

Central Material Extract

‘Queering’ Comic Book Characters: The Power of Speculation, Perceptions & the ‘Fan Theory’

Judith Butler’s theory of gender as a kind of ‘performance’ sees the social construct of gender as “not a stable attribute of identity, but something that must be constantly revealed and restated”.¹ Butler has called for the creation of ‘gender trouble’ in society “through the mobilisation, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity”.² The ‘subversion’ of gender and sexuality within the popular culture of comic books has undoubtedly been proliferated in recent years by the rise of explicitly ‘out’³ queer characters.

The effect of this explicit performance of queer sexualities in comic book storylines was evidenced in my primary research, for example where questionnaire respondents commented on the need for inclusion “in the influencing of young kids and teens”, as it will allow for “kids [to] grow up tolerant as well”⁴ and subvert the heteronormative values that they are socialised into at a young age. In my focus group with young Generation Z peers, the prevalence of heteronormative attitudes toward gender, especially in relation to ‘superheroes’ and heroism, was clear to see. One respondent commented on the prospect of the Hulk⁵ being gay, describing how it would “be funny” and “cute”.⁶ Whilst I perceived this kind of sentiment as positive at first, I came to reflect on how it implies that a traditionally hypermasculine superhero’s change of sexuality from heterosexual to queer somehow ‘robs’ him of his established heroic attributes. This reinforces the need for ‘gender trouble’, to use Butler’s language, in how we perceive and understand gender, especially in popular culture. As Bynum explains, this subversion of traditional values and mores in comic books has allowed for the depiction of “characters as people in our communities; not one in the same”,⁷ which is important to espousing the values of inclusion and diversity through the art and entertainment that we create and consume.

1 Callis, A. (2009). *Playing with Butler and Foucault: Bisexuality and Queer Theory*. [Accessed 10/2/19]

2 Butler, Judith (1990). *Gender Trouble*, Taylor & Francis, page 46 [Accessed 10/2/18]

3 ‘Out’ is a colloquial term often used to describe persons who have publicly identified, at least in their meso world, as LGBTQI+ in terms of their sexuality

4 Questionnaire completed on the 26/11/2018, 105 respondents

5 ‘Hulk’ created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, 1962, published by Marvel Comics

6 Focus Group conducted on the 21/3/19 with 9 Year 7 Students

7 Bynum, H. (2018). *Fighting Heteronormativity in Comics: One Gay Superhero at a Time*. [Accessed 1/3/19]

My content analysis revealed how contemporary superhero comic books are directly engaging in a subversion of gender and sexuality norms by 'queering' characters as explicitly LGBTQI+. In DC's 2017 'Batwoman' issue #18, entire pages are dedicated to displaying a non-traditional romance between the titular character and her female love interest, with explicit visuals of their relationship's physical intimacy a total of 4 times throughout the 25-page issue.⁸ Whilst this supports my hypothesis, these kinds of explicit representations of LGBTQI+ characters are admittedly a reasonably recent trend. The counter-cultural mythology that has empowered comic book stakeholders to create and accept diverse representations of gender and sexuality, among other characteristics, has been a site of conflict for some time now. While this recent emergence of explicitly queer characters represents a welcome move toward more direct inclusion, the popular culture has a history of more subtle representations of LGBTQI+ characters that have relied in part on fan theories.

Secondary research into the anti-gay criticism levelled at the popular culture in the middle of the 20th Century allowed me to investigate the 'queering' of comic books as a process that has been at work for quite some time. Attempts to unofficially censor comic books as far back as the 1950s can arguably be seen as having contributed to the popular culture's creation of 'gender trouble',⁹ to use Butler's notion once more. Smith and Duncan, for example, point to psychologist Fredric Wertham's claim in the 1950s that comics "taught children homosexuality" as an attempt to unofficially censor the popular culture that simultaneously allowed for a 'queering' of its characters.¹⁰ Secondary research allowed me to observe the subtle and not-so-subtle representations of Batman and Robin's potentially queer relationship in 1950s editions of the comic, although this relationship was never explicit or substantiated by creators. By accusing superheroes like Batman and Robin in the decade's comic books of espousing a homosexual lifestyle in an underhanded way, critics like Wertham "imposed a queer narrative atop superheroes".¹¹ Thus, the subversion of gender and sexuality through the popular culture's counter-cultural mythology has been purported as much by conservative criticisms of *implied* queer character traits as it has been by queer character identities, at least in the early stages of the popular culture's development.

8 Content Analysis of Batwoman #18 (2017) and All New X-Men #40 (2014), conducted 22/7/2019

9 Butler, Judith (1990). *Gender Trouble*, Taylor & Francis, page 46 [Accessed 10/2/19]

10 Smith, M. and Duncan, R. (2017). *The Secret Origins of Comics Studies*. [Accessed 9/5/19]

11 Ibid