



Save the Men! The Crisis of Masculinity and Manhood in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and A.E.W. Mason's *The Four Feathers*

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to examine the mythical constructions implicit in the representation of superpowered female characters, looking into how they reflect cultural norms, gender relations, and power dynamics. By using Roland Barthes' theory of "myth", this research examines how these female characters function as signifiers within broader social discourses. By analysing these characters as signifiers, we can gain a deeper understanding of their significance and the ways in which they contribute to shaping societal narratives. It investigates the extent to which these characters either reinforce or challenge prevailing gender stereotypes and societal expectations. This research focuses on the domain of comic books, doing a thorough examination of a carefully chosen cohort of characters. By using the Comic Vine database, which is widely recognised as a reliable and respected source within the community of comic book enthusiasts, this study aims to uncover the underlying myths that play a significant role in shaping the storylines and visual representations found within these comics. By examining the intricacies inherent in their depictions, this research provides valuable perspectives on how media serves as a mirror of and a catalyst for social attitudes towards gender, empowerment, and agency. Through the process of deconstructing the myths that are interwoven within the essence of these characters, this study makes a valuable contribution to the wider academic conversation around the portrayal of gender and the complex socio-cultural forces at play. Ultimately, this study aims to cultivate a more profound comprehension of the complex relationship between media, myth, and society.

Keywords: Female Superheroes, Barthes' Myth, Cultural Norms, Gender Stereotypes

1.1 Introduction

The representation of female superheroes in popular culture has seen significant changes throughout the course of history. The significance of their portrayal lies in their ability to challenge conventional gender norms, foster a feeling of empowerment, and advance inclusion. The depiction of these characters encompasses more than just a creative expression or narrative style; it requires a meticulous examination of several elements, including the cultural backdrop, the author's objectives, and the audience's anticipations. These cultural icons are not just fictional figures, but rather they include complex processes of signification and function as cultural symbols that communicate certain meanings that are profoundly ingrained in our culture. Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, introduced the concept of the "sign" in his work on semiotics. According to Saussure's theoretical framework, the notion of a "sign" is comprised of two fundamental components: the signifier, which refers to the physical manifestation of the sign, which might include a word or visual image, and the signified, which pertains to the underlying idea or meaning conveyed by the signifier.

In other words, the signified is the mental image or idea evoked in the interpreter's mind when they encounter the signifier. This concept of the sign has been widely influential in the fields of linguistics, philosophy, and cultural studies and has helped to shed light on the complex relationship between language, meaning, and representation. Saussure's theory posits that the relation between the signifier and the signified is determined arbitrarily, implying that there is no intrinsic association between the two entities. In this sense, the connection between the signifier (the word or symbol) and the signified (the concept or object it represents) is not predetermined by any external factors. Instead, it is established through social conventions and cultural norms. Additionally, Saussure contends that language operates as a sign system that adheres to a prescribed set of regulations, wherein the interpretation of a sign is contingent upon its interdependence with various other signs that operate within the system.

Roland Barthes, a prominent French literary theorist, expanded upon the concepts introduced by Saussure and formulated a theory that centres around the "signifier" and the "signified." He introduced the concept of "signification", which involves creating meaning through the interplay between the signifier and the signified. The term "signification" pertains to the mechanism through which signs obtain meaning and convey messages within a particular cultural framework. However, Barthes diverged from Saussure's view that the relationship between the "signifier" and "signified" is static and instead posited that the process of "signification" is a fluid and dynamic process that is consistently being deliberated and reevaluated by people as well as societies. It implies that the meaning of a sign is not inherent but rather is constructed through the interaction between the signifier and the signified, which is influenced by various factors such as cultural context, personal experience, and social norms. Barthes' theory thus highlights the importance of understanding the complex and multifaceted nature of meaning-making in communication.

