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Black Widow: Avenger of Feminism

Elizabeth G. Michalenko
University of Dayton

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Writing Process

The purpose of the assignment was to construct a well-researched argument regarding a socially different superhero and their role in society. The argument needed to address the super's social difference, as well as how that social difference defines the super's role. Through class brainstorming sessions and individual research, I determined that emerging gender issues in American society and culture would provide the impetus for my investigation. I searched for the quintessential female hero and found Black Widow from the Marvel universe. Black Widow defies the stereotypes of women and superheroes by living within the constraints of both worlds without succumbing to either. To create a complete profile of Black Widow, I researched the character's background and appearances in both the Marvel comic series and the film franchise. Placing Black Widow in the context of her society and today's modern society required research on the typical role of female superheroes and how audiences view such heroes. Scholarly sources and popular sources provided the foundations of my research. I refined the argument and revised the paper at the suggestion of peers and my professor.

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The Hulk, Thor, Iron Man, Captain America, and Hawkeye are the mighty male members of an elite fighting group in the Marvel universe whose films have dominated box offices. Individually, some of these men have their own films, focusing on their personal lives and stories: one for Hulk, three for Iron Man, two for Thor (with one more on the way), and two for Captain America (with a third in production). But what about Hawkeye and, even more importantly, his partner in crime-fighting Black Widow? Where is her movie and extensive backstory to make her character all the more intriguing and appealing to viewers? Despite the rise in popularity of the Marvel franchises, the world of Marvel still seems to lack the feminine touch, a film focusing on the empowering story of a strong female heroine. And with the recent success from *The Avengers* films, Black Widow seems an ideal candidate for such a movie. Marvel's inability to capitalize on this burst of popularity has incited criticism in the media. The apparent lack of feminism in such a testosterone-charged fictional universe has been criticized by viewers, and even parodied by the popular *Saturday Night Live* series. Black Widow's femininity and overall feminine power arises from the contrast between her and the male heroes surrounding her. This distinct difference between Black Widow and the rest of her fighting teammates throughout her history sets her up as a seductive spy in the Marvel world and a strong feminine role model in modern society.

The Black Widow known to audiences today is Natasha Romanoff, portrayed by actress Scarlett Johansson in films from *The Avengers* franchise. However, this is not the first appearance for the seductive spy in the Marvel universe. The character Black Widow first appeared in Marvel comics in 1964 as the superhero alias of Russian-born Natasha Romanova. Like most supers, Natasha's story begins with trauma, specifically her parents' deaths. From there, she is recruited by Soviet intelligence, and gains admission to the Red Room Academy; home of the Black Widow Program ("Black Widow"). Described as "a team of elite female sleeper agents," the Black Widow Program transforms Natasha into a resourceful and violent assassin, sporting impressive fighting skills and the willingness to do whatever it takes to complete a mission ("Black Widow").

After officially earning the title of Black Widow, Natasha becomes a sort of assassin-for-hire, working with Russian and American agencies alike. In true black widow spider fashion, she begins and quickly ends multiple relationships with superheroes like Iron Man, Hercules, Daredevil, and Captain America (“Black Widow”). Her promiscuity and multitude of failed relationships not only reflect the origin of her name, but also reveal the true nature of her character in the world of



*Figure 1
Black Widow comic
drawing*



*Figure 2
Black Widow from The
Avengers*

Marvel comics. As we learn from Brinkman, the society in which superheroes exist (which is not exclusive to Marvel characters) generates female heroes in cookie-cutter fashion; their roles and overall reason for existence are incredibly predictable. More often than not, women cannot be presented as strong and self-reliant without also becoming a sexualized object of attention (Brinkman 434). Sexualizing female heroes in this way encourages “looking sexy as a way of gaining power” (Brinkman 434). Female protagonists in superhero comics or films often portray this stereotype. As shown in the figures below, the Black Widow character in both the comic series and films dresses in tight, black leather, a clear nod to what Julie O’Reilly calls an appeal to “men’s sexual domination fantasies” (274). Tight leather, while probably not the most comfortable or efficient choice of fighting clothing, does provide much visual appeal, as opposed to an armored women bearing a bulky shield and powerful weapon. In this way, Black Widow appeals to the Marvel society that seems to favor a physically strong yet visually feminine appeal in their female supers.

