Taking a Dip in the Crazy Pool: The Evolution of X-Women From Heroic Subject to Sexual Object

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The *X-Men* presents a unique opportunity for examining changing social attitudes toward women in the evolution of the personality and character of the female X-Men to reflect the social construction of women. Analysis reveals that they reflect and reaffirm traditional patriarchal gender hierarchies and traditional American middle-class values and norms. Nearly all of the X-Women, regardless of their individual personality, physical characteristics, or superpower, share the same pattern of development. They are hypersexualized and hyperfetishized physically, emotionally, and psychologically. They are emotionally submissive to and dependent upon their male partners. Their powers are physically weaker than their male counterparts and they are usually incapable of managing those powers without masculine assistance. Their stories suggest that women who attempt to assume and exercise immense power are a danger to the very fabric of existence and that they will be punished for this unfeminine act with insanity or death or both.

Introduction

Teens read graphic novels. In recognition of this, YALSA has published the “Great Graphic Novels for Teens” list annually since 2007, and in that year awarded the Michael L. Printz award to a graphic novel, *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang. The YALSA list includes works in every genre and every type: non-fiction, original novels in graphic form, graphic versions of classic novels, manga series, graphic novels in serial form, and traditional superhero trade paperback comic book compilations. There is no question that a teen collection should include a variety of graphic novels and comic books to meet the needs of its users. The teen librarian who is charged with creating a balanced collection of age-appropriate works and providing readers’ advisory may understandably feel overwhelmed when faced with the task of evaluating such a wide range of types and genres. When considering that superhero comic book series have been published continuously since the first Superman comic book in 1934 and proliferated into literally hundreds of titles in the ensuing years, the challenge can seem insurmountable.

This paper is designed to provide teen librarians with insight into one popular and
long-lived superhero series, X-Men, particularly its depiction of women over the life of the series. The initial series has split into numerous series since its beginning in 1963, most of which are still in publication, so it is not reasonable to expect any librarian who has not been a fan of the series to read or have read every issue of every series. This article presents a summary and overview of the major female characters and themes in order to assist teen librarians with creating a balanced collection of comic books/graphic novels and providing effective readers’ advisory in that area. Understanding the image presented by this series will enable librarians to add to the collection titles which present a different image and thereby provide a more balanced view of women to the teens who use the collection for recreational reading. It will also allow librarians to provide more precise readers’ advisory and to engage teens in more meaningful discussions of some of their favorite characters.

Summary of X-Men Series

For those unfamiliar with the series, the titular X-Men are mutant teens and adults who have been recruited by the telepathic mutant, Professor Charles Xavier (Professor X), to join his private academy, Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters (later Xavier Institute for Higher Learning), and his team of crime-fighting superheroes, the X-Men. The initial team in 1963 consisted of five teens: Cyclops (Scott Summers), whose mutant power was firing a force beam from his eyes; Angel (Warren Kenneth Worthington III), who, as his name suggests, had wings and could fly; Beast (Henry Philip “Hank” McCoy), blessed with great strength and agility; Iceman (Bobby Drake), whose power allowed him to freeze the water vapor in the air; and Jean Grey, referred to nearly exclusively by her name rather than her sobriquet of Marvel Girl. Her power was initially telekinesis, the ability to move things with her mind. Later she too would develop telepathic abilities.

They battled mutant supervillains, such as Magneto (Eric Lehnsherr), who had power over magnetism, Toad (Mortimer Toynbee), nicknamed for his appearance and powers, the psychic Mastermind (Jason Wyngarde), and Mystique, whose shapeshifting abilities allowed her to assume any form. Over the ensuing years, numerous mutants were added to both the ranks of X-Men and of villains, so many that in 2005 Marvel reduced the millions to a more manageable few hundred. The original series also split into dozens of team series, individual series, limited series, and crossovers with other Marvel comic book series. Some of the titles take place in alternate universes or in alternate timelines within our universe.

Of the female X-Men characters who have been studied by researchers, the African weather witch Storm (Ororo Munroe) is the only one to have warranted individual treatment, primarily in terms of her status and role as the first black female superhero. In general, scholarly explorations of the X-Men as a team have focused on the characters as metaphors for persecuted racial, sexual, ethnic, and other minorities and marginalized groups. Other than brief references to a handful of female characters, the specific aspect of the representations of female X-Men in comic books when viewed through the lens of postmodern feminist theory and social constructionism has not been explored. These theories hold that gender is not defined or determined by biology but instead is a social construct which is created by a culture through language and imagery. Because it is a social construct, it changes as the society and culture which created it also evolve.

Postmodern feminist theory in particular argues that what we consider “feminine” behavior and appearance is really a reflection of what is constructed as “masculine”—in other words, it is feminine because it is not masculine. This paper will use these perspectives to analyze the way that “woman” is constructed within the X-Universe both in language (the way the characters are defined and the stories that are told about them) and images, which are as essential as language in graphic novels and comic books.
Scholarly critiques of the representations of the female superhero in comic books are notably scarce. Most such works have focused on a single superhero, primarily Wonder Woman, with occasional references to Supergirl, She-Hulk, Invisible Girl, and a few others. Despite the fact that the highly successful X-Men franchise included a female superhero, Jean Grey, in its first issue and has added dozens of female characters over its forty-plus year run, few scholars have included them in their analysis of comic book female superheroes.

