

CREATING A SUPERHEROINE: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS
OF THE X-MEN COMIC BOOKS

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a rhetorical analysis of a two-year *X-Men* comic book publication that features an entirely female cast. This research was conducted using Kenneth Burke's theory of terministic screens to evaluate how the authors and artists created the comic books. Sonja Foss's description of cluster criticism is used to determine key terms in the series and how they were contributed to the creation of characters. I also used visual rhetoric to understand how comic book structure and conventions impacted the visual creation of superheroines. The results indicate that while these superheroines are multi-dimensional characters, they are still created within a male standard of what constitutes a hero. The female characters in the series point to an awareness of diversity in the comic book universe.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an introduction to comic books, their format, and their significance in popular culture. I will discuss my rationale for this particular study, as well as illuminating some of the popular criticisms that comic books receive and as their subversive potential. I also introduce the theoretical framework for analysis.

Comic Books

If you ask a child to tell you their favorite superhero, he or she will probably give you an extensive list. From the classic DC comics like Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman to the cast of the wildly popular Avengers franchise by Marvel, superheroes are virtually everywhere. The female superhero is frequently viewed as a token character, but she has been present since the beginning of superhero comic books. In the 1940s, Lois Lane was featured in her own comic books. An issue of *Superman* comics entitled “Woman of Steel” showed the hero saving a train full of people alongside an unnamed woman (Beritela, 2007). These stories of heroines have also reflected the culture. As women were stepping out of manufacturing jobs, Wonder Woman was featured in a variety of domestic situations (Wandtke, 2007). While the peak of comic book consumption was in the 1940s (Scott, 2013), comic books seen a dramatic increase in popularity in recent years. The massive success of comic-based movies has refueled interest in comic books. With literally dozens of movies scheduled for release over the next five years (Keyes, 2014), the interest in comic books is expected to increase.

This thesis focuses specifically on American superhero comic books. Comic books have addressed a wide variety of social concerns, ranging from racism, sexism, and more recently gay rights. (Palmer-Mehta & Hay, 2005; Zingsheim, 2011). These comic books have also been read by a wide variety of people and interpreted in different ways. Adolescents who read comic books often find pieces of their identity within comic books (Simon, 2012). However, comic books have also faced criticism for their content. Women in particular face sexualization on cover art (Cocca, 2014), although this trend has decreased in the last decade. However, a 2013 creation of the *X-Men* comic books features an all-female cast of characters (Betancourt, 2014). Additionally, the transition to digital formats has increased the online presence of comic books (Stevens & Bell, 2012). The current Marvel Unlimited subscription is considered to be the Netflix of comic books. For a monthly fee, anyone with an internet connection can read Marvel comic books. This is often more affordable than buying a physical copy of every comic book. Almost all of the *X-Men* comics since the 1960s are available online. This provides a unique opportunity to understand how the female character series fits into the larger *X-Men* brand while branching out on into its own story. My study focused on the female characters found in the 2013-2015 *X-Men* series. The more recent creation of the *X-Men* with an all-female cast makes an ideal subject for analysis because it utilizes standard symbols within the franchise while simultaneously creating its own interpretation of heroism.

Rationale

Comic books have been a cultural icon since the 1940s. The presence of superhero comic books in the United States has helped define the culture. They can be

used to address a variety of sociopolitical issues or simply created and consumed for enjoyment. With the creation of Superman, Wonder Woman, and other superheroes, comic books became a staple of entertainment. However, the importance of the comic book superhero waned around the 1960's. After several decades as a kind of niche form of entertainment, superheroes have experienced a resurgence in popularity due to movies and television (Scott, 2013). Over the next few years, about forty different movies based on Marvel and DC Comics will be released (Keyes, 2014). The 2014 movie *Guardians of the Galaxy* was “an unexpected summer blockbuster” which grossed \$772.8 million worldwide (Schlossberg, 2014). Due to their popularity, comic books have begun appearing in mainstream news sources and are worthy of academic inquiry

X-Men

X-Men has been a popular franchise for Marvel Comics for decades. The comic was first written in 1963 by Marvel legend Stan Lee and his writing partner Jack Kirby (Martin, 2013). Unlike many other superheroes, these characters do not get their abilities in a freak accident. They have a genetic mutation that enables them to manifest superpowers around puberty. Multiple adaptations to the series have been published since, and characters have also been part of the *Avengers* ensemble as well. There are two different contexts in which to use the word “X-Men.” “*X-Men*” when it is italicized refers to the series title. The “X-Men” refers to a team of superheroes originally assembled by Professor Charles Xavier. This title is based on the X in his name and a mutated “x-gene” that these superheroes possess (Martin, 2013).

Over time, the dynamic of the ‘feared and hated’ mutants who nevertheless defend ordinary humans has been used to explore different dynamics of power and

privilege*. These include anti-Semitism, racism, and LGBT issues” (Martin, 2013). The X-Men series was relaunched in 2013 with an exclusively female cast. This gained notoriety because this particular method of relaunching a series has never been done. Often, series reboots add new characters and plotlines to their storytelling, but no previously co-ed comic books have featured an ensemble that is exclusively female.

While the X-Men are an allegory that supports Civil Rights, most of the characters have historically come from white, privileged backgrounds and are predominantly male (Martin, 2013; Zingsheim, 2011). There are some notable exceptions to this that rose up after the original publication. Most famously, Magneto is a Holocaust survivor whose backstory makes him highly critical of the anti-mutant rhetoric. Other characters have been added through the years from a variety of nations and backgrounds.

Women in Comic Books

While women have always been present in comic books, criticisms have arisen regarding their portrayal. Better representation is one of the chief demands among female comic book readers (Oyola, 2014). Research on readers by comic book companies has indicated that researchers are predominantly male (Scott, 2013). This encouraged companies to continue catering to their perceived audience, but this is not an accurate reflection of the demographic makeup of readers (Schenker, 2014). Beyond academia, online forums have been developed to create a dialogue about gender bias prevalent in many comic books. Most notably, the Hawkeye Initiative served as a forum for comic book readers to protest the use of sexualized images of women in comic books through visual juxtaposition (About THI and FAQ, n.d.). These forums allow for discussion and active participation without the trappings of academia.

As Scott (2013) wrote, there has been a wealth of research into comic books (Beritela, 2007; Palmer-Mehta & Hay, 2005; Wandtke, 2007; Zingsheim, 2011) and their readers (Botzakis, 2009; Lopes, 2006; MacDonald, 2013; Quail, 2011; Simon, 2012; Scott, 2013; Stevens & Bell, 2012), but “instructors and scholars in Rhetoric and Composition have been slower to adopt comics” (Sealey-Morris, 2015, p. 31). Additionally, this version of *X-Men* is the first time ensemble cast of a major title is entirely comprised of women. This provides an opportunity for unique research that explores how comic books create their fictional worlds and characters.

Research Questions

By using a feminist lens, this study examined how the 2013-2015 *X-Men* series uses graphic narrative to create female superheroes. The visual presentation is analyzed in addition to the language and plot used to create the story. While some research indicates that female superheroines are essentially “men in drag” (Neumann & Parks, 2015), echoing Judith Butler’s (1990) explanation of subversive acts. Further studies have also indicated that women in comic books are drawn by men and for men. Using Kenneth Burke’s (1966) discussion of terministic screens as a framework, this series will be examined. The following research questions was answered through rhetorical criticism:

RQ 1: How does the 2013 *X-Men* series utilize discursive symbols to create superheroines?

RQ 2: How does the 2013 *X-Men* series utilize non-discursive symbols to create superheroines?

RQ 3: What terministic screens does the 2013 *X-Men* series utilize in creating superheroines?

Summary

Chapter 1 discussed comic books and some popular criticisms of female characters. The chapter briefly described the X-Men series as well as the significance of comic books in popular culture. Chapter 2 discusses the artifact at length along with comic book history, previous literature on comic books, and the theoretical framework. Chapter 3 presents the method for rhetorical analysis. Chapter 4 shows the results of the analysis. Finally, chapter 5 concludes with a discussion of the analysis and its implications.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter discusses current research on comic books, especially in relation to gender, sexual orientation, or minority populations. I also provide a brief history of comic books and their significance within popular culture. Topics included are a description of the 2013-2015 *X-Men* series, terministic screens, feminist theory, linear storytelling, and representation issues within comic books. These elements create the basis for the focus of this analysis and create a framework for understanding how a potentially groundbreaking adaptation of a popular series frames heroism.

Description of the Artifact

The first *X-Men* comic book was written in 1963 (Martin, 2013). Marvel legends Stan Lee and Jack Kirby created characters who were not given their powers through an accident or experimentation. These characters were born with a genetic mutation that manifests superpowers around puberty. “X-Men” as a term has two meanings. When italicized, it refers to the series title. “X-Men” also indicates the team of superheroes originally assembled by Professor Charles Xavier as well as the mutated “x-gene” that gives these individuals power in the first place (Martin, 2013). While the initial cast of the *X-Men* series were white, the cast expanded after a few years. These new characters originate from across the globe, and their range of backgrounds has been used to support a variety of causes.

In their attempt to “internationalize” the X-Men, Len Wein and the artist Dave Cockrum created new mutants, ones who weren’t as whitebread as their Lee/Kirby predecessors. They included Storm, who hailed from Kenya; Thunderbird, who was Native American; Nightcrawler, who was German; and Colossus, who was Russian. (Singer, 2008, p. 188)

The *X-Men* series has been used as an allegory for the Civil Rights movement (Zingsheim, 2011). “Over time, the dynamic of the ‘feared and hated’ mutants who nevertheless defend ordinary humans has been used to explore different dynamics of power and privilege *. These include anti-Semitism, racism, and LGBT issues” (Martin, 2013).

This new series launched in July 2013 and concluded in June 2015. Artists Brian Wood and Oliver Coipel designed these additions to the *X-Men* franchise (Pantozzi, 2013). The twenty-six editions in the series provided something never seen before in mainstream comics: an exclusively female lead cast. While some comic book readers have complained that an all-female cast alienates male readers, editor David Ketchum has a distinctly different impression of the series. He stated to the *Washington Post*, “I don’t think any Marvel comic is exclusively for one audience or another, and we certainly haven’t tried to make ‘X-Men’ the exception to that rule” (Betancourt, 2014, p. para. 6).

Characters

“Not only is it the first time that an X-Men team has been all female (in a primary ‘X-Men’ title, no less), but Storm, Rogue, Jubilee, Kitty Pryde, Rachel Grey and Psylocke join the Fearless Defenders as one of two Marvel female super-teams” (Hanks, 2013, para. 4). Each character has her own distinct background and struggles, not only as

a mutant, but also as a person. Rogue – for instance – is the child of hippies who settled on a commune in Mississippi. Her powers absorb the life energy of others, which put her teenage crush into a coma. She left her identity as Anna Marie behind and ran away from home. Her fear and bitterness that she cannot touch other people sometimes pit her against the X-Men team (Rogue, n.d.).

As one of the oldest female characters in the *X-Men* franchise, Storm has appeared in numerous films and comic books. Originally named Ororo Munroe, she is a descendant of a line of African priestesses. Her mother was a Kenyan tribal princess, and her father was an American photojournalist. Her powers emerged while traveling across the Sahara Desert. Her ability to control the weather convinced several tribes in Kenya to believe she is a goddess (Storm, n.d.).

Jubilee is one of the newer characters in the series. She was the daughter of Chinese immigrants to the United States who named her Jubilation Lee. Her powers of explosive energy manifested shortly before her parents were killed. A female group from the X-Men team saved her from a group of mutant hunters, and she followed them back to their base. At first she was unsure about joining the team, but she eventually became vital to them and the Jean Grey School, the new name of the school at Professor Xavier's mansion.

Katherine "Kitty" Pryde is also known by her X-Men codename of Shadowcat. Her grandfather Samuel Prydeman survived a concentration camp (Shadowcat, n.d.). Her powers allow her to phase through solid matter and various points in time. She became a close friend to Storm during her time with the X-Men. While often overlooked, Kitty's

Jewish heritage is important to her, and it once allowed her to defeat vampires with her Star of David necklace the same way a crucifix would traditionally work (Singer, 2008).

