

THE DAMSEL IN DISTRESS:  
RESCUING WOMEN FROM AMERICAN MYTHOLOGY

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## CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

The Damsel in Distress:

Rescuing Women from American Mythology

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Mythology is arguably the most powerful source of influencing and shaping society's gender roles and beliefs; additionally, mythology provides an accurate reflection of society's gender roles, general attitudes, fears, and preoccupations. Young boys and girls learn how to negotiate a complex world of possibilities, as well as manage gender expectations through observing gods, superheroes, and other notable characters found in mythological stories. American mythology, to include comic books, the superheroes upon which the literature is based, and the associated cartoons, motion pictures, merchandize, and fashion, contributes to an historical foundation of misogynistic entertainment and serves as didactic material for children and adults. The misogynistic nuances of the comic book storyline are not overt attempts at relegating women; instead, the influence is much more subtle and older than American mythology; rather, this debilitating feature is embedded in our psyche. Although the first comic book was printed in

1938, American mythology is largely influenced by Greek mythology, a major influence on western civilization. Overt and subtle misogynistic nuances have always existed in the patriarchal narrative of mythology, American, Greek, and beyond.

Misogyny, sexism, and inequality have a deeply embedded history in the collective psyche of American society and its Greek antecedents. These qualities can be found in comic books from their birth in the early 20th century to present day. Comic books are generally considered lowbrow entertainment and usually reserved for a juvenile audience. However, comic books have accurately captured American attitudes, values, and most importantly, the roles of men and women. While young boys and girls learn about gender roles, adults' attitudes are reinforced and reflected in the material; thus, perpetuating a cycle of misogyny, thinly veiled as entertainment but highly influential on gender development. The typical storyline, characterizations, and seemingly juvenile nature of comic book literature is robust material for perpetuating stereotypical roles and expectations, as well as perpetuating a sexist archetype in the psyche of American society. Although inequality is being rectified by seminal changes in American policy, laws, and regulations, and even comic books, it could take generations for changes to resonate in the American psyche as our current paradigm was forged over thousands of years of practice. The Damsel in Distress storyline resonates with young and old people alike. The story of Superman, for example, empowers men and appeals to women while reinforcing the idea that men are the more

capable sex and women need to be rescued. The entertainment value of this story overshadows the underlying and deep-rooted misogyny.

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Thank you Dr. Latzas for your passion and erudition in Greek Mythology. Thank you Rutgers for offering the class that inspired this paper. Ironically, my initial interest in this class was marginal at best. In fact, I saw Greek Mythology as an annoying deviation from my academic trajectory and interests. Needless to say, this was the last class I would have anticipated to have any influence or impact on the long anticipated Capstone Project. Surprisingly, the Greek Mythology class inspired one of the most enjoyable papers I wrote while at Rutgers so it was a natural fit to consider a related and pseudo-sequel topic for my Capstone Project. Excelsior!

I thank May Wedlund, 2016 Rutgers Law graduate. When I met her in 2011 I had no idea that I would follow her to Camden two years later. Our multitude of conversations about the sexes surely inspired my interest in this topic as she willingly listened to my seemingly nonsensical musings on this and an assortment of topics.

Thank you Rutgers campus and the staff for a surreal and monumental experience in my endless development as an adult. From the Gotham City feel of the city of Camden to the serene and rustic infrastructure of the Rutgers campus, the dichotomy between an institution of higher learning and the abject poverty and drab feel of its host city seems like a scene out of comic book.

Thank you guy at the gym wearing a Superman T-shirt. The duality of your existence was noted after you transformed from your business attire to your

cotton armor and went to training your mind and body, just in case. I wore the same shirt as I wrote this paper.

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## Introduction

The American mythological story of Superman debuted in 1938 as nothing more than a cartoonish character drawn and narrated by two teenage boys, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster and inspired by some of the classic and conventionally known mythological heroes, Samson and Hercules-both whom had unique and notable relationships with women. The story of Superman followed this trajectory. Although Superman and comic books in general have been stigmatized as lowbrow entertainment for youngsters they are an unequivocal source of American mythology, as well as the foundation for an entire industry that symbolizes universal archetypes, stereotypes, and gender role directives. As primary sources of popular culture, they have emerged from a specific context, reflecting the politics, prejudices and concerns of a particular historical moment (Aiken, 2010, p. 41). The story of Superman and other comic book superheroes might appear as an ostensibly random storyline or the product of whim and arbitrary fantasy; however, a look behind the masks, underneath the capes, and somewhere hidden in the fantasy, is an extremely profound appeal to the themes and storylines found in the American mythological world, many of which are universal in appeal. Thus myths contain images or “archetypes” (to use Jung’s term, which embraces Freud’s concept of symbols), traditional expressions of collective dreams, developed over thousands of years, of symbols upon which the society as a whole has come to depend (Morford, Lenardon, and Sham, 2011, p. 9).



The story of Superman and other superheroes found in comic books has an historical and sociological foundation. Like their more respectable cousins, film and television, they expose the collective psyche of a nation or culture because they embody the fantasies that fuel our national identity (Stanley, 2005, p. 143). Captain America, for example, represents the American Dream- the idea that the highest-level achievement is possible through rugged determination and lofty ambition. Stan Lee, comic book icon and former writer for Captain America, argues that Captain America represents the best aspects of America: courage and honesty (Dittmer, 2005, p. 629). The Captain America story begins with a boy named Steve Rogers who attempts to come to his country's defense by enlisting for military service; however, his frail and sickly constitution disqualifies him until he volunteers for a secret serum experiment that transforms him into a war fighting icon. The story of Captain America resonates on a variety of levels but the two most important qualities are found in the ideological nuances as well as the sociological context as the story gives readers inspiring hope and motivation for the weak or less capable, i.e. that limitations can be overcome by patriotic and selfless sacrifice-a cornerstone of the American military fighting machine.

Young children and adults worldwide are subject to the subtle nuances and overt characterizations of superhero mythology as the storylines transcend cultural barriers and appeal to the reader's innermost sense of truth, justice, love, and romance. Specifically, the common theme of an endangered woman being rescued by a male superhero perpetuates an indelible image of the incapable woman in need of rescue. The fate of most women in comics was dependent upon

the male heroes not only to rescue them, but also to give them a sense of purpose (Emad, 2006, p. 966). Perhaps the most cliché, but also most popular and resonating, is the story of a powerful man rescuing a vulnerable and beautiful woman in distress; otherwise translated as a prize for bravery or, in some epic poems, the spoils of war. Numerous examples, such as Lois Lane and Superman, Batman and Catwoman, and even Spider-Man and Gwen Stacy, can be shown to bear more than a passing resemblance to Greek mythological heroes, who themselves were often called upon to rescue women (Latham, 2012, p. 16).

The idea of the strong rescuing or gallantly coming to the aid of the weak or man coming to the rescue of woman has universal appeal in western culture. This often based on a nostalgic 1950s-style utopia that builds strong audience affiliation to traditional gender roles, innocence, and exceptionalism as traditional American mythology (Van Heertum and Hinton, 2010, p. 27). Although many storylines appeal to the male psyche and make for good general entertainment, there are collateral effects that perpetuate seemingly innocuous but serious social damage; for example, the female body image and how she is represented visual in comic books.

