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Sexualization of Violence in Comics:

Fact or Phallusy [*sic*]?

I. Introduction and Case Study

What's perhaps most disturbing about [the Harley Quinn suicide art] contest... is that it essentially prohibits comic artists who are opposed to the eroticization of violence against women from applying for the honor of drawing a strong female character.”—Callie Beusman, editorial assistant, Jezebel.com

Comic books have long been a controversial medium and frequent battleground in the ongoing battle of the sexes. In addition to the exaggerated physical assets and minimal costumes worn by many female characters in comics, there is also the matter of violence against these characters, which is often just as stylized and overblown as their attire. Feminist authors such as Callie Beusman of Jezebel.com and feminist watchdog groups charge that such violence, which often includes rape, torture, and even murder, when committed on the person of these characters, sends a clear message that violence against women, especially of the sexualized variety, is acceptable. However, let us consider the case of Harley Quinn and the recent backlash against the submissions call for the reboot of her comic as a sort of acid test to consider the veracity of these charges and their applicability to real life. By taking a reasoned and rational look at the genesis of the character and the nature of the reboot, we will be left with one inescapable conclusion: One page in one comic does not an overriding cultural ethos make, no matter how hard certain social elements strive to make it so.

On September 5th, 2013, DC Comics sent out a submission call on the Internet, offering a staff artist job to an artist who managed to successfully draw Harley Quinn, former villain and now antihero, in an array of suicide attempts on a single page. The first panel called for her to be standing on a rooftop wielding a detached cellular tower during a lightning storm. The second requested that she be portrayed wearing a bikini made of raw chicken and sitting in an alligator pond in hopes of being devoured. The third panel depicted Harley standing in a whale's mouth, cheerfully tickling the roof of said mouth with a feather, presumably to induce the whale to swallow her a la Jonah. It was the fourth panel, however, that prompted the most strident outcries:

Harley sitting naked in a bathtub with toasters, blow dryers, blenders, appliances all dangling above the bathtub and she has a cord that will release them all. We are watching the moment before the inevitable death. Her expression is one of "oh well, guess that's it for me" and she has resigned herself to the moment that is going to happen (Melrose).

The timing of this contest was unquestionably unfortunate, coming only three days before the beginning of National Suicide Prevention Week. The move prompted a joint statement from the American Psychiatric Association, National Alliance on Mental Illness, and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, which condemned the contest as "potentially dangerous" and read:

We believe that instead of making light of suicide, DC Comics could have used this opportunity to host a contest looking for artists to depict a hopeful message that there is help for those in crisis. This would have been a positive message to send, especially to young readers (Truitt).

A number of online publications and commentary sites picked up the furor, which quickly separated itself into three basic rubrics:

- 1) DC Comics has no business glamorizing or sexualizing suicide.
- 2) DC Comics is arguably misogynistic and degrades women.

3) Comics in general are misogynistic and degrading to women.

In the aftermath of this transparent publicity stunt, DC Comics apologized to readers and artists alike who were offended by the content. They pointed out that, unbeknownst to the general public, the entire page was intended as a dream sequence with a Looney Tunes feel and was not to be taken seriously. The page in question was intended for the re-launch of the Harley Quinn franchise, issue #0, and the story would be necessarily short-lived if the main character killed herself on page one. DC quickly removed the contest and all mentions of it from their website, but not before a number of artists had already completed their entries. These entries were subsequently posted online, and in some cases were even used as background illustrations for the texts of the commentary sites.



Left: Harley Quinn "0" Submission by "BloodySamoan"; Right: "Quinnicide" by Phillip M. Johnson

(DeviantArt.com)

II. Anatomy of a Character

The trope of sensationalized female character deaths has long haunted the medium, as has a terrible tendency to oversexualize and objectify women characters; it's almost surprising that it's taken DC this long to combine the two into a vile heap of casual sexism — because female suicide is *so fascinating and compelling and cool* [emphasis added]... —Callie Beusman

The problem with all of these arguments is that they overlook the essential nature of the character, as well as the general nature of comic books across the spectrum. Therefore, a closer look at the personality of Harley Quinn and DC in general is fitting to understand how and where these arguments do and do not hold water.