Barthes introduced several significant notions pertaining to signification, including myth, denotation, and connotation, in order to delve into the intricate strata of meaning associated with signs. Barthes posits that the notion of myth encompasses the occurrence in which a symbol is imbued with a sense of inherent and indisputable naturalness, thus obscuring its constructed essence. In his book *Mythologies*, Barthes provides a comprehensive examination of how ordinary consumer goods and societal phenomena, such as advertisements, films, and fashion trends, acquire substantial symbolism and are used to construct a shared cultural archetype. According to him, the meaning of these cultural products is derived from their use of symbols and myths. Barthes' study elucidates the process by which apparently ordinary items and sociocultural instances acquire the capacity to have significant influence in moulding our comprehension of the surrounding environment. Barthes posited the concept that myths are neither natural nor universally pervasive but rather are purposely constructed by certain civilisations and used to reinforce existing power structures. This approach posits that the myths seen in our everyday lives are not objective realities but rather subjective interpretations that have been influenced by cultural norms and values. Barthes posits that "Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion" (128). In other words, myths have a purpose beyond their literal interpretation, since they surpass the realm of factual representation to communicate more encompassing ideas pertaining to culture, society, and ideology. The phenomenon of "inflexion", defined by the act of bending, facilitates the ability of myths to reutilize familiar components in order to convey new and deeper levels of significance that align with the cultural milieu to which they pertain. Myths have the capacity to transform signs into potent cultural symbols that reflect and reinforce dominant beliefs and values. By acknowledging the deliberate construction of myths, we may initiate an inquiry and contestation of the power relations that these narratives perpetuate.

According to Barthes, readers often embrace myths in an innocent manner due to their tendency to approach them with an inductive perspective, rather than actively participating in semiotic analysis (130). This phenomenon is made possible by the process of incorporating myths into a given culture and their aligning with pre-established beliefs and symbols. Consequently, it is possible for readers to first overlook the intricate depths of significance inherent in myths, thereby facilitating the acceptance of these meanings without undergoing rigorous analysis. Therefore, by using a Barthesian theoretical framework, this study aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the portrayal of female characters with superpowers, with the objective of exploring the underlying "myths" that surround their depiction. Based on the conducted content analysis, it can be inferred that although the female characters are intended to be portrayed as symbols of empowerment, challenging traditional gender norms and assumptions; nevertheless, their portrayal is influenced by prevailing stereotypes that limit their agency and relegate them to subservient roles, consequently reinforcing gender-based power dynamics. An examination of the different myths surrounding female characters might provide insight into whether they are often depicted as submissive figures or whether they possess agency and independent storylines. This method would enable a critical evaluation and interrogation of the dominant ideas disseminated by popular culture. Through the identification and deconstruction of these misconceptions, it is possible to transcend preconceived notions and the reduction of women to mere objects, thereby fostering a more equitable representation of women in the media.

In order to delve into the intricate tapestry of myths represented by these characters, I used the Comic Vine database, a prominent online repository of comic book enthusiasts. From this vast collection, I deliberately handpicked ten female characters from different comic book publishers to analyse the diverse range of myths these

iconic figures embody. My selection aimed to encompass a range of personalities, encompassing both positive and negative portrayals (superheroes/supervillains). Through a careful analysis of these characters, we can delve into the myriad myths they embody and the narratives they contribute to the comic book landscape.

1.2 Exploring the Veracity of the Myth of Empowerment: Ideal Beauty and the Sexualised Female Body

The notion of beauty has been thoroughly entrenched within our cultural framework to the extent that it functions as a metaphor denoting societal norms and standards of acceptability. Women are often exposed to societal pressures about their physical appearance, which may include conforming to certain beauty standards by practices such as altering their dietary habits, using cosmetic enhancements, or having surgical interventions. This effect creates a feeling of inadequacy in females, compelling them to adhere to a pre-established criterion of physical appeal. The perpetuation of societal pressure to adhere to a certain standard of physical appearance is largely attributed to the influence of media. Frequently, media outlets depict women primarily as objects of desire, neglecting to recognise their individuality and distinct personalities and traits. These communications contribute to the establishment and perpetuation of feelings of insufficiency, as women find themselves incapable of meeting the unattainable ideals of physical attractiveness that are portrayed to them.

