# WOMEN BREAKING BAD: A PORTFOLIO

# INVESTIGATION INTO PROSE AND

# COMIC STORYTELLING

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Human Anatomy and Physiology
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Science

June 2020

# An Abstract of the Thesis of

Madeleine Monkewicz for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of Human Anatomy and Physiology to be taken June 2020

Title: Women Breaking Bad: A Portfolio Investigation Into Prose and Comic
Storytelling

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Webcomics are largely the domain of romance and comedy at the moment, but that is swiftly changing. As creators and audiences diversify, so does the content. Good writing and good art are both essential elements to the successful webcomic.

Ability allowing, we all speak the languages of sight and sound. Visual art can be just much writing as is written word, although it has distinct advantages and disadvantages when compared to prose. All writing, whether visual or written, is best when employs a "show don't tell" approach. The very best writing is non-cooperative, linguistically speaking, although not all non-cooperative writing is qualitatively good.

Visual and prose storytelling differ in the way perspective and POV are employed, how mood is achieved, how time is represented, and of course in the medium used. Neither modality is superior to the other.

The colors chosen for my visual piece sought to emphasize realism and to aid in storytelling. The lines used were selected because they were clearly readable and would not detract from the audience's experience. Values were chosen for a similar reason.

Women and other minorities have historically been denied the role of "villain." Changing times see the rise of the Bad Woman – a broad character archetype that sees women as villain not because of their gender but because of their humanity. We are departing from the model that characters not white, cishet and male must have a reason for being so. Villainous non-demonizing minority characters are important because they place minorities in a position of power and offer them the full humanity so often denied.

# Acknowledgements

I would like to first thank the people without whom this project would be wholly impossible. Thank you so much to my CHC advisor Dr. Daphne Gallagher who very kindly agreed to help me with the project and who has aided me so much in my endeavors. She was always there to answer my questions and sat down with me for hours on numerous occasions to help explain the thesis process. I would have been completely lost without her and I'm grateful to have had the pleasure of having her as my advisor.

Thank you to my primary advisor, Dr. Ulrick Casimir, who really went above and beyond what's required of an advisor. As I have expressed to him in the past, he has pretty much single-handedly taught me how to write. He has met with me nearly every week since October to mentor me in writing and to check in on this progress and to help it along. It was because of him that I went from a mediocre writer to a writer who's really starting to get somewhere. I have grown more in the craft in these last eight months than I thought possible and it's all because of him, so thank you. I could not have asked for a better primary advisor.

Thank you to my parents, who support my passions and aspirations. I recognize that this is sadly not often the case, and I'm so grateful to have wonderful loving parents who encourage me and help me towards my goals. Likewise to my siblings, who through many a school break put up weeks of eye-contactless conversation while I furiously scribbled my 300 panel comic.

Finally, thank you to my roommate who introduced me to a ton of media that I never would have encountered otherwise and that certainly influenced my narratives. I thank her also for her patience in putting up with a roommate who, for seven weeks, almost never left her room on account of this project. That could not have been easy.

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# INTRODUCTION

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In most academic pursuits, one begins with a question and then forms a project around that question to research it. Other questions may arise during the research to lead the project in different directions, but movements are largely based on the original intent of the project. Creative writing is quite different. Emotion and feeling are at the center of a project. Desire to tell a particular story is met with careful pruning of everything unnecessary to reveal the true "question" of the piece -- the themes. Attempting to approach creative writing from the standard academic way is to doom a project before it has begun. There is perhaps no surer way to kill a project than to deliberately attempt to write *about* something. Rather, it should be that something *is written,* and that whatever themes or questions are inherent in the piece are allowed to surface naturally. Writing, as with all creative pursuits, is like a living thing; as a project grows, it must be molded and formed. It was by this process that I first decided to write about a woman who made the mistake of taking a childhood friend hostage, and then from there, simplified, simplified, simplified my writing to become the story I have today. It was only by cutting out anything unnecessary and by tying loose ends together that my project improved. This project aims to take all these sensitive factors into account and to render the story as perfectly as an amateur, imperfect writer can render it.

My thesis comes in two parts. The first part is the more non-traditional. It is a graphic short story, told in a webcomic format. Thus, art and physical space join words

and the typical temporal space to tell a story. Writing here is as much about the visual art as it is about the words on the page, if not more so. Linework, color, and framing must all work together to create mood and to illuminate the organizing principles of the piece, which in turn renders the story more emotionally centered. The first story is as follows:

A woman kidnaps and plans to exact her revenge on an old childhood friend. But, after discovering that her childhood friend had some secrets of her own, she is stuck with a moral dilemma: should she release her friend and risk getting caught, or should she complete what she has set out to do? The woman ultimately chooses to let her friend go and retires to a cabin where she believes no one will ever find her. Months after the event, she receives a knock on the door. Whether this knock is from the police or from her old friend is left up to the reader.