As a medium of popular culture, comic books and comic book art are “a particularly useful way to measure the impact—or at least the wide recognition—of social change on the general population.” As Larew notes, “images of women in comics tend to reflect social attitudes and perceptions of women during specific eras,” attitudes and perceptions which, in turn, are shaped by their reflection of themselves. Spanning more than forty years and including literally dozens of female characters, the X-Men presents a unique opportunity for examining the changes in existing characters as well as the introduction of new characters representative of changing social attitudes toward women. That is to say, the feminist exploration of the evolution of the personality and character of the female X-Men (X-Women) as a reflection of the changing social construction of “woman” from the 1961 through 2010. This paper will be restricted to a consideration of the recurring female characters who were official members of the X-Men team (also called the Uncanny X-Men and the New X-Men) founded, mentored, and directed by Professor X at his School for Gifted Youngsters in Westchester County, New York, and the major, recurring female villains in that series. However, it would be an almost impossible task to examine every one of the literally hundreds of minor characters who appeared over the years as members of the X-Men for a few issues. The recurring characters are those most likely to be remembered and so have the most impact on the readers and on society.

Female Superheroes as Hypersexual Object
The most obvious presentation, particularly in a visual medium, is the physical. Nearly all who write on female superheroes explore this aspect of their representation to some degree. In writing about Wonder Woman, O'Reilly observes that the “depiction of female superheroes as both strong and beautiful underscores the binary of the masculine-subject/feminine-object relationship,” while Emad interprets the hypersexualization of the character in the 1990s as a means for “directing the primary purpose…to be an object for male sexual pleasure.” Brown notes, “The problem at its simplest is that this double bind [of being tough and sexual, violent but desirable] constructs these emerging roles for women as both a heroic subject and a sexual object.”14

Of the modern hyperfeminized comic book superwoman, Reynolds asks, “How can women who dress up in the styles of 1940s pornography be anything other than the pawns or tools of male fantasy?” and further explicates the visual representation of female superheroes as the “reconciliation of all the conflicting demands of adolescent male sexual desire. Sexuality is domesticated (i.e., made safe) and yet remains exceptionally exciting. Women are visually thrilling, and yet threatening and dangerous only to outsiders and strangers.”16

The pattern of increasing hypersexualization set by Wonder Woman can be seen in the evolution of the X-Men's Jean Grey (also known as Marvel Girl; later Phoenix) from the “girl next door” teen in 1963, to the pouty-lipped, wide-eyed, hypersexualized mutant superbabe in skimpy, skintight clothing of the 1990s, and in the physical appearance of most female characters added over the years. “To point out that all modern comic book women are extremely fetishized is almost redundant. Nearly every female character in comics is illustrated as an adolescent
Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity

Underlying this rather obvious feature of the female characters is a deeper, more pervasive, and more meaningful pattern of psychological and social development shared by nearly all of the X-Women, regardless of their individual personality or physical characteristics. Without exception, the X-Women are constructed as heterosexual. All of them who are involved in a romantic or physical relationship are paired with male characters in what are essentially traditional gendered relationships; those who are not frequently express their interest in a particular male or their generalized desire for a relationship with a male.

Examples

Jean Grey began dating Scott Summers (Cyclops) within the first few issues of the original series and ultimately married him. Polaris carried on a long, complicated relationship with Scott's brother, Alex (Havock), to whom she was once engaged. Storm was in a relationship with fellow X-Man Forge for several years, and is currently married to the Marvel African superhero, Black Panther. Shadowcat was linked with a number of male characters over the years and is currently in a relationship with the X-Man Colossus; in the Ultimate series, she has been dating Spider-Man. Dazzler developed a relationship with the extra-dimensional yet male Longshot of Mojoworld; in the Ultimate series, she was paired with Angel. A continuing storyline for years was Rogue's relationship with fellow X-Man Gambit, and the question of whether he could be expected to remain faithful in the absence of sexual intimacy. Psylocke and Husk have both had relationships with Archangel, the current incarnation of Angel. Stacy-X was also in love with Archangel, and left the X-Men when it became obvious that he was in love with Husk; as a parting gift, she left him an erotic video of herself jumping rope in the nude.

Far from transgressing traditional gender roles, the X-Women reaffirm and support them, as they are all emotionally and sexually attracted to, dependent upon, and available to men, regardless of their mutant superpower. Even the character with the most transgressive promise, the one-time prostitute Stacy-X, with her snake-like skin and ability to create sexual euphoria through control of her pheromones, is revealed to be just as emotionally vulnerable as any of the more stereotypical females to the “right” man.

Superpower

Nearly all of the X-Women's mutant superpowers are mental, psychic, or otherwise invisible and operate through indirect means. They allow the X-Women to affect others only indirectly and frequently without their knowledge, by subtly manipulating their minds, the physical world, or both. Such powers reflect the traditional stereotype of women as emotional creatures who use indirect, not to say insidious and pernicious, means to achieve their ends.

At the same time, the X-Women can be viewed as archetypal witches and as forces of nature; Storm is frequently referred to as “weather witch.” They are able to affect and control humans and nature through “magical” or “supernatural” means, rather than physical force. Their control is based on deception and manipulation; they use a man's mind, emotions, and instincts against him. They are dangerous creatures who are subject to unexplained and violent outbursts as a result of their internal powers. However, when they willingly submit themselves to male control, they can be nurturing, noble, and self-sacrificing.

Like most other superwomen, X-Women have powers that they can use while remaining attractive and appealing to the male gaze. “But a heroine will look like a fantasy of the perfect woman.”
supermodel if she possesses what is known as ‘strike a pose and point’ power...Just like posing for a picture in Vogue.” The particular pose referred to frequently involves an arched back and thrusting chest, emphasizing the woman’s hypersexuality, and just as often includes sado-masochistic overtones of the dominatrix, such as black leather bustiers and thigh-high boots.

Not coincidentally, unlike many of the male mutants’ powers, the female's powers seldom result in physical abnormalities or deformities which would make them unappealing to the male gaze. If they have any physical effect at all, it is one of exoticizing the female Other, as with Storm’s blue eyes and flowing white hair, Psylocke’s new, eroticized Asian body, or Stacy-X’s phallic snakeskin.

