

From Victims to Voices: Reassessing The “Women in Refrigerators” Trope in Superhero Comics Through a Feminist Lens

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ABSTRACT

Comic books have traditionally relied upon trauma as a central mechanism for constructing heroic identities. While personal loss frequently motivates both male and female characters, feminist critics have argued that women are disproportionately subjected to violence, death, and psychological suffering primarily to facilitate the emotional development of male protagonists. This narrative pattern was famously identified by comic book writer Gail Simone in her 1999 “Women in Refrigerators” project, which exposed the systematic victimization of female characters across mainstream superhero comics. This paper examines the Women in Refrigerators trope as a gendered storytelling convention within DC and Marvel Comics by analysing representative characters, including Alexandra DeWitt, Gwen Stacy, Supergirl, Jean Grey, Barbara Gordon, Starfire, and Nora Fries. Drawing upon feminist literary criticism, particularly Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of woman as the “Other” and Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze, the study explores how female suffering is repeatedly framed as meaningful only through its impact on male heroes. At the same time, the paper investigates contemporary shifts in superhero narratives that increasingly privilege female agency, autonomy, and subjectivity. Characters such as Barbara Gordon, Carol Danvers, Jessica Jones, and Batwoman demonstrate a gradual movement away from women functioning solely as narrative catalysts toward protagonists with independent emotional and heroic trajectories. The paper argues that while the Women in Refrigerators trope continues to influence superhero storytelling, contemporary comics increasingly challenge patriarchal narrative structures by foregrounding female resilience and self-definition. Ultimately, the study highlights the importance of re-evaluating gender representation in popular culture and advocates for storytelling that grants women the same narrative complexity traditionally reserved for male heroes.

Keywords: Women in Refrigerators, Feminism, Superhero Comics, Gender Representation, DC Comics, Marvel Comics, Female Agency, Narrative Theory, Popular Culture, Comic Studies

INTRODUCTION

Superhero comics have long depended upon tragedy as one of their most effective storytelling devices. The deaths of parents, lovers, mentors, and friends frequently become the defining experiences that transform ordinary individuals into extraordinary heroes. Batman emerges from the murder of his parents, Spider-Man embraces responsibility following Uncle Ben’s death, and Superman’s moral identity is deeply connected to loss and sacrifice. Tragedy, therefore, occupies a foundational place within superhero mythology.

However, feminist scholars have observed that although suffering affects characters of all genders, female characters are disproportionately positioned as victims whose primary narrative purpose is to facilitate male emotional development. Their deaths, assaults, disappearances, and psychological trauma often function less as explorations of their own experiences than as catalysts for the growth of male protagonists.

This imbalance received widespread attention through Gail Simone’s Women in Refrigerators project in 1999. Simone compiled a list of female comic-book characters who had been murdered, crippled, depowered, sexually assaulted, or psychologically traumatized in ways that primarily advanced male narratives. Rather than simply

criticizing isolated storylines, Simone questioned a recurring structural tendency within superhero comics to privilege male subjectivity while reducing female characters to narrative instruments.

This paper examines the Women in Refrigerators trope through selected examples from DC and Marvel Comics. Employing feminist literary criticism, particularly Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as the "Other" and Laura Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure and the male gaze, the paper investigates how female victimization has shaped superhero storytelling while also considering contemporary efforts to restore agency and narrative autonomy to women.

The Origin of the Women in Refrigerators Trope

The phrase Women in Refrigerators originates from one of the most controversial moments in DC Comics. In *Green Lantern* #54 (1994), Alexandra DeWitt, the girlfriend of Kyle Rayner, is murdered by the villain Major Force, who hides her body inside a refrigerator for Kyle to discover.

The brutality of the act is disturbing, but its narrative function is even more revealing. Alexandra is not killed because her own story reaches a meaningful conclusion. Rather, her death serves as the emotional trigger for Kyle Rayner's transformation into a more determined Green Lantern.

Her ambitions, emotions, and individuality become secondary to the psychological development of the male protagonist. Alexandra's death illustrates what Simone identified as a broader cultural pattern: women frequently exist within superhero narratives not as independent subjects but as emotional sacrifices that motivate male heroism.

The enduring significance of Alexandra DeWitt's death lies in its transformation into a critical vocabulary that continues to shape feminist analyses of comic books today.

Female Victimization as Narrative Motivation

One of the clearest examples of this narrative structure appears in Marvel Comics through the death of Gwen Stacy in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #121.

Widely regarded as one of the most important moments in superhero history, Gwen's death profoundly reshapes Peter Parker's identity. Readers witness Peter's overwhelming guilt and renewed commitment to responsibility following her murder by the Green Goblin. Yet Gwen herself receives comparatively limited narrative attention.

Her future, ambitions, and personal identity disappear beneath Peter's emotional transformation. The tragedy becomes memorable not because of Gwen's lost life but because of its consequences for Spider-Man. This pattern exemplifies the Women in Refrigerators trope by positioning female suffering as meaningful primarily through male emotional experience.

Heroic Sacrifice and the Limits of Female Agency

Not every example of female victimization appears as passive suffering.

Supergirl's death during *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985) represents one of DC Comics' most celebrated heroic sacrifices. Kara Zor-El dies protecting the universe, displaying remarkable courage and selflessness. Nevertheless, much of the narrative attention quickly shifts toward Superman's grief.

While Kara's actions save countless lives, subsequent storytelling often emphasizes the emotional consequences of her absence rather than the significance of her own heroism. This demonstrates how even narratives centred upon female bravery can ultimately reinforce male emotional centrality. Heroic sacrifice, therefore, does not necessarily escape patriarchal narrative structures.

