

Diminished Power: The Fall of Wonder Woman

Ahmed Bhuiyan, Independent Researcher, Bangladesh

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Abstract

One of the most recognized characters that has become a part of the pantheon of pop-culture is Wonder Woman. Ever since she debuted in 1941, Wonder Woman has been established as one of the most familiar feminist icons today. However, one of the issues that this paper contends is that this her categorization as a feminist icon is incorrect. This question of her status is important when taking into account the recent position that Wonder Woman has taken in the DC Comics Universe. Ever since it had been decided to reset the status quo of the characters from DC Comics in 2011, the character has suffered the most from the changes made. No longer can Wonder Woman be seen as the same independent heroine as before, instead she has become diminished in status and stature thanks to the revamp on her character. This paper analyzes and discusses the diminishing power base of the character of Wonder Woman, shifting the dynamic of being a representative of feminism to essentially becoming a run-of-the-mill heroine.

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One of comics' oldest and most enduring characters, Wonder Woman, celebrates her seventy fifth anniversary next year. She has been continuously published in comic book form for over seven decades, an achievement that can be shared with only a few other iconic heroes, such as Batman and Superman. Her greatest accomplishment though is becoming a part of the pop-culture collective consciousness and serving as a role model for the feminist movement. With her Star-Spangled costume, silver bracelets, strength to rival Superman, and Amazonian good looks, she has always been held as an ideal as to what a woman is and can potentially be. Yet, how many people can claim to know who Wonder Woman is? And, more importantly, is she still staying true to her roots? Symbols are meant to be immutable and iconic, despite the wear and tear of time. However, what should be, does not necessarily translate into what actually is. As Hanley puts it, the presence of Wonder Woman in today's zeitgeist is far different from what she was initially created to be:

Fans today tend to have a very iconic but generic concept of Wonder Woman, a combination of nostalgia for the 1970s TV show and vague associations with feminism. She is important and beloved as the most famous superheroine of all-time, a bastion of female representation on a male-dominated genre, but she's a symbol more than a living, vibrant character. This is largely due to a lack of exposure; for the past thirty years, aside from her one sparsely read monthly comic, Wonder Woman has lacked the publication, television, and film presence of her fellow superheroes. The modern Wonder Woman is practically nonexistent outside of t-shirts and other memorabilia. (Hanley, 2014, x)

If one were to look at the 75 year history of Wonder Woman, one can see that she has had a rocky relationship with being a feminist icon and that despite the revamped nature of her latest incarnation, her status has become diminished. From first entering the world of man in order to become an ambassador of peace, to her being seen as Superman's super-powered girlfriend, the decline in who she has become runs counter to what she is still publically viewed as.

I – Origins

Wonder Woman was created by psychiatrist William Moulton Marston, noted for inventing the polygraph, in an effort to develop a new superhero who would "triumph not with fists or firepower, but with love." (Lamb, 2001). While an educational consultant for National Periodicals and All-American Publications, which would later merge and form DC Comics, he pitched his idea for Max Gaines of All-American Publications who approved of the new character's creation. It was with that approval that Wonder Woman hit the publication stands in All Star Comics #8, December 1941.

Before delving into Marston's role in developing Wonder Woman, her printed page origins should also be examined. Wonder Woman, who went by the name of Diana, was a member of a tribe of women known as the Amazons who were living on Paradise Island, a secluded piece of land that had cut itself from the rest of the world and humanity. When American pilot, Steve Trevor, crash lands onto the island, Hippolyta, Diana's mother and Queen of the Amazons, organizes a contest to select the most worthy in order to help deliver Trevor back to United States and help fight

for justice. Despite being forbidden, Diana joins in the contest, wins, and returns Trevor to his home. With the success of her mission, she is given her iconic dress and the name Wonder Woman.

She returns to America, where she comes across a nurse at the hospital Steve Trevor is in named Diana Prince who needs money to move to South America and be with her fiancé. Diana, being the kind soul that she is, gives Diana Prince the money in exchange for her identity and thus, Wonder Woman's secret identity is created.

Her mission as she stayed in the United States was not only to help fight the Nazis, but to become an ambassador of peace and help pacify the aggressive nature of man. As it was put by Rhodes:

In short, the 1941 Amazon heroine is sent off to war not just with evil Nazis but to be an agent in a culture within the United States. (96)

From the very start, Wonder Woman was different from the other super-powered heroes gracing the pages:

Most of the first superheroes had origins rooted in some sort of tragic event that motivated their crime-fighting career, Wonder Woman, on the other hand, was rooted in a feminist utopian vision. Her mission was not to resolve her own personal issues but to help facilitate a coming matriarchy. Marston rejected the conventions of the burgeoning superhero genre and set-up Wonder Woman as a new, unique brand of hero. (Hanley, 2014, 4)

