

SDSU CENTER FOR COMICS STUDIES

The Sketchbook

for Teaching Comics and Social Justice

LESSON PLAN FOR:

“Wonder Woman #1” (Summer 1942)



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Why This Comic for Social Justice?



"Wonder Woman #1" (Summer 1942)

Wonder Woman is probably the comic character most associated with the feminist movement; she was born from first-wave feminism and she inspired second-wave feminists such as Gloria Steinem in their fight for equality. The fact that Diana, Wonder Woman, is an Amazon, from the ancient Greek tribe of Amazon warrior women, is part of her appeal. Ancient Greek authors tell us that the Amazons challenged patriarchy, lived without men, and were the equivalent of men. Whereas the Amazon warrior women originated in ancient Greek literature, their appearance in "Wonder Woman" brought their story to a broad, popular audience.

Though the Amazons were usually defeated and killed in ancient Greek lore, in this "Wonder Woman #1" comic the story is altered. The Amazons escape from their Greek captors, Hercules and his men, thus breaking free (literally) from the chains of enslavement to men. The comic thus challenges notions of patriarchy. The fact that the Amazons live apart from men on Paradise Island after gaining their freedom is, also, in a sense, queer.

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The Amazon Diana, Wonder Woman, chose ultimately to leave Paradise Island to live in the "world of men," but in so doing challenged the gender norms of the 1940s by fighting criminals, flying a plane, serving in the army, befriending smart young women college students, and embodying the kinds of change that first-wave feminists sought.



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About the Comic



Summary of "Wonder Woman #1"

"Wonder Woman #1" begins with Diana bringing Steve Trevor to a hospital in Washington, D.C. after he had been wounded when he crashed his plane on Paradise Island, a story which had been told in "All Star Comics #8." As she is leaving the hospital, Wonder Woman drops a parchment scroll which tells the story of the Amazons in ancient Greek. One Dr. Hellas from the Smithsonian Institute translates the script, which tells the reader that earth is ruled by rival gods, Ares, the god of war, and Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Men, following Ares (also called Mars), use their swords to plunder and wreak chaos upon the earth. In their violence, men enslave women, but Aphrodite creates a new "race of super women" to challenge these men, whom she calls Amazons. She gives their queen, Hippolyte, a magic girdle, which, as long as it is worn, makes the Amazons invincible. These super women thus defeat all men who attack them, and create a magnificent city, Amazonia. But, ignoring Aphrodite's command, Hippolyte allows herself to be seduced by Hercules, and gives him her magic girdle in a moment of weakness. Hercules and his men then enslave the Amazons as they had done with other women. Aphrodite, however, ultimately takes pity on the Amazons and allows Hippolyte to regain her girdle.

The Amazons escape to Paradise Island, where they can live without men and the perils of patriarchy that men bring to the lives of women. The "history" of the Amazons is thus an allegory of patriarchy and a moral lesson to women to beware of the evils of men. Despite having escaped the ills of patriarchy, Hippolyte longs for a child, and so Aphrodite breathes life into a statue of a girl who becomes Diana, Wonder Woman. When Steve Trevor crashes his plane off the coast of Paradise Island, Diana falls in love with him and escorts him back to Washington, D.C., as commanded by Aphrodite. Thus she renounces her eternal life as an Amazon, and goes to "the warring world of men" to aid Steve and fight for freedom in the face of World War II Nazi oppression.

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About the Creators



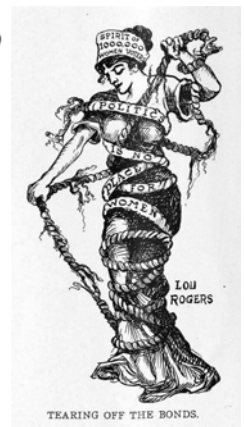
William Moulton Marston

The original author of “Wonder Woman,” William Moulton Marston was a psychologist who used the “Wonder Woman” comics to portray his own very unique ideas about men and women. Marston was an essentialist, like others of his time, who believed that men and women were quite different. Men, being belligerent, were not capable of ruling the world amicably, but women, essentially loving creatures, would make better rulers. Marston illustrated his ideas on the pages of “Wonder Woman.” Diana is a strong woman who is capable of fighting the worst of men — criminals and Nazis — but she does so through peaceful means by capturing and reforming her foes rather than killing them. Marston lived in a polyamorous relationship with three women, who probably provided him with much assistance in creating and writing “Wonder Woman,” although they received no official credit for their efforts. (They certainly did provide him with inspiration.)