**Examples**

This pattern was established in the very first issue of the comic book. Jean's power initially was telekinesis–she could move things with her mind. She utilized her power without making any direct physical contact with the target object or person. Later, it was revealed that she is a powerful telepath as well, another ability that does not operate through direct physical contact. Polaris manipulates magnetic fields. Storm controls and manipulates atmospheric elements, again indirectly attacking her foes. As an Earth Goddess/Mother, her powers are almost maternal, “embodying the forces of nature which are enveloping rather than explosive or lacerating in their effect.”

Shadowcat's power to pass through solid objects allows her to become essentially non-corporeal. She does disrupt electromagnetic processes as she passes through people or things, but she takes no direct physical action. Marvel Girl (Rachel Summers, the daughter of Scott Summers and Jean Grey in an alternate timeline) is a telepath, like her mother, and has the same telekinetic powers, while Dazzler converts music into light “in all its infinite variety,” which allows her to induce a coma or even kill without ever touching her target. When she uses it to protect herself against a villain, it floods “his eyes, his mind his soul. His brain can’t cope with the sensory overload. It short-circuits—and turns itself completely off.” Rogue sucks the life force out of her victims merely by touching them.

Psylocke is a telepath, is able to perceive the future, and at some point acquires telekenetic ability. Jubilee exudes explosive energy, which was originally compared to firecrackers and sparklers. Later it was revealed that these were globules of plasma that are under her mental control. Emma Frost and the Stepford Cuckoos (quintuplet sisters) are also telepaths. The Stepford Cuckoos are able to combine their abilities and function as one, often speaking in chorus, “Combined we are a single, brilliant supermind. Without (any one of us), we’re just four smart blondes.”

This pattern continues into the 21st century, with the introduction of new X-Women and exemplified by Stacy-X's power to manipulate men through exuding sexually-arousing pheromones. Sage, introduced as the telepath Tessa, a member of the villainous Hellfire Club in 1981, was revealed in 2001 to have been a spy for Professor X and a virtual living computer. Later she was found to have the power to project an astral form, manipulate mutagenic fields, and serve as a catalyst for latent mutant abilities. She uses her power to heal other wounded mutants, serving essentially as a nurse to the X-Men.

Armor (Hisako Ichiki), introduced in 2004, “can generate a psionic exoskeleton around her entire body by drawing on the strength of the line of her ancestors.” Pixie (also 2004), as might be expected from her name, has butterfly-like wings which allow her to fly, causes hallucinations by sprinkling her “pixie dust,” can teleport, and has the potential for other magical abilities.
Exceptions

The three exceptions to this rule could be said to prove it. X-23 is a female clone of a male superhero (Wolverine) and has his powers and personality, rather than traditional female powers. However, she is a performer of masculinity, not truly masculine. Her killer instincts were activated only through repeated psychological and physical abuse, while Wolverine’s came naturally. She is as physically sexualized and fetishized as any of the X-Women, and is undeniably heterosexual. But because she is constructed as feminine, her possession of masculine powers has resulted in severe psychological and emotional damage and self-destructive behavior.

Marrow’s power is physical and deforming—she grows blade-like projections from her bones that she can then break off and use as weapons. Initially, the growth is not under her power and causes her excruciating pain, something no other X-Man’s physical power does. However, after being mortally wounded, she is returned to life as a beautiful young woman with the ability to retract her bone spikes, which no longer cause her pain, so that she can become appealing to the male gaze.

Husk’s power is ultimately more defensive than offensive, and more than a little voyeuristic. She removes her epidermis to reveal a skin of a different composition, frequently stone or metal. Along with her skin, she must remove her clothes, meaning that “regardless of whether her skin was stone or metal, Husk was actually naked when she went into battle,” something readers could not fail to realize. After having performed her striptease, she is resistant to attack and possibly stronger, but her fighting skills have not been improved. As the character developed and the power was further explained, it was revealed that she must mimic a known substance, rather than become anything that she can imagine. She frequently chooses to blend in to her surroundings and, when under stress, will “shed” repeatedly in patches. She can only hold the new form for about an hour, and when she returns to her human form, she is—naturally—nude. So although her power is more direct and physical than the other X-Women’s, it is as limited and it sexualizes her as much or more than their “strike a pose and point” powers.

Power as a Danger for X-Women

Loss of Control

Despite having been given mental powers that do not require any physical strength to command and that would seem to be inherently feminine, all of the X-Women eventually lose control of those powers, either because of strong negative emotions, their powers have developed beyond their ability to control them, they have become intoxicated by power, or they have been brainwashed, corrupted, possessed, controlled, or driven insane by a greater force or power. They are punished for having transgressed the traditional gender binary of men as powerful and aggressive and women as weak and submissive. As Madrid puts it, “It seemed to be a requirement that the women who wore an ‘X’ on their costumes would eventually take a dip in the crazy pool at least once.” They then become a danger to their teammates, to humanity, the world, the galaxy, or, in extreme cases, the universe. As the archetypal givers of life, women who become evil necessarily become bringers of death.

Suicide as a Punishment

At this stage, their only hope is to submit to the control of a stronger, masculine force, usually in the person of Professor X. However, they are frequently completely uncontrollable and cause immense destruction. They are self-aware enough to know what they are doing and to experience great grief and shame over their actions, and as a result, most have attempted, if not committed, suicide at least once. Although male X-Men have been known to die to save others, “they tend to die heroically and are often commemorated and/or magically brought back from the
dead on a regular basis.”

A classic example is when Colossus, in a Messiah-like act, sacrifices himself in order to save all other mutants from the deadly Legacy Virus, using his own blood to create the vaccine.