Women are usually drawn with hourglass figures, over exaggerated breasts, and suggestive or revealing clothing that is not practical for fighting crime, e.g., high heels, daisy dukes shorts, latex pants, or spandex bras that expose the entire upper body to shrapnel, heat, and other byproducts of serious crime fighting. In a survey distributed across campus about superheroes, when asked about their favorite attributes of superheroes 40% of females and 32% of males

responded that some physical aspect of this hero was their favorite attribute or the reason that particular hero was their favorite (Demarest, 2010, p. 2). The extreme physical physique or appearance has since grown out of proportion (literally and figuratively) in mainstream society as a tool for marketing almost any sort of beauty or androgenic product. Marketers know that men and women are susceptible to the iconic and hypersexualized images that pervade our psyche. The comic book and cartoon superheroes provide the reader with an unrealistic image of the American ideal, fueling a fitness craze laced with eroticism and innuendo. According to Demarest (2010, p. 4),

For the women superheroes, they are built to promote their sexuality. Nearly all of the women have hourglass figures that could rarely be accomplished in real life, like Barbie, with a small waist and large bust and hips. The breasts especially are very pronounced. These women are seen as beautiful in the American culture, and other women try to emulate the body styles.

Figure 1: Catwoman cover, shown with Batman, Volume 3, Issue 27.

Source: [http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Catwoman\\_Vol\\_3\\_27](http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Catwoman_Vol_3_27) Accessed November 27, 2016.

The misrepresentation of reality has enduring unintended consequences; for example, plastic surgery, eating disorders, and unrealistic expectations which are generally accompanied by pathological disappointment. Weida (2011, p. 101) notes that female characters share a stereotypical Hollywoodesque aesthetic of shampoo-commercial hair, an impossibly slender yet voluptuous physique, and overall Caucasian appearance. Physically, women are represented as unrealistically hypersexualized objects that add little depth or meaning to the traditional storyline. Since their earliest days, female superheroes have been overly sexualized with revealing outfits, stood aside in favor of male superheroes, and turned into damsels rather than heroes more than once (Davis, 2013, p. 28). Both ordinary damsels in the typical comic book storyline, as well as female superheroes, generally share the same objectifying fate, that is, scopophilic gratification for the male dominated audience.

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey, 1999, p. 837).

In contemporary vernacular, women who are incorporated into modern mythology, to include comic books and the associated spin off items such as cinema, graphic novels, and any other visual merchandise, are considered eye candy.

Figure 2: Catwoman, Volume 2. Number 1 and 55.

Source:

[http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Category:1993,\\_August?file=Catwoman\\_Vol\\_2\\_1.jpg](http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Category:1993,_August?file=Catwoman_Vol_2_1.jpg);

[http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Catwoman\\_Vol\\_2\\_55](http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Catwoman_Vol_2_55) Accessed November 27, 2016.

### **The Reality of Mythology: The Nexus Between Real and Imagined**

Myth in today's parlance is equated with falsehood, primitive science and mere stories (Dorschel, 2011, p. 96) especially when considered from a non-

mystical American or western perspective. The average definition of myth includes: an idea or story that is believed by many people but that is not true (Merriam-Webster); a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events (Oxford dictionary); an ancient story or set of stories, especially explaining the early history of a group of people or about natural events and facts (Cambridge dictionary). One of the most effective approaches towards a definition can be found in Csapo's *Theories of Mythology*, where he states that "myth might be more usefully defined as a narrative which is considered socially important, and is told in such a way as to allow the entire social collective to share a sense of this importance (Csapo, 2005). Myths, tales and other related stories for children have a significant role in all cultures since they can render the multiplicity of experiences; explain the behavior of the physical universe; and describe human nature and society (Marlina, 2015, p. 41). In layperson's terms, myth provides the "how to behave" and "what to expect" for boys and girls and men and women when faced with the dubious task of fitting into a complex society and unpredictable world. Myth attempts to make sense of the world by answering the complex existential questions that accompany the vagaries of life. The answers to dubious existential questions support the specific cultural and social nuances that shape society and help create the social structure needed to live in harmony and minimize conflict between the two sexes.

American mythological characters and storylines reflect social, political, and economic issues of the time in which they were written; thus, capturing a

crude but accurate reflection of history just as other forms of mythology and religion can be considered loosely based on historical events and used as didactic material to influence individuals and society writ large. In the history of civilization, storytelling is one of the oldest ways to preserve and sustain cultural traditions within social groups (Horn, 2015, p. 38). Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind (Campbell, 2004, introduction). In American society, comic books-inspired by Greek mythology, have been the foundation of an entire industry, primarily to generate profit but, due to their resonating nature, also perpetuate the collective images and stories in our collective psyche. Myth connects people with their ancestors, preserves tradition, and frames truth or reality in a more broadly palatable form. The veracity of a story is completely irrelevant as many change with time and telling anyway. Observing many tribes, Jung noted that the myth can give dignity, meaning, and purpose to life – it has an important and positive role, even if objectively it is not true (Adamski, 2011, p. 566).

Although making the seemingly futile attempt to define myth is important, it can easily overshadow the reality or purpose of myth. One can easily discount myth as not being real and thus unworthy of rigorous analysis. This position overlooks the sociological context and the social implications of where and why myth fits into our lives. Unbeknownst to most people, our daily lives are replete with rituals and events that worship the Greek gods. One of the most famous is

the Olympic games, an event that garners worldwide participation and attention. When one watches or participates in the Olympic games he or she is honoring Zeus and the other gods who lived on Mount Olympus. “The reality of myth” might seem like an oxymoron due to the juxtaposition of what science-minded westerners consider factual, observable, repeatable or quantifiable compared to fantasy or entertainment; however, myth is a social mirror that reflects a society’s values and attitudes; in essence, myth reflects reality and, therefore, is real in the correct context. Common mythological symbols and themes connect disparate cultures and religions. Myths and fairy tales of world literature contain certain motifs that appear everywhere with similar content (Adamski, 2011, p. 564).

The blending of fact and fiction has a powerfully far-reaching and more captivating capability. The unique context of myth has a greater reach than either fact or fiction alone; specifically, the amalgamation of the two creates a resonating synergy that captures a vastly diverse audience from young to old. By including ancient myths, stories, symbols and motifs, as well as historical events and personalities, into contemporary American television narratives, the creators of these shows facilitate a blurring of factual and fictional elements to propagate current discussions of American norms and ideologies (Horn, 2015, p. 2). The context provided by myth or story will resonate more deeply than a ‘matter of fact’ discussion of an issue because of this powerful combination; for example, Spiderman issue 96-98 addressed the growing problem of drug use and addiction. Comic books would later be used as an effective medium to address the entire



spectrum of important American social issues, especially as an innovative medium for educators.

Although American mythology is influenced by ancient mythology, it is still distinctly American just as other geographically or culturally distinct mythologies are influenced by ancient mythology but are still highly reflective of their respective values and attitudes. In her introduction to a collection of Wonder Woman comics, Gloria Steinem argues for the mythic status of Wonder Woman and proclaims, “Mythology is a collective human memory” (Bahlmann, 2016, p. 3). Dr. Jung (1964, p. 98) points out that the human mind has its own history and the psyche retains many traces left from previous stages of its development. Jung (1964, p. 98) describes this as the “collective unconscious.” The collective unconscious is a central psychic repository of common information that is inherited by men and women, most of which contains values and norms or simple guidance on how one relates to the world. This provides an explanation for why the establishment of laws to promote equality or the abolition of laws that fostered inequality change behavior but not attitudes; for example, although discrimination based on sex is made illegal and eliminated in practice, a misogynistic collective psyche could take generations to eradicate in order to achieve parity with laws and regulations. According to Jung, this collective unconscious is formed by instincts and archetypes that are symbols, signs, patterns of behavior, and thinking and experiencing, that are physically inherited from our ancestors (Adamski, 2011, p. 563); thus, adding resonance to certain mythological themes that inexplicably captivate our attention. The hero storyline, for example, is imprinted

into our psyche. Additionally, the romantic preludes, plots, storylines, or role of the female is a product of unconscious subjugation of one sex by the other and not due to a nefarious or overt agenda.