Marston's philosophy concerning his creation of Wonder Woman was unique to say the least. In discussing the driving ideas behind Wonder Woman, he makes it clear what he thinks she should be:

psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, save the world. There isn't love enough in the male organism to run this planet peacefully. Woman's body contains twice as many love generating organs and endocrine mechanisms as the male. What woman lacks is the dominance or self-assertive power to put over and enforce her love desires. (Daniels 2000, 22-23)

Her origin has changed little from what Marston had developed in 1941. However, when her character was re-tooled after the 1986 "comics event", Crisis on Infinite Earths, Diana was made different from the other Amazonians on Paradise Island, now known as Themyscira. She was special from the others in that she was actually a statue molded by her mother Hippolyta and given life and attributes to her by the gods. Thus, she then embodies a pure woman, one who is without the imperfections and foibles that other women have thanks to the contribution that man has in their creation.

II – Feminist Icon

Despite her fantastic origins, it is the lasting effect of her character that is even more notable. Even renowned feminist, activist, and founder of Ms. Magazine, Gloria Steinem, was moved by Marston's creation (Emad, 2006). She had described the Wonder Woman written under Marston as being an early feminist hero:

This was an Amazon super-hero who never killed her enemies. Instead, she converted them to a belief in equality and peace, to self-reliance, and respect for the rights of others. If villains destroyed themselves, it was through their own actions or some unbloody accident. (Steinem, 1995, 9)

Steinem's connection with Wonder Woman was especially profound, feeling like she was rescued by Wonder Woman in her childhood (Emad, 2006). She describes the reason she felt so connected to Wonder Woman was due to the fact that:

[Wonder Woman] had come to many of her amazing powers naturally. Together with her Amazon sisters, she had been trained in them from infancy and perfected them in Greek-style contests of dexterity, strength, and speed. The lesson was that each of us might have unknown powers within us, if we only believed and practiced them. (Steinem, 1995, 7)

Steinem resonated so acutely with Wonder Woman that she made sure that Wonder Woman graced the inaugural issue of Ms. Magazine in 1972. While Steinem provides a broad reason to see Wonder Woman as a role model, the Amazonian Princess has a lot of details that help to establish why she is such a feminist icon.

Let us look at the intrusion of man into the world of Amazons, Steve Trevor. He is seen as a potential romantic leading man for Diana, yet the way Marston portrays him is as someone who cannot compete with the Amazonian princess:

Like her superhero peers, Wonder Woman had her own damsel in distress, a fawning love interest who always got captured and had to be rescued. 'Her' name was Steve Trevor...he appeared to be the quintessential American Hero and was drawn that way by H.G. Peter, with a strong jaw, muscular build, and handsome face...however, the man was entirely inept. No matter the mission, he'd end up ambushed or captured and Wonder Woman would have to save him...Whenever Wonder Woman was in trouble, Steve was no help. He showed up too late, was knocked out and woke up to find Wonder Woman had set herself free or was captured as well so Wonder Woman had to free herself and Steve. (Hanley, 2014, 28-29)

Considering the gender roles of man and woman in literature during those times, this was a unique situation. Wonder Woman was not behooved to fawn over the man she rescued, instead she took an active pursuit in carving her own way in the world of man. She would allow her alter-ego, Diana Prince, to continue with these traditional aspects of gender and romance and then comment on how absurd the concept was:

Wonder Woman once stated that [Diana] will have to go on mooning over Steve Trevor, while he, goes on mooning over Wonder Woman, essentially

declaring that those two hapless characters would engage in typical gender roles but Wonder Woman wouldn't be a part of such an inane system. (Hanley, 2014, 32).

For Wonder Woman, she was only there for her mission, to bring peace. Considering that her comics were being published during World War II, this meant that her most frequent enemies were the Axis powers. What was interesting was how Wonder Woman's approach to the situation was so different from her contemporaries:

While Batman and Superman used their covers to promote war bonds and stamps, they never actually fought the war themselves...but while Superman and Batman sat out the war, Wonder Woman fought on every possible front. (Hanley, 2014, 28)

That was not the only way that she was different in fighting crime and the problems she was out to fix. While Robin was introduced to be Batman's sidekick, and Superman was supported by his non-super powered colleagues at the Daily Planet, Wonder Woman was always out to empower the women who were also as unconventional from the comics' world as possible:

While a lot of superheroes had a sidekick to help them in their crime fighting, Wonder Woman developed an entire network of powerful women...The Holliday Girls were led by Etta Candy. Etta's appearance was a stark contrast to the svelte wasp-waisted women depicted in most comic books...in fact the Holliday Girls were more useful to Wonder Woman than the American Military, often showing up to help her fight the Nazis or Japanese way before any soldiers arrived on the scene. (Hanley, 2014, 21)