Rachel Grey is the daughter of Jean Grey and Scott Summers. While they are both deceased in this timeline, Rachel possesses the same telepathic and telekinetic abilities of her mother. Grey even assumed the identity of her mother as the Phoenix. Because Rachel Grey originated in an alternate timeline, she was hunted down after anti-mutant Senator Robert Kelley was killed. She was captured, tortured, and brainwashed into hunting mutants until she was imprisoned in New York and met Kitty Pryde. Her entrance into an alternate timeline occurred when she tried to stop the Sentinel program in her own universe (Marvel Girl, n.d.).

Psylocke is one of the few characters in the Marvel universe with a designated birthday. When introduced as Elizabeth Braddock, her birthday was April 23, 1956. The year has since been changed to 1982. She and her twin brother Brian are the children of James Braddock, Sr. The twins were born in Essex. They both teamed up With Captain America to defeat the Red Skull. In this fight, Psylocke discovered that she had precognitive abilities that ultimately grew into telepathy. She joined the X-Men after she was blinded and given bionic eyes (Psylocke, n.d.). Each of these characters comes from a variety of backgrounds and family situations. Their ability to work as a team helps them to overcome personal struggles.

Comic Books

Comic books have been present in American popular culture since the introduction of the penny dreadfuls in the late nineteenth century. While the writers may

not have intended their work to be subversive, American comic books have been at the center of controversy for over a century.

The US comic book industry has addressed a number of pressing social and political issues in its narratives through the years, including alcohol and drug abuse, racism, environmental devastation, gun control, and poverty. In the process, the industry has provided a rich tapestry of American cultural attitudes and philosophies that reflect varying approaches to issues that continue to haunt, confound, and rile the American public. (Palmer-Mehta & Hay, 2005, p. 390)

American comic books have been a staple of popular culture since the 1940s. Women in comic books have been given freedoms and superpowers almost from the beginning. Lois Lane, Superman's love interest in the DC Comics series, was featured in her own 1940's comic book solving mysteries and saving people. Superman's female equivalent was introduced in "Woman of Steel" around the same time working alongside Clark Kent to save railway passengers (Beritela, 2007). While women have always been present in comic books, they have not been represented at the same level as male characters.

However, women in comic books have frequently been written from the viewpoint of how the male writers and publishers believe women should be. Female protagonists have featured in comic books beginning with penny dreadfuls – short comic books that only cost a penny. *Girls Own Paper* (1880-1956) "instructed heavily on domestic duties and preached about how to become an 'angel in the house'" (Danziger-Russell, 2013, p. 10). Women and girls at the time consumed the penny dreadful comic

books written for a male audience as well. One of the first women in comic books was Sheena, Queen of the Jungle. Sheena had no superpowers but was an expert in all forms of combat. “Although she was represented as a strong and powerful female, Sheena resembled a pin-up model, designed for the male gaze” (Danziger-Russell, 2013, p. 12). Wonder Woman was quite possibly the first superhero designed with a feminist message. Creator Elizabeth Holloway Marston reportedly told her husband and co-creator, “Come on, let’s have a superwoman! There’s too many men out there” (Danziger-Russell, 2013, p. 13). This was the first superheroine written with a woman’s perspective in mind. After World War II, women were hesitant to leave the workplace. Wonder Woman was drawn in a variety of domestic situations, including vacuuming and wearing a wedding dress (Wandtke, 2007). Timely Comics, later Marvel Comics, created *Miss America* in 1944 as a superheroine, but the second issue featured almost entirely fashion tips and articles about pop stars (Danziger-Russell, 2013).

DC Comics introduced Supergirl in 1959 as Superman’s younger cousin. Through most of the series, she is subservient to Superman and follows his instruction. The only time she tries to defy her cousin is during an “evil twin” story arc where she is being controlled by another being. There is a consistent theme in the series that Supergirl can only reach her full potential through disobedience. However, towards the end of her story, she demonstrates that she is just as capable and resourceful as Superman (Beritela, 2007). While her introduction post-dates that of the super dog, she becomes a crucial part of Superman’s extended family.

Comic books began to decline in the 1950’s, largely due to psychiatrist Fredric Wertham’s book *Seduction of the Innocent*. In it, he blamed comic books for rising

juvenile delinquency. A three-day hearing by the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency concluded that, while comic books were not responsible for teen behavior, the violence in comic books should be decreased (Danziger-Russell, 2013, pp. 16-17). As Timely Comics transitioned into Marvel Comics, the Silver Age of Marvel Comics began. The *Fantastic Four* was published in 1961 as competition for DC Comics' *Justice League*. "Many point to this first issue as the book that revived the comic book industry as a whole" (McClelland, 2007, p. 71). This was also Marvel staff writer Stan Lee's big break to fame.

There are currently multiple variations of virtually every series on the planet. DC Comics recently rebooted their series with the *New 52* editions (Scott, 2013). Marvel Comics is also releasing numerous variations of their comic books, especially those that have been made into popular movies and television shows. The massive success of superheroes through other media has fueled a renewed increase in comic book readership (Scott, 2013). An increase in digital subscriptions has allowed readers to enjoy comic books from electronic devices instead of traveling to a comic book store (Stevens & Bell, 2012). Given their growth in recent years, comic books are reclaiming their place in the zeitgeist.

While women have consistently been present in comic books, they have not necessarily been portrayed in a positive light. DC Comics writer Gail Simone noted the "women in refrigerators" trope, wherein a woman is victimized, killed, or depowered in order to advance the character development of her male companion (Scott, 2013). The name came from an edition in the *Green Lantern* comics where the hero's girlfriend is

chopped up and stuffed into a refrigerator by the villain. This is quite possibly one of the most well-known tropes, but it is not the only issue in gender representation.

Gender Representation in Comic Books

Comic books have portrayed numerous women on the covers. They tend to be sexualized on cover art more than their male counterparts (Cocca, 2014). While this has decreased since the 1990s, female characters are still drawn in revealing clothing and impossible poses (Scott, 2013). This seems to occur across both major comic book publishers. There seems to be an assumption that comic books are written exclusively for men, in spite of the fact that almost half of all comic book readers are women (Schenker, 2014). Because major publishers adhere to outdated assumptions about their readership, women who read comic books often enjoy more independent titles (Scott, 2013). With this in mind, it is important to also understand how specific comic books have been used for gender representation.

The X-Men specifically have been used as a narrative for the Civil Rights movement. Zingsheim (2011) analyzed the *X-Men* series over the years. Although they have been used to support human rights causes, the X-Men teams have traditionally been white and male. These characters are also portrayed as strong, heroic, and hyper-masculine. There are some significant exceptions to this rule. Perhaps the most famous example is Magneto, A Jewish Holocaust survivor who has the ability to manipulate metal. His background makes him extremely critical of anti-mutant rhetoric (Singer, 2008). Because of their diverse backgrounds, writer Brian Wood said “Our lineup is total A-listers. You can build a team with your eyes closed” (Hanks, 2013). Because of the

seemingly diverse representation in the X-Men series, the new adaptation seems ideal for analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Kenneth Burke believed that language was symbolic, and that humans communicated extensively in symbols. Words essentially had two functions: “scientific” and “dramatistic.”

We might begin by stressing the distinction between a “scientific and a “dramatistic” approach to the nature of language. A “scientific” approach begins with questions of naming or definition. Or the power of language to define and describe may be viewed as derivative; and its essential function may be treated as attitudinal or hortatory: attitudinal as with expressions of complaint, fear, gratitude, and such; hortatory as with commands or requests, or, in general, an instrument developed through its use in the social processes of cooperation and competition. (Burke K. , 1966, p. 44)

These two methods of approaching language are not mutually exclusive. Scientific approaches put an effort on describing an artifact, and dramatistic approaches focus on the prescriptive. Ultimately the scientific approach focuses on logic, while the dramatistic approach allows for more speculation. These methods are often used together.

One of the most interesting factors that Burke discusses is the ability of even the simplest and direct language to portray a specific selection of reality. “Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality” (Burke K. , 1966, p. 45). “Terministic screens” are the method in which attention is

directed. Deflection of reality involves describing an event or scenario in a way that puts the focus on a desired point while simultaneously diverting attention from others.

Terministic Screens

Burke uses the example of photographs to explain terministic screens. They are photographs of the same objects that are made different by different color filters. “Here something so “factual” as a photograph revealed notable distinctions in texture, and even in form, depending upon which color filter was used for the documentary description of the event being recorded” (Burke K. , 1966, p. 45). The seemingly innocuous change in a color filter changes the focus of the pictures. With language, our word choice changes how we portray reality.

In language, the way words are created impacts how we see the world around us. Burke references Bentham and Emerson to establish how our mental schema is constructed by word association. In the social sciences, physical terms are given to intangible phenomena. “Logology” is the systematic study of terms. Where “theology” is considered “words about God,” logology is “words about words” (Burke K. , 1966). The theological phrase “*Believe that you may understand*” has a fundamental application to the purely secular problem of *terministic screens*” (Burke K. , 1966, p. 47). “Believe” in this case is to engage in specific terms while “that you may understand” is the process of recognizing observations through the terms you have chosen.

Our involvement in symbols determines “how fantastically much of our ‘Reality’ could not exist for us, were it not for our profound and inveterate involvement in symbol systems” (Burke K. , 1966, p. 48). Burke puts “reality” in quotation marks in order to indicate that he believes it to be completely subjective. Reality in his interpretation is not

concrete. It is determined entirely by the words and symbols we use to construct it. In studying three perspectives on infant behavior, three different interpretations will emerge. Although, these observations document behaviors that are “objectively there,” there is no truly objective way of observing it.

Composition and Division

Terministic screens construct reality in two different ways. “Basically, there are two kinds of terms: terms that put things together, and terms that take things apart. Otherwise put, A can feel himself identified with B, or he can think of himself as disassociated from B” (Burke K. , 1966, p. 49). In his critique of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, Burke points out that the main weakness in the theory is its overemphasis on the continuity between people and animals. Darwin also says very little about human use of symbols.

We must use terministic screens, since we can’t say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another. Within that field there can be different screens, each with its ways of directing the attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology. All terminologies must implicitly or explicitly embody choices between the principle of continuity and the principle of discontinuity. (Burke K. , 1966, p. 50)

The language we use in everyday life also includes terms of togetherness and separation. Political affairs put emphasis on the division of citizens and is often healed

when conflicting parties get together to fight a common enemy (Burke K. , 1966). One of Burke's contentions is that discussion in specialized terminology can be used to illuminate the human condition. Specific terms may be applied broadly to "throw light upon one or another aspect of human motives" (Burke K. , 1966, p. 51). Each discipline from biology to poetics has something to offer as a terministic screen for humanity.

Avoiding Relativism

While Burke acknowledges that screens portray different realities, he is not willing to accept complete relativism. No one person's perspective will be identical with another's. However, our shared reality is constructed through symbolism. As with academic disciplines, these symbols can either unite us or divide us (Burke K. , 1966). There is a "collective revelation" about reality through coming to conclusions based on the screens we are exposed to. We "cannot relate to one another sheerly as things in motion" (Burke K. , 1966, p. 53). Although we are probably "things in motion," Burke argues that we are not exclusively that. Our use of speech in a symbolic environment makes us more.

The "collective revelation" that we experience can be seen in terms of action in various religions. These theological and philosophical terms have been moved to a more modern context by using terms like "'transactions,' 'exchange,' 'competition,' 'cooperation,'" (Burke K. , 1966, p. 54). A single action culminates in drama. The "dramatistic screen," therefore, is an evaluation of the implication present in ideas and action. Because Burke sees the use of symbols as an action, basically anything can be viewed through this screen.

We engage with symbols in a variety of contexts, and each symbol exists within a large system of symbols. There may be a sense of collective revelation, but “there is a striking difference within symbol systems” (Burke K. , 1966, p. 57). Each scientific discipline has its own system of symbols, as do writers, or “poets,” as Burke calls them. Poetic symbol systems do not rely on specific nomenclature like the sciences, so they use elements beyond them. Because comic books rely on linear storytelling and poetic symbols, they offer a unique artifact for evaluation.