The second story is formatted traditionally. It is a short story written in prose with no visual or non-traditional elements. This story is as follows:

A man tells the police there was an attempt on his life. When they go to investigate the scene, one of the detectives locks the door and reveals herself to be his assailant. Soon after, the two detectives and the man discover they're trapped inside the crime scene and that no help is coming. The three must reconcile their differences to find a way out. They ultimately succeed and the detective is arrested.

The stories are connected by their themes of justice and revenge, their character-centered nature, and their questions of deservedness. Identity takes center stage in these pieces, as well as past wrongdoings, and I hope to explore new territory in juxtaposing two similar but distinct dynamics between characters. This project is also woman-

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centric with LGBT themes, both groups of which have been historically

underrepresented in human drama and in writing in general.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

What are the similarities and differences between justice and revenge? What

does it mean to hate someone? To love someone? What is mercy and when is it

appropriate? What is blame and how does it relate to deservedness? How do cycles of

violence perpetuate and how do they end?

How can we better portray women and minorities in media? What is the role of

villainous characters in progressive efforts? What are the differences between prose and

visual storytelling? How is communication accomplished in art and writing?

**METHODS**

Research:

I studied art for a year through practice and visual art textbooks. Art was the

more challenging aspect of this project since I'd never drawn much before. I have 10

years writing experience and have taken two college-level classes in creative writing.

Both classes included a large workshop component that helped me become more aware

of the artistic expectations within the community. Close reading stories across all forms

of media in the last year or so has also given me great insight into how story should

(and shouldn't) be told.

Drafting:

My stories have been through several drafts and are still being perfected. The first step was to decide on what story I wanted to tell, while drafting characters and their backgrounds. After this, the setting was decided on, and the outlining could begin.

The outlines were initially very vague and became more and more detailed each draft until dialogue could be written. For part A, the dialogue was the only part of the script that would appear in words in the final product. For part B, every word will be a piece of the finished draft.

For part A, there is the additional step of putting that dialogue into the comic and to use art to tell the rest of the story. Visual art is to be used wherever possible in place of words to avoid problems of redundancy. For part B, the writing will go through several stages of editing until the draft is finalized.

Comic drafting:

Comics are a slow and laborious process. Each panel takes roughly an hour and a half to produce, not counting the writing. First the writing for the panels must be laid out: what words will go in which panels and what happens in each panel. Then, the composition of each panel is decided upon: what goes where at what size. This includes speech bubbles. Linework (also called "inking" – when a creator traces over their rough draft lines with a pen) is not considered in this stage at all. Then, several layers of sketching are used to outline the contents of a panel. Next, a black pen tool is used to complete the linework of the comic. Style of pen, size, and shape must all be accounted for. Then flat colors are laid down. Then details and shading are added. Finally, speech bubbles and effects are placed in. The comics are strung together linearly and the webcomic is complete.

# DISCUSSION

## Part I: Webcomics and Storytelling

*HISTORY AND CURRENT STATE OF WEBCOMICS*

Webcomics have existed for as long as the internet. The original "webcomics" were print comics scanned in and shared through the World Wide Web. However, in the 90's, with the advent of digital art, creators began writing and drawing comics specifically for the internet. In 2003, the webcomic platform Webtoon was created, and it remains the largest serialized webcomics site to this day, with many people reading on their smartphones. Tapas is another major serialized webcomic platform and has seen much growth in recent years. Reddit, Instagram, and other social media sites also host a plethora of comics, though creators on these platforms tend to post short, often comedic 1-4 panel comics, as opposed to longer-form stories. These would be the equivalent of the Sunday funnies in newspapers, where serialized webcomics have the potential to contain content nearly identical to that of print graphic novels. These are equally valid art forms, but very different in their aims and style.

There are also those authors who post serialized comics to their own websites, usually with the aim of generating more revenue, as large platforms invariably take a cut of advertising profits. These creators tend to be more established in the community, as running one's own site means being responsible for directing traffic there. *Homestuck,* perhaps one of the most famous webcomics, is found on one of these sites. Some websites such as these charge users for access to their comics, but these people

are generally professionals in the field who have the art and the advertising behind them to find success in their endeavors.