First, let us begin with considering how gender roles are portrayed in comic books. The men are typically muscular, if not outright musclebound, obviously well-endowed behind codpieces and under skintight costumes, and cerebral. The women of this world are often depicted as elderly and incapable of defending themselves from a number of threats both mundane and metahuman or as overtly sexualized caricatures with outsized mammary glands and a more or less complete lack of intelligence or common sense. One humorous and nominally less offensive example is Daphne, from the *Scooby Doo* cartoons and comics, a franchise also owned by DC. Daphne frequently finds herself in the position of hapless hostage *cum* eye candy, waiting for the valiant Fred, the brilliant-in-spite-of-himself Shaggy, and the titular hound to find and rescue her from the threat *du jour*.

DC Comics has long portrayed its heroes and villains with a number of psychological glitches and twitches. Some of the more notorious examples are the pedophilic Mad Hatter with his proclivity for little blonde girls, the narcissistic Riddler and his obsessive need to leave a

calling card for his crimes, and even Batman himself, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and possibly dissociative identity disorder. In many cases, these people are actually self-defeating because of their pathological psyches. Knowing this gives a context to look harder at the character of Harley Quinn specifically and understand why DC would not see such a range of suicide attempts as out of context or character for her.

Dr. Harleen Quinzel began her career with DC in 1992, working in Gotham City's infamous Arkham Asylum as a psychologist who was tasked with trying to unravel the tangled threads of the Joker's twisted mind (Reed). Instead of curing him, however, she quickly succumbed to a recognized psychological dysfunction known as *hybristophilia*, defined by The Free Dictionary as "[a] paraphilia [*sexual fetish*] in which a person is sexueroerotically attracted to a person who has committed an outrage or a gruesome crime (Segan's Medical Dictionary)." This syndrome, also referred to informally as "Bonnie and Clyde syndrome" and in certain tightly controlled circumstances used interchangeably with Stockholm syndrome, sent Dr. Quinzel into a tailspin.

She adopted the clownish demeanor of her lover/mentor/tormentor, took on the moniker of Harley Quinn, and in short became just as ruthless, sadistic, and chaotic as the Joker himself. Indeed, the parallels between the Joker and Harley Quinn are so obvious that it could fairly be argued that she is little more than a female version of the Joker designed specifically to attract (or pander to) the female demographic for DC during a period of flagging readership across the board, but particularly among girls and women, in the wake of the highly publicized death of Superman.

Unlike the Joker, Quinn has several redeeming qualities. When the abuse she undergoes at the Joker's hands becomes too much, she walks away in true supervillain fashion. Renouncing

her evil ways and seeking to make amends for her past misdeeds, she joins the Suicide Squad, a group of superheroes working for the US government who take their team name from the idea that their assignments are tantamount to active and direct suicide. Nevertheless, they always prevail for truth and justice. Harley recognizes her illness and makes a concerted effort to “fix” herself, albeit in a self-destructive manner.

Given this, it is not only reasonable but realistic to assume that her dreams would be more than a little troubled. Many survivors of abusive relationships, both male and female, report thoughts of suicide, nightmares, or fantasizing about self-harm scenarios. In Quinn’s case, the fact that she was an active and willing participant in her own downfall, albeit through a form of mental illness which raises the necessary adjunct issue of just how culpable she truly was, would almost inevitably lead to a number of such happenstances. Indeed, the very fact that she is a trained clinical psychologist may actually have left her more vulnerable to them, because she understands on an intellectual level the mechanisms and thought processes which would likely lead to these feelings and ideas and would be in a state of constant conflict as a result.