Comic Books and Narrative

Comic books can be evaluated as “poetic” works because they are a sequential art form that relies on storytelling. While comic books are usually considered a relatively new form of narrative, several other instances of sequential art have been analyzed as early as the ancient Egyptians (Lopes, 2006). The Bayeux tapestry is one of the oldest forms that closely resembles the paneled art found in comic books (Lopes, 2006; Thon & Stein, 2013). “Telling a story through a series of discrete images accompanied by textual elements is an old and efficient method of addressing, instructing, and entertaining the illiterate or semi-literate” (Horstkotte, 2013).

The storytelling in comic books has also become highly sophisticated. Beginning in the 1980s, more complex narratives within comic books emerged that put them on the same level of complexity as a literary novel (Horstkotte, 2013). Because comic books are illustrated images instead of pictures, they have potential to be anything the artist desires. Essentially, the artist can create whatever “screen” he or she would like.

Panel size, shape, and placement, drawing style, coloring, and the use of frames, as well as the use or lack of narrative text boxes, their size, shape,

color, and position in- or outside panels are just some of the elements that contribute toward the unique ways in which a graphic narrative draws its readers into the storyworld. (Horstkotte, 2013, p. 32)

Every style of comic book has its own potential for using and creating symbols. However, comic books subscribe to a series of norms. At least in the United States, comic books are drawn with panels and frames separated by uniform amounts of space. This creates a kind of “collective revelation” where one can expect the same elements from a comic book. One of the prominent criticisms of comic books is that superheroines are simply “male” characters drawn as women for the pleasure of readers. The character of “the action heroine, who fights and kills at par with men, confuses the boundaries and is seen by some critics as a gender transvestite” (Neumann & Parks, 2015, p. 298).

Feminist Criticism

The subject of feminist criticism is important. Judith Butler (1990) argues that the presentation of women as the subject of feminism is inaccurate. Instead, feminism does not have a clear subject. Because the concept of womanhood is created by patriarchal systems, seeing women as the exclusive subject of analysis is self-defeating. Butler argues that multiple identities are at play in the same person.

If one ‘is a woman’, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered ‘person’ transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to

separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (Butler J. , 1990, p. 3)

This concept is vital to a feminist criticism. Butler describes the assumption of a singular point of oppression based on gender identity as too simplistic and therefore ineffective. Gender is specific to the culture that it exists within, and a one-size-fits-all approach is overly simplistic at best and racist at worst.

When discussing issues of men and women, it is important to understand some definitions. Judith Butler (1990) points to sex and gender as two distinctly different concepts. Sex is a biological feature, which is determined at birth by physical features. Gender is a social construction which determines the guidelines for those identified as male and female. There is a tension between whether this construction is based on free will or determinism. “In either case, the body is figured as a mere *instrument* or *medium* for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related” (Butler J. , 1990, p. 8). However, the issues related to sex and gender are limited by the cultures they exist in. Butler argues that the distinction between sex and gender is often muddled, and is ultimately not the determining factor in feminist critiques.

The binary assumptions relating to gender are inherently problematic. In order to have women, you must also consider men. In order to have lesbianism, heterosexuality must exist as well. These identities are defined by what they are not. Subversive acts would help to deconstruct identities. By deconstructing gender performance, it is possible “to render that category, in whatever form, permanently problematic” (Butler J. , 1990, p. 128). “The body” essentially becomes a battleground for identity. The identities that

feminist politics often prescribe to can be useful to mobilize people for change, but they are limiting just the same.

Summary

Chapter 2 offered a review of the literature surrounding comic books and the *X-Men* series and a brief introduction to the characters in the 2013-2015 issues. The chapter also provided an in-depth look at Kenneth Burke's terministic screens, comic books as a linear art form, and feminist criticism. This research supports the purpose of my analysis by connecting the *X-Men* series to frameworks for rhetorical criticism. Chapter 3 discusses the methods used evaluate the portrayal of women in the *X-Men* comic books.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL GROUNDING

This chapter discusses Cluster criticism and justifies the choice of this method for analyzing *X-Men* comic books. I include a description of the narrative structure within comic books. The chapter examines how comic books can use rhetoric to simultaneously tell a story and present an argument. This chapter also discusses narrative criticism and visual rhetoric. I discuss the process of analyzing rhetorical clusters within the *X-Men* comic books to better understand how superheroines are created.

Cluster Criticism

Kenneth Burke never used the term cluster criticism himself, but the term was popularized in the academic community based on his analysis of rhetorical “clusters.” Sonja Foss (1984) created the term “cluster criticism” from Burke’s writing. Cluster criticism or cluster analysis is “a method of noting what subjects cluster about other subjects in an effort to discover what goes with what and why” (p. 3). Essentially, if one phrase or sequence is used repeatedly, it is important. In the “new sciences” such as Anthropology, Burke emphasizes that rhetorical clusters are used to define different cultures (Burke, 1951). The association between key terms and their context is analyzed to better understand the artifact. Once a term of high frequency is identified, it is followed by “an examination of each context in which those key terms implicitly or explicitly appear” (Foss, *Women priests in the Episcopal church: A cluster analysis of establishment rhetoric*, 1984, p. 3). For instance, when discussing “church,” Foss found

that the term was associated with terms related to tradition and history. In teaching cluster criticism to students, Shannan Butler (2011) explains that visualizing clusters around key terms in a tree-like structure can be helpful to better understand the terministic screen the author is using.

Aldenderfer and Blashfield (1984) viewed cluster analysis as a purely scientific approach and used primarily quantitative methods to discuss its application. They assert that clustering and classification is the basis for all scientific disciplines. In the social sciences, scholars designate different levels or categories to individuals in order to better understand them. In his rhetorical categorization, Burke (1966) emphasized the context of literary images. This does not simply mean the context within the book, but also focuses on the cultural influences that shaped this image (Foss, *Women priests in the Episcopal church: A cluster analysis of establishment rhetoric*, 1984). These authors seem to argue that in order for cluster criticism to be effective, it must focus on both the artifact and the society that shaped the artifact.

Expanding Ideology

Burke's rhetorical theories were heavily influenced by Nietzsche and Aristotle's view that art and reason must be viewed simultaneously (Clair, et al., 2014). While Nietzsche believed that the dialectical tension must be viewed in order to understand humanity, Burke suggested that both are rhetorical tools that people use on a daily basis. Dialectic expands our understanding and can be used to strengthen rhetoric. "Put several such voices together, with each voicing its own special assertion, let them act upon one another in co-operative competition, and you get a dialectic that, properly developed, can

lead to views transcending the limitations of each” (Burke, 1951, p. 203). Comparing and evaluating two different ideas ultimately leads to a better understanding

When understanding rhetorical theories in a feminist context, the hierarchy of ideas must be discussed. “Theories possess ideological hegemony, delimiting the territory of study, suggesting what seems natural and reasonable, and thus controlling how we think about an area of study such as rhetoric” (Foss & Griffin, 1992, p. 330). One of the challenges when conducting rhetorical analysis through a feminist lens is this hegemony. Only certain concepts are deemed important in a traditional framework. Burke’s rhetorical theory is considered a “master theory” and, therefore, it has patriarchal delimiting boundaries (Foss & Griffin, 1992). This may not be through any conscious effort on Burke’s part. Instead, it may be a result of his worldview, personal privilege, and culture. Foss and Griffin focus on the same dialectical understanding as Burke by arguing that a good rhetorical theory can be made stronger when viewed with another that may challenge it.

Uses of Cluster Criticism

Cluster criticism can be used to analyze virtually any example of rhetoric. The foundations of rhetorical theory and cluster criticism can be traced back to Greek philosophy (Clair, et al., 2014). When looking at the rhetoric surrounding adoptive families, the commodification of adoption used terms such as “supply and demand” to make the decision to adopt seem more like an economic decision (Potter, 2013). Adoptions are also depersonalized and commodified by the bureaucratic nature of adoption, “positioning adoptees as objects of instrumental rationality and economic calculation” (Potter, 2013, p. 118). Ultimately, this rhetorical cluster implies that adopted

children are objects in ways that biological children are not. Potter's analysis of print media is useful for this study because it considers what words people read on an issue.

In their study on empathy, Clair et. al. (2014) state: "Narrative constructions can both reinforce or challenge socioeconomic status, which is one of the clearest indicators of position in capitalist societies" (p. 9). The authors argue that rhetorical study falls into a dialectic of uplifting and elevating scholarship or oppressing already marginalized groups. Both studies focus on how rhetorical criticism can be used to understand hegemonic structures.

One of the most intriguing uses of rhetoric was the reaction to the Penn State sex abuse scandal. From a deontological perspective, the university failed to fulfill its duty to protect children and prevent future abuse. The school used euphemisms consistently throughout the ordeal (Lucas & Fyke, 2014). Euphemisms are a way of conveying a message without explicitly stating it. For instance, saying "I'm expecting" instead of "I'm pregnant" is a common use of euphemism. Lucas and Fyke (2014) determined using the clusters around euphemisms that Penn State used the technique to shield their own actions and minimize their role in the abuse. While most uses of euphemism are not tied to the same sinister activity, euphemisms are one of the most common uses of language and may be present in almost any form of rhetoric. Because comic books are rhetorical, they use euphemisms to tell the story. For instance, alternate forms of swearing are common in comic books. The Legion of Super-Heroes used "Sprock" as an ambiguous swear word, but the words "Sprock Happens" were used once (Unusual Euphemisms, n.d.). It appears that some euphemisms are specific to certain comic books, but other language is generally understood within broader society.

Figures of speech in rhetoric can provide valuable information about how relationships are projected to the audience. When looking at politicians and religious figures “what is significant about the rhetoric of each is not the recurrence of a single metaphor but rather the appearance of clusters of related metaphors which reveal the rhetor’s projected relationship with his audience and corroborate otherwise inconclusive rhetorical clues” (Jamieson, 1980, p. 52). Politicians and religious leaders have a different purpose in their speech. Candidates must set themselves apart when speaking, but religious leaders must unify.

Jerry Brown’s metaphoric network sets him apart not only from his father but from the other presidential contenders in 1976 and from other politicians as well. Paul VI’s purpose is not differentiation but identification. By employing the metaphors in which Christ, the apostles, and nineteen centuries of popes have expressed Catholicism, Paul VI implies that he has preserved the tradition of the Church and, hence, is a legitimate heir of Peter. So, while Brown’s metaphors may suggest a rejection of his father’s philosophy, Paul’s metaphors endorse ancestral doctrine. (Jamieson, 1980, p. 52)

An additional consideration is the audience being addressed. Paul VI addressed Catholics across the world, so his metaphors relied on archetypes that can be understood across cultures. Jerry Brown addressed an American audience, so his metaphors were more culturally specific. That makes the clusters surrounding metaphors unique to each speaker. The intended audience can be better understood based on the clusters. For comic books, the intended audience most likely is familiar with the history of the series.

Therefore, referring to a specific hero or heroine by their superhero name and given name interchangeably would not confuse the reader. Referring to other series printed by the same company would also be a simple reference point for the audience.

Rhetorical clusters can also be used to make sense of issues. The way a story is framed can shape how sense making occurs. Stories about climate change are portrayed differently depending on who tells the story (Jones & Song, 2014). For instance, conservative or business-oriented news sources will tell individualistic news stories but others see a hierarchical issue (Jones & Song, 2014). The difference in framing may make sense from the perspective of writers, but stories with multiple narrators may also show different perspectives on the same issue.

Rhetorical clusters can also indicate a preferred perspective for people to take on a given issue. For instance, media coverage surrounding the beginning of the Iraq War took a pro-war stance within major national news sources. Deepa Kumar (2006) argues that the consolidation of media ownership by conservatives contributed to media narratives all taking the same perspective: Iraq's connection to the 9/11 terror attacks and Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). While later evidence indicates that both of these narratives were false, they shaped the reasons the public supported military engagement with Iraq. Additionally, claims from the military were published by 24 hour news sources without checking all the facts. Kumar describes the news coverage as Orwellian.