Power without Narrative Autonomy: Jean Grey

Jean Grey presents a particularly interesting challenge to the Women in Refrigerators framework. Unlike Alexandra DeWitt or Gwen Stacy, Jean is among Marvel's most powerful superheroes. Her transformation into the Phoenix and later the Dark Phoenix grants her extraordinary cosmic abilities. Yet despite possessing immense power, Jean repeatedly dies, resurrects, and sacrifices herself across decades of X-Men continuity.

The Dark Phoenix Saga culminates in Jean's death, producing immense emotional devastation for Cyclops, Wolverine, Professor Xavier, and the wider X-Men. Although Jean exercises agency in choosing sacrifice, her death repeatedly functions as emotional fuel for male narratives. Her story demonstrates that female power alone does not necessarily prevent patriarchal narrative framing.

Barbara Gordon: From Victim to Survivor

Barbara Gordon represents one of the most significant examples of resistance to the Women in Refrigerators trope. In Alan Moore's *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988), the Joker shoots Barbara Gordon, leaving her permanently paralysed. The attack primarily serves to psychologically torture Commissioner Gordon and challenge Batman.

Initially, Barbara appears to embody the familiar trope of female victimization. However, later writers fundamentally transformed her narrative role. Rather than disappearing from continuity, Barbara reinvented herself as Oracle, becoming one of the DC Universe's greatest strategists, information specialists, and leaders.

Oracle demonstrates that disability does not erase heroism. Instead of remaining defined by trauma, Barbara gains intellectual authority, leadership, and independent narrative significance. Her evolution marks an important turning point in feminist comic-book history.

Invisible Women: Starfire and Nora Fries

Not all manifestations of the trope involve spectacular acts of violence.

Characters such as Starfire and Nora Fries reveal more subtle forms of narrative marginalisation. Starfire's history includes enslavement, torture, imprisonment, and sexual exploitation. Although these experiences contribute to her emotional resilience, they also reveal how female characters frequently acquire narrative depth through repeated suffering.

Nora Fries occupies an even more limited position. Throughout much of Batman mythology, Nora exists primarily as the dying wife whose illness motivates Victor Fries to become Mr. Freeze. Her character possesses little independent identity outside her husband's emotional journey. Rather than existing as a fully realised individual, Nora functions symbolically as an object of male grief.

Feminist Readings of the Trope

The persistence of the Women in Refrigerators trope reflects broader patriarchal assumptions embedded within popular culture.

Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex* that women have historically been constructed as "the Other." Rather than existing as autonomous subjects, they are defined through their relationships to men.

The Women in Refrigerators trope reflects precisely this dynamic. Female characters frequently gain narrative importance only through their effects upon male protagonists. Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze further deepens this analysis. Although Mulvey originally examined cinema, her observations remain relevant to superhero comics.

Women frequently exist within visual narratives as objects of spectacle rather than active agents. Within comics, this objectification extends beyond visual representation to narrative structure itself. Female pain becomes another spectacle consumed by readers while simultaneously legitimising male heroism.

Beyond Victimhood: Contemporary Transformations

Recent decades have witnessed significant changes in superhero storytelling. The increasing presence of women writers, editors, artists, and diverse readerships has encouraged more nuanced portrayals of female superheroes. Characters such as Barbara Gordon, Carol Danvers (Captain Marvel), Jessica Jones, Batwoman, Kamala Khan (Ms. Marvel), and the members of Birds of Prey increasingly occupy narratives centred upon their own experiences rather than functioning merely as supporting characters.

These stories emphasise resilience, recovery, leadership, friendship, trauma, healing, and self-discovery. Rather than existing solely as victims, women become heroes whose emotional journeys possess intrinsic narrative value. Barbara Gordon's transition into Oracle remains one of the earliest examples of this transformation, while Jessica Jones demonstrates how trauma can be explored without reducing female identity to victimhood alone. Such developments suggest that superhero comics are gradually moving beyond patriarchal storytelling conventions.

CONCLUSION

The Women in Refrigerators trope remains one of the most influential critical frameworks for examining gender representation in superhero comics. Gail Simone's intervention exposed a recurring narrative pattern in which female characters are disproportionately subjected to violence, death, and psychological trauma primarily to facilitate the emotional development of male heroes. Characters such as Alexandra DeWitt, Gwen Stacy, Jean Grey, Supergirl, Starfire, and Nora Fries illustrate how women's suffering has frequently been positioned as meaningful only through its consequences for male protagonists. Feminist theories proposed by Simone de Beauvoir and Laura Mulvey reveal that this pattern reflects broader patriarchal structures in which women are constructed as the "Other" or as objects of narrative and visual consumption rather than as autonomous subjects.

At the same time, contemporary superhero comics demonstrate encouraging shifts in gender representation. The emergence of characters like Barbara Gordon as Oracle, alongside female-led narratives featuring Carol Danvers, Jessica Jones, Batwoman, Kamala Khan, and the *Birds of Prey*, signals a movement toward stories that prioritise women's agency, resilience, and subjectivity. These narratives challenge the assumption that female characters exist merely to motivate male heroes and instead position them as protagonists whose experiences possess independent narrative significance.

Although traces of the Women in Refrigerators trope continue to appear in mainstream superhero comics, the increasing emphasis on female autonomy suggests that the genre is gradually embracing more equitable forms of storytelling. The challenge for contemporary creators is not simply to avoid depicting female suffering but to ensure that women are granted the same complexity, emotional depth, and heroic potential that have historically defined male superheroes. In doing so, superhero comics can evolve into more inclusive narratives that reflect diverse experiences while enriching the possibilities of the genre itself.

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