

# First Class: A Journal of First-Year Composition

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Volume 2018

Article 4

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Spring 2018

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### Recommended Citation

Bliss, L. (2018). A True Feminine Identity. *First Class: A Journal of First-Year Composition*, 2018 (1). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/first-class/vol2018/iss1/4>

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# Spring 2018 First Prize Essay

## A TRUE FEMININE IDENTITY

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Sally Kempton once said, “I became a feminist as an alternative to becoming a masochist,” clearly presenting the vulgarity of the feminist argument: either be a feminist or accept a painful life (“Sally Kempton Quote”). Superhero characters, while representing a popular genre of movie and comic entertainment, also convey idealized versions of what we hope to be. The Wonder Woman character represents an idealized woman. In the comic book *Earth One: Volume One*, author Grant Morrison, along with artists Yanick Paquette and Nathan Fairbairn, offers a hypersexual portrayal of the Wonder Women character. They employ exploitative cover art, increasingly revealing costumes, and a power-centered approach to sexuality in their portrayal of the idealized woman. In Patty Jenkins’ 2017 film, *Wonder Woman*, she portrays the idealized female as one who fosters hope, struggles with traditional femininity, and champions both idealized love and gender equality. Both present a woman struggling with her feminine identity, with one employing a hypersexual path to power and domination and the other representing subtle empowerment through both independence and equality.



Figure 1.

Morrison, in *Earth One: Volume One*, presents Wonder Woman as an adolescent boy’s ideal: Diana Prince chained up, wearing a top four sizes too small for her breasts, looking into the eyes of those who pick up the book and capturing them with her seductive expressions. The drawing uses dark shading and light highlighting to emphasize certain areas of the image, pulling the viewer’s attention to different parts of her body. The chains tied around her neck, twisted around the back of her body, and tying her arms together represent the BDSM-fueled-origins of the character and contribute to the promiscuous nature of the illustration (See Figure 1). The drawing represents Wonder Woman but shares a striking physical resemblance to Hollywood actress Megan Fox. Megan Fox is known for her sex appeal, and enhances the “male gaze” aspects of the movies she stars in. This cover image, focused on accentuating Diana’s

chest, gives readers a simple message: Wonder Woman is sexy and should be seen as a sexual object.

Wonder Woman discovers a man, Steve Trevor, washed up on the shore of her island in the Jenkins’ 2017 film, *Wonder Woman*. Trevor, after engaging German soldiers he was spying on, takes Diana with him and escapes from the land of the Amazons. Diana’s physical movement away from her home also foreshadows her struggle to maintain her identity in a male-centric culture. Trevor took her to a clothing store, and with the help of another woman, she was given modest period outfits to try on. However, with each new turtleneck or dress that fell below the knee, Diana’s main concern was not how she looked in her new attire, but how well she was suited to fight (*Wonder Woman* 49:55). Her encounter with traditional feminine clothing is strange to Wonder Woman, and her questioning the clothing is strange to the traditional women trying to outfit her. As an empowered female, clothing was functional for her defense, not attire for at-



Figure 2.

traction. Her main costume in the movie resembles armor, representing her Amazonian heritage. Private body parts were covered with protective armor, all while looking fashionable, flattering, and appropriate for Amazonian weather. The genital area, unlike *Earth One*, was covered with a long flap, giving her a more comfortable and flexible suit to wear in battle. *Earth One* fails to meet even the basic requirements of covering a woman's chest but does serve a sexualized purpose.