Regardless of the veracity of myth, and whether or not one is convinced of its position as a cornerstone in the social construct of society, the larger fascination is irrefutable and its indelible impression on society is undeniable. Whether one is a scientist who works with facts or a metaphysicist whose work is largely theoretical, myth captivates the whole of society. Whether those who support a myth believe it to be factual or not, they do believe it is significant in some meaningful way (Bahlmann, 2016, p. 11). Any diligent incursion into myth would be remiss without asking why people are so fascinated and captivated by myth and how something as ostensibly juvenile as a comic book can sell millions of copies due to its subject matter and the ability of the readers to relate to both the scenarios and the characters.

The first comic book, Superman, reflected the spirit of the times and composition of society as he, too, was an immigrant like most of the American population, struggling to adapt while chasing the American dream. Furthermore, Superman is defender of the oppressed and a champion for the ordinary people who generally comprise the bulk of American society. The psychological answer to the question of why people are so fascinated and captivated by myth is that myth resonates deep in our psyche, facilitating an identification with the characters, their personal struggles, and the complex world through which they negotiate their duties. Joseph Campbell's comprehensive study of mythology

transcended cultures and identified universal patterns and themes that resonated with all people.

Borrowing the term monomyth, a word he identifies as one coined by James Joyce, he puts forth the ancient idea-that the mysterious energy for inspirations, revelations, and actions in heroic stories worldwide is also universally found in human beings. People who find resonant heroic themes of challenges and questing in their own lives, in their goals, creative outpourings, in their day- and night-dreams-are being led to a single psychic fact. That is, that the creative and spiritual lives of individuals influence the outer world as much as the mythic world influences the individual (Campbell, 2004, introduction).

American mythology, as expressed in comic books by superheroes, provides the reader or viewer with an opportunity to relate his or her own struggles to larger contextual meaning as most stories are already encoded in society's psyche or collective unconscious as Jung pointed out. Many of our dreams or nightmares contain similar or related themes and symbols, thus making the connection to mythical stories deeper than basic conscious awareness.

The myth of the hero is the most common and the best-known myth in the world (Jung, 1964, p. 101). It can easily be argued that comic books' success is largely due to the hero being central to the story, his or her tribulations in the normal world, the transcendence to finding meaning or a role in a confusing world, fighting for some greater meaning against the evil intentions of some person, creature, or organization, and a romantic connection to a person in which he or she can confide or must express the human attribute of love or affection-all key elements of the first comic book superhero-Superman. In subsequent issues and motion pictures of Superman and other comic books, the hero frequently had to contend with social problems of the time, poverty, crime, war, and other issues

with which the reader or view could relate. It is worth noting that very little attention was given to the social problem of misogyny or sexism; only a Women's Lib issue of Wonder Woman.

The overarching element or common theme that resonates with the appeal of adventure is the journey, the perilous traversing that ultimately changes the hero as he or she survives a test. The journey is an integral part of the superhero mythology, making the myth recognizable to others (Bahlmann, 2016, p. 178). If struggle were not an inherent part of any journey worth making then it would not be worth making and such a story would not captivate the audience's attention; nor would the story resonate universally or be a story with which the average audience could identify or provide the medium to project his or her own problems. Life is replete with struggle and, when viewed through the aperture of journey, the struggle makes sense as the reward for struggle transcends the hardship. This simple and powerful encouragement to go on with the journey has been expressed in different words, at different times, to the yearning but timid, to the uncertain, the jaded, the hesitant, the dawdlers, the postponers, the fakers, the foolish, and the wise (Campbell, 1968, introduction). It can be argued that every person is born with the predisposition to journey. Additionally, the old adage that life is a journey adds credence to our attraction with participating in the coveted journey directly or indirectly.

Certain tropes or themes resonate more deeply than others such as the alter ego, which is usually inferior to the person or hero. The superhero's alter ego has a much weaker composition, contrasted with the hypermasculinity of his hero

self. Superman's alter ego, Clark Kent, is a nervous and clumsy type, lacking confidence, and who has trouble attracting the object (person) of his affection, Lois Lane. This story deeply resonates with the average man anyway but more so with the less capable in the way of attracting the opposite sex and overcoming his shortfalls. A sense of empathy connects the average person to the superhero. The transition from a frustrated Clark Kent to Superman is a way of sublimating life's frustration and overcoming ostensibly insurmountable obstacles while expressing the will to dominate and conquer what one wants.

Another way people identify with superheroes is through familiarity with the storyline or issue with which the superhero contends or struggles. It is easy to imagine a young reader of comic books who is as clumsy as Clark Kent but believes he has the potential to overcome his shortcomings. Readers of Batman might be able to identify with loss and the feelings of avenging loss (after Batman lost both of his parents to a gunman in a dark alley as a child). Through resolute dedication and commitment to his cause, Batman forged his ability to fight crime in a hopeless city where criminals ran amok. Unlike Superman, Batman does not have super powers. This atypical quality or deviation from the superhero standard is extremely attractive to the average person as his capabilities blur the line between fantasy and reality. Batman's storyline and capabilities skirt the division between fantasy and reality in a way that Batman's human qualities or lack of super powers have attracted a substantial following for these very (human) reasons. Additionally, both Superman and Batman stories involved a damsel in distress.

The significance of comic books as a reflection of society is easily illustrated by the market response to the content or material. Comic sales have been known to surge during times of national crisis. Comic books sold even more copies during the war time because the stories within them reflected events happening in the real world, thus giving their audience a way to relate to the war effort; though Americans left at home, especially children, were not able to participate on the field of battle during the war, the war stories told in comic books allowed them to feel closer to their fathers, husbands, and friends who were fighting in Europe (Russell, 2013, p. 123). Comic books, as a reflection of the zeitgeist, can rapidly encapsulate a crisis as well as the associated collective preoccupations; ultimately, providing a sense of comfort and reminding society that we all face the same challenges.

One of the most resonating and relatively recent examples of accurately capturing the American spirit is post September 11, 2001 (“911”) Captain America. Captain America is the embodiment of mythic and symbolic American identity. Younger readers may even fantasize about being Captain America, connecting themselves to the nation in their imaginations (Dittmer, 2005, p. 627), or endeavor to pursue a patriotic career or role as a way to come to the aid of their country or simply do what they consider their part. Captain America #1 reflected the events and images of 911, complete with box cutters, jetliners, men with robes, beards, and AK 47s—all of the ingredients of one of the most emotional events in American history. These images were seared in the minds of Americans who were bombarded with news reports and discussions that looped the same

words, images, phrases, and concerns. The issue later references the dichotomy and tension between Christianity and Islam. This trope reflects former President Bush's rhetoric of the events in terms of good versus evil—a very apocalyptic forecast and framing of events. The use of “evil” (more than once) in a presidential address to the nation has the strategic advantage of inspiring superhero-like zealotry in order to combat an existential threat to America, and its coveted way of life.

In the Gulf War, Kosovo, and Afghanistan the United States acted more in the line of a superhero than a Western sheriff. Saddam Hussein, Slobodon Milosovic, and Osama Bin Laden are portrayed in the media as power-mad, megalomaniacal supervillains who threaten the world and whom no one but America can stop. The American military's invulnerability and quick victories fit in well with the superhero genre, as do the recurring fights with Hussein, Bin Laden, and their proxies. Admittedly, it is unlikely that Powell or either President Bush consciously drew on superhero comics when thinking about world events, but it is similarly unlikely that Truman had the Western in mind when he propounded his doctrine of containment, although in retrospect the connection is fairly obvious (Coogen, 2006, p. 233).