Loss of Physical Form

Frequently X-Women lose their physical form and either exist on the astral plane or become purely elemental beings. They become literally as well as figuratively invisible and ineffectual. Ultimately, most of those who die or become bodiless are reborn, usually in a new, improved physical body, with new or enhanced powers, and with a new ability to control those powers and use them for the good of the team. Many suffer amnesia, a figurative death of the self, when they are restored to their physical form and continue to pose a threat until their memories are restored, usually with the telepathic assistance of Professor X.

Examples

Again, Jean Grey set the pattern in the first few years of the comic book history. In the original story, she apparently died when the shuttle she was piloting was subjected to cosmic radiation and crashed into Jamaica Bay. However, she had evolved into the “Phoenix” force and was reborn out of the waters of the Bay. Then, like Eve in the Garden of Eden, she was deceived by evil—in her case, the Hellfire Club—and brought death into the world, this time in the persona of the Dark Phoenix, also known as the Chaos-Bringer. Drunk on power, she went on a rampage throughout the universe and destroyed an inhabited planet when she consumed its sun, D’Bari, for energy. She was finally brought under control by Professor X. Brought to trial by a cosmic court for the destruction of the D’Bari system, she eventually realized that she was incapable of controlling the Phoenix power and chose to commit suicide both to protect the universe and to atone for her actions. She explains to Cyclops, “I’d have to stay completely in control of myself every second of every day for the rest of my mortal life. Maybe I could do it, but if I slipped, even for an instant, if I…failed…if even one more person died at my hands…it’s better this way. Quick. Clean. Final.”

She would be brought back to life through various means at least four times over the succeeding years and each time she chose death in order to save the universe from the uncontrolled power of the Phoenix.

In a later retroactive continuity, it was revealed that Professor X had placed mental blocks on Jean’s power when she was a young girl because she was unable to control it at that age. He also wiped her memory of the event. Her parents sent her to his school when she was older so that he could teach her how to use and control her powers. Although a powerful telekinetic, it is obvious that “Marvel Girl lets men dominate her life.”

Storm has such an empathic connection with the forces of nature that she must maintain a strict control over her emotions to avoid creating violent weather phenomena, the duration and extent of which are in direct proportion to the intensity of her emotions. She is constantly aware of the threat her emotions pose and the need to continually suppress and deny them.

On her first mission as leader of the X-Men, she allowed her power over her fellow
mutants to go to her head, declared herself an elemental goddess, and unleashed a hurricane on friends and foes alike. During a space encounter with the alien race known as the Brood, her powers flared out of control, due in part to the fact that she had been implanted with a Brood egg that would transform her into one of them upon hatching. In order to avoid unleashing that evil on her return to Earth, she channeled all of the surrounding stellar energy into her own body in a suicide attempt, thus destroying the Brood embryo and leaving her adrift in space. She was saved by an Acanti, a space-faring whale-like creature.

In an earlier storyline, she had been turned into a vampire slave of Dracula, and in a later one, she suffered a type of death and rebirth when she was physically regressed to childhood by the evil cyborg called “Nanny” and returned as an amnesiac. After regaining her memory, but while still physically a child, she was again brainwashed by her enemies.

Ultimately, she was rescued by the X-Men and restored to her adult form. Later she evolved into an elemental being while fighting Apocalypse in an alternate future. Shadowcat becomes incorporeal and invisible every time she uses her powers and has several times been possessed or otherwise controlled by outside forces. She was first possessed by the spirit of the martial arts master Ogun in an attempt to kill Wolverine, and only managed to overcome Ogun and exorcise his spirit with Wolverine's assistance. Injured by an energy spear in a battle with the Morlocks, she lost the ability to become solid and was only saved from fading away through the efforts of Doctor Doom and Reed Richards of the Fantastic Four.

When her fellow mutant and interdimensional sorceress Illyana died, her magic Soulsword bonded with Shadowcat and began to corrupt her, making her a danger to herself and others. She was only saved by surrendering the sword to a gypsy sorceress after much difficulty.

Dazzler was possessed at different times by Lightmaster, Doctor Doom, and Malice, and was controlled by Flynn and Silence. Galactus imbued her with the “power cosmic”; she has died and been resurrected at least three times.

In the future of an alternate universe, Rachel Summers was brainwashed and used to hunt and kill mutants. She risked her life to return to the past in an effort to change the future and atone for her crimes. In one alternate reality, she existed only on the astral plane after dying as the result of transporting her parents to the future to care for Cyclops' son, Nathan.

Betsy Braddock (Psylocke) attacked her brothers while under the control of Dr. Synne, was later brainwashed, and lost her memory and then literally her mind. That is to say, her body lost its mind when her psyche and that of the Ninja assassin Kwannon's were switched. Their psyches mingled, leaving each personality with some of the traits of the other. Psylocke, in Kwannon’s body and with her aggressive traits, was turned into the murderous Lady Mandarin, a festishized Asian sex object in the style of the classic Dragon Lady of the 1930s. She learned to use her telepathic powers to create a “psychic knife” as a weapon. Using it against Wolverine, she regained her memories and joined the X-Men. Later, when Kwannon in Psylocke's body (now called Revanche) learned that she was dying from the Legacy virus, she committed suicide (killed Betsy Braddock's body) in order to fully restore Psylocke's psyche, which remained in Kwannon's body. Psylocke later died in battle protecting Rogue and Beast and was resurrected a year later by her brother, Jamie, who has the power to manipulate reality.

Prior to the revelation of Sage's role as a spy for Professor X, she played a relatively minor role in stories involving the Hellfire Club. Shortly before that revelation, she came under the mental domination of another telepathic Hellfire Club member and
was rescued by Storm. Afraid that she was not powerful enough to prevent future incidents, she created mental blocks that prevented her from using her telepathic power. This was not enough to prevent Lady Mastermind from trapping her in the illusion of being once again a member of the Hellfire Club, from which she was rescued by the X-Men. Later she was possessed by her “dark side” alter ego and killed two X-Men, was nearly driven insane by a massive download of information, and suffered from hallucinations. Ultimately, her alter ego sacrificed herself to save the universe and restore Sage to full sanity. Sage then merged with the Crystal Palace, “the Nexus of All Realities,” in order to stabilize those realities, and so sacrificed herself in expiation for her alter egos.