On a more uplifting note, the politics of queer public kissing have also changed rhetorically. While media narratives surrounding public queer kissing change depending on the perspective of the person discussing it (Morris & Sloop, 2006), both queer

filmmaker Bruce LaBruce and Robert Knight, director of the Cultural and Family Institute, “conclude that from the collision of queer lips is sparked a conflagration sufficient to scorch the heteronormative order in the US public culture” (p. 2). While the conclusion about this disruption is distinctly different, the similarities within these rhetorical clusters show at least a realization that these kisses change the perception of public kissing. Cluster analysis is useful for a variety of rhetorical situations. Clusters help a researcher see what terministic screens are being used to sway an audience. Both the speaker and the audience are better understood based on the rhetoric used.

Visual Rhetoric

An important theoretical point to remember when considering rhetoric is that “Words and concepts have meanings in historical contexts; they are situated in the conventions of their usage communities” (Blair, 2008, p. 45). While these conventions may change, the meanings are always grounded in cultural contexts. In order to change conventions, sometimes a change in terminology is used. For instance, using gender-neutral terms like “flight attendant,” instead of “stewardess,” changes the perception of the job (Blair, 2008). In visual rhetoric, the argument lies within the images and symbols presented.

Some scholars argue that “the relationship between rhetoric of the word and rhetoric of the image is far more fluid both on synchronic and diachronic levels than the divide permits” (Goggin, 2008, p. 87). In fact, Goggin argues that the division between words and images prioritizes words as the most significant use of rhetoric. However, both are often found together. “When images and words appear together in one discursive space, they operate synergetically” (Goggin, 2008, p. 88). In many cases written rhetoric

is also visual. Discursive practices also engage with the visual because the words are written down to be seen and understood.

Although visual design and rhetoric have been viewed as different disciplines, they are incredibly similar.

What emerged as two distinct fields of study are intricately related, as reflected in their assumptions, goals and functions. For instance, scholars in design and rhetoric define their practices and objects of study similarly.

In addition, they have similar values and goals particularly related to the possibility of changing an imperfect situation and instigating a level of social consciousness. (Gallagher, Martin, & Ma, 2011, p. 27)

Rhetorical analysis in the field of communication has shifted its focus to visual mediums. Although the focus in rhetorical study has historically been on the use of visual symbols such as letters, scholarship did not focus on pictures and images until much later (Gallagher, Martin, & Ma, 2011). The 1990s saw an increase in the analysis of visual rhetorical analysis (Blakesley, 2008; Owen & Ehrenhaus, 2010). One of the biggest reasons is the “visual symbol and its impact on contemporary culture” (Foss, 2008, p. 303). Foss argues that visual rhetoric is becoming more and more a part of everyday life. The focus on visual rhetoric also challenges the traditional boundaries of rhetorical theories. In other words, scholars are developing a more complete perspective on what rhetoric is and how it can be used. “Visual rhetoric as an artifact, then, is the purposive production or arrangement of colors, forms, and other elements to communicate with an audience” (Foss, 2008). Comic books employ all of these elements in addition to the more traditional linguistic features.

Visual rhetoric has been employed long before the printed word. Goggin (Goggin, 2008, p. 90) discusses needlework as an early combination of words and images. Even without written words, needlework uses “glottographic systems” which are visual representations of spoken language. For instance, the word “bird” is represented by a visual depiction of a bird. The process of producing letters and images is the same in needlework. The focus is on the “text” in “textile” (Goggin, 2008) and that needlework is a process of reading and writing the textile. This closely resembles the argument that linear storytelling was first documented in textiles (Lopes, 2006).

One of the most iconic filmmakers is Alfred Hitchcock. His work defined horror filmmaking for decades (Blakesley, 2008). One of the arguments for why Hitchcock was so successful is his combination of visual and verbal presentations. In their analysis of film, Owen and Ehrenhaus (2010) explain certain movies as “memory projects” where a narrative of the past is framed by the present moment. They argue that by setting memories of the past in context with the present, the narrative exists on multiple levels. This is similar to flashbacks and is a common storytelling mechanism. It is also similar to elements within graphic novels.

Images may also be used for the purpose of public argument. As Burke notes, a simple photograph may be used to portray certain perspectives. “We need to recognize that archives – even seemingly transparent image archives – function as terministic screens, simultaneously revealing and concealing ‘facts,’ at once enabling and constraining interpretation” (Finnegan, 2006, p. 117). While Finnegan’s article focuses on public archives of poverty, the argument stands with almost any subject matter. Images tell a story and are used to put the viewer’s focus on a specific area. Finnegan

also notes that what we interpret may not be what the photographer intended.

Interpretation depends on the individual.

Contemporary images have also become a part of the public consciousness.

Hariman and Lucaites (2007) explain how some imagery has “taken on a life of its own.”

These images become symbols that a community forms around. Our public identity is created by images. The authors also refer to Finnegan’s (2006) work when explaining iconic photographs such as one from the Kent State University Massacre. The image is memorable and evocative and came to define a generation of anti-war protest. Similarly, photographs during the Tiananmen Square protests have helped share global politics across the world (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007). Because images can be polarizing, they are frequently used to transmit a political message.

In popular culture, one image that stands out is Rosie the Riveter. This poster has become almost a feminist myth. However, Kimble and Olson (2006) argue that it “has become a part of our collective memory, a symbol of the good war that is itself resistant to critique” (p. 535). The myths surrounding Rosie the Riveter have become more common than the reality faced by American women at the time. Rosie has become a “representative character” in our collective memory by defining what personality traits women should develop. One of the most popular misconceptions about Rosie the Riveter is that she was created by Norman Rockwell. This is not actually true. Rosie was the creation of J. Howard Miller, who was virtually unknown until the 1950s (Kimble & Olson, 2006). The original version of the character was created by Rockwell, but features distinctly different imagery. Similarly, Hariman and Lucaites (2007) discuss the image of soldiers raising the American flag over Iwo Jima. The picture was recreated to be more

dramatic after the battle was over. This image has dominated the American landscape and duplicated in multiple variations, much like Rosie the Riveter. The characters within comic books have a specific appearance that stays generally the same regardless of who is drawing the character. For instance, Wolverine will always be large, dark-haired, and have metal claws coming out of his hands.

Comic Book Structure

Comic books and graphic novels often tell stories through “graphic memoir” (Pedri, 2015). This is not limited simply to comic books. Any visual storytelling medium utilizes graphic memoir. A technique often called “vision with” is a common element in these stories. “Vision with” separates the “character’s angle of vision and the mental processes of characters or narrators” to allow the reader to have two perspectives (Pedri, 2015, p. 10). Essentially, the reader identifies with the character’s emotions and perspective, while knowing more than the character at that time. Comic books use “a wealth of visual techniques to visually encode a character-bound focalization. The character’s subjective experience can be visually communicated with the panel size and shape, blank or empty panels, the inclusion or absence of background details, and the use of visual metaphors” (Pedri, 2015, p. 12).

The paneled page is an element unique to comic books. Much like newspapers, comic books use white space, lines, and image size to tell a story. In comics, the space between images creates a paneled sequence (Kukkonen, 2011). Because comic books utilize images, text, and spacing to create a story, each element must be examined. This study examines individual images and issues within the *X-Men* series as well as the whole two-year publication.

The dialogue in comic books exists within speech balloons. These bubbles on text over images combine visual narrative with written word. “Speech balloons are so associated with the medium of comics that in Italy the word ‘fumetto’ (‘puffs of smoke’) describes both balloons and “comics” as a genre (Cohn, 2013). Cohn describes “two modalities of written and visual language found in graphic representation and underlying properties at work in those signs” (p. 36). There are four ways that the two combine. First, “Inherent” relations where the text falls within the image, such as writing on an object within the picture. Second, he describes the speech balloons in comic books as an “Emergent” connection, where the text and image work together with each other. “Adjoined” relations occur where the text and image are used together but not fully combined, such as captions. Finally, “Independent” relations exist when text and image are completely separated, such as academic writing. The shape of the bubble also indicates what thought is being conveyed. For instance, jagged edges with no tail typically surround sound effects like “Bam!” and other words that indicate action. Action bubbles fit somewhere between Inherent and Emergent, but most bubbles fit neatly into the Emergent category. Thought bubbles and speech balloons also appear to tell the story. Standalone text boxes rarely appear because comic books tell the story through a combination of action and speech balloons.

Comic Book Criticism

Comic book superheroes have thrilled and inspired generations of readers, while critics have dismissed them as nothing more than kid’s stuff. But if you go behind the mask and beneath the cape, you’ll see a more complicated story. Ever since the Great Depression, superheroes have

dealt with deep personal, social, and political issues. And in every era, the forces that have shaped our world have transformed theirs. (Goldin, 2003)

As Pedri (2015) indicates, comic books have been the subject of rhetorical criticism relatively recently. Some scholars have examined the subversive nature of comic books. For instance the popular *Mad Magazine* comic “Spy vs Spy” was used to ridicule political ideologies during the Cold War (Carabas, 2007). Because the artist behind the comic strip was a Cuban immigrant to the United States, his perspective allowed him to ridicule both sides.

Comic books are now recognized as literature. “Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus* won a special Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1992. The Pulitzer is considered to be one of the highest honors in writing, and for a comic book to be recognized alongside this year’s best work in literature and journalism was previously unthinkable” (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 1). While some literary critics separated *Maus* from the rest of graphic novels by asserting that Spiegelman did not write a comic book, this work demonstrates the vast potential of paneled pages to tell a compelling story.

Like Spiegelman, the creators of Superman were also Jewish. Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster created the idea when they were seventeen. Clark Kent’s origin story even centers on genocide and diaspora (Goldin, 2003). Many creators of early comic books were young, Jewish men. As a result, comic book superheroes were fighting Nazis before the United States became involved in World War II. Stan Lee, widely considered the godfather of modern comic books, argued, “We were fighting Hitler before our government was fighting Hitler” (Goldin, 2003). This reflects the idea that storytellers will reflect their own personal experience within the story (Jones & Song, 2014). As a

result, the fictitious story is often a way for an author to share a truth about his or her lives or a social critique.

Comic book narrative can tell a deep personal truth. While this may sometimes be in autobiographical form or “autography”, Warhol (2011) argues that comic books can both present an argument and narrate a story at the same time. Without directly acknowledging it, Warhol is engaging the dialectic that a large portion of Burke’s theory emphasizes. Similarly, a *Green Lantern* story arc narrated a story about typical comic book heroics while simultaneously presenting a gay man in a positive and humanized light (Palmer-Mehta & Hay, 2005).

Comic books have also been controversial throughout their history. As early as 1940, critics argued that comics were a corrupting influence on children (Coville, n.d.). “Their crude blacks and reds spoils a child’s natural sense of colour; their hypodermic injection of sex and murder make the child impatient with better, though quieter, stories” (para. 3). In 1948, Dr. Fredric Wertham publicly came out against comic books and launched a seven-year study on the negative effects of comic books. While Dr. Wertham was eventually discredited, he did leave a legacy for comic books. Those that might have violent content or strong language will indicate somewhere on the cover that it is intended for mature readers. Dr. Wertham’s claims about the danger of comic books were outlandish, but he did understand one key point. The majority of comic book readers were adolescents (Golda, 1997). However, comic books were shipped in care packages to US soldiers overseas during World War II. Sales increased by \$10 billion in the course of a year, indicating the height of the Golden Age of comic books (Goldin, 2003). While

comic books do not have such a large readership today, they still seem to reflect our society and the truths that their creators wish to tell.

X-Men Analysis

While it is difficult to find a cluster analysis of comic books, rhetorical analysis of comic books as well as cluster analyses of other artifacts demonstrates how the analysis is conducted. Much like Clair et. al. (2014), I examine how rhetorical clusters are used in the X-Men series to either reframe how superheroines are created or reinforce hegemonic structures. Looking at Butler's (1990) explanation of subverting gender norms helps to provide additional perspective. The research on how Butler's work relates to comic books focuses the broader theory to this topic. These clusters surrounding female characters illuminate how the artists and writers view women within the context of popular culture. In my analysis, I look for the clusters that surround important concepts in the series and explore how they are framed in the comic book and larger societal context.