Although American leadership might not be aware of the way they frame geopolitical events, they still do so in a way that resonates according to archetypal superhero framework. The tactics of the 90s proved no different than the tactics of WWII in the way of strategic communications through the use of mythological style reference. Stories, legends, and myth serve their strategic purpose for justifying state or institutional behavior, to include despotic or even misogynistic policy.

Figure 3: Captain America cover, number 1, showing him “decking Hitler.”

Source: [http://marvel.com/comics/issue/7860/captain\\_america\\_comics\\_1941\\_2](http://marvel.com/comics/issue/7860/captain_america_comics_1941_2).

Accessed November 27, 2016.

The Captain America myth has always reflected American nationalism and patriotic fervor. In his first issue, when a Nazi saboteur assassinates the creator of the “super-soldier serum” (Dr. Reinstein, an obvious allusion to Albert Einstein), Captain America captures the murderer and treats the reader to an image of the Captain bursting into a room in Germany and decking Hitler nine months before Pearl Harbor and the American entry into WWII (Dittmer, 2005, p.



631). The mythology of Captain America clearly represents the proud American value of fervent nationalism during times of geopolitical crisis. As either allegory or direct commentary on pressing social issues, the superhero stands as a unique tool for the critical analysis of U.S. culture (Chambliss, 2012, p. 150). The Captain America trope is one illustration of how mythology reflects society's values in the form of nationalism or patriotic fervor and over the top culture of John Wayne-style reaction.

Most of the comic books stories from the 50s and 60s reflected the core American value at the time, i.e. the white, heterosexual, male perspective but women were also subject to categorized expectations as reflected by women in comics. New artists and writers took over and Wonder Woman went through a subtle standardization process that more closely mimicked typical female roles of forties, fifties, and sixties (Dunne, 2006, p. 3). White males are the ones most often shown to be heroes, and often non-white characters are relegated to being heroes only for their own race, ethnicity, or nationality, while white heroes get to be "universal," and treated as the default (Philips and Strobl, 2013, p. 9). In American mythology, the dominant class interprets the world (and shapes mythology) in their own image just as, in Greek mythology, the dominant class (primarily men) shaped mythology and society in their image. American mythology has been used at critical junctures in history to impose an ideal image on society. Superhero comic books of the Golden Age fit this pattern of expressing the prevailing social ideology of their times (Coogan, 2006, p. 201). While the male superhero image is based on the dominant social standard, the

female's role in the mythological story is also based on the dominant social standard, that is, the damsel in distress. Dominant truths, as well as dominant falsehoods or stereotypes, pervade the social milieu, shaping thoughts and opinions of the audience. The examination of stereotypes in their historical context should accordingly prove particularly productive for the cultural analysis of comic books, as the displacement of unfavorable characteristics on to certain groups with little power to challenge popular (mis)representations (such as criminals, enemies of war, and minorities) can provide insight into the historical power structures (Philipzig, 2011, p. 10). As the balance of power shifts between groups over time, so do the dominant themes, stereotypes, and discourses.

Although the archetypal story emanates from ancient Greek mythology, the standard storyline was established early in American print. Hugo Hercules' introductory episode, a six-panel Sunday strip titled "Hugo Hercules Obliges Beauty in Distress," opens with a young woman attempting to board a speeding streetcar, which does not heed her plea to stop (Coogan, 2006, p. 165). Subsequent episodes follow this general pattern of man rescuing woman, even on the lowest level; for example, lifting up an elephant so a lady could retrieve her handkerchief. As the comic strip and comic book industry evolved, the storylines grew more complex as evident in their relationship to their Greek antecedents.

The final argument for the significance of American myth can be illustrated by the response it has provoked by the American government and industry pundits. In brief, the Comics Code Authority was a body that forced comic publishers to remove certain themes from their publications as a result of

an investigation by a subcommittee on juvenile delinquency in the United States (Winterbach, 2006, p. 115); for example, crime, drug use, and sexual perversion—all forbidden topics to address in comic books if publishers were to receive the Code’s stamp of approval. Various social science studies around this time and just before perpetuated the idea that youth were hormonally volatile and therefore impressionable, easily corruptible, and subject to the whims of various media. Not surprisingly, then, many adults perceived the existence of superhero comics as an intolerable form of cultural insubordination threatening not only vulnerable adolescent and even preadolescent minds, but also the traditional family hierarchy (Philipzig, 2011, p. 10). The hysteria surrounding comic books and their alleged ability to corrupt the youth was perpetuated by Fredric Wertham’s 1954 Seduction of the Innocent, a deriding tome responsible for the anti-comics campaign that engendered the Comics Code Authority. Publishers would abide by the rules of the authority and, in return, receive a stamp of approval on the front cover. Wertham’s fixation on sexuality and clothing, and the CCA’s rules on ‘suggestive posture’ and the ‘exaggeration of ... physical qualities,’ ended the careers of many women characters (Nixon, 2014, p. 271); specifically, Phantom Lady, Sheena, and Cat woman. Conversely, Batwoman was then created to shore up Batman’s heterosexuality, as his relationship with Robin had grown worrisome to the comic book critics. It is interesting how the Comics Code Authority levied judgment against the inclusion of specific themes that were considered harmful to the youth such as crime, violence, and alcohol while completely overlooking the social injustice that comes sexism and misogyny.

## **American Mythology**

American mythology generally consists of nursery rhymes, short stories, music, movies, jokes, fairy tales, comic books, and cartoons. Any medium designed to teach or entertain is usually inextricably bound to mythological influence; hence, mythology is a useful tool for facilitating didactic storytelling. Although Disney cartoons and a few other mediums have endured the test of iconic influence, comic books can reasonably be considered the most popular, influential, and accurate rendition of American mythology. Comic books have a variety of influences, but Greek mythology has a tendency to be one of the most noticeable, particularly in western countries such as the United States, which have a historical connection to ancient Greek civilization (Latham, 2012, p. 1). The sexist or misogynistic nature of American mythology is less of an original American invention and more of a cultural relic of past stories that have transcended various generations, cultures, and civilizations. Every story comes from somewhere.

Sexist notions regarding inferiority of women were well established in the ancient world by the time of Paul. Aristotle commented that men are superior to women in every way. Orthodox Jewish men thanked God in daily prayers that they were not born women. The Persian prophet Zoroaster taught of the inferiority of women, as did the cults of Attis and Mithras, two mystery religions popular in Rome at the time (Ewing, 2000, p. 14).

Just like its Greek antecedents, American mythology is highly androcentric, patriarchal, and cast in visual extremes. These extremes are representations of how common stereotypes are turned into archetypes and can help us learn about contemporary American social structure because

representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent the world meaningfully to other people (Maity, 2014, p. 28). Although comic books are hardly considered reliable news sources or even classical literature, they do accurately reflect the social and historical milieu, thereby giving readers a medium for both expression and identity. Long-standing American comics that appeared for the first time during the “Golden Age” of comics (the 1940s) and continue to the present day constitute a rich arena for exploring cultural meanings about America as a nation and the mythologies of national identity pervasive during specific historical moments (Emad, 2006, p. 954). Additionally, the lack of equality for which so many women fought during the various waves of feminism is either highlighted in American mythology or exists somewhere in the shadows of the stories.