In her 1990 publication titled *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, Naomi Wolf explores the adverse effects of cultural conventions that enforce unachievable beauty standards. According to Wolf, the beauty myth imposes a restrictive norm onto women, compelling them to conform in order to achieve social validation and prosperity. She posits that the concept of the beauty myth may be seen as "the modern version of a social reflex that has been in force since the Industrial Revolution" (10). The author argues that the beauty myth has resulted in the loss of women's autonomy and ability to make decisions for themselves since it imposes unrealistic standards on them. The beauty myth serves as a mechanism for the oppression and control of women, leading to detrimental consequences on their sense of value and hindering their capacity to exercise genuine independence. She asserts that "As women released themselves from the feminine mystique of domesticity, the beauty myth took over its lost ground, expanding as it wanted to carry on its work social control" (10). To better understand, the concept of the beauty myth functioned as a mechanism of social regulation, aiming to restrict women's agency in response to their growing resistance against traditional gender norms. This myth gave rise to a distinct set of restrictive attitudes and practices that curtailed the autonomy of women and perpetuated traditional gender norms.

Thus, the beauty myth not only supplanted the previous constraints associated with domestic life but also enforced more stringent and exacting ideals of beauty onto women. The author further underscores the notion that the beauty myth is now attempting to subtly and psychologically undermine the tangible and explicit advancements that feminism has achieved for women (11). This observation suggests that, despite the significant advancements made by women in terms of their rights and opportunities, there is a need for further efforts to address the social and psychological obstacles that persist within society. One may argue that the beauty myth seeks to undermine the progress women have achieved in their pursuit of genuine equality. The prevailing concept of beauty, as established by patriarchal societies, has resulted in a flawed understanding of what is considered socially acceptable. This issue has resulted in a shared disrespect for the subjective nature of beauty, as well as a lack of acknowledgement for its broader importance transcending outward physical characteristics.

Instead of actively encouraging the recognition and acceptance of many manifestations of physical beauty, society has inadvertently created a cultural environment that objectifies women and perpetuates their marginalisation. The concept of beauty has been used to develop a hierarchical system of power and control in which women are considered inferior, and their worth is evaluated solely primarily on their physical appearance. As Wolf aptly argues, the beauty myth does not pertain to women in any way; it pertains to institutions mostly associated with males and the influence they wield inside these institutional structures (13). Hence, this myth serves as a means to divert women's attention away from questioning the prevailing cultural frameworks that subjugate them, thereby enabling males to maintain their authority over those frameworks. This behaviour has led to detrimental psychological consequences for a significant portion of females, eliciting emotions of shame and dissatisfaction. Furthermore, it has perpetuated a cultural convention of scrutinising and marginalising people based on their bodily characteristics while endorsing the belief that only some beauty benchmarks deserve reverence.

The media's impact on society and individuality is often underestimated. We are constantly exposed to a wide array of visual representations that the media presents as aesthetically appealing. These depictions include several entities, including models, celebrities, and other personalities shown in magazines, ads, films, and television programmes. This phenomenon fosters a societal environment in which people have a sense of obligation to adhere to certain norms, resulting in an excessive focus on one's physical attractiveness. The media often perpetuates a singular idealised female body image, which fails to align with the wide range of physical looks observed in women in reality. As the proliferation of these images throughout popular culture expands, also does the corresponding societal expectation to conform to them.

The current study primarily focuses on the portrayal of female superheroes within the realm of print media, with a special emphasis on comic books. The media often depicts female characters with exaggerated body proportions, which may result in the formation of distorted body ideals among young persons. Consequently, women may develop unrealistic beauty standards that have the potential to adversely affect their self-perception. The inclusion of female characters with superhuman abilities in mainstream media might potentially function as a catalyst for empowering young females. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that these characters may also reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations. Female characters endowed with superhuman abilities are often shown in a manner that unduly emphasises their sexual appeal, focusing on their physical beauty and sexuality as a primary strategy for escaping dangerous situations. This occurrence perhaps suggests that women's success is often associated with physical appearance and aesthetic appeal rather than emphasising the importance of intellectual abilities and hard work. The physical appearances of these female characters are often exaggerated, making them unrealistic and unachievable as role models. This kind of portrayal not only reinforces traditional gender norms that prioritise males but it also sustains the notion that women are mainly valued for their physical appearance and exist only to fulfil male expectations.