Chapter Summary

Visual rhetoric is a field that has rapidly expanded in the last two decades. Language and images are combined in a multitude of ways to create popular culture. While this is definitely not a new phenomenon, my analysis adds to the body of work examining popular culture. Cluster criticism can be used to find underlying arguments within a work and see what the thoughts are surrounding major concepts. By using existing examples of cluster criticism as a framework, the next chapter delves into the X-Men series and analyzes how it portrays superheroines.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF THE X-MEN COMIC BOOKS

This chapter applies cluster analysis to the *X-Men* comic book series to understand how the superheroine is created. I identify key terms and the clusters that surround them. Visual elements within the comic book are also addressed in order to shape our understanding of the comic books.

Cluster Analysis

In this analysis of X-Men, I use cluster criticism to discover terms used most frequently by the characters and how the clusters around these terms influence how the superheroines are created and how they do their jobs.

Identifying Key Terms

The first step in cluster criticism is identifying key terms within the artifact. Frequency and intensity are the main factors in determining key terms (Foss, 1984). The terms I have identified are *family*, *power*, and *X-Men*. The idea of a continuous Marvel Universe appears as a cluster, but it is never stated as such.

I chose *family* for the first term because it begins the story and has an influence over the characters' lives. Familial terms such as brother, sister, or mother are also included in this grouping. *Power* is the second term because it defines each character's role within the team as well as how the X-Men will stop a villain. Finally, the word *X-Men* itself is evaluated, not only as a title, but a term that connects generations of mutants under one label. The concept of the Marvel Universe appears throughout the series. The

Marvel Universe is evaluated as its own cluster because it sets a context for the series within a lengthy list of other comic books.

Family

Family is the first term within the series that merits attention. It seems to be the issue that drives conflict, especially at the beginning. In fact, an adversarial sibling relationship puts the X-Men in danger from the first comic.

Before there was anything else, there were two siblings. Perfect twins, in thrall to their biological imperatives. Replication. Dominance. Survival.

One was forced out, to evolve on her own, to find her own place in the infant cosmos. The other, the victor, would come to inherit primordial earth. And as life came and went, lesser species giving rise to superior lines, some thousands of billions of life cycles ... she was forgotten.

(Wood & Coipel, X-Men #1, 2013, p. 3)

This creation story begins the X-Men comics. This is the first story about families featured in the books, but it is far from the only one. John Sublime is the twin who cast his sister out. Because Arkea Prime and her brother are at the center of conflict when the series begins, their familial relationship is the first one I address.. Arkea's first action when she leaves the school is to go to a hospital that provides cybernetic solutions to medical problems. On their arrival, the X-Men team attacked by patients saying "We are Arkea" (Wood & Coipel, X-Men #3, 2013, p. 14). They also refer to technologically enhanced humans as a superior species. Arkea refers to herself as a superior species throughout the series. John Sublime and Arkea Prime go back and forth about the distinction between humanity and primal urges. Sublime argues that Arkea is focused on

a primal need for vengeance, “whereas I’ve learned a certain level of humanity from my hosts” (Wood & Coipel, X-Men #2, 2013, p. 10). This indicates that a familial relationship does not mean two people will agree with each other.

Beyond the dynamic between Arkea Prime and John Sublime, the X-Men choose to make a family together. Sublime states “I’ve heard it said that the X-Men consider themselves family to each other” (Wood & Coipel, X-Men #2, 2013, p. 19). Sublime even refers to the baby once he is no longer possessed as Jubilee’s son, further indicating that creating their own family is important to the identity of the X-Men. This could be especially important for Jubilee because she is an orphan who was raised by Storm and other heroes. Jubilee even develops an attachment to the baby and names him Shogo. When Karima asks who he is, she responds, “He’s mine, one hundred percent” (Wood & Coipel, X-Men #3, 2013, p. 20). Her almost instantaneous parenting shows how much family means to her. She is elated when Storm tells her “you are soon to be his legal mother” (Wood, X-Men #7, 2013, p. 8). She is protective of her new baby because she knows what it is like to grow up without a family. Her need for a family makes her an unofficial big sister to Roxy, who confides in her that the girl she had a crush on punched her in the face (Wood, X-Men #7, 2013). Roxy is also Shogo’s babysitter, so she is especially close with the new family.

Family is also important to Rachel Grey. Because she originated from a future alternate timeline, her interaction with a young version of her parents challenge her loyalty to the X-Men team (Wood & Lopez, X-Men #5, 2013). Her loyalty to her dead family prevents her from developing a relationship with John Sublime because he was responsible for killing her parents (Wood & Dodson, X-Men #12, 2014). Interestingly,

sometimes, family does not indicate an emotional attachment. There is one person that Rachel does not want to call her family. Deathbird is Rachel's aunt through marriage and a Shi'ar alien. The Shi'ar killed Rachel's family, so she has very little regard for them. She even tells Monet not to call Deathbird her aunt (Guggenheim & Soy, X-Men #18, 2014). However, the discovery that Deathbird is pregnant changes Rachel's priorities. The team believes Rachel's uncle is the father of the child, making the baby her only known biological relative (Guggenheim, Tolibao, & Soy, X-Men #20, 2014). Deathbird believes she has the right to kill everyone involved in hurting her. "An attack on one's family is an attack on one's self" (Guggenheim, Tolibao, & Soy, X-Men #20, 2014). As different as the two seem, they are incredibly protective of whatever family they have left.

After the team defeats Arkea a second time (Wood & Dodson, X-Men #12, 2014), the plot takes a different turn. A man calling himself "The Future" escapes from a high security prison and sets out to find his son (Wood & Mann, X-Men #13, 2014). Jubilee receives a text from someone claiming to be Shogo's biological father, and the school is attacked by the man and his allies (Wood & Mann, X-Men #14, 2014). Shogo is someone the X-Men want to protect. Storm's daughter Kymera travels from the future to help the X-Men and protect the Shogo from her time. The two are best friends, and she would do almost anything to protect him, including killing prisoners who pose a threat (Wood & Mann, X-Men #15, 2014). The cluster around this indicates that family extends far beyond biological relationships and adoption. Kymera considers Shogo to be her family, but The Future is never considered part of Shogo's family.

Storm has a complicated relationship with her daughter. Because Kymera is from the future, she is a teenager almost Jubilee's age. Kymera wants a relationship with her mother, but only on her terms (Wood & Mann, X-Men #15, 2014). Kymera's goodbye note to Ororo says "It's not like you signed up for a teenage daughter, just like that out of the blue. You go on to do great things, world-changing things. And none of them are having me. Not yet anyway" (Wood & Buffagni, X-Men #17, 2014, p. 22). Kymera's decision to leave is a difficult choice, but she understands how important her mom is to the X-Men. Family in this instance requires sacrifice.

The women who team up with Arkea also reference themselves as a family. Amora the Enchantress says "Arkea's bonded to us all. The sisterhood will crush all of you" (Wood, X-Men #9, 2014, p. 20). The connection that groups of powered individuals feel seems to be related to their specific goals. Because Lady Deathstrike has cybernetic enhancements, she may also be connected through Arkea's consciousness. This further increases the likelihood that's these women feel a connection.

Sometimes, having a family gives a sense of identity. Krakoa, a sentient alien rock formation is believed to be the only one of his kind. He was created by Kree ships that landed on Earth. When the X-Men find another Krakoa in the desert, they realize they cannot keep him alive. Because she understands how important family is, Jubilee picks up a piece after the new Krakoa is destroyed and gives it to her friend. She says "I've got something for you, buddy" and leaves him to bond with something just like him (Wilson & Boschi, X-Men #26, 2015, p. 22). Krakoa's case is interesting because it shows that the need to connect with someone else is innate in almost every creature. This

image ends the series, so we see two characters who were on their own finding someone just like them.

The concept of family appears to drive many of the characters in the series. A family can provide a source of strength for some in the case of Jubilee or weakness in the case of Rachel Grey. Family serves as a motivator for most of the other characters, either to protect or avenge them. For mutants, this sense of family within the Jean Grey school provides something their biological relatives may not have been able to provide.

Power

The next key term within the series is *power*. Power in this instance comes in a variety of forms, either in the form of abilities or other special skills. Mutants all have special abilities, but they develop skills that help them solve specific issues the team faces. For instance, computer skills or the ability to pilot the X-Men planes do not require a genetic mutation, but they do require time and effort in order to achieve.

John Sublime has the ability to “possess” people and control them (Wood & Coipel, X-Men #1, 2013). How Sublime used those abilities put him at odds with the X-Men in the past, but he came to the group for help to stop his sister Arkea Prime. Sublime also gains human traits through possessing his hosts, such as regret and concern for someone else. His learned humanity gives him the opportunity to express remorse for what he has done as well as develop legitimate feelings for Rachel Grey (Wood & Anka, X-Men #10, 2014). Psyloche has a similar ability, but her power as a telepath is more extensively discussed in the series (Wood & Mann, X-Men #13, 2014).

Arkea Prime’s abilities are similar to her brother’s, but she controls technology instead of people (Wood & Coipel, X-Men #1, 2013). Arkea inhabits a comatose X-Man

named Karima Shapandar to take control of the school's computer system. Karima's care included a cybernetic life support system that allowed Arkea to inhabit her. Prime consistently refers to herself as "we," indicating a connection with the technology she inhabits. "We are Arkea" (Wood & Coipel, X-Men #2, 2013) demonstrates a hive mind mentality with any possessed technology. Computers are no longer independent entities; they are part of Arkea Prime. Arkea never refers to herself as "I." She has a sense that she is one with her machines. This is different from when Ana Cortes/Yuriko Oyama say "We are Lady Deathstrike" (Wood & Anka, X-Men #10, 2014, p. 3). They refer more to the fact that two beings operate in the same body to form Lady Deathstrike. They have a symbiotic relationship with each other, unlike Arkea's dominating relationship with those she possesses.

Power can also be scary if it gets out of control. Ana Cortes and Typhoid Mary discuss how they should not have agreed to help Arkea. They are not heroes, but they hate being enslaved by her (Wood, X-Men #11, 2014). They believe that Arkea will not help them as she said. Ana says, "I wanted to be powerful and popular. I thought I might get to meet Cyclops of the X-Men... He's hot. I'm still in my teens, Mary. This was supposed to be fun" (Wood, X-Men #11, 2014, p. 16). She wants to find a way out and ends up killing herself to stop Lady Deathstrike (Wood & Dodson, X-Men #12, 2014). In this case, taking away the only power she had over Yuriko Oyama meant taking away the body she used.

Some non-mutants spend a lot of time with the X-Men. Karima Shapandar has no special abilities. She was a police officer who became friends with the X-Men. The group of mutants considers her a part of the X-Men. In some ways, she has been adopted by the X-Men. They include her on operations and keep her informed of what is happening at

the Jean Grey School The team is sad to see her leave after Arkea is defeated (Wood & Dodson, X-Men #12, 2014). Her learned ability as a police officer combined with her loyalty to the mutant community made her a valuable asset.

One of the most common powers in this series is telepathy. Characters have a love/hate relationship with telepaths. Their abilities are highly valued, but because they are privy to unspoken thoughts, they are not generally trusted. Monet St. Croix's ability to read people prevents Ana Cortes/Yuriko Oyama from ambushing the school (Wood, X-Men #7, 2013). The three telepaths within the X-Men give them a strategic advantage for defense. They can alert the school during an impending threat and determine if a person's intentions are to harm them. Rachel Grey's position at the command center enable her to direct X-Men across the globe. Once Ororo forms a team of X-Men, three of five members have telepathic powers (Guggenheim & Soy, X-Men #18, 2014). This is not only a valuable asset to the team in combat, but their abilities help to determine that Storm is alive when she is trapped underground (Wilson G. W., 2015). Telepaths also have the ability to "boost" each other's powers, which provides needed backup when one of them is injured (Wilson & Boschi, X-Men #24, 2015).

The characters seem obsessed with power. Not only is it important in the fight between John Sublime and Arkea Prime, every person with abilities seems obsessed with how their power compares with others. Lady Deathstrike asks Arkea to enhance her powers to defeat the X-Men (Wood, X-Men #9, 2014). Amora the Enchantress is shocked that Arkea has the ability to return her abilities. "By what sorcery this Arkea can defy even Odin's power" (Wood, X-Men #9, 2014, p. 16). Similarly, Sublime and the X-Men are afraid of the powers that Lady Deathstrike has given herself through modifications

and wonder if they are strong enough to stop her (Wood, X-Men #8, 2013).. This desire to be prepared may also be why a handful of students enter Psyloche's danger room simulation program in order to be better prepared for an attack. (Wood & Mann, X-Men #14, 2014). However, just like Karima Shapandar, some have the capacity to fight at a nearly superhuman level (Wood & Mann, X-Men #13, 2014). There appears to be a distinction between having a superhuman attribute and having the capability of success.