Other than physical intervention, Wonder Woman approached her villains differently, especially the female ones:

Although they regularly used force to stop villains, violence wasn't the only option, Wonder Woman frequently tried to talk to criminals and show them that another path would be a better choice...Wonder Woman's general approach to women was to encouragingly point out their own strengths and set them free of the dominant men in their lives...Superman and Batman never offered encouraging suggestions for alternate careers paths to Lex Luthor or the Joker, but Wonder Woman saw the good in everyone. (Hanley, 2014, 21 - 22)

Still, it is her basic concept that makes Wonder Woman such a feminist icon. Marston developed her story into something that is beyond the usual superhero fair. The fact that she is a woman who can be seen as equal to men in all aspects is a key-point and the driving force for what makes her a unique character. No place is this more clearly seen than in Hanley's description of Wonder Woman, her Amazon sisters, and their history:

Thousands of years earlier, the Amazons had been imprisoned by Hercules in his quest to accomplish his famous Twelve Labors. The Ninth Labor was to capture the Girdle of Hippolyta, Queen of Amazons, which he did through

trickery and deceit. After the Amazons escaped from Hercules, they quit the aggressive, violent world of men and were led by Aphrodite to a hidden island where women would reside (in order to never forget the cruel treatment of Hercules and the brutal nature of men generally, the Amazons adapted the shackles they wore while imprisoned into bracelets. Wonder Woman's famous bullet-deflecting bracelets weren't just a handy tool but a constant reminder of this injustice, and they turned an object of oppression into an object of strength). (Hanley, 2014, 14)

Thus, we see that Marston had attempted to establish Wonder Woman and her Amazonian sisters as very different from the other heroes that were roaming around. The quest for peace was firmly entrenched in their history and their desire. These basic elements that made up Wonder Woman and her history were only slightly tweaked over her long history and it has become firmly established as part of the generic concept that people generally know her for.

III – Revamp and Re-launch

Despite the noble ideals that Wonder Woman started off with, they have never been adhered to strictly, having gone through extensive re-writes and revisions over the seventy-five years of publication, yet one thing can be said quite decisively:

While many writers for DC Comics have drifted far afield from Marston's conception of the character (typically reducing her to standard male superhero fisticuffs or in one glaring instance, removing her power altogether) others have recognized her primary appeal as a progressive figure. (Daniels, 2000, 15)

In 2011, DC Comics, the publisher of Wonder Woman's comics, decided to a company-wide relaunch, with all characters and titles being reset to establish a new status quo. This re-launch was dubbed "The New 52" and is presently the established canon for the characters and titles that DC Comics publishes. Currently, Wonder Woman is the headliner in two comic books, Wonder Woman and Superman-Wonder Woman, as well as a secondary character in several others. Looking primarily at the two books she is the main character in, one can see that the iconography that Wonder Woman is associated with has greatly changed. In her latest incarnation, an argument can be made that the concept of her being a progressive figure has eroded. With the publication-wide change, Wonder Woman's character and origins had changed drastically. Gone was her purity as a perfect woman, instead being one of many of Zeus's half-mortal children, no longer is she not romantically involved, and instead is Superman's significant other, and her status as Ambassador of Peace has become a bygone mainstay.

The first and most glaring change in the current Wonder Woman incarnation is her origin story. Formerly depicted as a clay statue come to life, but instead is a child of Zeus, the Greek God. While the change may seem minor, it sends a fundamentally different message. Before, Wonder Woman was untainted because she was a clay statue brought to life. This purity was especially important because it meant that she did not have the aggression and violence that was associated with men and their world, yet at the same time, she still was human. Now, with her being a demi-god, she has risen above mortals, but also becomes a part of the machinations, chaos, and

hubris that is associated with Greek mythology. The first 35 issues of Wonder Woman, had Wonder Woman dealing with her half-sisters and half-brothers as they tried to claim Zeus's throne. With her firmly entrenched with the dealings of gods and monsters, we find that she has little time in trying to help humanity pull out of their violent ways. Thus, her perfection is marred and her message is missing.

Wonder Woman's romantic life is also something that needs to be scrutinized. Before, the only man in her life was Steve Trevor, a normal human. Even then, the romance was not long lived - Wonder Woman finding her duty to be more important than the need for romance or companionship. The original importance of Wonder Woman, relationships, and her purpose is succinctly described by Goode (2014):

Wonder Woman is defined by her voluntary submission to the will of her mother and, in order for her utopian social vision to be realized, requires the willing submission of the masses. Significantly Wonder Woman must also submit to the will of the state, an act she performs through the power of affect. That is she wholly gives herself to America's fight for freedom against the Axis in her origin story in large part because she falls in love with Steve Trevor. Marston removes the threat that this defining action might have on Wonder Woman's feminist agency by rendering Trevor essentially impotent. Wonder Woman is never compromised by her love of Trevor, only motivated by it and it never supersedes her pursuit of freedom and equality for all.