The top genre of both major serialized webcomics platforms is romance and comedy. Very often, anime-esque art styles are employed in romance genre, and it appears to be popular among readers. The prevalence of this East-Asian style is no mystery as South Korea is a massive producer and consumer of webcomics. Many of the most popular comics have been translated into English from Korean. However, American style comics have claimed their fair portion of the 'popular' comics (determined by likes and views) and Webtoon often shows images from American-style *Lore Olympus* in their US advertising. This is presumably due to its beautiful artwork and appeal to American audiences.

Webcomics have created a major shift in manga-style[1] comics, as Japanese print manga is almost invariably in black and white. However, almost all popular webcomics are in color. I have hypothesized that this is due to American's expectations that comics be in color, since our print comic books have historically been bright and fully inked.[2] It would be difficult to go far dealing all in black and white or grayscale. The only non-color comics that make it to the "popular" pages of these platforms are ones whose art demonstrates skill and an artistic reason for their choice. That is to say that the artist can typically only get away with it if audience can tell that leaving out color was a

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[1] "Manga-style" here refers to the wide and variable East-Asian art style that includes Japanese manga art, and that art inspired by it.
[2] This also in spite of the fact that most print comic strips were and are published in gray scale. Interestingly, there are many webcomic strips in the "popular" pages of major online publishers, but most of these, too, are most often in color.

conscious and informed decision. Indeed, color is the default in the world of webcomics.

*WEBCOMICS AS ART*

Most popular webcomics are entertainment-driven and not necessarily of the highest caliber "art" when it comes to writing. This, of course, doesn't decrease their value, it simply shifts it. This makes sense, too, when considering that younger audiences are more drawn to webcomics than older audiences -- the comics with themes that appeal to younger audiences will become more popular than those that don't. This, however, creates a cycle, whereby content is created for younger audiences and older audiences are steered away from the medium altogether as it becomes something that they view as "not for them." There's also the aspect of why cartoons and visual story telling is for a "younger audience" in our culture at all (and an entire thesis could be written on that topic alone) but I believe the greatest barrier to older potential audience members is that their interests are not present in the stories told. But first, let's look at what makes a successful webcomic.

As a writer, I'm inclined to believe that storytelling is everything when it comes to art. I wouldn't have gotten into comics if I didn't believe that I could write a good comic even though my art left a lot to be desired. And while it's probably not correct that storytelling is absolutely everything, I don't know that it's wrong either. It isn't what one does but how one does it. It's the story that matters, in whatever shape it takes, whether it's a canvas or a movie or a ballet or a comic. This is evident in the webcomic world as well, though this truth may not be immediately apparent.

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When viewing the "popular" page on a large webcomic platform like Webtoon, the first thing one notices is that all the thumbnail art is almost invariably excellent. Not every comic's art is complex or detailed -- and in fact many very successful comedy series such as *Sarah's Scribbles* have relatively simplistic styles -- but the talent is still evident. These are comics drawn by master artists, who have often had training in their craft and who understand the fundamentals of color, composition, line control, etcetera. But can the same be said for storytelling?

Storytelling is every inch an art as any other. Yet in my experience, it often gets mistaken for a softer skill by those who do not fully understand the craft. Many of the more successful webcomics out in the world have artist/writer teams, allowing those who have mastered one art to collaborate with someone who has mastered the other. But more often, webcomics are written and drawn by the same person. Since audience members are typically looking for what I'll call capital-E Entertainment, as long as the comic is visually appealing and the writer can produce an interesting and engaging script, the other skills in the skill tree of storytelling (story structure, consistency, realistic dialogue, word choice, etc.) can more or less be neglected so long as sum of their parts isn't distractingly terrible and no one piece is egregiously poor. That said, the most popular webcomics of course have great art and, as one could guess great storytelling as well.

This is to say that great art is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the most successful comics, and so is great storytelling by and large. Webcomics like *Lore Olympus* that have both can find success that transcends what might be thought possible

for an online platform where anyone can post.[3] It is no surprise that well-written, well-drawn, entertaining comics become wildly popular. And here, artfulness is a key feature. Artfulness and entertainment value are not exclusive of each other, and really go hand-in-hand.

