved women rarely make history," and Carol is a testament to the truth of that statement. She is unapologetically strong, stubborn and capable. There is a lot of potential for the further growth of her character in the future, if those who next take up her story can do right by her. From an intense study of this film, and this heroic and inspiring character, one can see not only the merits of challenging gender normativity, but can also understand the societal mindset which must be altered in the future, for the betterment of film, diversity, and equal representation for all.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this thesis paper, I have shown how the film versions of these intensely popular female superheroes have made progress toward a better future for female cinematic role models. I must also point out the undeniable fact that the amount of female

characters– and characters identifying with other minority groups– that play important roles in these films has doubled over the past ten years alone within the MCU. The film industry has shown progress, especially in the last five years or so, both in the types of women characters they tell stories about and the actresses they choose to play those characters, in the amount of women that are involved in substantial parts of the movie making process (screenwriting, directing, costume design, etc.), and in the sheer amount of super women that now populate these cinematic universes. Despite this evident progress, there is still work to be done.

If there is one thing that I hope to have demonstrated throughout this thesis, it is that the characters with the least comic history, and conversely, those with the most comic history and also the most cinematic exposure and growth, have translated into stronger examples of 21st century female role models. In other words, Wonder Woman has the most comic history and her character in film has been largely tied to her 1940s origins, which is a strong example of feminism for its time, but falls short by 21st century standards. Black Widow has very damaging history, and is perhaps impossible to make into a traditional 'role model' due to her career, yet the films that she is portrayed in have still managed, over a period of ten years, to craft her into a sympathetic, strong, competent female character. Yet still, due to her inherent character traits, she cannot help but embody some stereotypical roles as a female Avenger who is widely known as a deadly sex symbol. But Captain Marvel's film, having been based largely on source material (written by women) from 2012 and forward, is not tainted by the female stereotypes of a bygone era, or a history that is demeaning to, yet defines, who that character is. Instead, the Carol Danvers of film embodies all of the strengths and flaws of its comic book hero, providing

viewers with a hero to look up to: one who is profoundly human, and who fights for the

downtrodden no matter the cost.

Comics have always been criticized "for (their) lack of female artists and writers, as well

as for the high number of underdeveloped, overly sexualized female comic book characters it has

generated over the years" (MegaWestgarth). Over the course of my studies, the obvious fact has

only become more apparent: even some modern comics are either progressive or not merely

based on their writers and illustrators. This is particularly evident for Captain Marvel, especially

in the 21st century. Even before she donned her latest costume and still wore what was

essentially black and yellow bathing suit, many of her illustrators were moderate with her body

and did not exploit it for the pleasure of the reader. However, certain illustrators when hired for

certain issues of the larger run, would miraculously endow Carol with large breasts, and a bottom

that inevitably caused her spandex to ride up. And of course these facts are only noticeable

because Carol's bottom was featured in comic frames quite frequently. The editors of *Gender

and the Superhero Narrative* write in their introduction about how there are many promising

comic books that have come into being in the past few years that, while slightly flawed, at least

exhibit some small steps in the right direction. Here they cite comics like Ryan North and Erica

Anderson's *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl* (2015-), and G. Willow Wilson's *Ms. Marvel* (more on

her later). Despite these small improvements, the superhero industry as a whole is still largely

centered around the sexualization of women and stereotypes, especially with the tried and true

methods of having a white male savior who overcomes villains using nothing but violence.

Female fans of superhero comic books have had an ever growing voice, especially with the

power of the internet to spread one's ideas and opinions. While technology as a way to share

information is slowly changing the game, it has not yet completely changed the fact that straight white male fans have had "more collective economic influence over the comics industry" (Goodrum, et. al 13). Of course, if the market for these comics is still overwhelmingly male, why would a business stop producing that which brings in the most profit; in this case, superhero comics that often read like porno magazines. This has started to change slowly in comics, so if and when those new characters break into cinema, there will be better source material for those movies which already improves the situation.

Comic book origins, and histories thereafter, tend to have a negative affect on how Wonder Woman and Black Widow have been translated to film. The dilemma then, is that if the character's past is changed too much, the character herself could be changed beyond recognition. But many of the female superheroes are not accurate or substantial characters based on 21st century standards… so, what is to be done? Filmmakers seem to have been doing the best they can with female heroes who have a lot of comic book history, but the important step is to then continue to evolve today. Storytellers have already started to create new heroes with more updated values that reflect the world we are living in today, characters who are less oppressed by white male dominance, created with consciousness toward our ever changing worldviews. We must expand the comic and film industry to be more diverse and more representative of the mixed world we live in, like Kamala Khan, Shuri and Monica Rambeau. The amount of POC superheroes, both male and female, is rising in both comics and film. It has been a long time coming, but hopefully these heroes will begin to truly reflect all types of people, and all ways of life.