According to Dr. Steven Barney, president of the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association and an associate professor of psychology at Southern Utah University, it may well be that Quinn’s innate fascination with the darker aspects of the human psyche and her interest in studying subjects who display aberrant psychology may have unconsciously led to her role as the Joker’s paramour. She likely had no initial intention of falling prey to his blandishments and was well aware of his dangerously chaotic nature, but gradually her deeply buried unconscious desires and her conscious need to maintain professional distance were drawn into inevitable conflict. Dr. Barney likens this struggle to submerging a beach ball. “It’s easy to hold the ball

underwater for a while, but if you have any weaknesses in your arms, sooner or later the pressure to release the ball becomes unbearable,” he said in an oral interview with the author (Barney).

III. Suicide and Sex in Comics

Anyone who knows anything about Harley Quinn knows she shares Joker’s interest in the macabre. A contest to find out which artist can be most creative about her suicide would seem something Harley would do to try and locate someone with her same sense of warped perception of the world. – User/commentator “Brian From Canada,” Robot6.com

In 1999, Gail Simone, a staff writer for DC Comics, coined the phrase “women in refrigerators” as shorthand for the often overblown deaths and violence perpetrated against female characters (Burlingame). This phrase stems from the reboot of the Green Lantern franchise, in which the titular hero returns home to find his girlfriend has been murdered and her body stuffed in the refrigerator. However, this phrase also serves as a ghoulish double entendre, referring not merely to the death of the characters but as a macabre reference to the intermediate destination of murder victims between the scene of the crime and the cemetery or crematorium, as appropriate: the morgue.

The idea of violence against women in comics is certainly not a new one. As comics have become progressively darker and edgier, comic writers have found new and more exotic ways to kill off female characters. One particularly famous example is the demise of Shelly Webster in James O’Barr’s classic paranormal graphic novel *The Crow*, who died as a result of a brutal gang rape. In O’Barr’s unique case, he was grieving the death of his fiancée, who died in precisely that fashion. Another is that of the character Silhouette in *The Watchmen*, whose death is made to appear directly linked to her public lesbianism. In the majority of cases, Simone observed the

overriding reason for such deaths is generally to give the hero “manpain” and a motivation for revenge.

Comic books serve as a funhouse mirror of reality, not a template for it. Rapists and murderers, as well as even worse deviants, are dealt with harshly in these pages and often meet their demise at the hands of their own machinations, with a well-timed push from the hero or heroine. In DC’s case, one particular aspect of a villain’s psyche becomes the trope that informs their every move, as with early Harley Quinn/the Joker storylines, where her hybristophilia coupled with a formidable intellect results in a sexualized, less successful version of her twisted love interest. Nevertheless, the character must not only be true to their own mind, but also behave in a realistic way even in utterly unrealistic circumstances, as with Harvey “Two-Face” Dent, whose obsessive-compulsive disorder demands that his notorious coin be employed on every decision he makes. Failure to involve this prop results in acute psychological discomfort until he rectifies this oversight, and was used as the key to his defeat by the Dark Knight and the Boy Wonder in the movie *Batman Forever*.

Many feminist comic readers and critics argue that women are unfairly and illogically portrayed as “cut-rate” versions of male heroes and villains, although this sentiment has become fairly muted in the outcry over the perceived unfairness of gender portrayals in comics. In the case of Harley Quinn, there is a certain amount of justification to this argument. However, when the feminist argument is added to that of Harley Quinn’s apparent attempts to court death in DC’s fan art contest, the resulting logical edifice ends up working against the argument for a complex of reasons.

First, Quinn has extricated herself from an abusive relationship in which she could only be the sidekick/punching bag. In doing so, she established a sense of self-worth and positive self-

image which the suicide attempts portrayed belie. Second, it is reasonable to argue that Quinn is not attempting passive suicide, such as “suicide by cop” or agitating a supervillain into taking out their frustrations on her. In the case of the portrayals DC specified, she is an active, even gleeful participant in her own death, albeit in a dream sequence.

When she fails to get struck by lightning, even though bolts from the heavens are striking everywhere but where she is standing with a large detached cellular tower, one possible interpretation is that the gods themselves are refusing her plea for death. Her failure to get eaten by alligators, even though she’s wearing a bikini made of raw chicken, may be seen as an intensely personal indictment of her own physical appeal, especially when the specified look with which she is to be drawn is taken into consideration. “Not only can I not believe I’m here, but even *alligators* don’t want to eat me!” is the underlying message, which in its own turn virtually demands the reader’s attention be directed to considerations of psychosexual Freudian and Jungian archetypes and sexual activities such as matters of personal attractiveness and her “suitability” as the recipient of oral sex which range far beyond the scope of this discussion.