The mythological hero archetype is a very important figure in the cultural imagery of the West as he represents hegemonic masculinity in action (Connell, 2005, p. 213). Women have been poorly represented in nearly every form of mythology to include comic books but also television programs, video games, and cartoons. Thompson and Zerbinos (1995, p. 653) note that:

More than twenty years ago Streicher (1974) looked at how females were portrayed in cartoons. She found that many cartoons had all male characters especially in those cartoons categorized as “chase-and-pratfall.” When females did appear, they needed to be rescued. Female characters appearing in “continuing adventure” series were stereotypical and had a tendency to fall in love at first sight. Even heroines who were trying to do good caused trouble for everyone in their paths.

Before the notion of equality gained traction in mainstream society, gender scripts were strictly defined within predictable and stereotypical parameters. When

women are represented, they take on very stereotypical roles; for example, women as needy victims and, conversely, men as protectors and saviors. Disney stories and cartoons are particularly powerful as they exacerbate traditional roles of men and women, i.e. that a woman's worth is proportionate to her beauty and that suffering will ultimately be mitigated when rescued by a handsome prince. Cinderella is an example of a woman who scrubs and cooks and is dependent on finding her Prince Charming who would come and sweep her off her feet, and save her from this slave like lifestyle like many of the female protagonists in Disney films (Dietz, 1998, p. 30). Disney ideology teaches young women to live within the limitations of their gender instead of their capabilities, placing heavy emphasis on beauty and hope. When stereotypical patterns are accepted as normal, they are unwittingly perpetuated by both men and women. Although men can be blamed for the misogyny and sexism found in decades of comic book literature since they were the primary authors and artists, women are equally culpable if they subscribe to the androcentric and demeaning narrative.

No single type of media is immune to gender misrepresentation as male and female stereotypes abound. Men are shown as rational, ambitious, smart, competitive, powerful, stable, violent, and tolerant (Towbin et al. 2003, p. 21) while women are depicted as sex objects who are usually young, thin beautiful, passive, dependent, and often incompetent and dumb (Wood, 1994, p. 32). In addition to mainstream men and women playing stereotypical roles, other less mainstream men and women are also casted in stereotypical roles; for example, black men were first introduced as lazy and then as athletes or entertainers.

Hispanics and Asians were absent from all media for a long time and when introduced they were presented as villains and criminals. Old people were also under represented or presented as sickly or insignificant. Asian males tend to be portrayed as either the evil martial arts expert or the non-sexualized, non-masculine male while Asian females tend to be portrayed as attractive and submissive or as an overtly sexual exotic beauty (Towbin et al. 2003, p. 22). Because media pervade our lives, the ways they misrepresent genders may distort how we see ourselves and what we perceive as normal and desirable for men and women (Wood, 1994, p. 32); the unintended consequence is the perpetuation of the negative or stereotypical behavior. Even obscure forms of media such as pornography normalize violence against or domination of women by men. The overwhelming material found on MTV consists [of] women as ornamental objects whose primary functions are to look good, please men, and stay quietly on the periphery of life (Wood, 1994, p. 33) while frequently being relegated to lurid sex objects in men's fantasies. Raised on images of buxom women and studly men, who spout definite ideals about what the perfect man or woman is, our cultural ideals laid out in complete exaggeration, how can we not expect our children to emulate and eventually perpetuate these ideals on the next generation (Demarest, 2010, p. 3)? As previously mentioned in the definition of myth, the didactic purpose necessitates passing down from one generation to the next; however, the availability of myth in so many different forms from comic books through cartoons to movies almost removes the traditional storyteller and creates a direct relationship between the industry and subscriber. For example, cartoons are a

legitimate purveyor of myth and a convenient way for a parent to relinquish responsibility for personally entertaining his or her child; hence, the unwitting perpetuation of a harmful narrative as the mother or father sits the child in front of the television screen.

An imperative part of investigating the power of myth is to illustrate the direct relationship between the characters' behavior and the impact on the audience. Gender specific behavior is primarily learned through observational learning whereby boys and girls learn what type of behavior is gender appropriate or inappropriate while each is subsequently rewarded or punished. Gender thus is something created and maintained in practice; doing a task associated with a specific gender creates and perpetuates meanings that define who one is and what it means to be a man or woman, or masculine or feminine (Carter, 2014, p. 246). Children idolize their favorite character, the character they have most in common with and are best able identify with, and try to emulate the characters' actions (Maity, 2014, p. 28). For example, girls may expect that they will continue to be victims and needy and that their responsibilities include maintaining beauty and sexual appeal while boys may determine that their role is to protect and defend women and to [be] possessive them even through the use of violence (Dietz, 1998, p. 426). Organic and seemingly innocuous descriptive language provides the foundation for how we see each other and how others portray us, to include the myriad of media to which we are exposed. Language used by families to describe boys is often centered on physical characteristics and such themes as



strength and agility, while language appropriated to girls by families might address affection, expressivity, daintiness, or fragility (Carter, 2014, p. 244).

Comic books, cartoons, television shows, movies, and advertising are all guilty of perpetuating negative stereotypes as the messages constantly inundate our consciousness and are then reflected in our behavior, many of which we are not even aware. It is impossible to avoid gender-based messages that, in some way, shape our beliefs and our behavior. We determine what is acceptable and what is not acceptable by what we observe. According to Bandura (1971, p. 2), virtually all learning phenomena resulting from direct experiences can occur on a vicarious basis through observation of other people's behavior and its consequences for them. Children model the behavior they witness in person, on television, in print, or via any other medium. Although it has been mentioned that comic books are generally considered juvenile, authors of comic books view their work as educational and informative; however, the validity of this claim is trumped by the overt or subliminal gender negativity that pervades the works. Their influential nature is not disputed as much as the nature of the influence. Superheroes have resonating influence in American society but the message warrants greater scrutiny.

### **Antecedents to American Mythology**

An examination of American mythology requires an understanding of Greek mythology, the most influential gods, stories, and the general role and status of the female. Just as comic books have been purported to represent the

spirit of the times, it can be argued that Greek mythology is a reflection of how its authors created Greek gods in their image, reflecting their beliefs, understanding of the world, fears, and passions. For instance, when they heard the awful roar of thunder, and saw vivid flashes of lightning, accompanied by black clouds and torrents of rain, they believed that the great god of heaven was angry, and they trembled at his wrath (Berens, 2009, Introduction). The need to explain things in general is a natural human quality as we long for answers and avoid the unknown or unknowable. From the earliest times, humans have had a need to explain the origins and wonders of the world: the mountains and the oceans, the changing seasons, the earthquakes and storms, volcanoes, floods, and the existence of animals, including humans (Daly, 2009, p. VII). Almost every culture has made up stories and invented gods for this purpose. They are often changed and even embellished over time. Just as the modern variety of disparate religions provide explanations, answers, and interpretations for the complex world in which its adherents live, so did the Greek gods for Greeks and so does American mythology for Americans; specifically, guidance on how to behave as a man or a woman. Although Greece is widely known as the birthplace of democracy, freedom of speech, thought, and other highly valued American values, women had few, if any, social or political rights. The democratic citizen body was composed of only the adult male citizens; that is, it represented a small minority (perhaps between 10 and 20 percent) of the total population (Raaflaub et al. 2007, p. 11).

Greeks were the first people to create gods and goddesses that looked like real human beings: beautiful men and women, old people with humor and dignity,

and splendidly natural animals (as well as a few monsters) (Daly, 2009, p. VIII), a very similar literary architecture to the superheroes found in comic books. Additionally, Greek gods interacted with humans just as superheroes do, facing similar problems and wrestling with similar dilemmas. Many Greek gods share the same characteristics, qualities, and abilities as superheroes, but exist on an echelon above in the way of mortality or supernatural powers. Just like each Greek god had a different function, each superhero has a different power. In appearance, the gods were supposed to resemble mortals, whom, however, they far surpassed in beauty, grandeur, and strength; they were also more commanding in stature, height being considered by the Greeks an attribute of beauty in man or woman (Berens, 2009, Introduction). Just as superheroes are reflected or drawn in extremes, so are Greek gods in the form of statues.