Harry G. Peter

The original artist of “Wonder Woman,” Harry G. Peter had worked with Lou Rogers, one of the great women artists of the suffragist movement. His artwork seemingly took inspiration from Rogers, in particular his drawings of women (particularly Wonder Woman) breaking free from chains. Both Marston and Peter seem to have been heavily influenced by the messaging and imagery of the suffragist and larger first-wave feminist movements.

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[Image credits: Above: Photo of William Moulton Marston and drawing by Harry G. Peter; Middle left: drawing by Harry G. Peter from “Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics” *The American Scholar*, Volume 13, No. 1, Winter 1943/44, published by The Phi Beta Kappa Society; Middle right: drawing by Lou Rogers.]



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Discussion Questions



Discussion Questions for "Wonder Woman #1"

1. How is the history of the Amazons revealed in the comic?
2. How does the comic portray essentialist ideas of gender, particularly in the dialogue between Ares the god of war and Aphrodite the goddess of love?
3. How and why does Aphrodite create the Amazons? How were women treated by men before their creation? How does this comic function as a critique of patriarchy?
4. What is the significance of Hippolyte's girdle, and how does Hercules take it? How does this tale of woe function as a warning to all women?
5. Why does Aphrodite insist that the Amazons must continue to wear the wrist bands of the chains, even after she breaks the Amazons' chains off?
6. How does the artist complement the dialogue with depictions? In the frame where Hippolyte retrieves her girdle from Hercules, how does the artist use size to represent the difference between the two characters? Why does he make Hercules so large, even larger than he was in earlier panels?
7. Given the publication date of 1942, how is the Amazon society depicted as futuristic/advanced?
8. When Steve Trevor recovers, he expresses disbelief that the beautiful Diana is the scientist who saved his life. How are Steve's comments sexist? How does Diana defy traditional 1940s stereotypes of women?
9. The author and artists of "Wonder Woman" were both criticized in their day for objectifying women's bodies. Would you agree with this criticism? Why or why not?
10. How is this comic patriotic? How are the war efforts of the Americans understood by Aphrodite? How are good and evil differentiated?

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Activities and Assignments



Activity #1

Break students into small groups or pairs. Have one set of groups list five ways in which the comic portrays patriarchal attitudes and have the other groups list five ways in which the comic portrays a feminist message. Bring the entire class together afterwards to compare their observations.

Activity #2

Assign a term paper in which students compare “Wonder Woman #1” to later editions of “Wonder Woman” and/or the “Wonder Woman” film (2017). Have students answer one of the following prompts:

- Despite the violence and enslavement of women depicted in “Wonder Woman #1,” is it less violent than later conceptions? Are bloodshed and/or death depicted in “Wonder Woman #1” (1942)? What might diachronic changes in this portrayal tell us about the history of comic representations and/or societal attitudes towards violence?
- Does the feminist message found in “Wonder Woman #1” continue in later renditions of the comic, the TV show, and/or the 2017 “Wonder Woman” film? If so, how does it change?

Activity #3

Compare and contrast the story of the Amazons in “Wonder Woman #1” (1942) to the ancient Greek texts of Lysias (2.4-5, available at Perseus Digital Library) and Herodotus (4.110-119, available at Perseus Digital Library). Write a response paper indicating how the story is both similar to and different from each of these texts. What is the ultimate outcome of “Wonder Woman #1” (1942) versus Lysias and/or Herodotus? Does “Wonder Woman #1” give the Amazon legend a feminist twist when compared to one or both of these ancient legends?