The collective vision of Morrison, Paquette, and Fairbairn is one of gender-informed power exercises. Throughout the book, Diana and her mother, Hippolyta, make references about how much they despise men and do not see themselves as equal to men—they believe they are more powerful and dominant. Hippolyta serves as a teacher to Diana, and through her strong opinions, she helps Diana to believe the same evil that she sees in men. Hippolyta rants to Wonder Woman, “Their ‘masculinity’ is a sad, broken, aberration of nature. Genetically incomplete man, always yearning for what he cannot be or own” (Morrison and Paquette 27). Hippolyta directly emphasizes the greed in men; it shows her pride. In fact, it took until the end of the book for Hippolyta to admit to the fact that she needed a man to have a child: “I took the egg from my womb, and the seed from the loins of the man-god Hercules. Blended in my alembics, seasoned with my fury” (113). Men, then, serve a functional, even subservient purpose, for a powerful woman: biological procreation.

In Jenkins' 2017 film, Wonder Woman fosters collaboration and equality as feminist characteristics. Wonder Woman, while initially minimizing men as tools of procreation, eventually arrives at a softer belief of the value of men for a harmonious life. As she and Steve Trevor are sailing away to stop the war, she declares, “When it comes to procreation, men are necessary, but for pleasure, not necessary” (*Wonder Woman* 43:38). However, she begins to form an emotional connection with Steve, and they develop a mutually supportive, caring relationship far beyond one designed for simple procreation. Diana and Steve share an emotional moment while dancing in the snow. She asks him more questions about what life is like outside of the Amazon world, and he explains to her, “...they love to wake up and read the paper or go to work, they get married, make some babies, grow old together, I guess” (1:27:24). This touching moment was followed up a couple minutes later by their long-awaited kiss. This introduces Diana to another importance of men in society and demonstrates the value of a relationship of equality. Steve, ironically, is the one who has to prove both bravery of morality to Diana when he agrees to sacrifice himself for the lives of others, drawing admiration from Diana (2:01:05).

Morrison employs sexuality as a major component and power source of Wonder Woman in *Earth One*. Diana, living amidst a population full of strong, sexually appealing women, was given a lesbian lover character of her own, Mala. Mala does not appear very often throughout the book, but when she does, she offers commentary on her distaste for men and her love for the land of women. She thrives in her utopian society, the chief characteristic being the absence of men. When Mala comes in contact with Beth, an overweight sorority girl from the man's world that befriends Diana, she is instantly disgusted by her lack of physical strength. She blames this entirely of the world of men: “This girl is sick— her body mass grotesquely distorted. If man's world does this to women—” (Morrison and Paquette 95). Mala was drawn with a short and blonde haircut, giving into modern stereotypes about lesbian women. Her clothing and body language give off more of a masculine identity rather than a feminine one. She addresses Diana as “princess,” showing dominance in their relationship (26). By introducing a lesbian character showing a masculine identity, Morrison plays into the modern-day stereotypes and subordinating the positive qualities of men. Men, in this world, are to be controlled through female sexuality, and the absence of men is a positive situation for women.

Jenkins' presents Wonder Woman's sexuality in a gender-neutral fashion. One of the hints she gives about her sexuality happens on the boat with Steve Trevor where Diana addresses how men are important

for reproduction but not for pleasure. Diana did not show any interest in Amazonian women, but nods to the ability for women to please women as equal to man. While intimacy beyond a kiss is not shown on-screen in *Wonder Woman*, Jenkins implies that Steve and Diana have sexual relations later on in the movie. Steve expresses his view of their relationship by saying, “It’s not what you deserve. It’s about what you believe” (*Wonder Woman* 1:38:38). This declaration gives Diana an indication that Steve is in the relationship for the sole purpose of teamwork and collaboration, and that he does not have any desire to dominate. As Diana grows closer with Steve, their relationship flourishes; he falls for her for reasons other than just her looks. He takes note of her innocent nature, her strength, and her love for others. Unlike *Earth One*, the film *Wonder Woman* offers a fair approach to her sexuality: her attractions to Steve Trevor are determined by his character traits, not explicitly his sex. Her attraction is an emotional one, not a gendered one.



Figure 3.

