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Women in Refrigerators: The Objectification of Women in Comics

Kyra Nelson

In Green Lantern issue 54, Kyle Rayner, a new addition to the Green Lantern corps, walks into his apartment. On the table he finds a note saying a surprise awaits him in the refrigerator. Kyle makes his way into the kitchen and to his horror discovers the body of his strangled girlfriend, Alex, stuffed into the refrigerator. Alex, who only made it through five issues of the series, suffers a fate similar to those of many other women in comics. Frequently, comic book writers employ female characters as little more than plot devices designed to provide emotional drama and backstory for their male counterparts.

Women Portrayed in Comics

The treatment of women in comics has been discussed for many years. From Frederic Wertham's Seduction of the Innocent in 1953 to the Women in Refrigerators movement started by Gail Simone in 1999, readers of comic books have analyzed various ways in which females are portrayed. Discussions on the objectification of women consist of two important aspects. First is the overtly sexual portrayal of women in regard to their impossible bodies and revealing costumes. The second focuses more generally on how comics show women as inferior characters who are more likely to be killed or lose their powers.

Superhero comics have traditionally targeted a male audience, which writers and artists have learned to cater to. One of the first women to make it big in the comic book industry was not a superheroine, but rather a voluptuous queen of the jungle named Sheena (Madrid 31). Sheena oozed sexuality, running around with her mate while wearing her leopard skin bikini. Other women of the early comic book era were similarly sexualized. In 1941 the world of masked crime fighters saw the rise of Phantom Lady, a pin-up girl whose costume progressively showed more and more skin. In Figure 1, Phantom Lady proudly shows off her famous cleavage. These types of sensuous women drew criticism in Wertham’s book Seduction of the Innocent, which resulted in the formation of the Comics Code.
Authority, a regulatory agency that would put a stamp of approval on comic books appropriate for young boys to read (Madrid 49).

![Phantom Lady comic cover](image)


With the Comics Code Authority in place, both Sheena and Phantom Lady disappeared from the pages of comics, unable to sell books when they were wearing more clothes. Those females who did survive the new regulations were much less sexual in nature. So it might seem that for a time women were relieved from their role as sexual sirens. But these more conservative times only provided new obstacles for the women of comics.

While Sheena, Phantom Lady, and the other early women of the comics were scantily clad, impossibly proportioned, and overly sexualized, the more demure women of the post—World War II era generally did little more than fall into the damsel-in-distress role. Sheena and Phantom Lady were fierce and could hold their own. The same could not be said for their successors. These more conservative times saw the introduction of characters such as Batwoman and Lois Lane. Batwoman was designed as a romantic interest for Batman—created to refute allegations of homosexuality between the Caped Crusader and his sidekick Robin (Madrid 55). Lois Lane was a feisty reporter in love with Superman. The main ambition of both women was to marry their respective caped loves. Their attempts to do so usually landed them in bad situations, which their beaus then had to remedy. Lois Lane's misadventures, for instance, included being turned into a centaur, growing an oversized brain, and almost accidentally marrying the devil. Superman was always there to save her, though, just as Batman was always around to rescue Batwoman from the trouble she found by insisting on following him in his adventures.
Although Batwoman and Lois Lane were not objectified by unrealistic proportions and low-cut outfits, they were objectified by their extreme need to be married and their seeming incompetence to do much else. As comics have moved forward through the decades, they have continued to struggle in portraying females who are neither over-idealized nor helpless victims. Although female heroines have varied between the two extremes, there is almost always room for improvement.

Women in Comics in the '90s

The Comics Code Authority eventually lost power, and women in comics became increasingly sexualized. The '90s was a particularly notable decade in comics for impossible body proportions with very few clothes to hide them. Marvel published a swimsuit issue where busty heroines lounged around a pool in bikinis. Characters such as Lady Death (shown in Figure 2) wore barely-there outfits that left nothing to the imagination. Furthermore, these characters featured impossibly large breasts and toothpick torsos (Madrid 271). These women were so impossibly proportioned that, had they been real, they would have tipped over if they had tried to stand up. Although the proportions of women in comics are not quite so absurd in recent years, they are still highly idealized forms. Among the ranks of the superheroines, there is not a Plain Jane to be found.