Activity #4

Break the class up into small groups, ideally of mixed gender makeup. Ask the students to discuss reasons why women might wish to escape from the patriarchal “world of men” and form their own society. What kinds of advantages would this bring to women? What kinds of disadvantages might women avoid? Reconvene the class and ask each group to present one of the reasons they’ve listed, and/or one of the advantages.

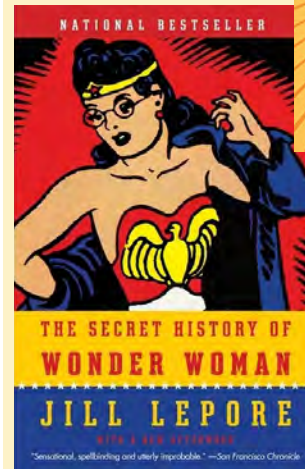
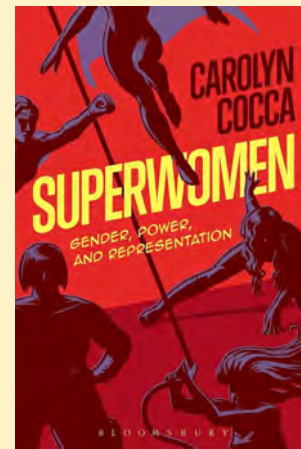
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Further Reading



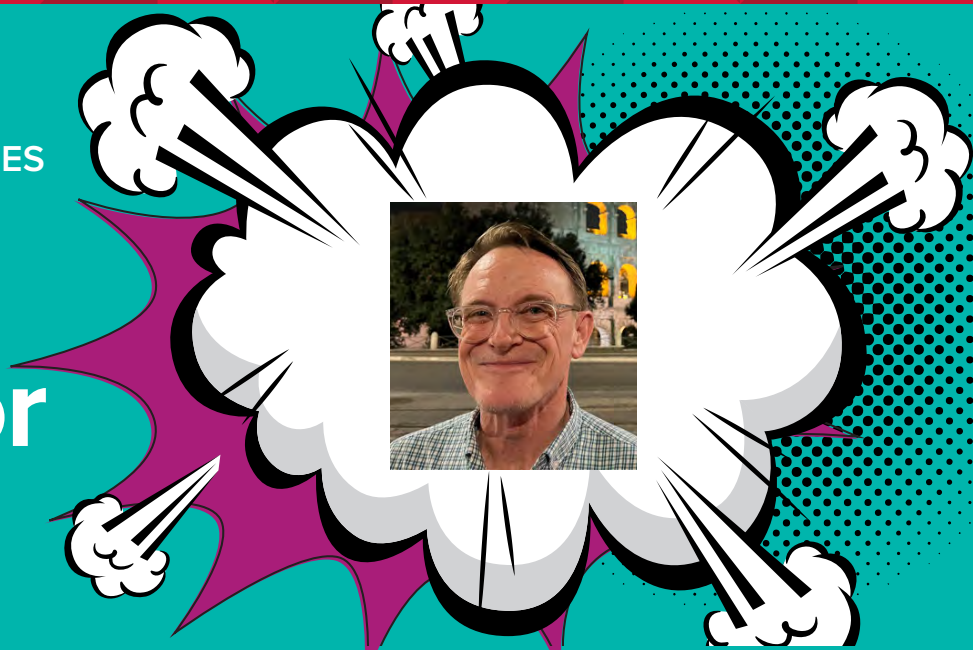
Additional Reading and Research

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About the Educator



Walter Duvall Penrose, Jr. is an Associate Professor of History at San Diego State University, specializing in ancient history and its later reception.

Dr. Penrose received his Ph.D. from the City University of New York Graduate Center. He is the author of “Postcolonial Amazons: Female Masculinity and Courage in Ancient Greek and Sanskrit Literature” (Oxford 2016).

Penrose's research and teaching interests include the histories of gender, sexuality, and disability. He has published on issues ranging from the poet Sappho to the reception of the Amazons in “Wonder Woman.” He also teaches a course entitled Amazons and Wonder Woman that focuses on the history of feminism.