The first female, Pandora, was sent to earth as punishment, thereby unleashing a sequence of events that would categorically define the woman's relegated role in society. It was said that Zeus was angry at the world for accepting the gift of fire from Prometheus and set out to punish the world. To revenge himself on humankind, Zeus sent Pandora into the world and with her all the troubles and sicknesses of humankind (Daly, 2009, p. 121) enclosed in a jar that she was ordered to keep secured. Keeping the contents of the jar hidden from her is invariably an exploitative tactic leveraging the human sense of curiosity but also a convenient way to ascribe blame to the female for simply being human. Instead of blaming humans for releasing all of the ills of the world, woman's proverbial curiosity (Berens, 2009, p. 16) and inability to subdue temptation is

blamed. The story of Pandora could be a reflection of females in Greek society at the time of creation just as the role of females in American mythological stories reflects their position in greater society, relegated to subordinate positions, incompetent, and in need of rescue. The domination of Greek society by men had an exponential and long lasting effect on the relegation of future female generations as most of the misogynistic precepts were manifested in American society thousands of years later.

In addition to overt, subtle, and institutionalized sexism, the most debilitating and sometimes jocular belief is that women are inherently evil. This negative perception of women has been so deeply placed in the Western world's psyche that this misogyny became the reason for one of the most brutally organized crimes of the world history: namely "witch craze" or "witch hunts" of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Dorschel, 2011, p. 20). This idea has inspired various works in literature, cinema, and the most casual of stories. Children are raised being well aware of the wicked witch-always a woman and a byproduct of any story designed to strike fear in children. The image of women has been relegated to a very binary status, i.e. evil or passive (which most men would likely consider good). In Greek mythology, an example of evil is Medusa, a gorgon-- but really a woman-- whose wretched appearance turns anyone who lays eyes upon her to stone while Helen of Troy is an example of a woman made famous for her beauty. She is treated like an object, taken from Sparta to Troy by Paris, prince of Troy, and then made the reason, or blamed, for the Trojan War, a ten-year epic battle between Greece and Troy. This is another allusion to the problematic nature of

women and their propensity to cause problems, cost men money, lives, and inordinate frustration.

Women since Greece (and possibly beyond) have been seen as problematic, robbing men of their resources, and upsetting the balance of a male dominated world. Pandora was the first mortal woman in Greek mythology. As previously mentioned, she was created as a punishment meant to afflict men and the world with misery, pain, sickness, disease, and all of the other ills. The first woman was sent to earth as a punishment to mankind (Scanlon, 2006) yet all subsequent women are made to bare the burden of Pandora's reputation. According to Professor Richard Martin (2006):

She's (woman) one you can't do without. She's a *αλός κακός* ('kalos kakos') in the terms of the Greek, a beautiful bad thing; and so Greek myth, Greek poetry likes to have it both ways; women are beautiful; women are something irresistible; at the same time women make you work and so they are a bad thing.

Women wield a powerful energy in the form of femininity, beauty, and attraction; they are sexually threatening to men while men's efforts to resist them seem futile at best. Overwhelming feminine sexuality threatens men (Sorum, 2006). The famous mythological story of Samson is indicative of man's weakness for women, as Delilah was ultimately able to discern the source of his strength and then subdue him only after many failed attempts by the Philistines. His weakness, a haircut, may be an unacknowledged archetype of the vulnerabilities that afflict superheroes, such as kryptonite (Coogan, 2006, p. 118) or, more accurately, man's vulnerability to woman. This story is not only indicative of man's weakness and vulnerability for women but it also reinforces the notion that

women are inherently evil or problematic, robbing men of their strength and exploiting their closely guarded secrets. The former may be a fact while the latter may be a sublimating attempt for man to rationalize his weakness. This very phenomenon could be responsible for another common trope in adventure comics and movies, i.e. the use of women as weapons in that they are able to exploit man's weakness by leveraging their sexuality and, for example, as spies women could extract secrets more effectively than their male counterparts. Although most of American mythology is inspired by Greek mythology, the Christian religion provides the dominant narrative in American society as well as the "other" source of mythological inspiration for our stories, interpretations, and beliefs.

Just as in Greek mythology and the problematic nature of the first woman (Pandora), the Christian religion provides an equally relegating story on the origin of the woman. According to Genesis (Bible, chapter 2), woman was made from man. And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man (Bible, Genesis, 2:22). In addition to woman being a product of man and owing her existence to the sacrifice man made to spare a rib for her making, she also carries the burden of man's disobedience by eating "forbidden fruit." After being warned, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die (Bible, Genesis, 2:3), not to eat the fruit in the garden, she ate the fruit anyway and gave some to her husband. And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat (Bible, Genesis, 3:6). The story of Eve is an example of standard

objectification of women; in this case, Eve is demonized for her actions. The ideological corollary is the idolization of women as in the case of the Virgin Mary. This binary perspective, in addition to being found in Greek mythology, is also pervasive in comic book storylines as women are either heroes or villains, or good or evil; thus simplifying women to convenient bins of utility.

According to the aforementioned stories, woman is not only naturally subservient to man but she is also responsible for cajoling him into sinning just as women are frequently blamed for tempting men into other acts. Ewing (2000, p. 16) argues that the woman is always at fault, whether sex is consensual or not, because she is biologically different from men and she is the real source of his lust. Self-denial and asceticism have always been lauded as virtuous and moral traits but typically only in men like priests, ministers, or other virtuous positions. Women are actually excluded from the whole of Mount Athos in Greece, which is covered in Greek Orthodox monasteries, so that the monks may be protected from having to see them (Jeffreys, 2005, p. 43). Women, conversely, have been seen as incapable of restraint and therefore must be controlled by men, as illustrated in Pandora's opening of the jar and Eve eating the forbidden fruit. Woman was seen as a possession owned by man with having no civil rights supported by law (Ercan, 2013, p. 39). Although the subject is beyond the scope of this paper, one of the rationales behind Female Genital Mutilation is to reduce the woman's propensity for pleasure and therefore prevent her from cheating on her man. It was even argued that without women, there would be no carnal desires; hence, the belief that women are inherently contaminating or corrupting. St. Augustine

codified these views into the doctrine of original sin, which taught that Eve was to blame for all pain and death in the world (Ewing, 2000, p. 15), just like Pandora in Greek mythology being blamed for all evil in the world.

In many cases, the threat women pose to men is manifested in repressive laws and policies, especially in Muslim countries where women are required to suppress their femininity by covering themselves and are usually treated as second class citizens compared to their male counterparts. Religion is leveraged as rationale but religious myth has already been proven to be inherently misogynistic and thus provides an inadequate reason for subjugation. In ancient Greek society, women were considered second-class citizens and, in most cases, share the same status as slaves, i.e. deprived of civil and political rights. In the United States, birth control and abortion are examples of sensitive women's issues governed by laws designed to regulate a woman's sexuality.

In the Batman comic story, Catwoman is frequently seen as the instigator of sexual tension; additionally, she starts a jealousy war with Batgirl for the love and affection of Batman. Yet female superheroes have relatively rarely assumed a central role in comic book publishing, despite the emergence and evolution of feminism and a continued societal emphasis on the quest for gender equality (Palmer, p. 2). It is also worth noting that the two aforementioned female comic book characters, Catwoman and Batgirl, debuted in the Batman comic and not in their own comic books with their own storylines. Although Lois Lane is not a female superhero she plays an instrumental role in the Superman story but solely due to her utility.