As was noted, Marrow was brought back from the dead as a beautiful young woman. Prior to joining the X-Men, she was a mutant terrorist who was responsible for numerous mass murders. She was invited to join the X-Men in an attempt at rehabilitation and reformation, which was partially successful. It was during this period that she was wounded in battle while fighting on the side of the X-Men, and returned to life. She symbolically died to expiate for her previous sins, and her new attractive body and ability to control her powers were the sign that her sacrifice was accepted. Ultimately, after a brainwashing, a suicide attempt, and a failed heterosexual love affair, she returned to her terrorist ways.

Rogue: A Special Case

The very fact of her existence makes Rogue a danger to others. Her power requires nothing more on her part than direct physical contact to injure, if not kill. Horrified at her abilities, she ran away from home after her powers manifested, was taken in by the female mutant villain Mystique, and became part of her crime family, the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants. During one of their battles, Rogue permanently absorbed Ms. Marvel’s powers of flight, superhuman strength, and invulnerability, as well as her thoughts and memories. Nearly driven insane and unable to control her growing powers, she finally sought help from Professor X and joined the X-Men. Later, she would have died protecting an innocent human if Wolverine had not risked his life by kissing her and so transferring his healing power to her. At one point, her psyche and that of Carol Danvers shared her body, each expressing her own personality during their time of dominance. During this period, it was suggested that Rogue’s lack of control over her powers was psychological, not physical. Eventually, Rogue’s psyche was purged of the remnants of Carol Danvers’ personality, leaving her to struggle primarily with the romantic implications of her own mutant powers. Currently, Rogue is in full control of her own powers, thanks to Professor X removing the mental blocks which prevented her powers from developing normally.

Jubilee: The Exception

Uniquely among the X-Women, Jubilee never completely lost control of her powers, despite the revelation that she has the ability to affect matter at an atomic level and potentially create nuclear explosions, nor was she ever romantically involved with anyone. She is essentially an asexual character, “one of the guys.” Her long-standing relationship with Wolverine is one of father and daughter. Although introduced in 1989 as a young teen, she is currently in her twenties. Also uniquely, she has never committed suicide and has never been killed. She lost her mutant powers in 2005, as part of the purge of mutants by Marvel, but replaced them with high-tech devices that give her superhuman strength, flight, and invulnerability.

Summary

Not only are the X-Women hyperfeminized physically, they are hyperfeminized emotionally and psychologically. Far from giving them “access to a position of empowerment,” their abilities “merely further fetishize them as dangerous sex objects.”32 Many represent modern versions of classic female archetypes, and all of them reflect very conventional patriarchal views of women as physically and
psychologically weaker than men, ruled by their emotions and their hormones, possessors of a mysterious and non-rational “feminine intuition,” and able to subtly and deceptively manipulate men using their feminine wiles. The only male X-Man whose powers are wholly psychic is Professor Xavier, a paraplegic confined to a wheelchair. In other words, in a classic Freudian equivalence, X-Women are the equal only of a castrated (i.e., impotent) man.

A Closer Look at the Evolution of Three Characters

Emma Frost’s Evolution
Emma Frost’s transition from the White Queen of the Hellfire Club to Co-Headmaster of Xavier Institute validates this reading. Contrary to Brown’s contention that her color suggests “angelic images of white womanhood,” her name and her color bring to mind the icy cold of winter. She and Jean exemplify the classic Madonna/Whore binary, with Jean as the Madonna or an angel.

Although Emma was initially a villain, she is still a female, and so her telepathic powers are “feminine,” as is her secondary ability to transform into a diamond form in which she is virtually indestructible. Diamonds, also called “ice” in popular slang, have long been associated with mercenary, heartless women who use men for their own selfish purposes; as Marilyn Monroe declared, “Diamonds are a girl’s best friend.” In this form, her emotions are suppressed and she is unable to feel pain or empathy, so that she is literally as well as figuratively cold and hard.

Because she was a villain, she successfully utilized all of her powers–psychic and physical–to manipulate men for her own ends. She was emotionally and financially independent, self-confident, and empowered. She exercised complete control over her powers as well as her emotions. She controlled others but was not controlled by anyone in return; she could be defeated but not dominated. She exploited the young, using her Massachusetts Academy as the training ground for the mutant supervillain team the Hellions. In the X-universe, this alone made her a villain.

However, as soon as she joined forces with the X-Men to oppose the mutant-hunting Sentinels, she was plunged into a deep, death-like coma. The Hellions were all killed and Emma continued to exist on the astral plane as a disembodied personality while Professor X merged the remnants of her Massachusetts Academy with his School for Gifted Youngsters, symbolizing his assumption of power over her. At his insistence, she resumed her physical form. Ultimately, she symbolically killed her old self when she killed the new White Queen, her evil sister Adrienne, in order to save the X-Men and students at the School.

She became a teacher and mentor of Generation X in expiation for leading the Hellions to their deaths and served as a surrogate mother to the Stepford Cuckoos. When Emma’s diamond form was found shattered, Jean reassembled her body and revived her using her increasing Phoenix powers, despite having telepathically discovered Emma in a psychic affair with her husband. She explains her reasons to Beast, “She loves him, Hank. Emma has actually fallen in love with my husband. It’s almost funny.” And then to Emma, “Wake up, Emma. Scott needs you. Wake up.” Forty years later, Marvel Girl is still allowing men to dominate her life. Both Emma’s love and Scott’s needs justify and atone for her husband’s emotional infidelity.