Furthermore, this phenomenon serves to devalue the position of women, reducing them to mere commodities that exist just to satisfy the sexual desires of males rather than seeing them as independent individuals with unique aspirations and goals. The communicated message to the audience is harmful as it suggests that the value of women is only contingent upon their physical attractiveness rather than their ability and resilience. The possibility exists for the cultivation of a discriminatory culture in which women are excluded from certain opportunities or positions merely due to their gender. Moreover, it may foster a social climate characterised by hostility, hence increasing the vulnerability of females to incidents of physical violence and sexual assault. Through a comprehensive analysis of the portrayal of female superheroes, one may identify and critically examine the underlying gender dynamics, thereby initiating a process of challenging and perhaps subverting them.

After conducting a thorough examination of the data obtained from Comic Vine, it can be pointed out that the selected characters are consistently portrayed in a manner that excessively emphasises their sexual attributes. The chosen characters – Power Girl, Psylocke, Invisible Woman, Witchblade, Dawn, Vampirella, Lady Death, Emma Frost, Catwoman, and Enchantress are subjected to a level of sexualisation that significantly undermines their ability to exercise agency and autonomy, effectively reducing them to objects intended solely for the male audience. The data indicates that the female protagonists mostly use their sexuality and beauty as means of manipulation, seduction, and control over their primarily male adversaries.

Power Girl is well recognised for her distinctive attire feature, often described as the "cleavage cutout." Despite her significant influence inside the DC Universe, the portrayal of this character is somewhat overshadowed by her unconventional and potentially ludicrous array of attire choices. The attire worn by Power Girl is notable due to its overt sexualisation, mostly attributed to the deliberate design element of a conspicuous aperture in the fabric, deliberately situated amongst her amply proportioned breast. The main purpose of this design seems to be the enhancement of her cleavage without any discernible additional purpose. Power Girl herself confesses that her physical appearance often attracts attention to her breasts rather than directing focus towards her face. Regardless of the controversial discourse around this specific design element, it is disheartening to see that a considerable portion of readers primarily associate the character with this singular facet of her physical attributes.

Throughout her existence in the realm of comic books, Psylocke has undeniably been a character whose identity has been heavily influenced by her perceived sex appeal among readers. This particular aspect has played a significant role in shaping her overall portrayal and reception within the comic book community. The portrayal of Psylocke in scantily clad attire serves primarily to cater to the male viewer's pleasure. The character has also undergone a transformation, being portrayed as a figure of sexual allure. Psylocke, prior to her iconic outfit, was perceived as rather unremarkable in terms of appearance. The significance of a character in a comic book often lies in their ability to captivate readers and undergo substantial character development. In the case of this character, it was not until the creator made a deliberate decision to alter her costume by removing her pants and positioning her in a bent-over posture throughout the comic book panels that readers truly began to take notice.

If one were to choose any given issue of the comic book series featuring "Witchblade" from the most recent year of its publication, it would be challenging to locate a cover page that did not depict the primary character in a sexualised manner. The primary factor contributing to the sexualised aspect of the character's comic book covers is undeniably the very impractical design of the costume and exaggerated physical appearance. In essence, the outfit provides only sufficient coverage for the minimal area of her body. It is obvious that the majority of people tend to identify the character primarily based on her physical appearance rather than her acts of heroism. Similarly, in analysing the character of Dawn, it becomes evident that she possesses an undeniable aura of sex appeal. The portrayal of the character in various covers predominantly showcases her adorned in different types of lingerie, with a notable focus on accentuating her breasts. The perception of an individual being predominantly influenced by their physical appearance is a prevailing characteristic that is often attributed to her.

The character Vampirella is also mostly defined by her physical appearance. It may be argued that vampires in popular culture have consistently been shown as entities with strong sexual connotations. One aspect of their allure lies in their enigmatic, alluring, and seductive nature. Nevertheless, Vampirella exudes an exceptional level of sexual allure, as seen by the heightened intensity of sexual attraction. Much like, the character Lady Death serves as a prominent illustration of the prevalent trend of hypersexualised female characters throughout the 1990s. When perusing her comic books, it becomes evident that her character has prominent bosoms, exhibits minimal attire, and assumes provocative poses on every cover. Lady Death has undergone significant development and transformation over the years, resulting in a more intricate and multifaceted portrayal. She subsequently garnered attention and acclaim as a result of her exaggerated and provocative expression of her sexuality. Her physical appearance continues to be her most prominent attribute.