Standing in the mouth of a whale is the only panel in which Quinn is depicted as having a good time, and even then, we can only assume this attempt is doomed to failure as well because of the presence of the fourth panel. This also feeds further into the “I’m not good enough to be eaten” idea considered in panel two.

Finally, she rigs up a diabolically clever Rube Goldberg mechanism consisting of various electrical household appliances and a cord, which she need only cut or pull to achieve the desired result of dropping the charged devices into the water she herself occupies, thereby completing and simultaneously terminating her desire for death. The interesting thing about this method, if “interesting” is the word to apply, is that out of all the methods she considered, this is the one

with both the highest probability of success and the only one that requires her direct intervention to function properly. In this case, it is as though she decided to stop leaving her fate in the hands of Fate and decided to take a more proactive and certain role.

Dr. Barney commented particularly on the disconnect among the suicide scenarios mentioned. “The odds of getting struck by lightning, even during a lightning storm and holding a metal contraption, are something like 10,000,000 to one,” he remarked. The alligator and whale scenes were even more improbable, because the alligators must be hungry or they will not attack and the whale is as likely to vomit as a result of having its uvula tickled as to swallow. In the latter case, this problem is compounded by the logistical difficulties of getting into the whale’s mouth in the first place, as one can hardly expect the leviathan to open its mouth placidly so Quinn can jump inside. The negative visceral reaction to the bathtub scene, he said, is the most rational because “People do this in real life. They don’t generally go to such extreme lengths, but this attempt is by far the most plausible (Barney).”

However, the question of each attempt’s implausibility within the context of the dream sequence was countered during the interview by pointing out that Quinn’s psyche has evolved through intimate and direct experience of psychological dysfunction. The evolution of her dysfunction and its likely retained presence in various forms in her mind renders it only natural that she would question her self-worth, her sexuality, and even on some level pray for death in the most fundamentally religious sense, which Dr. Barney conceded would be consistent with the self-destructive impulse Freud called the *thanatos* drive, the counter to the *libido* or survival instinct.

What all these attempts have in common is that she is the orchestrator and conductor of her own doom. She needs no man, or anyone else, to help her shuffle loose the mortal coil,

although Dr. Barney raised the issue that in the first three scenarios, her demise still relied heavily on external factors (Barney). There is no outside intelligence guiding or directing her hand, no reliance on anyone else to end her presumed suffering. The fact that she is nude in the bathtub proves nothing except that even the most severely disturbed individuals generally prefer not to wear clothing in the bathtub. As she is working out scenarios by which she can die by her own hand, or at the very least as a direct result of her own actions, she is behaving in a way that is perfectly legitimate given the circumstances in which she has been placed and therefore could be argued to be acting in accord with feminist principles of self-reliance.

Many who commented on the nudity required in panel four of the contest made much of the fact that nudity was specifically stated as necessary to begin with. The argument here is that if nudity in the bathtub can be assumed, then emphasizing it only sexualizes something that should not and cannot be made sexy.

There are two possible counterarguments to this statement. One is the ever-increasing popularity of so-called “snuff films,” in which a nude man or woman is killed, often in barbaric ways. Snuff films and their viewers are themselves symptomatic of other paraphilias, but it can be argued that *so long as the depictions are, and are understood to be, fictitious and the acts depicted therein are not replicated on living beings*, there is no inherent harm in this. Quite to the contrary, Dr. Barney asserts such transgressive fare in many cases provides a “safe” outlet for latent desires that could otherwise become dangerous or even monstrous if acted upon in the real world (Barney). This can be applied in a more subtle and gentle way to comic books as well.