The creation of the new Ms. Marvel, a.k.a. Kamala Khan, a sixteen-year old female Muslim-Pakistani-American is a symbol for both female readers minority groups in America. Kamala not only has to struggle to balance her new powers with her life, but she also has had to balance her Pakistani and Muslim background with her teenage life in New Jersey. What has made Kamala such an important and popular character is twofold. First, her writer, G. Willow Wilson, and editor, Sana Amanat are female and Amanat is Pakistani American. And her primary illustrator, Adrian Alphona, is a Muslim American (Gibson 23). Thus Kamala's struggles in assimilation and integration are not imagined, they are authentic, based on the experiences and point of view of her creators. Furthermore, the struggle that the shapeshifting Kamala endure with regards to her body image and identity is one that is at the heart of an average teenage girl's struggles. Kamala wishes that she looked more like her namesake Captain Marvel, but learns that to change her image would be to give up her identity (Gibson 27). Kamala instead chooses to maintain her appearance and wears a burkini as part of her superhero costume. In this way, she sends a message to her young female readers to embrace both their identity and their faith.

There will always be traditional characters who are still widely loved but who reflect older values, some of which are timeless, but some which are simply stereotypical, racist, sexist, marginal, and just plain misinformed. These characters that people have loved for decades will always hold special places in our hearts, and they have in their own ways paved the way for the characters that have followed, but there comes a time when new heroes must take over. To create movies which better reflect the diversity of the real world, we need new heroes who are not held back by their history, by their origins, and who "open up the infinite possibilities of what

heroism can look like" (Cocca, *Superwomen* 53). Heroes like Captain Marvel and the Wasp

(Hope Van Dyne) who have less comic book history are more likely to be stronger female

characters in their film versions. As I have shown, Captain Marvel acts very much in the films as

her comic book character does who was written only five or six years ago. She is less bound to

her stereotypical comic history from 1977. And Hope Van Dyne is incredible because she is a

character who is not even in the comics. The Wasp of the Avengers was Janet Van Dyne, who in

the film *Ant-Man* (2015) and *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (2018), is Hope's mother. This 'passing of

the moniker' gives moviemakers the creative license to write a new character, one who is

immersed in the 21st century instead of forced to adapt traits from another time period. Hope is a

stronger female role model because the writers were not as compelled to adhere to comic history,

thus adhering, in some sense, to the white male story. Characters who are 'newer' have the

creative license to build their own histories in a time when women are just a little bit closer to

representative equality. But perhaps in fifty years some of the characters that are created today

will look just as archaic and inaccurate at the characters they are attempting to translate to the

current age.

However, there is more work to be done toward this end: equal, diverse and accurate

representation in film for all. For example, Clara Mae, a writer for the increasingly popular

website womenwriteaboutcomics.com, writes indignantly about how James Gunn, the director of

Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2, almost completely rewrote the character of Mantis from the

character she is in comic books. Mae cites many examples to make her point, but to mention just

a few, the Mantis of the comic books is a young Asian woman trained from a young age to be a

skilled fighter, who later becomes an Avenger and then a type of Goddess. However, as

introduced in *Guardians Vol. 2*, Mantis is described multiple times as a pet. She was raised by

the God Ego and refers to him as master. She is not the powerful fighter who is in the comics,

instead she is the brunt of many jokes, her skill set has been greatly diminished and, due to her

upbringing as completely separate from any being beside Ego, she has a socially awkward

demeanor and does not seem to understand that she is being mistreated (Mae). The question

becomes why Gunn would deliberately change the origin of a strong female hero to one who is

much more bland and submissive. An obvious answer, and one that plagues many females in the

superhero genre, is that Mantis is used in the film as a plot point to advance the narrative of the

characters around her. This is demeaning not only to the character just as she appears in the film,

but also to the unfulfilled potential of her character, which was largely ignored (Mae). This is a

watered down version of what Gail Simone refers to as 'Woman in a Refrigerator' syndrome.