After Jean was killed (again) and reborn as the transcendent White Phoenix of the Crown, she was confronted with “a badly wounded ed orphan universe” created when Scott succumbed to loneliness and doubt on her death. In order to mend it, she is told that she “must water it with her heart’s blood,” by giving her blessing to Scott and Emma before ascending to a higher plane of existence, an allusion to the Virgin Mary’s assumption into heaven.
It was later revealed that the Stepford Cuckoos were cloned from Emma without her knowledge, making her their literal mother and a less threatening maternal character. She was also possessed by the evil spirit, Cassandra Nova, who attempted to use her to destroy the X-Men. In the battle that followed, when it appeared that Cyclops has been mortally wounded, Emma in her diamond form shed a tear. Now that she knows true love and has the love of a good man, she is no longer impervious to emotion, regardless of her form. Emma also frequently expresses doubts about whether she deserves to be an X-Man. She recruits Kitty Pride to serve as a teacher because “I like to think I’ve evolved…but I wanted someone on the team that I hadn’t really fought alongside. Someone who would be inclined to watch me, if I…” As the self-confident White Queen, such self-doubt was unimaginable.

When Lady Mastermind took control of Emma’s mind, Jean, like a fairy godmother or a guardian angel, once again appeared to rescue the now-helpless Emma using the Phoenix Force. At a later point, Emma was traumatized by the return of an enemy from her past, an emotional condition unthinkable when she was a villain. Her role is increasingly one of providing moral support for the man in her life and the students in her care. In order to become one of the “good women,” she had to submit to male control. Her sexual expression and activity were restricted to one man in a relationship founded on love. She became nurturing and self-sacrificing and ruled more by emotion than ambition. She had to figuratively and literally die and be born again. However, as a former villain, she is a more interesting character with more dramatic potential than the always-saintly Jean, and she still dresses like a pawn of male sexual fantasy.

Mystique: The Unredeemed Female
In stark contrast is the development of the other primary female mutant villain, Mystique (Raven Darkholme). Although she served for a time as a secret agent of Professor X and claims to want to join the X-Men, she has never been accepted onto the team. She works with them on occasion for her own purposes, but she is not one of them. Her motives remain suspect and she continues to be viewed as a villain. She has never died and has never lost control of her powers. She has never submitted to control by any other power.

Like the X-Women, her power is a passive one of deception and manipulation. She can change into any form, animal, vegetable, or mineral, in an instant. She even creates the clothes that she appears to be wearing, meaning that she is essentially always naked. Her true age is unknown due to her ability to project any age she desires.

Like Emma, she has achieved success as an independent, empowered woman. As Raven Darkholme, she rose to the position of Deputy Director of the Defense Advanced Research Planning Agency (DARPA) in the U.S. Department of Defense and used the military secrets and advanced weaponry to which she was privy for her own criminal and subversive purposes.

She uses her sexuality for her own ends and feels loyalty to no one. She has frequently seduced unwary X-Men by assuming the form of their loved one. Although her power offers an opportunity for creating a truly transgressive character who embodies the concept of gender as performance, the writers (or editors) have not taken advantage of it. To date, Mystique has never, while in the form of a male, attempted to seduce either a straight female or a gay male. Regardless of her form, to the reader she remains inherently female.

In the guise of a beautiful young woman, she married an older, wealthy aristocrat in the Bavarian Alps while indulging in affairs with several others, including the demon Azazel, by whom she became pregnant. She murdered her impotent husband when he discovered her pregnancy. She also assumed at one time the identity of the wife of a U.S. senator and used his influence to gain access to secret government
She has impersonated both Professor X and Jean Grey in order to deceive and manipulate the X-Men.

She is without natural maternal instincts or feelings. When her son was born and his demonic ancestry only too clear, she and the baby were driven out by a large mob of angry villagers in true Gothic horror story style. In order to make her escape, she threw the baby into a river. He was saved by gypsies and later became the X-Man known as Nightcrawler. She abandoned her other son, Graydon Creed, the outcome of an affair with Victor Creed (the mutant supervillain Sabretooth), when it became obvious that he was not a mutant. As a result, he became a mutant-hating politician, whom she assassinated when he was nominated as a presidential candidate.

Given that she can assume any form, masculine or feminine, it is not surprising that it has been established that she is bisexual, if not lesbian—a fact which was only recently explicitly stated in the comic books. As such, she is a woman who rejects all masculine control; she manipulates men sexually but is not dependent upon them for her own sexual fulfillment. Her only truly loving relationship was with the female mutant Destiny, which ended only with Destiny's death. According to Mystique co-creator Chris Claremont, “it was his original intention that Mystique and Destiny be Nightcrawler's biological parents by way of Mystique having transformed into a man for conception. However, given Marvel's attitude at the time, the idea was considered entirely too controversial.”

Like Emma, she corrupts the young. Although she established a maternal relationship with Rogue, she did so only after Destiny foresaw that Rouge would be important to them. Her primary purpose was to recruit Rogue for her Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, which included other young, disaffected mutants.

In a long and convoluted storyline, Mystique was driven insane and attempted to destroy humanity with a lethal virus. When Rogue attempted to stop her, Mystique tried to kill her. After her sanity was restored, Mystique infiltrated the X-Men primarily to seduce Gambit in Rogue's form as revenge. Unlike the X-Women, she felt no compulsion to atone for her actions, even after regaining her sanity. To the contrary, she managed to deceive the X-Men into accepting her, then betrayed them and shot Rogue in a continuing search for revenge.