The other counterargument is that Quinn’s nudity in this scenario is a result of happenstance, a necessity of place, and has little or nothing to do with the sexual assumptions

accompanying the presence of a disrobed human body. Therefore her nudity or lack thereof becomes more or less irrelevant in the context of the scene.

Another frequent observation is that comic books largely cater to adolescents and adult men trapped in a state of perennial postpubescence, otherwise known as Peter Pan syndrome. While this observation is valid to a point, it is also a gross and more than slightly sexist oversimplification, as it ignores the ever-growing popularity of comic books among female readers of all ages, races, and demographics, many of whom go on to become comic book artists in their own right. The overwhelming box office success of superhero movies in general seems superficially to accord with this androcentric perspective on comic characters and their readers, but women heroes and villains have become increasingly prevalent and indeed far more diabolical in their actions than many of their ovary-challenged opposite numbers. Additionally, the current artists and authors of the Harley Quinn series are a male/female duo, Jimmy Palmiotti and Amanda Conner, which surely ameliorates or negates outright the sexist connotations of Quinn's demise. When one considers that some 12% of the staff artists at DC today are women, it becomes clear that the game is changing with regard to how gender is viewed in the comic community (Los Angeles Times).

The most obvious and oft-heard argument is that comic books subliminally suggest that violence against women, whether perpetrated by others or themselves, is acceptable. The counterargument here is equally obvious: Comic books often serve as morality tales. The heroes and heroines generally treat one another with respect, and when this is not the case, the transgressor typically is punished in short order, often by their own actions. It is easier to spot the villains specifically because of the way they treat underlings, both of their own and the other gender. This is not always true, such as in the case of Starfire, an alien heroine who is largely

treated as a sex doll by the men of Red Hood and the Outlaws through her own opinions and beliefs about what constitutes acceptable expressions of sexuality, but this certainly stands as an exception rather than the rule (Hudson). For a better example of what a sexy but not overtly sexualized comic book heroine is, one might consider Wonder Woman's role as the lead and often only female point character in the Justice League.

IV. Conclusion

[Comics] tell me that I can be beautiful and powerful, but only if I wear as few clothes as possible. They tell me that I can have exciting adventures, as long as I have enormous breasts that I constantly contort to display to the people around me. They tell me I can be sexually adventurous and pursue my physical desires, as long as I do it in ways that feel inauthentic and contrived to appeal to men and kind of creep me out. –Laura Hudson, editor in chief of ComicsAlliance.com.

The quote above is both alarmingly accurate and terrifyingly inaccurate, primarily because of the assumptions involved. The author, while in one direction raising a perfectly valid argument, also completely ignores the Lois Lanes and Mary Jane Parkers of the comic book world. The fallacy of her argument in the other direction stems from the assumption that women cannot be legitimately sexual if that sexuality is depicted in a way that is not appealing to men. This comes back to the crux of the problem with the Harley Quinn debacle.

On one hand, the debate is restricted to her (subconscious) desire to end her life. This is an understandable concern at a time when teen suicide is a prevalent news topic, and parents are justifiably interested in limiting their children's access to anything that might suggest suicide is a reasonable solution to life's problems. It would have helped DC's case immensely had they given full disclosure at the outset and told the artists why they wanted this particular series of panels incorporated. While this would not have done anything to ameliorate the issue of poor

timing, at the very least it would have demonstrated that the underlying intent was not, as such, to glorify or advocate suicide.

On the other hand, the specter of nudity in comics and its inherent link to sexuality was raised yet again. Well-meaning but not completely informed people jumped on the bandwagon to condemn DC, whose stylized version of sexuality has been a bookstore mainstay for nearly eighty years. This in turn created its own set of problems, because it brushes up against the issue of whose hand is worthy to depict which gender's or class's sexuality and in what forms.

It is a lamentable fact of modern life that a woman who admits to being interested in or taking pleasure in sex and her own sexuality is considered immoral, a whore, and a "bad influence" on the women around her. A woman who dresses in revealing clothing because she chooses to is celebrated for her "liberation," but at the same time is condemned as a "rape magnet," a "slut," and a woman who caters to men's ideals of how women should look, dress, and behave. Conversely, a woman who dresses in clothing calculated to conceal her body is reviled as an uptight prude, especially if she evinces no interest in sex whatsoever, a classic case of "damned if you do and damned if you don't."