*VISUAL STORYTELLING*

When I first approached comics, I saw myself as an okay writer and a terrible artist. But a phenomenal artist once told me, "art doesn't matter, writing is everything." I would never have started if I didn't believe her. The manga artist ONE's *One Punch Man* always comes to mind. This was an early webcomic that would one day become one of the most popular manga and anime series of all time. The writer and author of it had terrific writing and beyond terrible art, yet his series became unironically popular. Later, a professional and renowned artist (Yusuke Murata) offered to draw his art for him -- an uncommon but not unheard-of practice in Japan. And indeed, if one scrolls through the "fresh" section of a major webcomic platform like Tapas, one will often find newcomers to comics citing *One Punch Man* as their inspiration and motivation.

Of course, the world of comics isn't quite so simple. Art matters, as one glance at the "popular" page on one of these sites will show. Thus when I, further on down the line, realized that perhaps art mattered a little more than I was letting myself believe, I began to think of good art as a secondary, but necessary component to a good story. Take *Avatar: The Last Airbender* as an (ever popular) example. The writing is beyond excellent and it's what made the series what it is. The characters, the world building, the dialogue, the story arcs, the character arcs; all these components are what make it the

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[3] An animated television adaption was confirmed for the series just a little over a year after its first post.

masterpiece that it is. And the visually appealing art ties it all together in a bow and serves to do the heavy lifting on the world-building. It makes the story palatable and cements the words and ideas into realities we can see. That is the value of art.

But wait. World building, characters, and even the body language of dialogue is owed to visual art just as much as it's owed to writing, if not more. The so-called "action" writing on a screenplay between the lines of dialogue are powerless without visual expression, and even those lines of dialogue are dependent upon body language for true expression (and voice acting in the case of animation -- not so for comics by and large). It was only through writing hundreds of hours of comics that I came to see visual art *as* writing. Pictures aren't just pretty tools that package bland words in visually appealing wrapping. They can be as alive as words, if not more so. In comics, the two are codependent. Visual art may even have the upper hand, as one can tell a comic in pictures alone, but not words.

So what does this mean? It means that visual artists have different, but great potential as storytellers. It means that when I sit down to draw a panel, I am looking to communicate, just as I do when I sit down to write. Visual and written art are different languages, but they are both languages we speak. And they are languages we use on a daily basis.

*VISUAL VERSUS PROSE STORYTELLING*

The largest difference between visual and prose writing media is the language of communication. The two languages of our daily lives (senses permitting) are the language that is transmitted through sound, and the language that is transmitted through sight. Prose writers must function in the recorded language of sound: words. Visual

artists must function in the recorded language of sight: images.[4] Unless the creator can bring the audience to see a physical object or hear a sound in its "true" unrecorded sound, they must rely on illusion and human imagination on both ends to communicate. Occasionally, the two may cross the other's domain by putting an image next to some words, or some words in an image, but largely the two function in their own capacity and not far outside it. Neither is superior or inferior; they are simply different.

Comics are at the intersection of these two languages. Animation, film, theatre, and even social media arts also meet at this intersection, although most of these employ non-symbolic sound (language) and all but the latter employ non-symbolic visuals (recordings of real objects). This isn't to say that film can't employ symbolism, but that the images are more or less "true" images in film, whereas images in art must employ lines and colors to communicate the existence and essence of a non-extant thing. Comics are among the cheapest and most symbolic of mediums. Because of this, most writing will not be recorded in letters but in art. Just as excellent books have much recorded beyond what characters say (dialogue), good comics record in words only that which cannot be recorded in art. This is the great challenge to those who have not been baptized into the ways of visual storytelling, and it was my greatest challenge when I began writing comics.

One of the greatest pitfalls of writing and the first thing the young prose writing must learn is Show Don't Tell. We are raised and expected to communicate in a way according to the linguistic "Cooperative Principal." We are expected to (and expect

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[4] Writers use images as well – the alphabet is entirely composed of images that represent sound. These images are highly iconic and almost entirely arbitrary – there is nothing about the letter "A" that connects it to the sound it stands for. Visual artists may use letters as well, but prose writers use letters almost exclusively.

others): be truthful, be succinct, and have relevance. Liars, people who take too long to get to the point, and folks who don't have a "point" are all met with frustration. We're not raised to be coy in everyday life. However, cooperation -- as it turns out -- is rather boring. Thus the skilled prose writer is not cooperative. They are delicate and subtle and wholly indirect. They know everything in a story, yet may wait several hundred pages to tell the reader how it ends! They may even "lie" to their audience if the story necessitates it. But the skilled writer knows how to turn the rules against themselves and draw the audience in. "Show don't tell" is non-cooperative and that is precisely what makes it interesting.