Sometimes the X-Men are unable to use their abilities. When Storm is trapped underground, she cannot fly out, and the telepaths cannot use their abilities to save her. She says, "I'm reminded that there are still things we can't control" (Wilson & Boschi, X-Men #24, 2015, p. 16). This lack of control does not sit well with any of the X-Men and they fight to regain some control over the situation. Storm regains her agency and control over the situation when she decides to stop using her superpowers and physically crawl up through the tunnel. This happens after she hallucinates that Wolverine was in the tunnel with her, and he tells her to stop trying to control everything. Instead, she had to rely on her own determination. The fact that Storm had to get advice from a man in order to succeed could be seen as anti-feminist. However, Wolverine was just a personification of her own consciousness and someone she greatly missed. That could be interpreted that Storm was giving herself the solution to her problem. Rachel Grey, Psyloche, and Monet are trapped underground and each go off to find their own solutions, which fails. The only way they regain control over the situation is when they work as a unit. The lesson here is that merely having an ability does not make one powerful.

Aliens have been part of the X-Men storyline before, and they feature in the last several comic books in this series. While being from another planet is not an ability in

itself, alien species have capabilities that extend beyond humans. Some, like Amora, look nearly identical to humans but have superhuman abilities. Some have completely different physical attributes altogether. There are even some aliens and humans that form relationships and have children (Guggenheim & Soy, X-Men #18, 2014). Aliens and alien-human hybrid people have been on Earth before, but the Sidri are hunters who stop at nothing to find their quarry. With the help of the Shi'ar, the team discovers that the Sidri have been experimenting on live subjects to combine species (Guggenheim & Tolibao, X-Men #19, 2014). This is not a new concept; several characters in the Marvel Universe are alien hybrids. These experiments, however, are done at the will of a woman named Sharada who wants to create a stronger species (Guggenheim, Tolibao, & Soy, X-Men #20, 2014), essentially creating powers that no singular species possesses.

Power takes many forms within the X-Men series. The unique physical abilities superheroes possess are a part, but abilities are not the only source. Power comes from the bond that these characters have with each other, as well as psychological strength.

X-Men

One of the key terms in this series is the *X-Men* name. X-Men is not only the title of the series, but the banner under which mutants unite. This is not a gender-neutral name, and most of the original X-Men were actually men. It was not until the 1970s that the series began to diversify (Zingsheim, 2011). By that time, the name had gained popularity, and the publishers saw no reason to change it. Unlike Stan Lee's earlier creation, *The Fantastic Four*, which has a gender-neutral title, "X-Men" emphasizes male dominance within the mutant community. Whether or not this is intentional, and even

disregarding that both men and women have joined the X-Men in several decades, the dominance of men in this particular series seems embedded in the very title.

The X-Men operate out of the Jean Grey School for Higher Learning. This location was previously known as Professor Charles Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, and it appears in every variation of the X-Men series. While the name has changed, the purpose has not. The school's dual purpose as a home for super powered teens and an operating base for adult heroes helps build relationships between generations of X-Men. Students use their powers to help the X-Men team on school grounds and occasionally travel with the adults on missions. The students went to Japan and helped the team defeat Arkea Prime (Wood & Dodson, X-Men #12, 2014). They serve almost a dual role as both students and part-time X-Men. Jubilee also feels the pressure from this dual existence. She says "I'm back here in some not-quite-a-student, not-quite-an-X-Man holding pattern" (Wood & Mann, X-Men #13, 2014, p. 9). Psyloche recruits the students to defend the school and tells them, "Jubilee was some random mutant kid that fell on hard times, and if you asked her, she'll tell you the X-Men saved her life. Sound familiar? This is the defining characteristic of the mutant community. There is no limit on what we'll do to support each other" (Wood & Buffagni, X-Men #16, 2014, p. 7). This group of older students successfully defeats The Future to bring Jubilee home (Wood & Buffagni, X-Men #17, 2014). This shows that there is very little difference between an official member of the X-Men and a student.

Throughout the series Rachel Grey and Storm have a conflict over who leads the X-Men team. Storm assumes control because she was there the longest, but Rachel Grey sees the group as a team effort that requires equal input from members (Wood & Lopez,

X-Men #4, 2013). This division puts the two strongest team leaders at odds over the future of the X-Men. As headmistress of the school, Storm's orders are usually carried out without question. Psyloche tells Storm "Where's the Ororo Munro that gave Scott Summers the proverbial finger during the proto-mutant crisis? I loved that Ororo. I was proud to follow that Ororo" (Wood & Mann, X-Men #13, 2014, p. 8). Once Ororo officially puts the group together, Rachel tells her that she will follow her into battle (Wood & Mann, X-Men #15, 2014).

The name X-Men also refers to the official team of mutants that fight together. When the women decide to band together to fight Ana Cortez/Yuriko Oyama, Rachel Grey says that she has a name, and Monet responds "So we're just X-Men then? Superb, Let's get to it" (Wood, X-Men #7, 2013, p. 19). The X-Men identity in this case goes beyond mutation because they include Karima as one of them. Her experience as cop gives a strategic benefit to the team. In fact, the X-Men see no difference between a group of mutants and their family. Jubilee tells her captor, "The X-Men are a family, in the best sense of the word" (Wood & Buffagni, X-Men #16, 2014, p. 21). There is very little discussion of changing the name to X-Women or any other title. This may be because there are bylaws to assembling a team of mutants called "the X-Men" or because the writers never thought to change it. "X-Men" also limits what women can do because it only provides a masculine framework for success. Beritela (2007) and Butler (1990) argue that only providing examples of female success within a masculine framework is not empowerment. The women in these comic books solve most of their problems with violence, a typically masculine solution. It is important to note that the creator of this series is a man, so changing the title may never have occurred to him. Established comic

books also have better readership than new titles. Even if they are not officially part of an assembled team, X-Men can call the school for help. Gambit calls Jubilee from a festival when an unexplained sinkhole opens up under attendees (Wilson, 2015). She immediately sends the team to help stop the situation from getting worse. This fuels the idea that the name X-Men also constitutes a legacy that each mutant carries with himself or herself.

In the X-Men, characters have both legal names and superhero names. Storm's name is Ororo Munro. Her identity as a superhero nods to her power to control weather. Storm also can have a negative connotation because of its destructive power. Furthermore, her given name points to the fact that she has a white father and African mother. Both names point to her identity as a person and a mutant. Psyloche is known more by her superhero name than her given name of Betsy. Psyloche also could be an allusion to Shakespeare's character Shylock. Because she inhabits the bodies of other people, the Japanese girl she currently resides in is not her original form. Jubilee is actually a play on the name Jubilation Lee, showing that Jubilee's identity as a person and a mutant is basically the same. There may be a biblical connection here to the Year of Jubilee, where slaves were set free every fifty years. Jubilee could be the one set free by the X-Men or her role is to set people free. Rachel Grey only goes by Rachel Grey in the series because her superhero name Phoenix is the same as her mother's. The phoenix also refers to a creature that rises from the ashes of its predecessor, which Rachel Grey has not done yet. This may be the author's way of signaling that Rachel has not moved on from the loss of her mother. Monet St. Croix and Karima Shapandar have no alternate identities, probably because they are not part of the team on a regular basis. Monet St.

Croix is a French name, and St. Croix may refer to an island in the US Virgin Islands. Karima is an Arabic name, but she is a practicing Hindu. This points to her family coming from somewhere near Pakistan. The name also brings diversity to the X-Men because she is the only character of South Asian origin.

Marvel Universe

The idea of a complete Marvel Universe is present, but never explicitly written in the books. The Marvel Universe is not just the imprint the books are published under. The Marvel Comic Universe is the widely accepted term for comic book characters and their storylines that extend beyond the individual series. These stories are told in multiple Marvel titles over several comic books. In the first issue, characters referenced the Avengers as possible allies in fighting Arkea Prime (Wood & Coipel, X-Men #1, 2013). The Avengers are also referenced when the X-Men have to face a new villain named The Future (Wood & Buffagni, X-Men #16, 2014). Storm responds to the suggestion by saying, “The Avengers should think to call us sometime” (p. 6). Towards the end of the series, the remains of an old alien threat are discovered. Monet knows to ask another group for help. “The Kree created Inhumans too – and they know a lot more about those ancient Kree experiments on Earth than we do” (Wilson & Boschi, X-Men #25, 2014, p. 6). Kree could be a reference to the Cree Indian tribe in the Northern US and Canada. It would have been familiar to Stan Lee and Jack Kirby because they lived in New York (Goldin, 2003). The Kree have appeared all over the Marvel Universe, both in comic books and within the Marvel Cinematic Universe as well. This reinforces the idea of continuity over each series. There are also smaller embedded stories that the characters narrate to explain their origin. John Sublime tells the story about the brother who forced

his twin sister out of Earth (Wood & Coipel, X-Men #1, 2013). The names Sublime and Prime are used to indicate that both characters are older than anything else. Prime in particular tells us that Arkea is not only old, she is dominant. “Prime” could also point toward perfection or even prime numbers. Ana Cortez tells the story of her father and how he built his company that she inherited (Wood, X-Men #7, 2013). Cortez has an innocuous-sounding Latina name. Her name is also a reference to Cortez, one of the most ruthless Spanish conquistadors. What people see of her is the heiress, and the audience has little reason to think otherwise until she becomes Lady Deathstrike. This name is not tied to Yuriko or Ana, once again indicating that the identity of this character is not solely related to either entity creating it. Another storyline that provides continuity across the Marvel Universe is Amora the Enchantress. Not only is her nomenclature different because she has no last name, her title indicates what skills she may possess. The name Amora is a derivative of the Italian word “amore” which means love. She is exiled by Thor (Wood, X-Men #8, 2013), a member of the Avengers who has his own comic book series. Her exile in Norway provides valuable information to Lady Deathstrike.

Another common theme in comic books is that no one is truly dead. After the team defeats Arkea, they believe she has been destroyed (Wood & Coipel, X-Men #3, 2013). That is not actually the case because Arkea Prime operates like a virus and infects technology. As long as the virus exists, Arkea Prime is alive. Monet St. Croix is killed in a fight with Amora the Enchantress (Wood, X-Men #9, 2014), but she is immediately revived in the next book. Death for people with superpowers is not usually permanent, which seems true across most comic book titles. Monet even seems to acknowledge this when she says “And self, you seriously need to stop dying and coming back... It’s getting

embarrassing” (Wood & Anka, X-Men #10, 2014, p. 7). Jubilee’s vampire nature exists because it was the only way to save her life (Guggenheim, Tolibao, & Soy, X-Men #20, 2014). Storm and Dr. Reyes are both attacked by an alien working for the Providian Order, but Dr. Reyes uses her abilities to stay alive (Guggenheim, Tolibao, & Soy, X-Men #20, 2014). She is unable to wake Storm with her abilities and asks for assistance (Guggenheim, Soy, & Tolibao, X-Men #21, 2014). As soon as the X-Men restore Storm, they join the battle (Guggenheim, Soy, & Tolibao, X-Men #22, 2014). The overarching theme here is that those with super powers do not experience death the same way that most people do.

Brian Wood seems to acknowledge the *X-Men* comic book history. While Roxy and Jubilee are talking in the Jean Grey school cafeteria, Roxy makes an important observation about the group. “I thought the X-Men were supposed to be all about inclusion and acceptance and appreciating people who are different” (Wood, X-Men #8, 2013, p. 19). Besides pointing to the reason the school was founded, this statement recognizes that the X-Men have been used to advocate the inclusion of different people.