**Wanda Maximoff: Force of Chaos**

No discussion of the X-Women would be complete without the inclusion of Wanda Maximoff, the Scarlet Witch. Although originally introduced in the *Avengers* comic book and appearing in the X-Men primarily as a member of the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, Wanda played a vital role in the revision of the *X-Men* universe in the 2005 mini-series *House of M*. Initially, Wanda had the ability to use magic, as well as “hex” people and events—that is, to control probability and cause the least likely outcome to occur. Later it was revealed that she and her brother, the mutant Quicksilver, were the biological children of Magneto, often billed as “the X-Men's greatest foe.” Raised by gypsies after the death of their mother, they joined the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants only out of a sense of obligation to Magneto after he rescued them from an angry mob. After leaving the Brotherhood and joining the Avengers, Wanda fell in love with and married the android Vision.

Unlike the X-Women, when Wanda found that she had trouble managing her growing powers, she consulted not a man but the female witch Agatha Harkness, who taught her how to control them. She used her powers to become pregnant by her android husband and gave birth to two boys. They were later shown to be two shards of a demonic entity, and after they were reunited with that entity, Agatha Harkness erased all memory of them from Wanda's mind. Despite this, Wanda fell into a catatonic state. She was at various times possessed by a demon, by Magneto, and by an alien entity before she was returned to sanity.
She and the other Avengers, along with the Fantastic Four, sacrificed themselves to save the universe from the mutant villain Onslaught. However, they continued to exist in a parallel universe until being returned to this universe a year later. After being kidnapped by the sorceress Morgan la Fey, Wanda developed the ability to channel “chaos magic” and change the very structure of reality. When a chance reference to her children restored her memory of them, she went insane and began changing reality in an attempt to recreate her children. After many changes and much destruction, including the de-powering of all but about one hundred mutants, Doctor Strange managed to shut down her mind. She was left with no powers and no memory, living what is depicted as a quiet, middle-class life in the suburbs.

**Adolescent Male Perspective**

This presentation of women reflects in many cases “the conflicting demands of adolescent male sexual desire.” From the adolescent male perspective, women are physically desirable, but emotionally threatening. They are unpredictable, controlled by mysterious hormonal forces that cause them to act irrationally at times, lashing out at those around them. Yet, paradoxically, they can be loving and nurturing. They frequently seem to be able to read minds, extrapolating the truth from very little evidence.

The teenaged Rogue in particular represents an archetypal fear that emotional commitment will result in loss of power and a loss of self for the male. Her relationship with Gambit reflects the conflict many teens feel between abstinence and sexual intimacy. It is noteworthy that, while the female might pay the price of emotional and psychological damage for engaging in sexual intimacy, the male could literally pay with his life.

X-23 is not only fetishized as a dangerous sex object, she is quite literally “a product of male design,” bred and trained by a patriarchal institution and molded into “an obedient killing machine” who wields her power “in a manner that suggest a fulfillment of the male’s own wish for perfection,” in this case, the adolescent male who gazes at her as an object of his sexual desire. Having been bred, trained, and molded by male design, her character permits the adolescent male to fantasize reasserting that male control over her or to indulge in a classic rescue fantasy. It has also been suggested that X-23 provides young gay males with a socially acceptable outlet for their homosexual desire for the hypermasculine Wolverine.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the evolution of the personality and character of the X-Women over 40 years of comic book history. Sadly, the only evolution that could be discerned was one of increasing objectification, sexualization, and fetishization. Contrary to the assertions of some that, as female superheroes, the X-Women are transgressive figures who challenge our basic cultural assumptions about gender roles, a careful exploration and analysis of their personalities and their stories reveals that they in fact reflect and reaffirm traditional patriarchal gender hierarchies and traditional American middle-class values and norms. It is instructive to note that, in a world where a human woman can marry an android, the only black woman marries a black man.

There can be no question that physically they are constructed according to changing masculine gender fantasies and ideals and that they are situated within a traditional gendered power structure. They are called “X-Men,” and as members of that team they are subject to the leadership and control of Professor X or the male who has succeeded him. Storm was the only female to ever serve as leader of the X-Men, and her term was brief and has not been repeated.
As heterosexual women, they are emotionally submissive to and dependent upon their male partners; few, if any, of the relationships could be described as egalitarian. Their powers are physically weaker than their male counterparts and they are usually incapable of managing those powers without masculine assistance.

Being intangible, their feminine powers do not challenge the physical superiority of the male members of the team or even of the male villains that they encounter, and so affirm the binary of women as spiritual and men as physical. Being invisible, they support the binary of women as active in the private sphere and men in the public sphere. Being psychical and imperceptible, they validate the binary of women as emotional/personal and men as rational/scientific. The women can also be identified with archetypal witches, wielding mysterious, supernatural powers, and with the archetypal mother, nurturing the young and the weak and sacrificing herself for their benefit. They are the archetypal Eve, bringing both life and death to the world.

Their stories suggest that women who attempt to assume and exercise immense power are a danger to the very fabric of existence and that they will be punished for this unfeminine act with insanity or death or both. In classic mythological fashion, they are reborn, having expiated their sins. They remain, however, weak vessels capable of incalculable destruction. When the story called for a destructive power that would literally rewrite the previous several decades’ worth of storylines, the writers called not on an immensely powerful supervillain, but on a raging, insane Scarlet Witch who was suffering extreme postpartum depression. The resolution of her story suggests that society is safer and women are happier when they do not have to struggle with superpowers which are really beyond their ability to control.

It is tempting to conclude that this construction of “female” and of “woman” is a result of the fact that, in its fifty-year history, all of the authors, illustrators, and editors have been men. But the very absence of women among the creators makes this question one that cannot be answered, as there is no comparison. We cannot know how women would have constructed the characters, their images, or their stories. In addition, the fact that the series is designed for and marketed to adolescent males has a strong influence on editorial decisions, at the same time that the decision to market to adolescent males drives the images of women that are presented, regardless of who the creators are. As was demonstrated, at least one male writer was prevented from transgressing gender in at least one story. What we can say is that these images and characters reflect social attitudes about women among at least one social group.