Many instances of bad writing are actually abuses of the Cooperative Principle inaccurately applied. There's a reason why "it was all a dream" works well in *The Wizard of Oz* but is otherwise usually unacceptable to an audience. The author of the *The Wizard of Oz* knew what he was doing and was able to leave an ambiguous ending in order to lend the story realism and, more importantly, open the door to possible interpretations of Oz. This is similar to the effect the author of *The Life of Pi* achieved when the audience is left to decide whether the narrator's story was fact or parable. Both are being non-cooperative as they have "lied" to the audience in a sense, but their skill and intent is evidence and the media is better for it. The unskilled writer employs an ending like this as a cheap trick to "surprise" the audience. They are usually met with frustration. Lying becomes the least of their sins – they've wasted the audience's time, which is the most valuable thing to an audience. They feel cheated, lied to. They were duped into getting invested in a story that are left feeling had no purpose, had no point. The prose writer must be non-cooperative to tell an interesting story (read a good

scientific article if you want an example of excellent cooperative communication) but they must do so in specific ways. The question of "how" is the craft of writing itself.

The visual storyteller must learn the same lesson, although their learning curve is steeper. They have few options to tell and not show. In most cases, telling is impossible without words. This means that the great challenge of the visual artist is not Show Don't Tell (since telling is often near impossible), but *how* to show. *How* to convey complex emotions and ideas using pictures and artistic elements. With practice, this comes, and the artist will spend a lifetime learning the best way to show in much the same way a prose writer will.

As evidence of this truth, my advisor knew me at the very beginning of my comics "career" and knew my writing. We met in winter of 2018, just a few months after I'd begun writing comics -- and in winter of 2019, he remarked that my prose had improved noticeably, likely because of my work in comics. I wholeheartedly agree with him. Having few words at my disposal, I was forced to tell my stories through images and actions rather than through words alone. When I turned back to prose, I was able to "see" the story in my head much more clearly and put down in words what I wanted to draw in pictures. Interestingly, to those who speak the languages of art and writing with relative fluency, there is little difference in visual and written narrative in terms of how a story is told. However, there are greater, less obvious differences than medium between these two forms.

Point of view (POV) is one such difference. Comics can allow for first or second-person with a sort of voice-over-text-box effect, and many comics employ this tool. I've seen quite a bit of this in Japanese manga. However, the total seamlessness of

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the first-person POV one sees in narrative is lost. There's something about first-person

prose that can make it feel like we're listening to a friend tell their story. Unless first-

person point of view is employed in art as well,[5] the fourth wall is broken. We hear the

narrator, we see the narrator on the page or screen. An element of immersion is missing.

This isn't to say that full first-person POV can't be employed in comics; it just comes at

a higher price. The reader would have to become used to seeing that perspective in art

the way one reads it in writing, and it runs the risk of seeming gimmicky to the audience

if not executed properly. For an expert in the comics field, however, this is an obstacle

that can be overcome, and indeed, many comic artists have employed this perspective in

the past.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words, and so it is with comics. Art can

capture specific moods instantaneously that may take even the skilled writer several

sentences to achieve. I've been discussing the languages of art and writing up until now

as though they were one-to-one translations of each other, but this is not the case. Art,

colors, line, and form act on a different part of the brain than words. Words can create

images in our mind that may have similar, or perhaps even more powerful effects, but

we do not actually see what is being described. Skilled writers can achieve many of the

visceral reactions skilled artists can achieve, like grossing the reader out, making their

mouth water, making their skin crawl, etc. However, there still is something to be said

for seeing that bowl of warm soup, or that severed head, that all the words in the world

cannot make up for even with the most evocative of incantations. It is the difference of

being handed a picture of a beautiful beach, and being led on a guided mediation to one

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[5] And indeed, video games can employ this type of perspective with incredibly impactful results

of your own creation. Both are powerful in their own way, but they cannot be said to be the same.

How temporal space is represented is another obvious but important difference between the two mediums. In writing, temporal space is represented by words and by time itself. One of the few times a writer might "tell" a reader something is when a significant amount of time has passed. "Five days later," a chapter might lead. Even "FIVE YEARS LATER," alone, at the top of a new section to denote the passage of time. Comics tells time this way as well. But what about moment-to-moment? Writing relies largely on the actual time it takes the reader to read. If you want to hold the reader in a moment longer, write more. If you want to make something happen in a flash, allow the event mere words to take place. The distance between two events is similarly paced. Two lines of dialogue following one another will seem to the reader as closer together in time than two lines of dialogue with a long tag between them. This, of course, is all a trick because there is no specific amount of time it takes to read a set of words. Words cannot be spaced out in time by a static sheet of paper, like they can in audio. And readers read at a wide range of speeds, but the important factor is that the proportions stay the same. And due to the nature of text, they always will. A fast reader and a slow reader will arrive halfway through the story when they make it halfway through the story. It does not matter if it takes them an hour or ten minutes.