Yet, in this new incarnation, we find her romantically linked with Superman, an alien, white male who is seen as the only person her equal in terms of power. The problem with such a "power couple" is that it diminishes the worth of Wonder Woman. The title Superman-Wonder Woman primarily addressed their relationship and what is seen in their dynamic is that Wonder Woman's demigod status is what makes her worthy of being Superman's significant other. In the second issue of the series, we see that Superman had to fight her brethren and they were all handily defeated, establishing his dominance over the Pantheon of Gods that reside in the DC Universe, thus implying that Wonder Woman too is weaker than him.

While strength is not the primary issue, the series continually shows that between the two of them, she plays the role of the "damsel in distress" more often than he does. In the thirteen issues printed, we find Wonder Woman beaten by Superman's roster of villains: Doomsday (Superman-Wonder Woman #2), Zod (Superman-Wonder Woman #3), Brainiac (Superman-Wonder Woman #8-11), and an infected Superman as well. All of this indicates that the level that Superman operates on is much higher than Wonder Woman's, giving him the dominant position over her in the super-powered universe.

The other problem with her being in an established relationship is that she now is prey to the tropes of romance. Before, she was an unattainable figure, idolized, but seen above the mundane concept of romance and love. She loves everyone and it is that which powers her fight for justice and peace.

Finally, we need to look at what is the purpose of Wonder Woman. When she was first introduced in the 1940s, she was sent to America, and the world in general, in order to become an "Ambassador of Peace." This purpose of hers was largely unchanged for the past seventy-plus years of her history. However, with the latest

New 52 relaunch by her publication company, DC Comics, this goal has gone unaddressed. Instead we find that she has become the new God of War. While this new status could be played with for some irony, we find that she has an oddly defeatist attitude towards what she has become. As she states:

If I can, I'll end it [war] forever. And if I can't, maybe I can pass along some of my understanding. Make it more of an absolute last resort. (Superman-Wonder Woman #7, p. 19)

This is not something that the Wonder Woman that we have grown up with would say. She would be definitive in her purpose. It also shows how much more accepting of violence she has become. While she and her sister Amazonians had perfected their abilities in the art of war, they were still a utopian society of peace. In her primary title, Wonder Woman, we find that they are more hostile and ready to fight than previously. All of these run contrary to what has been established and recognized, as Marc Edward DiPaolo notes, "cultural critics...have asserted that Wonder Woman should ideally promote peace over war, feminism over conservatism, and multiculturalism over American Imperialism (DiPaolo 2007, 152).

IV - Conclusion

While the generic concept of Wonder Woman remains in the general pop-culture consciousness, the fact is that her current comic-book status does not reflect her cultural importance - "Apart from being one of the original Golden Age comic book superheroes, she has a strong claim to being popular culture's most enduring, recognizable, and iconic woman hero." (Leung, 2011) Despite her diminished status today, there is no doubt that she is and has been a feminist icon. This status is hers is quite unique considering, as Coaca (2014) describes, "while she conforms to traditional articulations of gender in the way she performs an attractive female, white, heterosexual, middle-to-upper class woman, she also unsettles gendered boundaries through performing a determined, astute, formidable warrior at the same time."

However, when we look at how she is delineated in her comic book, we find that she is drastically different than how she is viewed. Emad (2006) has remarked on the disparity between what is on the page and what she is known for:

While the ideals of Wonder Woman are clear and noble, it is clear that the way she is portrayed is not always ideal. As Dahbany-Miraglia (2012) describes, "A true child of men's minds...been defined by the imaginations of her cadre of nannies - mostly male artists and story writers."

Looking at the two titles that she currently stars in, Wonder Woman and Superman-Wonder Woman, we find that her independence, her purity, and her quest have all been largely done away with to become more of a mundane super-heroine, rather than the paragon of feminism that Marston initially created the character to be - as Mangels puts it, "When I look at Wonder Woman...I'm seeing a woman that's powerful, a woman with a sense of truth and grace to her. Her message was always about accepting everybody as equals and about making the world a better place." Considering how much Wonder Woman's status has diminished in her recent books,

she is a far cry from the theme song of her television show, The New Original Wonder Woman, which echoed Marston's sentiments succinctly:

Wonder Woman! Wonder Woman!
Now the world is ready for you,
And the wonders you can do:
Make a hawk a dove,
Stop a war with love
Make a liar tell the truth.

Wonder Woman
Get us out from under, Wonder Woman!
All our hopes are pinned upon you!

Right now, those hopes are attached to a Wonder Woman who has fallen away from her original legacy. Let us hope that she soon returns to the vision of being the people's champion.

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