Visual Rhetoric

With each change in artists, there are differences in how the comic book is drawn. While the standard story panel format is clearly followed by each artist, their individual style is clearly visible. Take these drawings of Rachel Grey as an example of how each artist uses his or her own style as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Left: Rachel Grey (Wood & Coipel, X-Men #3, 2013, p. 9). Right: Rachel Grey (Wood & Lopez, X-Men #4, 2013, p. 4).



Lopez's drawing shows bigger eyes and bolder marks on the face, but Coipel draws narrower eyes. Her markings are also less pronounced. The markings on her face are also thicker in Lopez's art. These differences show how each artist develops a terministic screen for Brian Wood's story. Coipel draws Grey's hair wavier and unkempt, but Lopez makes her hair smooth with pieces of her bangs in her eyes. Rachel Grey's eyes look at different points as well in each picture. In the image on the left, her focus is down, looking dejected or upset about something. In the second, she is looking up, like she is forming a plan of her own. While the character fits the description given for them each time, artists use their own style and perspective for the characters. Each image shows a different perspective on the character. On the left, she is sad and upset, but the right image shows her as stronger and almost defiant.

Inherent Relations

Inherent relations occur when text and image function as the same thing (Cohn, 2013). This could be wording on a sign placed on a lawn or a business name over the door. Inherent relations are not exceedingly common in comic books but there are some instances in this series.

Figure 2 John Sublime dials on a pay phone (Wood & Coipel, X-Men #1, 2013, p. 8)



Inherent relationships are hard to find in this series, but the buttons on this payphone, as illustrated in Figure 2, are an excellent example. In this case, the text tells readers what buttons John Sublime is pushing. This image occurs right after Jubilee dials the Jean Grey School. By redialing, Sublime is able to track down where Jubilee and Shogo are going. The text in particular is set at an angle to fit with the buttons on the phone, unlike any of the other ways text and image can be combined.

Emergent Relations

The speech bubbles in Figure 3 are what Cohn (2013) describes as “emergent” text. The conversation between Lady Deathstrike and Amora in Figure 3 happens while the action being depicted is taking place. Conversations between different characters almost always have an emergent relationship with text. This is the “fumetto” (Cohn, 2013) that gives comic books their name in Italy. Speech bubbles are how comic book

characters communicate with each other, and they function as quotation marks would in a traditional novel.

Font choice features as a distinguishing characteristic in *X-Men #8* (Wood, 2013). When Lady Deathstrike travels to Norway to track down remnants of Arkea Prime, she is greeted by Enchantress. Comic books have a unique font. It is usually sans serif and written in all capital letters. The standard comic book font is used for every character except one. The font used on Enchantress is different from the rest of the comic book font that the rest of the book uses.

Figure 3 Enchantress meets Lady Deathstrike (Wood, X-Men #8, 2013, p. 17).



Lady Deathstrike's words are written in the same regular font as most characters, but Amora's speech is clearly different. The font here almost acts as an accent for

Enchantress. Aside from her speech patterns being different from the Americanized X-men, the different font creates a sense of a different native language. Both fonts use entirely capital letters, but Enchantress' font uses more curves in the letters. Besides the difference in accent, the font may also point to her origin as a reason for this choice.

Unlike the X-Men, Enchantress is not from earth. In comparison with Figure 1, Enchantress is the only character to have a unique font associated with her speech, further highlighting her separation from mutants. Everyone from her world has abilities, so she is not considered an anomaly in her society. Most of the text in comic books is emergent, but some blurs the lines between emergent and adjoined. This hybrid relationship occurs in conversations that take place over telecommunications or another way that is not face-to-face conversation.

Figure 4 Right: Monet St. Croix and Amora fight over Arkea. Left: Amora the Enchantress pushes Monet St. Croix (Wood, X-Men #9, 2014, p. 20).



The font used for Enchantress' speech is the same as other characters when she refers to the alliance with Arkea as a sisterhood on the right side of Figure 4. This could mean that she no longer sees herself as part of a different world and instead finds a group

to identify with. However, the very next image on the right returns to the distinct font, indicating that Amora may now belong to multiple worlds. She still wishes to return home to rule Asgard, but she is eager to help her newfound friends defeat the X-Men. Additionally, the image on the left shows speech over telepathic channels. While this is not a bubble that Cohn (2013) describes, it fits somewhere between emergent and adjoined text. The conversation is not happening alongside the action. It is happening almost independently through a psychic connection.

Adjoined Relations

Cover art also provides insight into the artists responsible for creating comic books. Covers are usually drawn by a separate artist than the one who draws the panel pages. The ensemble cast on the cover shows how the book is focused on multiple characters, instead of a single person. Olivier Coipel is responsible for the first few covers.

Figure 5 Cover drawn by Olivier Coipel (Wood & Coipel, X-Men #1, 2013, p. 1).



The text on the cover in Figure 5 is a clear example of an adjoined relationship. It provides the reader with information about the comic book, but it still fits around the text. This is the same on each cover in the series. Coipel's drawing shows which X-Men are the center of the comic. It shows Storm, Rogue, Psylocke, Kitty Pryde, Rachel Grey, and Jubilee in their uniforms. The positioning of each character tells us something about them. Storm is in the most prominent position at the center of the picture and stands with an authoritative posture. She is clearly the group leader. Behind her are Rogue and Psylocke, indicating their closeness with her. The rest are in positions at the back. Jubilee is in a crouched stance and chewing on a stick. This is a very juvenile posture and emphasizes the fact that she is the youngest in the group.

Sexualization of superheroines has been an issue in the past, prompting criticism from numerous sources (Scott, 2013). All of the women in Figure 5 are drawn in form-fitting clothing, and Psyloche in particular is drawn with her legs spread apart is holding a sword between her legs. Storm and Rachel Grey are drawn less sexually than the others. Storm is standing with authority and confidence. Her posture is designed to intimidate others. In the case of Rachel Grey, part of her torso is covered, and her leg closes her off to viewers. Rogue is twirling her hair, which is a sign of youth or flirtatiousness. Kitty Pryde's tight-fitting clothing is designed to highlight her rear end. Jubilee is drawn to appear young, but she is still crouched with her legs spread apart. The sexualization of these characters seems to corroborate previous criticism (Beritela, 2007; Scott, 2013) of women in comic books. This contradicts the verbal messages of these characters that they are serious superheroes and should be taken seriously as X-Men. These women are still drawn sexually. The focus here is not on their abilities or even the team as a whole. Instead, the reader immediately sees women drawn in the same sexual positions that that seem typical in popular media (Horstkotte, 2013; Scott, 2013).

Figure 6 X-Men #2 cover drawn by Olivier Coipel (Wood & Coipel, X-Men #2, 2013, p. 1).



This second cover in Figure 6 shows Jubilee and Shogo prominently in the center with the other X-Men fighting in the background. Once again, the art draws attention to a few important pieces of the story. Jubilee at this point is still unsure if she can keep Shogo and is incredibly protective of him. The other women in the picture are in the midst of a battle with Arkea Prime over the school's computer systems (Wood & Coipel, X-Men #2, 2013). Jubilee also looks to the side, indicating that she is conflicted between her duty as an X-Man and her attachment to Shogo. Her look could also indicate paranoia that someone will take Shogo away from her. This demonstrates a vulnerability and possibly a weakness for Jubilee.

Figure 7 Cover drawn by Terry Dodson (Wood & Anka, *X-Men* #10, 2014, p. 1).



Terry Dodson drew several of the covers for the *X-Men* series as well.

Stylistically, the art in Figure 7 is distinct from Coipel. There is a significant amount of detail put into the hair for each character. The lines are sharper, and the heroes have more angular faces. Jubilee looks older and more confident than she does in the previous covers. She is at the forefront of the action, which gives her a more powerful position than previous covers. Her gaze is directly forward, which could constitute a challenge to whoever she is fighting. Very little about her stance indicates vulnerability. While her facial structure may have something to do with the artist, her stance and relation to both Shogo and the X-Men indicates that she is becoming more comfortable with her dual roles as superheroine and mother. All the women are fighting, and Shogo is there in the

middle of the action. He seems to have a permanent place in the X-Men. Rachel Grey is at the center of the fight, indicating that she has become central to the story.

Independent Relations

There is one instance of independent relations in every comic book. The inside cover page in every comic provides a brief plot summary in the series up to that point and a list of contributors to the comic book. It exists completely separately from the images in the comic books.

Figure 8 Inside cover page (Wilson & Boschi, X-Men #26, 2015, p. 4).



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The cover page in Figure 8 is divided between the image on the top and the text on the bottom. Both operate independently of each other. A list of contributors to the book appears towards the bottom along with copyright information. While the list of authors and artists should not be considered complete, it does show which people were in charge of each area. The small plot summary is not meant to be a comprehensive retelling, but it is a reminder of what happened previously because comic books are released on a monthly basis.

Summary

Chapter 4 discussed the rhetorical clusters within the *X-Men* comic books. Clusters related to family, power, and the X-Men were discussed along with a broader explanation of the Marvel Universe. The visual elements associated with comic books are also addressed, including an analysis of the relations between text and image. There is a contradiction between the visual images of female characters and their images as superheroines. The next chapter answers the research questions and the implications of this analysis

CHAPTER V

RESEARCH QUESTIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this chapter I discuss the research questions and how the *X-Men* series has contributed to our understanding of superheroines. I explain how the women in the comic books are framed and what they mean for the creation of superheroes as a whole. I conclude the chapter by suggesting the implications of my analysis.

Research Question and Analysis

My study focused on three research questions:

RQ 1: How does the 2013 *X-Men* series utilize discursive symbols to create superheroines?

Rhetorically, the name X-Men limits what women can do. The diversity within the team beginning in the 1970s did not influence a change in the title, so the team is still tied to male ideas. There is very little discussion of what the team should call themselves. When Storm puts the team together, the women already know that they will be X-Men instead of a non-gendered name (Wood, *X-Men* #7, 2013). The underlying assumption here is that groups of mutants assembled at the Jean Grey school are just “X-Men.” While this provides a sense of continuity throughout each new *X-Men* series, it also disregards the fact that women have fought on these teams literally for decades. While unity and brand identity are maintained for the franchise through the use of the term *X-Men*, rhetorically the female characters and their unique traits continue to be dominated by the images created for the male characters.

The physical abilities of the women also help to create a superheroine. With three telepaths on the team, telepathy is a defining element for this team of X-men. Storm's ability to control the weather, and Jubilee's vampiric power are the other elements on the team. Only Jubilee's abilities require physical contact. This shows that while physical violence may be a solution, physical contact is not necessarily appropriate for women. In fact, Jubilee only uses her abilities once in the entire series. The all-woman X-Men team strategizes far more than they engage in violence. The majority of women in the X-Men who employ violence are the villains. There seems to be a collaborative communication style with these heroines that eschews violence when there are alternatives present.

Some of the X-Men work through intense physical pain. During the battle against the second Krakoa, Psyloche is severely injured, but she uses her psychic abilities to fight through her injuries (Wilson & Boschi, X-Men #24, 2015). This level of dedication to the team shows what kind of heroics the X-men are capable of achieving. It also points to sacrifices that these women are willing to make. Psyloche could seriously injure herself and not realize it. She chooses to fight in spite of the personal risk. Self-sacrifice appears to be a characteristic of superheroines.

The dominant discursive element in the comic books is family. Even for those who do not have a family in the traditional sense, the X-Men create their own family. This is evidenced by the way they care for each other and support each other both on missions and at the school. They are characterized by acceptance and support for each other (Wood, X-Men #9, 2014). They need each other to function and have a remarkable bond. Teamwork defines the X-Men possibly more than any other trait. Because they live and work together, some doing so since childhood, they trust each other. When Psyloche

calls the X-Men a family, she means it literally. Their closest relationships are with each other.

Motherhood does not necessarily take away from the heroine's abilities, instead it makes them stronger in some ways. Jubilee's protectiveness of Shogo gives her a purpose and a desire to speak up to the rest of the group. It also brings her closer to the other X-Men by asking them to help her with her baby. Motherhood also gives Jubilee a sense of belonging. Because she did not have a family before joining the X-Men, Shogo seems to fulfill some need that she has. Wood's portrayal of Jubilee needing to be a mother neatly fits the stereotype of women as maternal.