Lois Lane does not take on narrative value as a fully developed character in her own right, but strictly in terms of the game of masculinity. Her function in this game is twofold. First she provides Superman with the opportunity to master physical challenges by getting into trouble over her head and awaiting rescue. Second, as we have seen, she repeatedly creates situations in which he can prove his hyper~masculine dedication to the heroic mission by rejecting her romantic advances (Philipzig, 2011, p. 69).

In addition to few female superheroes rating their own comic book, most of their alter egos are given menial jobs and occupations whereas male superheroes' alter egos are given more professional jobs and occupations. Wonder Woman and Captain America clearly demonstrate the emphasis on masculinity and femininity that define American comics in general and superhero comics even more specifically (Aiken, 2010, p. 46).

From a pedagogical perspective, misogyny is an inherent part of the subject matter; unfortunately, the overwhelming influence of this material has shaped the media and industry so that it is reinforced and then subscribed to by viewers and readers of the material. Misogyny and sexism are difficult qualities to escape and eradicate due to their pervasive nature and how so many components of our society have come to depend on these two qualities. Heracles, for example, does not engender an instant image per se but the name itself is synonymous with extraordinary strength. The Incredible Hulk, conversely, evokes an instant image of both strength and unrealistic muscle mass. Few people can picture Aphrodite or Artemis but they are known for their beauty just as many female comic book characters are based on their sex appeal. Poison Ivy is one such character that, without her sinisterly sexual appearance and venomous kiss, would probably not be as popular, especially to a male dominated and fantasy addicted audience.

Comics are more frequently being used in the classroom as a way to increase literacy and add context to print. Since they are mostly series of pictures accompanying illustrations and speech bubbles, they are among the simplest yet most communicative media of information traverse (Roy and Nagarathinam, p. 1). Although this medium is probably more enjoyable and entertaining than the traditional textbook, the unintended consequence is the perpetuation of the social nuances found in the subject matter.

Media, print or otherwise, is highly visual. The visual extremes can overwhelm the viewer or reader and undermine the storyline or character that is represented, thereby reducing them to a voyeurized object instead of a character of substance. A person is sexually objectified when her sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her (Bartky, 1990, p. 26). Males and females are hypersexualized in order to enhance appeal to the audience. This sexualized hypermasculinity complicates gender roles and stereotypes in that both male and female comic characters arouse sexual fantasy with unrealistic bodies and their powers to save the world (Weida, 2011, p. 100). Female comic book characters are also drawn in highly impractical poses in order to display both breasts and buttocks in the same shot. Damsel in Distress is also a fetish that is fuelled by repeated depictions of women in media (Roy and Nagarathinam, p. 8) usually in support of a greater bondage scenario to include a subdued and hopelessly struggling female--all designed to support the male bondage fantasy. This trope will be discussed later with Wonder Woman.

The first, and probably most well-known comic book super hero, Superman, debuted in 1938 and has since inspired various motion pictures on the big screen and television. The classic storyline is simple: Clark Kent, a clumsy and bookish fellow, transforms into Superman who fights nefarious villains and then saves a lovely lass who is enamored by Superman but not his alter-ego Clark Kent. This fact undermines the woman by teaching us that she is superficial and shallow and only interested in the magnificence of the superhero but not the ordinary man. This basic premise has striking similarities to the story of Perseus who, like Superman, also fights to save Andromeda, who is held captive by the Kraken. As an iconic damsel in distress of Greek mythology, the character of Andromeda relates just as neatly to the character of Lois Lane as Superman does to Perseus (Latham, 2012, p. 19). In addition to vanquishing their foes, they both embody physical perfection but, most importantly, they both receive a prize for their deeds in the form of the assumedly less capable sex, the female. Specific conventions of the superhero genre have definite roots in stories of mythological and legendary heroes, particularly in the epic poems that retell their tales (Coogan, 2006, p. 117).

Although Superman and Perseus share similar superhero and storyline attributes, the most resonating trope that unites nearly all American comic book superheroes is rescuing the damsel in distress. Other examples include Batman and Catwoman, Spiderman and Gwen Stacy, and the Invisible Girl and Fantastic Four. Pennell and Behm-Morawitz (May, 2015) posited that exposure to these stereotypic female victims, whose primary appeal is sexual, may lower women's

body esteem, heighten the value they place on body image, and result in less egalitarian gender role beliefs and expectations. Even worse than objectification, the damsel in all of the hero stories is taken as a prize for the man, reducing her existence to a commodity. In the case of Perseus and Andromeda, she was sacrificed (women are most exclusively the objects of sacrifice) to the sea monster in order to prevent the destruction of their kingdom. The rescue of Andromeda by Perseus was conditional and based upon his right to marry her, which he subsequently did even though she was already promised to Phineus, brother of her father Cepheus. This case illustrates the Greek tradition of passing a daughter from her father's house to her husband's house like a closely guarded piece of property. In the case of Perseus and Andromeda and many comic book story lines, the damsel is generally used as a bargaining chip, prize, or the object of competing love interests--invariably wreaking havoc on the semblance of order as evinced by the Trojan War or myriad of disasters comic book heroes cause when rescuing the damsel in distress.

### **The Longest Running Female Superhero: Wonder Woman**

A thorough analysis of American mythology through the scope of gender bias must address the position of Wonder Woman, as she is frequently used as ammunition to argue that women were not completely subjugated in comic books and that she is an example of feminism or female empowerment. Either may be true but one must look into both the story as well as the creation in order to render accurate analysis. William Moulton Marston, Harvard psychologist and inventor of the first polygraph test, created the Wonder Woman character with stated

pedagogic intent (Matsuuchi, 2012, p. 122), i.e. to socialize his belief that a battle of the sexes was imminent and that women would some day rule the world. This notion could have been more of a fantasy of his instead of an intelligent appraisal based on evidence of impending conflict. Marston was an older, successful comic book writer who was a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of DC comics. He was a clear deviation from the typical young, financially struggling comic book artist. In this case, he had more latitude to enrich his story as opposed to the profit-oriented artist who must adapt to the zeitgeist in order to maintain relevancy and profits. Since Marston's invention, Wonder Woman has been subject to a variety of storyline nuances. Ultimately her comic book life exists behind a subtle veil of sexism. During the high tide of the women's movement, when Wonder Woman should have been in the spotlight, she lost her super powers and opened a fashion boutique (Aiken, 2010, p. 46). Regardless of her early start as a strong non-stereotypical female character, the transitions between decades and writers have altered her physical image, the story lines and the professional roles available to her (Dunn, 2006, p. 4), reflecting the stereotypical standards or expectations of the time.

It was purported that Wonder Woman sent an encouraging message to young girls, i.e. that they could overcome traditional gender roles and rise to the occasion of any challenge; however, she was quickly relegated to the Justice Society of America team's secretary, a cliché and typically menial role for females in the American work force during this time period. This position was offered after other members were impressed by the work she did as an honorary

member. The intention behind the creation of Wonder Woman, according to her author, was to reduce patriarchal overtones and attract more female readers, as most have historically been male. Unfortunately, her comic book life has been subject to the same misogynistic overtones that afflict all women in American society.