Yanick Paquette and Nathan Fairbairn exaggerate Wonder Woman’s sexuality. Colors and shading were utilized to enhance the sexual nature of the drawings. An advantage that these artists had over movie director Patty Jenkins was that they were able to create exactly what they saw in their head. If they wanted to create a supermodel heroine, they could. No drawing in the comic proved to be a realistic representation of a female body. The artists of *Earth One* were also able to capture the story in snippets, rather than in a continuous film. By just giving the reader glimpses of certain actions, they were able to draw the characters and position them however they pleased. To maximize the sexuality of the book, they drew photos of Wonder Woman’s butt facing the audience eighteen times as well as Diana in sexual stances (See figures 3 and 4). The portrayal of Wonder Woman in *Earth One: Volume One* was about as unrealistic as Paquette

and Fairbairn’s imagination.

*Wonder Woman* was accompanied by the composing and arranging skills of Rupert Gregson-Williams. Williams was able to offer the 2017 film an element that the comic book did not have: a soundtrack. The song “Wonder Woman Theme” was used to enhance Gal Gadot’s intense character portrayal. The soundtrack is similar to those of other popular superhero movies; in no way was the music less mysterious or tough. Instruments such as the electric cello were used to create a melody full of dark tones. The song itself, mostly conducted in a time signature of seven beats per measure, gave the beat something extra to make it unique and exciting to listeners. This epic theme song does not point to femininity, instead, it is representative of Wonder Woman’s strong character traits. Some other soundtrack hits include “Wonder Woman’s Wrath,” “Hell Hath No Fury,” and “Lightning Strikes.” All of these titles support Gal Gadot’s character and do not give into female stereotypes. Captain America, Batman, and Superman all could be accompanied by this same theme song, pointing to the gender-neutrality Gregson-Williams kept in mind while composing. The soundtrack could have been written for any movie, it just so happens to be accompanying a movie about a woman superhero.



Figure 4.

*Earth One: Volume One’s* plot revolved around the author’s inaccurate representation of women. The plot revolves around Diana Prince going on her journey throughout her Amazon land and then going to the man’s world to help rescue Steve Trevor. As the story progresses, however, Wonder Woman’s feminism is portrayed negatively. The authors essentially transform her into an ultra-feminine man-hater. For example, when she visits a hospital full of sick women, she exits with a newfound sense of fury and rage. This outburst leads her to hate the men surrounding her. Following her outrage, she saves a group of

sorority girls by lifting a massive bus over her head single-handedly. However, the focus does not shift towards her super human strength, but the concept of the sorority girls themselves. The *Beta Lambda* sorority girls give Diana a makeover after they befriend her following their accident. They feminize her. To make her more like a “proper woman” they dress her in a more revealing outfit, hoot and holler at her new look, and initiate her into their sorority. Her reward for heroism is to then fulfill a female stereotype.

In the 2017 film, Patty Jenkins emphasizes the equality between the genders as well as Wonder Woman’s independence. Diana’s past was outlined in the beginning, showing her as incredibly reliant on the other Amazon women for her training. As the story progresses, she gains both independence from them as well as strength. Her storyline, unlike *Earth One*’s does not conclude with a glamorous sorority makeover. Instead, she goes to war, travels to a foreign world, and comes face to face with her enemy, the embodiment of male-dominated aggression, the war-god Ares. She physically confronts the worst aspect of male-dominated society, male-created war, and overcomes this force. She represents an evolved and idealized woman overcoming the worst of a stereotypical male world view.

In her first ever comic book appearance in *All Star Comics*, Wonder Woman says, “Fight on as before-- we will show those evil men that women fight for peace harder than men can fight to satisfy their greed” (Marsten et al. 66). The character was created to be a strong female character, but films like *Wonder Woman* have adapted this view to make Wonder Woman not just a strong, female character, but a strong character. By interrogating gender stereotypes through the advertising, costumes, sexuality elements, soundtrack, and plotline, Patty Jenkins and her team morphed Wonder Woman into anything but the sexual object *Earth One* creates her to be.

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