Storm's family seems to be the X-Men themselves. Storm and Kymera may have a strained relationship, but Kymera's information about The Future proves invaluable. They both prioritize the safety of the X-Men and Shogo, which brings them together, even though they do not get along. Kymera's goodbye letter also provides some insight to their priorities. It is clear that they both care about each other, but they cannot be what the other one needs (Wood & Mann, X-Men #15, 2014). Leading the X-Men and being a mother are mutually exclusive for Storm.

Storm and Jubilee present an interesting dichotomy within the series. On one hand, Jubilee's newfound motherhood brings her fulfillment. On the other hand, Storm must choose between being a mother and being a leader. It presents a conundrum that women in the real world often face. They are expected to be mothers, but they cannot be both leaders and mothers (Slaughter, 2012).

If anything, the loss of family weakens the heroine. Because Rachel Grey's family was killed, she acts irrationally in situations that are connected to her family. It also

prevents her from calling herself The Phoenix because she has not risen from the ashes of her predecessor. Rachel Grey's mourning for her family also keeps her from pursuing a relationship with John Sublime (Wood & Dodson, *X-Men* #12, 2014). When Rachel's aunt is introduced, the evidence indicates that Deathbird will destroy everyone around her before she allows harm to come to her child (Guggenheim, Tolibao, & Soy, *X-Men* #20, 2014). Protectiveness of family members can even overrule good judgment.

All these portrayals of superheroines create a distinct image. Superheroines can be violent, but their powers do not require physical contact. Violence is a last resort that should only be considered if no other measures work. These women also sacrifice everything for their friends and family. Unfortunately, motherhood is not compatible with leadership in the *X-Men*, so superheroines must choose between one or the other. This particular team of *X-Men* is tied to generations of *X-Men* by either being members of different generations or being related to them. Storm is the oldest character present in this series, and Rachel Grey is the daughter of two of the earliest *X-Men*. The legacies that these characters are involved with help tie them back to the original series.

RQ 2: How does the 2013 *X-Men* series utilize non-discursive symbols to create superheroines?

First, individuality is a clear part of how superheroines are visually constructed. Looking at the very first cover in Figure 5, each character has her own identity and style. Storm is definitely in charge at the beginning because she is front and center. Her hair is also unique to her character. While she may not be traditionally feminine, her abilities and appearance make her intimidating. She is also the only African member of the current *X-Men*. Each character on the cover also has her own interpretation of the *X-Men*

uniform. Storm and Psyloche are in black and white outfits, but there is some F#color incorporated into each outfit. Psyloche's wears a purple sash, and Storm has gold trim around her chest. Rogue and Rachel Grey both have colorful outfits, but they all have a certain theme. These are clearly not outfits that most people would wear on a daily basis, but they allow a sense of individuality for each character. Jubilee's trench coat is the most individualistic aspect of these uniforms. She wears it with her regular clothing and her uniform. The superheroines here are allowed to be individuals as well as part of the team.

Unfortunately, Figure 5 also paints a very sexual picture of the characters. They are in form-fitting outfits and in sexual poses. Even Amora the Enchantress and Monet St. Croix in Figure 4 are drawn with tight clothing and an emphasis on their breasts. This reinforces Judith Butler's (1990) argument that framing female empowerment in a masculine context is not true empowerment. She uses the idea of "men in drag," which Beritela reinforces in a discussion about comic books (2007). According to these authors, the women in the *X-Men* series are not truly empowered so long as they are created within a masculine framework.

Jubilee's motherhood is at the center of her character. In multiple covers, Jubilee is holding Shogo. The relationship with him seems to drive her. While she is alone and insecure in Figure 6, she grows into her role of motherhood and is able to fight with the rest of the team in Figure 7. This is a progression that shows within eight issues of the comic book. Her growth into this mothering position is clear with how comfortable she is fighting with her child nearby. Shogo's existence makes her more determined. Jubilee is also childlike in the first two covers. This emphasizes that she is the youngest member of

the team and that motherhood has made her grow stronger and more mature. This could imply that motherhood is a natural expectation for women as they mature.

Rachel Grey's visual presentation establishes that she is different from the rest of them. She is from a different timeline, so she looks different. The markings on her face in Figure 1 do not exist on any of the other X-Men. She is also the only redhead on the team, and she looks like her mother. This gives her a connectedness to some of the earlier X-Men who worked with Jean Grey. She is also the only character facing away from the center in Figure 5, indicating that she does not completely belong with the X-Men. In Figure 7, she is in the very center of the cover, indicating that she has a more of a connection to this team of women than with her past.

There is a similarity between superheroines and supervillains in Figure 4. Monet St. Croix and Amora the Enchantress are both wearing costumes, but Monet's outfit is another variation on the X-Men uniform. Amora is wearing a green outfit from Asgard. She looks more like a deity than a someone with superpowers. Her headdress even closely resembles a crown. This further emphasizes that the X-Men are a team, and that Amora is not like other beings with powers. Figure 3 also clearly shows Lady Deathstrike's painted face. Ana Cortez's identity is subsumed by the supervillain that inhabits her. This is in direct contrast with the superheroines who are afforded individuality in their wardrobe choices.

Although each costume is different, the presentation of women in this series leaves something to be desired. They are drawn in tight-fitting clothing in many of the images, indicating that the role of women within the series is still partially designed to arouse audiences. Their role is still drawn within the context of small heroes, but

individuality is clearly important to the X-Men. These characters are drawn with an idealized female image: slim with large breasts.

There are no women in this series, or virtually any comic book series that is not slim, large-breasted, and beautiful. This is shown extensively in cover art. Superheroes, it seems cannot be fat or have any physical flaw. The heroine is still limited because she is drawn in a masculine mindset. Superheroines in X-Men do not represent the majority of women in America or even the women who read comic books.

Jubilee's attachment to Shogo also shapes how the women in X-Men are created. He is on her back in Figures 6 and 7, which indicates that motherhood is tied to her identity as much as being an X-Man. The team's loyalty to Jubilee puts them in a position where they have to protect Shogo at any cost.

RQ 3: What terministic screens does the 2013 *X-Men* series utilize in creating superheroines?

First, it is important to note that family is clearly important to the writers. It is at the center of much of the conflict in the series. There is also very little difference between being one of the X-Men and being part of a family. When Jubilee states "The X-Men are a family, in the best sense of the word" (Wood & Buffagni, X-Men #16, 2014, p. 21), she is explaining what the X-Men provided for her. Psyloche explains it another way by saying, "There is no limit on what we'll do to support each other" (Wood & Buffagni, X-Men #16, 2014, p. 7). By placing the focus on family and community instead of the individual powers that each character possesses, the writers demonstrate that unity is important. Even the villains at various points in the series have familial connections. The authors seem to be saying "everyone needs someone." There is also very little difference

between the X-Men as a group and as a family. They believe that their primary goal is to take care of each other.

Of course, superheroines have to have powers. Karima Shapandar is the only exception to this rule, but her experience as a cop gives her other abilities that the X-Men find valuable. How they get their powers is what bonds groups together. The X-Men are the product of natural genetic mutation, but the Inhumans introduced in X-Men #25 (Wilson & Boschi, 2014) are the result of alien genetic experimentation. Superheroines also exist in relation to other people with powers. The Avengers and Inhumans are part of the Marvel Universe, but they are not the only powered people. In the case of Arkea Prime's followers, the X-Men have to see how their powers matchup. Ana Cortes does not have any superpowers, but her money can buy enhancements and allies to help her sisterhood. The worlds that powered beings come from also influences how they are created. Because Amora is from Asgard, she is human-like, but much stronger. The rest of them have abilities that the team worries about defeating. This is why the team questions if they are strong enough to stop Arkea and the other threats they face. They may be strong, but their capacity to fight is in relation to the strength of their enemies.

The context of the complete Marvel Universe is significant to the writers. While none of the text or visual aspects inside the comic books directly state this, the books are still part of the Marvel Comic Universe. The references to the Avengers and actual interaction with Inhumans indicate that the X-Men function in context with other stories published by Marvel. Furthermore, the "Battle for the Atom" series extends across multiple Marvel titles. Legacy is significant to the writers because they tie the books to

the rest of the Marvel Universe as well as the history of the X-Men. Storm's interaction with Wolverine also helps to connect the X-Men to the history of the series.

The character names provide another terministic screen for the X-Men. They come from multiple backgrounds and continents, which is consistent with how the X-Men designed for decades (Singer, 2008). The identity of these individual characters as people is also tied with their identity as X-men. Mutants alternate between using each other's superhero name and their given name regularly. The character names are also created from their abilities and origin story. Psyloche, for instance, points to telekinetic abilities. Monet St. Croix and Karima Shapandar do not have alternate identities, but their names still point to multicultural origins. The perspective in these names is that the ability to be one of the X-Men is not limited by geography, just a mutated x-gene.

Implications

This X-Men title provides something unique to a major comic book title. While some authors have suggested that women in comic books are really just versions of men in feminine clothing (Beritela, 2007; Horstkotte, 2013), my analysis suggests another interpretation. A few characters have masculine traits, but their femininity is clearly present. They have lives and families. Near the end of the series, the issue of a group of women being called the X-Men is finally brought up. Agent Brand asks the question in response to Jubilee asking why a coworker calls her "sir" (Guggenheim & Soy, X-Men #18, 2014). The issue here is not that women should not have the X-Men name. It is merely playful banter between people with superpowers. While the argument that many so-called "empowered" women are simply masculine figures in dresses (Butler J. , 1990) may have some validity, this is not the case with the women in X-Men. They have

families and complex emotions that actually make them better at saving the world. Because Beritela (2007) and Horstkotte's (2013) criticism focuses on one-dimensional representations of women, the women in these comic books do not fit the description. These women are also limited in terms of what men can do, either by the X-Men name or how they are drawn on the screen. Superheroines in the X-Men series are constrained by having to be X-Men rather than X-Women or another title. The sexualization of these characters further demonstrates that they are not created on the same level as male heroes. However multi-dimensional these women are, they are still created in a male framework.

The results of this study also indicate that there are problematic areas within the series that should be addressed. Because the main women in this series have powers that do not require physical contact, their abilities may be seen as more "ladylike" than others. Additionally, the sexualization of these women in cover art continues to be a problem. They are still drawn under the male gaze. A woman artist or writer in this series may have created the characters differently.

Future Research

The combination of visual rhetoric and printed word can be easily evaluated using the methods in this research. Furthermore, a rhetorical analysis could have implications for other titles with entirely female casts. Another all-women major title is slated to be released by Marvel in the near future (Hanks, 2013), and the understanding of superheroines in Marvel comic books could be useful for this study as well. Similar analysis could also be conducted using race instead of gender as a lens within the X-Men series. The X-Men are a diverse cast (Singer, 2008), and the racial aspect of the series

could also provide new information about how heroes are created. With a multitude of comic book titles to choose from, the opportunity for research into marginalized groups and their portrayal is virtually limitless.

Additionally, other genres, such as the new *Ghostbusters* film (Feig, 2016), could easily be discussed with similar analysis. Comic book-based movies could also be analyzed using a similar approach. Movies, like comic books rely on a combination of discursive and non-discursive symbols to tell a story. Cluster criticism and visual rhetoric would fit well with this medium.

A more long-term study of the writers and artists would also be possible. Brian Wood's writing style over multiple comic book titles may reveal the terministic screens that he uses to create characters. The plots and character development written into multiple titles could provide information on his personal viewpoint about superheroes. Furthermore, the difference between Olivier Coipel and Terry Dodson's art indicates a difference in the screens they use to create characters. By exclusively examining the visual rhetoric present in comic books, entirely new clusters may emerge.

Furthermore, a blend of quantitative cluster analysis with rhetorical study could help to create a clearer map of rhetorical clusters. Aldernderfer and Blashfield's (1984) method could prove useful in uncovering key terms and clusters in this series that I may have overlooked. As with all qualitative analysis, researcher bias may have found something I took for granted as an avid reader of comic books.

Comic books are a complex medium that merit analysis from multiple facets. By combining cluster analysis and visual rhetoric, I have been able to shed light on how superheroines are created in one of the most popular titles published by Marvel. By

focusing not only on the words, but also on the images, analysis of comic books helps us understand their appeal and the richness of the narratives they create.

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