The initial characterisation of the character Emma Frost that any comic book enthusiast would provide is quite probably her physical characteristics. The exploration of her sexuality through her appearance has been a prominent aspect of the character from her initial appearances. Prior to her transformation into a heroic figure and subsequent inclusion as a prominent member of the X-Men, the character's portrayal as the White Queen had her donning very exposing white undergarments. By doing a search query for "Emma Frost" on Google Images, one might get insight into the prevailing perception of her character. The content mostly consists of sexually provocative images. Similarly, the character Starfire has perhaps become one of the most sexualised figures inside the realm of superhero comics. The focal point of appearance was her complexion, characterised by an orange hue, and her crimson hair, which commanded attention. Her physique was concealed by a limited number of purple cloth strips. Over the course of time, the character's initially revealing attire underwent further reduction, ultimately reaching a state of near non-existence. She made appearances in comic books wearing a bikini and sometimes even in a state of nudity, accentuating her physique.

Catwoman has been overshadowed by her sexuality to the point of degradation. She's always been attractive; however, her character goes deeper than a skin-tight catsuit. Unfortunately, her complexity takes a nosedive when creators rely too heavily on feline and female cultural connotations. When she's rendered with an extremely minimal waist but with boundless cleavage, drawn crouching at the feet of a towering Batman, her power is diminished. In many comics, Selina Kyle is restricted to being little more than an object of desire for the male gaze. In others, she's pitted against sexually predatory male characters. Her breast size and shape fluctuate more often than her moral compass. In 2012, the cover of Catwoman #0, drawn by Guillem March, was redone. The original design had the beloved character in an improbable pose on her knees without her torso visible between her exposed cleavage and rubber-clad bottom. Selina is often twisted submissively into feline poses, usually covered by the massive shadow of a dominating Batman.

While Enchantress' enchanting powers and unique persona offer ample narrative potential, it is evident that her depiction frequently places a greater emphasis on her alluring appearance rather than her autonomy as a multifaceted character. In many comic book iterations, Enchantress is characterised by revealing costumes that accentuate her physical attributes. Her attire often prioritises sex appeal over practicality or thematic consistency, raising questions about the intention behind her design. This emphasis on her overtly sexy appearance risks reducing her complexity and agency as a character, overshadowing her compelling magical abilities and personal motivations.

1.3 Unveiling Binary Patterns: Analysing the Myth of Dichotomous Representation of Female Characters as Damsels in Distress or Femme Fatales

The depiction of women in literature and other forms of media has long been a subject of complex and contentious discussion. Throughout different historical periods, the portrayal of women has exhibited a wide range of characteristics and interpretations. Within the vast realm of literature, the portrayal of female characters has consistently fallen into one of two distinct categories. These categories, which have endured over time, depict women either as highly idealised and helpless figures or as individuals of great malevolence. This dichotomy in the representation of female characters has been a subject of much analysis and debate within literary circles. On the one hand, we find female characters who are presented as paragons of virtue and perfection. These idealised figures embody qualities such as beauty, purity, and grace. They often serve as symbols of inspiration and moral guidance, captivating readers with their flawless demeanour and unwavering goodness. These characters are also often portrayed as helpless damsels in need of a man to rescue them. They are depicted as the epitome of femininity, embodying societal expectations and conforming to traditional gender roles. Their presence in literature can be seen as a reflection of the prevailing cultural norms and values of the time. On the other hand, female characters are also frequently depicted as individuals of great malevolence and wickedness. These portrayals often cast women as manipulative, deceitful, and power-hungry beings. They may be driven by jealousy, revenge, or a thirst for control. One possible origin of this portrayal can be traced back to the narrative of Eve in religious texts. In these texts, Eve is often depicted as a temptress who leads Adam astray, thereby perpetuating the notion of women as seductive and

deceitful beings. Furthermore, the works of William Shakespeare have also played a significant role in shaping the portrayal of women. Shakespeare's literary works feature a plethora of female characters, each with their own unique traits and characteristics. However, it is worth noting that many of these characters conform to certain stereotypes and archetypes prevalent during Shakespeare's time. Barthes states: "It is well known how often our 'realistic' literature is mythical (if only as a crude myth of realism) and how our 'literature of the unreal' has at least the merit of being only slightly so. The wise thing would of course be to define the writer's realism as an essentially ideological problem" (136). According to Barthes, literature categorised as both "realistic" and "unreal" has inherent components of myth and ideology. The genre of "realistic" literature often portrays a carefully produced representation of reality that reinforces prevailing cultural narratives and beliefs. In contrast, the genre of "literature of the unreal" presents inventive and imaginative approaches to conventional reality. By acknowledging the fundamentally ideological character of literary portrayal, we enhance our receptivity to the manners in which literature serves as a mirror of and a force upon the external reality.