Comics can employ both time-spacing methods as well, but as a general rule, they don't use blocks of text to add time between dialogue. They use physical space to achieve this effect. A dialogue bubble located very close to another can be read as closer in time than dialogue bubbles spaced far apart. Prose can sometimes use this tool,

as on occasion writers will put stretches of blank space between their words, but this is rare and generally used to deepen impact or to give breathing space for a major change or new section in the text. Traditional (non-electronic) comics will pay special attention to how close and far apart space bubbles are on the physical page. Webcomics will do this as well, but they are also likely to use space to their advantage more and may place long, even very long stretches of physical space between panels. Traditional comics did not typically employ this method because of the cost of paper, though there are exceptions. There is an example of this type of spacing being used in traditional comics, however. Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman: Overture* uses several glossy blank, black pages to communicate the length and depth of time that a central figure spent floating in space. Then, after black page after black page, a figure emerges. An effective if potentially expensive storytelling technique that was likely only greenlit because the project it was attached to the continuation of one of the most important comic series in the Western World. It's safe to bet that more consideration for materials would have been given to artists and writers newer in the field. However, this financial limit is not an obstacle to webcomic artists, who may use as many pixels as they like. The webcomic "format" with its vertical layout and vast tracts of blank space between panels is a reflection of this truth.

None of the aforementioned differences, however, are the difference most deeply felt by the reader. That would be how the information is transmitted. Simply put: comics is sequential art, and prose is written word. Many people are drawn to comics because the pictures tether them to the story. It would be simplistic to say that reading comics is less work than reading prose, but I'm not sure it would be wholly untrue.

Likewise, many people prefer books because their imaginations can run wild with the suggestions the author makes, and very often what the reader's mind conjures up may be just as effective, if not more so, than what someone could show them. There are pros and cons to each style, but clearly one is not inferior to the other, any more than music is inferior to literature, or biology is inferior to chemistry. And as with all things, I am positive that someone would argue that any one of those things is better than other, but in the world of art and science, quality is the only determination of good or bad. And even that is ultimately subjective.

**Part II: The Art**

Color Theory refers to those rules that govern what colors mix well together, and which colors do not. Human psychology also offers an insight into the emotional and chemical responses hues elicit, and anthropology allows a glimpse into societal, cultural, and symbolic meaning behind color. The color palate selected for a piece should have meaning and function in some capacity to add to the art, and in the generation of mood. Hue, value, and saturation all must be dealt with separately and considered.

Hue is what we think of when we think of color. It regards the wavelength of light that makes something red, blue, green, etcetera. I chose to use primarily reddish hues for my piece because red has a psychological and cultural link to passion and anger. The main theme of this piece is hatred, which connects perfectly with the aforementioned feelings. Value is the brightness of a color. Pink is lighter in value than red, though they're derived from the same hue. Values should ideally be contrasting in artwork in order to allow the art to be clearly "readable" -- too many similar values to an area can cause an element of a piece to appear blob-like and difficult to make out. Thus, I chose colors lighter in value for the characters themselves and colors darker in value for the background. Lighter values pop, and thus the eye is directed to the focus of a panel: the characters. The exception is during emotionally high scenes. These were treated with light background because colors lighter in value create a more energetic mood. Likewise, I chose background that was darker in value for panels that conveyed deep but depressed emotions -- emotions such as seething anger or sorrow.

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Finally, saturation must be decided. Color saturation regards the intensity of a color. Emerald green has a higher saturation than forest green, despite theoretically having the same hue and value. Saturated colors are often said to be more vibrant -- children's animation often deals in bright, saturated hues. The majority of the colors in my piece are very unsaturated due to the increased amount of realism they convey. Saturated colors are associated with playfulness, abstraction, and since they aren't found as often in our daily lives, they are often used symbolically — blonde hair becomes yellow, etc. They take a step away from reality. Just as I chose a more realistic art style to ground the piece in a less comical plane, I chose more realistic colors to function alongside the art.