A problem all sides seem to ignore by mutual unspoken accord is that pens held by both genders have collaborated, even when they were nominally working at cross purposes, to create this conflicting and self-contradictory rubric by which female appeal and sexuality is too often judged. However, if men in comics are portrayed as the ideal of manliness, complete with rippling six-pack abs and outsized genitalia, is it not reasonable to expect that women in comics will receive the same treatment? There is nary a complaint advanced regarding how Superman or Wolverine are depicted, but Star Sapphire and Rogue are feminist-baiting time bombs looking for a place to detonate.

What must first be realized is that men and women are inherently different, both due to cultural and social acclimatization and because of very real, legitimate physiological and emotional differences. This does not mean that neither side is more or less capable of representing the needs, desires, and feelings of the other. Rather, it suggests that each gender views the other through a somewhat skewed lens. By initiating a constructive and realistic dialogue between men and women, it is likely that the art of comics would more accurately imitate life as we know it.

The largest problem, and the point both sides have lost sight of, is that comic books are works of fantasy, created by artists and writers and read by millions for entertainment. While they hold a mirror up to the issues of the real world, they are a dark, cracked, dirty mirror that does not and cannot accurately reflect all the shades of gray in the complex species we call humanity. In much the same way, they do not accurately portray the “average” human being of either gender, nor are they intended to. This same complex of issues is reflected, albeit in a somewhat altered form, in the debate about the use of condoms in erotic romance, the question of who should and should not write different forms and flavors of erotica, and what merit one side or the other brings to our knowledge and understanding of what human intimacy is and can be.

In the case of Harley Quinn, the fact the entire page was a dream sequence has gotten lost in the outcry over what is and isn't acceptable in comics in this day and age. Comics imitate life; they do not in and of themselves directly *influence* life, anomalies like James Eagan Holmes, who shot and killed 12 people and wounded 70 others during a midnight screening of *The Dark Knight Rises* in Aurora, Colorado in 2012, notwithstanding. While no one in their right mind will argue that suicide is an acceptable resolution to the day to day problems of life, very few people will argue that no one in their right mind has never thought of suicide either.

The final issue to address here is that of reality versus fiction. For this entire argument to be possible in the first place, it demands that all sides are first willing to cede the characters concerned a level of existence they do not properly possess. When it becomes apparent that we are discussing fictional beings with no existence outside of the pages of comic books and in the readers' minds, the entire argument acquires a distinct air of silliness. Dr. Barney points to the example of James Eagan Holmes as an example of what happens when severe psychological dysfunction and a shaky grasp on the boundary between fantasy and reality collide (Barney). However, he also notes this is an aberration, not a trend.

Ultimately, the Harley Quinn submissions call was a publicity stunt that went somewhat awry due to an oversight in timing. It cannot be argued that, whatever the initial intentions, it had the highly desirable dual effect of stirring controversy and provoking public interest in the Harley Quinn reboot. The first month's sales reports from DC concerning issue 0 will doubtless make for fascinating reading for comic fans on both sides of the debate.

Whether the reader thinks suicide is right or wrong under any circumstances, whether the reader believes comics are too sexualized or not, the fact is, it is time for people to start remembering that there is a hard and firm line between fantasy and reality, and become more concerned with the former than the latter. What is said and done as entertainment does not automatically have a place in the real world, but the dialogues controversial materials create can be invaluable for helping one sort out their own beliefs and ideas about what is and isn't acceptable, and why. It is in this regard, and this regard only, that the fantasy world of comics can be reasonably said to intersect with or have any effect upon reality. This is what makes comic books so valuable, and this is why the writers of comic books, regardless of gender or orientation, should feel free to explore socially relevant topics in any way that moves them. The

discourse thereby engendered in the public purview is well worth the discomfort it may cause readers. In fact, that very discomfort could well become a catalyst for social change. This, ultimately, is the true value of comic books.

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