The representation of women in religious teachings and Shakespearean literature has exerted an enduring influence on societal attitudes towards women. These depictions have played a role in sustaining gender stereotypes and the marginalisation of women throughout several domains of existence. This notion perpetuates the binary perception of women, whereby they are categorised as either flawless or malevolent, hence excluding any other manifestations of femininity. The persistence of a binary framework for the portrayal of women has resulted in notable ramifications, contributing to a limited comprehension of the intricate and varied nature of the female experience and viewpoints. The occurrence of gender prejudice within media outlets has been considerably nurtured as a consequence. The portrayal of female characters in contemporary media has continually been shaped by this binary framework used in the representation of women. Such representation has significant adverse implications, affecting not just the advancement of women but also hindering general societal growth. It is primarily due to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and the institutionalisation of gender inequality.

The comic book industry has been making continuous efforts towards advancement. However, a captivating contradiction still persists within this realm. Throughout the history of female superheroes, it is evident that they are often portrayed in two distinct archetypes, each emphasising different aspects of their power. Those possessing substantial power are frequently portrayed within two distinct archetypes: the vulnerable and dependent "Damsel in Distress" and the alluring and dangerous "Femme Fatale." These archetypes have become prevalent in popular culture and have shaped the perception of female superheroes in significant ways. The first archetype, the "Damsel in Distress," portrays female superheroes as vulnerable and dependent. In this portrayal, these characters often find themselves in precarious situations, requiring the assistance of others, typically male superheroes, to rescue them. This archetype perpetuates the notion that women are inherently weak and incapable of handling challenging situations on their own. By emphasising their vulnerability, these female superheroes are reduced to mere objects of rescue, reinforcing traditional gender roles and undermining their potential for independent action. On the other hand, the second archetype, the "Femme Fatale," presents female superheroes as alluring and dangerous. These characters possess immense power and often use their seductive qualities to manipulate others to achieve their goals. However, it is intriguing to note that a captivating contradiction still persists within this industry. In the realm of female superheroes, those possessing substantial power are frequently portrayed within two distinct archetypes: the vulnerable and dependent "Damsel in Distress" and the alluring and dangerous "Femme Fatale."

For instance, throughout her existence in Marvel Comics, Susan Storm, who is also known as the Invisible Woman, has been portrayed in several manners. One of the noteworthy interpretations pertaining to her character is the use of the "Damsel in Distress" narrative convention. The depiction of the female character typically puts her in a position of dependence or vulnerability, requiring assistance or safeguarding from her male counterparts, namely her husband, Reed Richards (also known as Mr. Fantastic), who often assumes the role of the heroic protagonist within their relationship. The emphasis on Susan Storm's function as the mother figure among the Fantastic Four has been seen in some circumstances. She is shown as exhibiting qualities of compassion and supportiveness and often assumes a position that fosters cohesion among the members of the team. The protagonist's abilities, including invisibility and force field generation, have been symbolically linked to her function as a guardian and safeguard for her familial unit and other companions. This depiction is consistent with conventional gender norms that assign women to caring and supporting positions, highlighting their duties as spouses and mothers. Therefore, Susan Storm can be considered an embodiment of the Damsel in Distress archetype or the quintessential perfect heroine.

The character Emma Frost is portrayed as being a multidimensional and intricate personality that incorporates both the archetypes of the "Damsel in Distress" and the "Femme Fatale." She is often linked to the "Femme Fatale" archetype as a result of her captivating and manipulative attributes. She has a high level of cognitive prowess, remarkable psychic ability, and an authoritative demeanour. These characteristics have been used to depict her as a formidable and sometimes ethically ambiguous character, capable of using her charisma and authority to accomplish her goals. Emma Frost has sometimes found herself in circumstances of vulnerability or confronted with obstacles that need external support. It may include instances of being apprehended or encountering perilous circumstances that need her rescue by others, often by male characters.