It is important to recognize that not all diverse representations are good representations,

as evidenced by the treatment of Mantis in the *Guardians* franchise. At this point, where it has

been a struggle for certain people to be considered for large Hollywood roles, perhaps the more

diverse representation right now the better, but they have to be accurate also. It is also important

to note that by accurate I do not necessarily mean that every character has to be a hero. Carolyn

Cocca says it best: "'strong' female characters... have internal lives, friends and family, conflicts,

moments of doubt, quirks, strength, humor and heroism" (Cocca, *Superwomen* 213). These

characters can embody any role in a story: hero, villain and all types in between, but they must

simply be written well, with "female superhero characters (who) are portrayed with complexity

and care" (Cocca, *Superwomen* 215). DeConnick claims that if you can replace a female

character in your comic with a sexy lamp and nothing about your plot changes, then you've got a problem.

The plans for the future of the MCU have been expanded with the announcements of Phase 4 and 5 and Disney+ original shows. After the battle scene in Avengers: Endgame gave audiences a taste for what a future A-Force team might look like, Marvel Studios appears to be planning to add perhaps half a dozen more female heroes to their films and TV shows in the next five to six years. There may come a time when the number of male and female superheroes in the MCU are nearly equal! Movies like *The Eternals* (2021), which will have five major female female cast members, *Dr. Strange: Multiverse of Madness* (2021), which involves Scarlet Witch, *Black Widow* (2020), *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022) featuring Valkyrie, *Captain Marvel 2* (2022) and *Black Panther 2* (2022) promise *more* female characters, in hopefully more substantial roles. And shows planned to be released on Disney+ in the next few years include *WandaVision* (involving Scarlet Witch), and possibly *She-Hulk* and *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan). Additionally, DC, which currently has less female characters than the MCU, (which is understandable because their franchise is struggling a bit more than the MCU is) is planning a future filled with female leads such as Batgirl, Supergirl and the Gotham City Sirens. And *Birds of Prey*, a female ensemble film led by Harley Quinn (Margot Robbie) was a fan favorite despite a less than impressive opening weekend. Not to mention if Disney + turns out to be popular and the TV shows do well, then She-Hulk and Ms. Marvel could be integrated into the movies as well. The future's looking bright for super women!

Diverse and accurate role models inspire those in the real world to work on those stories and continue to recreate heroes or update heroes into new eras of storytelling. Creating

opportunities for more people, and different types of people to work on these projects is key, exposure of the masses to these ideas is key, showing young kids and impressionable teens that they can be heroes too is key. And showing overrepresented groups that diverse media is truly best, in order to "build empathy for those who look quite different but to whose humanity the reader can still relate" (Cocca, *Superwomen* 221). Media can showcase the ways in which all people have gifts, all people can do good (and then also that all people can do bad as well). It is important to expose the people that watch these films to the evolving 21st century worldview, which is not as tainted by archaic (but unfortunately still prevalent) views on sexism, racism, xenophobia and homophobia. These characters inspire, and inspiration for a better world is everything. *Anyone* could be inspired by the power that these characters embody. Who knows how many children and young adults look up to Carol Danvers, to Shuri, to the Wasp, to Iron Man, to Gamora, to Black Panther and think: if they do it, so can I. These people who are inspired by imaginary characters just might take what they have learned and change the world. If there is anything that I am sure of it is this: there *has* been progress, a slow, creeping progress, but progress in the right direction, *but there is still much more to be done for the benefit of authentic, diverse and representative storytelling.* As comics scholar Dr. Mel Gibson appropriately names her essay in *Gender and the Superhero Narrative*: "Yeah, I Think There Is Still Hope," and I am very interested to see where the next ten years of superhero movie-making brings us.

<div align="center">NOTES</div>

[1]The Bechdel test is a test for the representation of females in media. In order to pass the test a narrative must include at least two women, who talk to one another in a scene by themselves about something that is not concerning a man.

²The Marvel Comics referenced in both the Black Widow and Captain Marvel comic sections of this thesis were read and studied using the app *Marvel Unlimited*. For a fee, over 25,000 Marvel comics are available to read digitally. I cite the app *Marvel Unlimited* as the source for the comics referenced. Where applicable, I reference authors and illustrators in the text itself.

³The initial tweet has been cited as the primary source for the multitude of comments that followed, some of which are quoted in this section of the paper. To clarify, the views expressed in response to the initial tweet by @Jaywalker_9 were tweeted from various other accounts that can be found by searching for the original post on Twitter, which is cited in the bibliography at the conclusion of this paper.

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