Furthermore, women have not completely escaped the fate of being portrayed as inferior characters. Sue Storm, also known as the Invisible Woman, provides a good example of this. The only woman on a team of men, she concerned herself more with trying to win Mr. Fantastic's heart than with saving the world. She often played the role of damsel in distress. The team's first book in 1961 shows Sue caught in the clutches of a monster, exclaiming, "I can't turn invisible fast enough! How can we stop this creature, Torch?" (Lee). Meanwhile, her male teammates assure her that they are more than a match for the creature. This sort of portrayal was typical for many of her early years in comics. Sue later suffered from the overly sexual portrayals of the 1990s when she ditched her old jumpsuit and instead went with a swimwear-type suit with a cutout for the stomach and the team logo cut out in such a manner as to emphasize her cleavage.

Even when women in comics became more powerful, they were still inferior characters. In the rare cases that their powers matched their male counterparts, they were less important, as evidenced by their apparent disposability. Comic book writer Gail Simone pointed this out in her 1999 Women in Refrigerators campaign, so named in remembrance of the fate suffered by Alex DeWitt. Simone recounts that she began the Women in Refrigerators list, described at the beginning of this paper, by jotting down female characters that had suffered unfortunate fates, when she realized, "It was actually harder to list major female characters who hadn't been sliced up somehow" (Simone). This difference in portrayal plays a critical role in determining the effect of comic book females on women's body image.

Sometimes the effects of weaker portrayal and overt sexuality are combined in a morbid sort of way. Stephanie Brown makes a wonderful case study of this phenomenon. Stephanie began her superheroine career as the masked vigilante Spoiler. Later she teamed up with Batman as the latest incarnation of Batgirl. She then took up the mantle of Robin, the only female to ever do so. Stephanie's turn as Robin was short-lived, however, when she faced a brutal murder at the hands of the villainous Black Mask. After hours of being tortured with a power drill in the comic, Stephanie finally died. In Figure 3 we see that she is not only the victim of a gruesome murder, but also has the indignity of being drawn in a sexually suggestive pose after being killed. Stephanie's fans were further outraged when the heroine did not receive a memorial in the Batcave the way Jason Todd, the deceased second Robin, did (Borsellino). Later writers even tried to downplay her role, stating that Batman had never really thought of her as a real Robin.
Parasocial Relationships

One may question if females are really treated unjustly compared to men. It is certainly true that male characters are also drawn with very idealized bodies, covered in rippling muscles. To that extent it is fair to say that men are also objectified in comics. However, women in the comic book world suffer from other disadvantages. When it comes to the fates suffered by men and women, according to Simone, “If there are only 50 major female superheroes, and 40 of them get killed/maimed/depowered, then that’s more significant numerically than if 40 male characters get killed, since there are many times more of them total” (Simone). Essentially, Simone points out that there still is a proportionally larger group of abused women in comics than men. She then continues, “The male characters seem to die nobly, as heroes [but] shock value seems to be a major motivator in the superchick deaths more often than not.” Stephanie Brown’s death certainly fits the description of a shock-value death, as does Alex DeWitt’s. There are others who have suffered shock-value deaths in comics, such as Dee Tyler, whose impaled body was hung on the Washington monument, or Pantha, who was punched in the face so hard that she was decapitated.

A recent study shows that men often form parasocial relationships with superheroes, meaning that they strongly relate to the characters they read about (Young). When this happens, the negative effects of being exposed to an idealized body type are moderated. The male superheroes portrayed in comics are noble, powerful, and heroic. Because of this, men are likely to relate to these characters and form parasocial relationships, which in turn prevent the idealized forms from harming men’s body images (Young). Women in comics, however, are often

Women in comics...are often portrayed as...weak, ditzy, and disposable.
portrayed as so weak, ditzy, and disposable that it is hard to form parasocial relationships with them. Therefore, women are more likely to be negatively affected by the idealized female body images portrayed in comics.

Comics, Media, and Health

The negative effects media has on body image are well documented, as are the health risks associated with body dissatisfaction. One monumental study of the effects of media on body image is Becker’s study of Fijian girls before and after prolonged exposure to television. Fiji was chosen as a study site because by the mid-1990s only one case of anorexia had been reported (Becker 538). Over the course of the study, however, as media exposure increased, Becker’s group saw a substantial increase in the number of eating disorders (Becker 533). Other studies suggest that eating disorders are becoming ever more prevalent and are starting at younger ages, even as young as eight or nine years of age and that 40 percent of nine-year-olds have been on a diet (Derenne). Derenne says, “With media pressure to be thin and a multibillion dollar dieting industry at our disposal, higher rates of eating disorders in the population seem concerning, but are also understandable. While cultural standards of beauty are certainly not new, today’s media is far more ubiquitous and powerful.” What this means is that American women are more pressured than ever to be thin as a result of media portrayals of idealized women’s bodies.