Lines have a weight, or a thickness, and a texture. I chose a medium weight because I wanted my lines to be clear but not bold. Heavier lines give the impression that something is closer and generally lend a sense of strength or imposition. Lighter lines give the feeling of delicacy and may indicate that something is far away. The relative thickness between lines is the true driving force of perspective in this way, though. My lines are also lightly textured to add interest. One of the disadvantages to digital art in my opinion is the loss of texture that occurs when the standard pens are used. This can be remedied by the employment of a texture pen like the drafting pencil texture I chose for my comic. It gives more warmth and flavor to the piece that would otherwise be absent.

**Part III: Minorities in Media**

*WOMEN IN MEDIA: CONTEXT*

Serious dramatic comics are something of a rarity in the webcomics community, but it's not the only less-trodden path this comic takes. Perhaps more important is its treatment of women. The diversification of webcomics is inevitable. As audiences and creators grow larger in number, so too will they diversify, and contribute their interests and perspectives to the community. One can see this happening currently with American animation, and while webcomics are at an earlier stage of this process, they are on the same path. But there is a wider phenomenon occurring currently in American narratives, and that is the humanization of women and gender minority characters.

It used to be that (as with race, sexual orientation, etcetera) creators would feel a need to justify any deviation from the white, cis, straight male model. This assumed a norm and demanded a reason for deviation. A character couldn't simply be female, or black, or gay, or anything else. There had to be some narrative purpose for this "choice." And indeed, as my primary advisor has pointed out, our characteristics shape our perspective. A female character isn't likely to see the world in the same way a male character is, in the same way someone who grew up rich or poor or with five siblings versus none will have their viewpoint shaped by their experience. We learn from and are shaped by our experiences, whether we were born into those circumstances or chose them for ourselves. And since characters should be chosen for a reason in a narrative[6]

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[6] As a general rule, characters should not be able to be replaced by any other character with little to no effect on the story

there were inevitable questions about why an author chose a character's "differing" immutable qualities.

These days, readers and creators alike are much less likely to view the white, cis-gendered, heterosexual man as the standard human. Beyond being biologically and evolutionarily incorrect[7], this standard inherently casts all "deviants" as less than fully human. Since power structures have shifted, and more and more diverse authors write increasingly accessible stories, we see the rise of diversity in characters. This isn't to say that the lack of diversity in writing -- especially professional writing -- is still appalling, but it's better than it was ten, even five years ago. And with this shift comes the rise of --

*THE BAD WOMAN*

Women have been cast as the "upholders of morality" in every way save any ways that would give them power for millennia. While they suspiciously were kept out of politics and clergy, women were expected to keep everyone in their social sphere in check, including the men. It's not quite as simple as this, but it's fair to say that women were held to much higher standards than men were and that they were expected to look down on socially-deviant behavior. This meant that "bad" women characters[8] were more distasteful to audiences than bad men. Bad women were unlikable and irredeemable in a way bad men weren't. One must only look to beloved villains and think about them with changed genders. How would our perceptions of the Joker change if he were a woman? Would he be even creepier, maybe because we

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[7] Fetuses are by default "female" in body type and dark skin is the non-mutant, standard phenotype

[8] I say "women" because not all XX-chromosomed individuals are women and we have yet to develop an adjective for "woman" that isn't "female" in recognition of this truth.

subconsciously expect women to behave themselves more than men? What about if

Darth Vader had been Luke's mother and not father? How would that influence the

familial betray we feel that a parent has turned against their own child? Would that

betrayal be felt more deeply and feel even more repulsive if he had been a woman?

Women in television and media roles have traditionally been sexualized and

dehumanized in a way that men typically haven't. So there's no surprise that women

villains were and are often highly sexualized, such as The Devil from *Bedazzled* and

Jennifer Check from *Jennifer's Body*. However, the mere presence of these characters

was initially a step in the right direction since villainous women were and continue to

be exceedingly, but decreasingly rare. The rise of the popular Bad Woman character in

popular narrative is reflective of rising feminist tides. Villainous women characters are

trending towards less sexual, more human, and even more sympathetic roles. This isn't

just feminism. It's better writing. *Maleficient* and *Maleficient 2* are formatted around a

traditionally one-dimensional woman villain and cast her in a sympathetic light. Hela,

from *Thor: Ragnarok* was one of the MCU's first female villains. Though slightly

sexualized, her story was primarily that of an heir unjustly slipped over. She more or

less could have been replaced by a man — that is that she retained a woman's

"perspective" but her story was not about being a woman. Harley Quinn, a character

originally made to be the Joker's side kick and abused romantic partner, is now more

often portrayed as a liberated woman and even sometimes the girlfriend of Poison Ivy.