The archetypal depiction of Power Girl, Psylocke, and Dawn commonly depicts them as embodying the "Damsel in Distress" paradigm, whereby they are portrayed as helpless and reliant on male characters for assistance. Such depiction reflects long-standing gender norms that have been prevalent in media for an extended period of time. Frequently, these characters are shown in situations when female autonomy is compromised, necessitating the intervention of male characters for their rescue. The need for male support not only perpetuates gender dynamics but also constrains their personal growth and capacity for autonomy. The prioritisation of relationships with male characters above their personal development may sometimes take precedence in their challenges and disputes. Furthermore, these characters are portrayed as exemplars of femininity, exhibiting near perfection and flawlessness. These depictions overshadow the multifaceted nature of their characters and underestimate their capacity for leadership, intellect, and unique abilities. By strictly conforming to these limited portrayals, these fictional figures run the danger of being seen as flat and without depth, ultimately failing to question or challenge established societal standards.

In a similar vein, the depiction of characters such as Catwoman, Enchantress, and Witchblade often embodies the paradigm of the "Femme Fatale." Catwoman is often portrayed as a highly skilled thief and a character with ambiguous moral values, sometimes blurring the distinction between a heroic figure and an antihero. Catwoman exemplifies the ideal of the "Femme Fatale" with her feline-like dexterity, astute intelligence, and inclination to engage in ambiguous moral behaviour. Her captivating and enticing demeanour, together with the intricate underlying reasons, has made her a very intriguing figure. The character Enchantress has the ability to undergo a metamorphosis into a formidable sorceress. However, this metamorphosis is accompanied by a consequential internal conflict as she grapples with the exertion of control over her inherently darker and more malicious nature. The presence of duality in Enchantress's persona is in accordance with the "Femme Fatale" archetype, as she engages in a struggle with her internal conflicts and entices others with her mystical powers. The alluring aesthetic of Witchblade enhances her captivating appeal in conjunction with her enigmatic and powerful artefact. The amalgamation of her sexual identity and authoritative influence enhances the development of her persona.

Similarly, Lady Death and Vampirella are often linked to the archetype of the "Femme Fatale" owing to their captivating and enticing personas. The enchanting attribute is often shown as a means of asserting dominance, which is further enhanced by their intricate moral compass and cunning, manipulative tactics used to accomplish their goals.

1.4 Conclusion

When examining the portrayal of superpowered female characters from a Barthesian perspective, it becomes apparent that such depictions often conform to the constructed myths prevalent in society. The archetypes they personify, such as the "Damsel in Distress" or the "Femme Fatale," as well as the myth of "the idealised beauty," often originate from cultural and social frameworks that possess the potential to both constrain and enable them. The semiotic framework developed by Roland Barthes enables a comprehensive analysis of the numerous layers of significance included in these structures. The examination of female characters with superhuman abilities using a Barthesian framework provides not only valuable perspectives on the characters themselves but also serves as a reflective surface that illuminates the dynamic fabric of societal ideas and desires. We need to question the fictional frameworks that have traditionally limited the portrayal of these characters and actively participate in the continuous endeavour of revising, redefining, and transforming their stories for the empowerment of all.

It is possible to envision female superheroes that embody courage and resilience. The enhancement of their portrayal in mainstream media may be achieved by placing more focus on their strength and fortitude, as opposed to presenting them in a sexualised and idealised manner. This type of approach has the potential to provide a portrayal of women that is more authentic and relatable. Additionally, it has the potential to foster a feeling of empowerment among female readers, which may contribute to the transformation of society's attitudes towards women. The use of intertextuality in storytelling also facilitates the possibility of reinterpretations and reimaginations, which have the potential to dismantle mythical constructions and provide opportunities for more genuine and inclusive representations. By acknowledging these archetypes' inherent flexibility, we provide agency to these female characters possessing extraordinary abilities, enabling them to surpass the limitations imposed upon them during their creation and effectively traverse the ever-changing terrain of our cultural narrative.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Comic Vine database, which is widely recognised as a reliable and respected source within the community of comic book enthusiasts, at <https://comicvine.gamespot.com/characters/>

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