It may also be important to note that perceptions of the ideal body do change, and the changes are reflected in media (Harrison 40). The more dramatic changes in media portrayals then lead to increased body dissatisfaction when the ideal is harder to achieve. Thus the greatest numbers of eating disorders were recorded in the time periods that perceived the ideal female body as being the thinnest (40).

Although media is widely focused on as a negative influence on body image, few studies have centered specifically on exposure to comic books. However, it is reasonable to assume that impossible body types in comic books are no less harmful than impossible body types in other forms of media. Women in comics overwhelmingly have impossible body proportions, drawn to cater to a predominantly male audience. For this reason women are drawn to be sexually attractive and are portrayed as side characters supporting male heroes. Rather than being a result of predominant male readership, however, this could actually cause a predominantly male readership. As Simone points out, “If you demolish most of the characters girls like, then girls won’t read comics” (Simone). Meanwhile,
the smaller portion of girls who do read comics are exposed to women with unrealistic bodies and personalities that prevent easy formation of parasocial relationships, an exposure which could, as we’ve seen, lead to negative self-image. Girls may find themselves avoiding comics as a result of these negative experiences.

The Future for Women in Comics

In the comics of the ’90s, breasts became bigger and waists became longer until the overall effect was more freaky than sexy (Madrid 273). However, the future offers hope for the superheroine. Since the ’90s, idealized bodies have relaxed to some extent. More importantly, comics seem to be improving in their ability to portray powerful, relatable women. Many of the women on Simone’s original Women in Refrigerators list have been resurrected and restored to their original powers.

More women are writing comics now than in the past, and women often are more balanced in their portrayal of women as well as more interested in creating powerful women. Simone is a notable example of this for her work on the Birds of Prey comic book line. Birds of Prey is a DC Comics publication which portrays an all-female team featuring Oracle, Black Canary, Huntress, and Lady Blackhawk. Compare this to the Spiderman Loves Mary Jane series Marvel intended to cater to female readership. While Spiderman Loves Mary Jane attempts to depict a dramatic teenage love triangle as written by two adult men, Birds of Prey presents strong women overcoming difficult personal challenges while defending their city. It’s not hard to see why Birds of Prey is still in print, while Spiderman Loves Mary Jane ran only briefly.

Furthermore, with the recent spate of silver-screen adaptations of comic book characters, superheroes have become increasingly more mainstream and accessible to the general public. This offers the comic book industry an opportunity to gain new readership, and especially to gain new female readership. One character from the movies who shows the potential for female superheroes is Marvel’s Black Widow as portrayed in Iron Man 2 and The Avengers. Black Widow only plays a brief role in Iron Man 2, but even there manages to make an impression after being featured in a scene where she takes down a hallway full of armed assailants. Her role in The Avengers only improves on this image as she is depicted not only with impressive martial arts skills but also as capable of mentally competing with her opponents. This is best depicted in scenes where she pretends to be interrogated by her enemies while managing to elicit the information she wants from them. Black Widow has shown what superheroines can be, and hopefully her success will lead to more strong female characters both in movies and in comics.

Comic books have distinctive traits. Many of the characters were created in times very different from our own. Characters such as Superman, Batman, and Captain
America have been around for sixty or seventy years. Characters’ story lines will continue for many years, and characters are often written by many different writers. Because of this, characters are frequently revamped or portrayed in different ways based on whoever is writing them. Events are retconned out of continuity, and origin stories are updated to fit more modern times. One writer may kill off characters that he or she is not fond of, and a few years later a writer who liked the characters can bring them back from the dead. Because of this unique nature of the medium, comic books offer opportunities for characters to be improved, making the possibility of strong superheroines arising from formerly weak superheroines a very real one.

In 1988 Barbara Gordon, the original Batgirl, was shot by the Joker and paralyzed from the waist down in the comic. Although she nobly continued her involvement in crime fighting by becoming the information broker Oracle, fans bemoaned the loss of the Batgirl who flew across rooftops. For over twenty years Barbara fought from the confinement of a wheelchair. Then, with the relaunch of DC Comics’ entire franchise, Barbara finally regained the use of her legs. Not only that, but Batgirl once again found herself starring in her own line of comic books. The series has done well, and offers more evidence that women do have their place in comics. With luck, more women in comics will follow in Barbara’s footsteps, shaking off the dust of all the things that have held them back and rising up to a new era of comics: the era of the superheroine.