Just like Greek and other forms of mythology, American mythology, as represented in the form of comic books, changes to accurately reflect the current times, which ultimately resonates deeper and speaks to a wider audience. Comic-book heroes may be published under the same series title over several decades, but their concepts are constantly changing; their fictional identities fluctuate as multiple editors and creators and changing audiences struggle over their definitions (Philipzig, 2011, p. 10). Wonder Woman struggled with a constant search for relevance in a changing American society. Some stories and issues are easier to adapt and address while others are more problematic. The storytelling in the comic book series has been as uneven as its sales figures, a reflection of how depicting an idealized woman is a challenge given how unstable and untenable the concept of womanhood is (Matsuuchi, 2012, p. 119). In the case of Wonder Woman and her tenuous position in the comic book world, the original writer, Marston, was succeeded by another writer who was brought in to “boost lagging sales” (Matsuuchi, 2012, p. 125). This is significant because the issue of *Women’s Liberation* (issue #203) was used as a way to connect Wonder Woman to current issues; however, the cover contained the typical visually stimulating, male fantasy oriented drawings. From the cover art this depiction of “women’s

lib” seems consistent with the expected comic book formula: a sexy dark haired woman haloed by savage beasts comes to the rescue of a blonde in bondage, breasts jutting out invitingly (Matsuuchi, 2012, p. 126). It should be reiterated that this issue was created for profitability and not to foment social change. In fairness, it should be noted that Marston’s original intentions were in the interest of equality as he attempted to positively shape young women’s lives by providing a role model whose story was based on female empowerment. Sadly, Marston’s vision was not shared by the corporate machine who owned Wonder Woman and sought to make a profit.

Figure 4: Wonder Woman, Women’s Lib Issue.

Source: [http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Wonder\\_Woman\\_Vol\\_1\\_203](http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Wonder_Woman_Vol_1_203). Accessed November 27, 2016.

Although Marston's intentions were noble, the original Wonder Woman story is rife with patriarchal overtones. An American intelligence officer, Steve Trevor, discovered Wonder Woman as his plane crashes on Paradise Island, an island exclusively populated by women. Princess Diana saves his life, falls in love with him, and follows him back to America and becomes a nurse--a very stereotypical role for women during this period. This and subsequent stories of Steve Trevor needing to be rescued by a woman is an attempt to balance the damsel in distress theme. However, the insinuation that man is powerful enough to disrupt the social order on Paradise Island is never questioned. It is almost like a Superman and Lois Lane role reversal. This is a gallant attempt at digressing from an overly sexist theme of the damsel in distress but she is still only relevant because of man, i.e. Steve Trevor's discovery. Wonder Woman was "discovered" by a man and man could easily take credit for importing her skill set to the United States. Even though she lives in an extremely fruitful society, she abandons everything because she is powerless to her love for a man. Like most women of this period in American society, her life is subordinate to that of her man's wishes. Post WWII issues reflected the misogynistic spirit of the times. As American women were exhorted not to compete with returning servicemen for employment, to return home to kitchens and families, and to relinquish the desire to "earn your own living," Wonder Woman herself enters a phase where she is continually hounded by Capt. Trevor to marry him (Emad, 2006, p. 966).

Although Marston's efforts were well intentioned, the tropes of his storyline were largely motivated by his personal life. As the inventor of the



polygraph or lie detector test, it seems too coincidental that Wonder Woman's Lasso of Truth was not personally influenced; additionally, her bullet deflecting bronze bracelets were inspired by his live-in partner with him and his wife, Olive Byrne. The Wonder Woman stories have a substantial amount of dominance and submission themes. There is a substantial amount of bondage as well, between both men and women. Throughout the comic book's history, bondage remains a recurrent trope, beginning with images during Marston's 1940 era of Wonder Woman repeatedly breaking out of bonds (Emad, 2006, p. 980) and later frequently tied up with other women, often with her own lasso and bracelets. Although one of the longest running comic books, and as a female at the centerpiece, the underlying truth of the storyline seems more suited to male archetypal sexual fantasy than inspiration for other women. The disconnect between Marston's intentions and the actual work is an affront to the notion of equality at best and another instance of a male telling a female's story according to his perspective at worst.

### **Conclusion**

The misrepresentations of women in the myriad of media, with which people are inundated daily, adversely affects their attitude towards women. Specifically, the young male audience who is generally the target of authors, cartoonists, writers, and directors will perpetuate misogynistic attitudes towards women whilst failing to recognize the sexist policies and mores of society. Several comic characters including Batman and Wonder Woman were used in wartime propaganda (Roy and Nagarathinam, p. 7) in order to financially support

wartime efforts through paying taxes and buying war bonds. The power of comic books and superheroes should be wielded with more social responsibility so that fair and equitable social values are instilled in young minds. The didactic value of comic books (and all mythology) has been proven. The lack of gender sensitivity found in American mythology has grown from misogynistic Greek society and Greek mythology while becoming a boon to publishers who capitalize on the male scopophilic crowd. Moral responsibility has been hijacked by profitability, as the old adage that sex sells is made clearly evident.

The West has associated itself with Ancient Greece as its cultural ancestor; therefore, the impact of myths has been tremendous on the consciousness of the Western world (Dorschel, 2011, p. 5). The impact of ancient Greece on American society and its influence in American mythology is inextricable. Women in Greek society had few rights just as women in the United States had few rights until relatively recently. The various waves of feminism changed the political landscape in the U.S. by enacting rules and regulations prohibiting discriminatory practices against a person because of her sex; however, sexism and misogyny is still extremely prevalent in our society. The marketing industry knows that sex sells just as writers of movies and TV shows know that unrealistic sex appeal is more attractive than accurately portraying real life or average looking people.

From the one-page origin in *Action Comics #1*-in which Superman is declared to be the “champion of the oppressed” and a “physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need”-to the present, the

superhero brand has been concerned with power and justice-physical, economic, ideological-both within the narratives themselves and in scholarly analyses of them (Coogin, 2006, p. 239). However, the very heroic storyline found in both Greek and American mythology is, by definition, oppressive; specifically, due to the treatment of women and the complete disregard for their oppression. A superhero, by definition, is selfless, pro-social, and fights for social justice. The purpose of his or her superpowers is for the use of good; not evil. According to Joseph Campbell's (1968, p. 30) definition, "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow men." Unfortunately, superheroes, just like their Greek antecedents are contributing to the oppression and social injustice by perpetuating sexism and misogyny in their formulaic tales and adventures.

American mythology, as expressed in comic books, associated cartoons, television programs, and movies is an integral part of American identity as well as an accurate reflection of the American psyche just as Greek mythology served the same purpose in Greek society. And even in the twentieth century, when man has acquired the greater power than ever before to alter the natural world, the old myths continue to haunt us, not just in the form of nymphs and shepherds on vases or garden statuary, but in many common assumptions about the shape of human experience (Lefkowitz, 1985, p. 20). One demarcation of progress, worth noting in the spirit of objectivity, is the proliferation of female superheroes and

villains as a way to balance representation and attract more female readers; however, this gallant effort might only exacerbate the inclination to objectify women. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a good example of a female oriented story as well as one that has inspired significant academic analysis, it is not free from the cliché tropes that have garnered so much consternation from the historically male dominated comic book era. These include highly attractive or “cookie cutter” women, sexual tension between characters, lesbian scenes, and suggestive scenes whereby women are assaulted by both men and women. Although gender representation may be equalized through increased female heroines there is still a matter of objectification. The majority of women in comic books are still highly sexualized and misrepresented. Oversexualized scenes, bondage, and objectified women are undoubtedly archetypal images in American mythology. Women incorporate the values of the male sexual objectifiers within themselves (Jeffreys, 2005, p. 8) by aspiring to emulate the ubiquitously advertised “sexy” images of them. As long as these stories continue pandering to a male dominated audience by depicting the world as male-created, male-dominant, and male-managed the comic book audience will continue to undermine the value of women in American society. Likewise, as long as women idealize the hypersexualized images and thereby shackle themselves to misogynistic and sexist ideals, they will continue to be frustrated in their quest for equality in both the comic book and real world.

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