As was noted earlier, the images of women in comics both reflect and shape social attitudes about women. Teen librarians attempting to create a balanced collection need to understand the implicit message of this immensely popular comic book/graphic novel series in order to ensure that their collection provides examples of other female personality types, body images, and outcomes for strong, independent women. In evaluating works for inclusion, librarians should look beyond the immediately obvious to determine what the underlying message is and make an effort to select works that present a variety of images and role models. When offering readers’ advisory and selecting works for book clubs, librarians can deliberately offer teens a choice of works that present varied images of female characters. A few suggested titles include *Girl Genius* by Phil and Kaja Foglio, Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* series and related titles, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* by Joss Whedon and others, *Fables* created by Bill Willingham, and Brian K. Vaughan’s *Runaways* and *Y: The Last Man*, which presents numerous different female models.

References

1. Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in...*


10. Larew, 590.

11. D’Amore.


15. Reynolds, 79.

16. Ibid., 81.


18. See Appendix for date of introduction and description of superpowers.


20. Reynolds, 95.


23. http://marvel.com/universe/Armor_(Hisako_Ichiki)#ixzz2NR04y0Pf

24. Madrid, 263.


27. Claremont, 182.


31. Ibid., 179.

32. Ibid., 43.

33. Ibid., 173.


41. Reynolds, 81.

42. Brown, 85.

43. Ibid., 84.

44. Ibid., 85.

### Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Power</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Armor</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Psionic exoskeleton</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dazzler (Alison Blaire)</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Generate blinding light from sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma Frost (formerly White Queen)</td>
<td>2001*</td>
<td>Telepathic ability; assume diamond-hard form at will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husk (Paige Guthrie)</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Shed her skin for a different one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean Grey (Marvel Girl; Phoenix)</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Telekinesis; telepathy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jubilee (Jubilation Lee)</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Plasma energy bolts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Abilities</td>
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<td>-----------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marrow (Sarah)</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Blade-like projections of bone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marvel Girl (Rachel Summers)</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Telepathy; telekinesis; psionic ability**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mystique (real name unknown)</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Shapeshifting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pixie (Megan Gwinn)</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Butterfly wings; “pixie dust;” teleportation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polaris (Lorna Dane)</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Control magnetism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psylocke (Betsy Braddock)</td>
<td>1987***</td>
<td>Precognition, telepathy, mental bolts, mind control, and generating illusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rogue (Anna Marie)</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Absorb memories, abilities, personality and life force through touch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sage (Tessa)</td>
<td>2001****</td>
<td>Virtual human computer with the ability to record, analyze, and recall vast amounts of information with incredible speed and accuracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scarlet Witch</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Control probability; chaos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shadowcat (Kitty Pride)</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Pass through solid objects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stacy-X</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Induce sexual euphoria through control of her pheromones; shed her snake-like skin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepford Cuckoos (Celeste, Esme, Mindee, Phoebe, Sophie)</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Telepaths; combine individual powers into single “supermind”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storm (Ororo Monroe)</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Control weather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X-23 (Laura Kinney)</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Clone of Wolverine; cellular regeneration; berserker rages</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


** “The ability to project her own consciousness or those of others into the timestream, causing them to arrive in another time period within the body of their divergent counterpart or closest living ancestor or descendant.” [http://marvel.com/universe/Marvel_Girl_(Rachel_Summers)#ixzz2NQmSkRc3](http://marvel.com/universe/Marvel_Girl_(Rachel_Summers)#ixzz2NQmSkRc3)

*** Originally introduced as Elizabeth “Betsy” Braddock in Captain Britain in 1976. [http://marvel.com/universe/Psylocke](http://marvel.com/universe/Psylocke)

**** Originally introduced as a telepath and member of the Hellfire Club in 1981, but retroactively revealed in 2001 to have been a spy for Professor X. Her powers
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Podcast powered by podPress v8.8.10.17
Taking a Dip in the Crazy Pool: The Evolution of X-Women From Heroic Subject to Sexual Object Although male X-Men have been known to die to save others, “they Marvel. KF975 - Superwoman. Superwoman.” Aging Transformation Scenes and future Supergirl from Action 270. Discussing Potential Future Male and Female Leads for Stories Superwoman bolts down from the sky and nails Supergirl directly in the face, serving as the window into the X-Men for an entire generation of fans. Read more. Sean Morris takes the reader on a journey

Proudly powered by WordPress.
This allows the reader to imagine the smell of the odors and scents in the writing. Updated daily, for more funny memes check our homepage. Punch a pair of holes on both sides of the mask. Similarly, when entering a pool that's not at the ideal temperature, teachers sometimes need to walk in slowly, allowing their bodies to adjust to this shift. Some can just jump right in, knowing their bodies will eventually adjust, and at the same time knowing they can just stand up and jump out if they need to. I like the analogy of the swimming pool rather than a ladder when implementing SAMR. As a veteran teacher that after 13 years of teaching, was used to “jumping in” because there was a comfort level with the technology is now adjusting to a new school district that uses different technology than I'm used to. The evolution of Xmas. I no longer have to build a playhouse or a train set, now I have to set up Apple Family Shar… twitter.com/i/web/status/1…4 days ago. — Sexist Cinema; The Female as an Object of Sexual Desire -“The unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” This is how Laura Mulvey begins her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'; a definitive piece in which she examines the 'male gaze', the way in which women are viewed as sexual objects in what she perceived to be a male-orientated cinema. The ‘male gaze’ is the terminology used to depict the way in which the camera in films tends to look at the subject from a male perspective, thus objectifying the female form. The camera keeps cutting between the three businessmen and their looks of sexual anguish, and ‘Marina’ in the water; the camera clearly showing the viewpoint of the three businessmen.