*Birds of Prey* painted a more human and far less one-dimensional image of this

originally dependent, often quite boring character, as did the animated series *Harley*

*Quinn.* And notably, neither one involves Harley's relationship to the Joker too heavily.

It is imperative that characters of all minority backgrounds inhabit roles that do not revolve around their experiences as that minority group. Rather they need to be portrayed with human issues since they are every bit as human as the Western white cishet male standard. Minorities have stories and experiences that don't revolve around their gender, sex, race, sexual orientation, religion, etcetera, and the more those stories and experiences are portrayed, the more humanized they will be in media.

Villainhood is an interesting topic, because many minorities occupy it before they can become the hero before they can become the villain again. The first step to integration and acceptance is appearing in narrative at all. Take gay men for example. They rarely appeared in media for a long time, and when they finally did, it was often as the villain: they were demonized. *Rocky Picture Horror Show* (1975) featured a visibly queer villain, Frank N. Furt, whose queerness was likely only "allowed" by the producers at 20th Century Fox because he is the film's supposed antagonist. The film now has great significance to the Queer Community, in part because of the power and intrigue of Frank N. Furt's villainy, but more on that later. Suffice to say this same film could not have been made in the Seventies if the roles were reversed: if the straight couple had been the villains and the androgynous queer person had been the hero.

Later on, gay men were allowed to be portrayed as sympathetic and heroic: *Philadelphia* (1993) portrayed a very human gay man struggling to sue his company for discrimination. The man, Andrew Bekett (played by Tom Hanks) is portrayed as a flawed, but ultimately sympathetic character. He is the protagonist in the story, reflecting a shift in the public's treatment of this marginalized group. It may be awhile until a group can circle back to villainhood again, but when it can, it is evidence that

that group is entering wider societal recognition as full humans. When villains can be of a particular minority without that mattering -- without that aspect of their identity being demonized -- we can know progress has been made.

My comic and my written piece seek to include character traits as incidental. So while Reine and Cara's gender shapes their perspectives and is an important part of who they are, their gender isn't really what the stories are about. These are two flawed humans who have committed terrible crimes – their identity with a certain gender, race, sexual orientation; whatever else isn't relevant in these pieces. Reine and Cara are women because they are human, and some humans are women. I reject the idea that there exists a standard white male model and that any variation from that model needs explanation.

Similarly, Reine is a person of color. Obviously, writing female characters is second nature, but I felt that if I were to really hold an incidental view of characters, that gender shouldn't be the only aspect played with. I thought of whether to make Alice non-white, and thus cast a POC in the victim role (again) or to make Reine non-white and thus cast the same group in the villain role (again). I could have made both of them women of color, but because of my fantastic internal biases that idea didn't occur to me until much later in the process. So I considered my own experiences as a gender minority and came to the conclusion that it's far more empowering to see yourself as a villain on screen than as a victim. I've seen the show where the woman's the victim. I've seen the show where the Black man, gay man, Asian woman, whoever is harmed in some tragic way. And it's upsetting and reflective of really sadly common events but the people in a marginalized community are more often than not already painfully

aware of the issues and dangers they face. But to *be* the danger -- not because of one's marginalized identity but in spite of it – is to be put in a position of power.

Villains of gender, racial, ethnic, sexual, religious, ability, etc. minorities that don't demonize those traits offer audience members of the same group access to a vision of themselves as the one who commands, rather than the one who is commanded. It is to be on the Master side of Hegel's dialect. It allows minorities a glimpse an affirmation of their humanity and confirmation of our power as human. As a woman growing up, I always felt that no matter what I did, I would simply never be as powerful as a man. I felt men were biologically superior and I grew up in a liberal household that never tried to teach me any of those things. There's a story I heard from a woman about how she sat her eight-year-old daughter down to tell her about different types of families, and how not all families had a mommy and a daddy. When she told her daughter about gay parents, her daughter said that that was gross and disgusting, which disturbed the mother deeply. She asked her daughter where she'd heard that since her husband and she were very liberal and her daughter said that you never see two moms or two dads on TV. It's always one mom and one dad. Media representation matters. And if you're always cast as the hero or the victim, the savior or the saved, you're going to feel that element of humanity missing. You're going to wonder if there's something to the fact that only other people get to play the villain and maybe even internalize it as truth. But to err is human, and we are all nothing if not human.

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