While societal standards within Marvel societies call for sexualized heroines that, in Black Widow's case, use promiscuity to their advantage, further obstacles prevent female heroes from receiving as much recognition and power as their male counterparts. In most superhero stories, one does not simply decide to become a defender of justice. Heroes are driven to this line of business by some traumatic event or higher calling. For Superman, it is the discovery of his alien origin and his inhuman powers. So, Clark Kent dons a red cape and declares himself Superman, defender of justice. Female heroes do not seem to have it that easy. Natasha Romanova's transition into the role of Black Widow was not nearly as simple. She attended a prestigious Soviet assassin training academy where she forced to undergo intense preparation and even sterilization before becoming the fearsome Black Widow (Rosenberg). Recognition of her as a true heroine did not come as easily as it did for Superman's heroism. In fact, female superheroes often have to defend their abilities or prove themselves in some sort of trial before becoming official heroes in their societies (O'Reilly 273). Natasha's rise to heroism resulted from her training at the hands of the Red Room Academy, an elite academy whose sole purpose is to churn out graduates with advanced skills ("Black Widow"). With so many skilled agents trained and prepared for action, Natasha, similar to other female supers, would be considered easily replaceable in her role as Black Widow (O'Reilly 280). Yet the audience is never introduced to any other graduate of the Black Widow Program. One can assume that the reason for the resiliency and lasting appeal of her character is that she at some point proved herself to be the best of the best, and therefore this warrants her greater attention and a lasting appearance in the Marvel franchise. This idea of proving one's abilities to remain superior seems to be a key staple for heroines of any type that does not apply to similar male heroes; women must prove themselves time and time again before finding the same heroic recognition as men.

In gaining heroic recognition, Black Widow demonstrates an ability in standing out among her peers. She is rarely the damsel in distress, and instead assumes the role of the leading woman. In recent popular culture, Marvel films like *The Avengers* and *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* present a modern reboot of the Avengers fighting group and, in turn, a reboot of the typical female superhero. Black Widow appears in these films, played by Scarlett Johansson, and is presented in a new light. The Black Widow of Marvel comics lives a life of wavering loyalties and inconsistent romantic interludes (“Black Widow”). While implying her past as a top agent who sleeps around, recent films present her in as a potential role model for viewers. Both the original and new Black Widows fill the role of seductive female in the male-driven society created by Marvel. But in the society of viewers, the newer Black Widow provides something else: an opportunity to explore “what it means to both a woman and a[n] action hero” (Rosenberg). In a society with a shocking lack of women in lead roles, Black Widow/Natasha Romanoff in *The Avengers* seems to take control of pretty much any situation, becoming the central character and protagonist (Brinkman 435).

Black Widow’s first reappearance occurred in *Iron Man 2* in 2010, followed by her role in *The Avengers* in 2012. For viewers that had not seen *Iron Man*, in which her character was first presented, one of the opening scenes of *The Avengers* was the audience’s first introduction to Natasha Romanoff and her skills as Black Widow. The scene, shown below in figure 3, opens with Natasha being tied to a chair, while a man in a Russian military uniform threatens her. At first (seemingly) frightened, Natasha allows the man to feel as though he is intimidating her and



Figure 3
Interrogation scene in *The Avengers*

actually succeeding. By this point in the scene, Black Widow appears as any other damsel in distress. When the man receives a phone call asking for the bound Natasha, he hands it over, only for her to be called in to work. She responds somewhat annoyed with, “I’m working,” a comical response when one notices she is bound, incapacitated, and outnumbered, followed by, “I’m in the middle of an interrogation, and this moron is giving me everything.” In just a few seconds of dialogue, Black Widow, in her current state of helplessness and fright, assumes control of the situation and immediately switches from the damsel in distress to the intelligent strong agent in the eyes of the audience, thus fighting the idea that being female means submitting oneself to others (O’Reilly 280). Thus, we start to see that the Black Widow featured in recent films, while resembling the original Black Widow character, tends to feature different aspects of the character. As opposed to the original Black Widow, the recent Natasha Romanoff is generally viewed by the audience as a strong feminine role model, an example of the delicate mix of strength and beauty.

Despite the apparent progress in the range of plots for female characters, Black Widow as presented in *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* tends to fall back into the stereotype of the typical female heroine. Even in *The Avengers*, when the captured Loki attempts to get under Natasha’s skin, he appeals to what many deem two commonly sensitive fields for women: loyalty and emotion. Natasha replies to Loki’s prodding about her relationship with Hawkeye, Clint Barton, saying, “love is for children.” While this could suggest that Natasha wishes to be a strong individual woman, on the other hand, Natasha’s resistance to a committed relationship with the only person that seems to truly know her well leaves some viewers questioning her. Her inability to follow through with what appears in *The Avengers* to be an already strong friendship appears as an unwillingness to be tied down, and a way of giving in to her promiscuous history.

However, as is revealed in *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*, this is not the case. Scenes presenting the domestic lives of Clint and Natasha also unveil a different aspect of their relationship. When Natasha visits Clint's home and reveals somewhat of a friendship with his wife, Laura, the audience sees them for what they truly are: "not soulmates in denial but the best of friends" (Rosenberg). Rarely does a film present a friendship between a man and a woman that doesn't lead to some sort of romance. In this way, Natasha's strong friendship with Clint fights against the standard that men and women that work in close proximity are bound to be lovers. So, while most films show a female protagonist struggling between a duty and a romance, *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* presents something that fights the norm and sets a positive role model: a successful woman who is nothing more than best friends with a man.

The Black Widow of Marvel comics jumps from relationship to relationship as her missions demand it. Notoriously seductive, Natasha uses her feminine wiles to her advantage when she needs something from a man. Whether the intention is stealing a device from Tony Stark or tricking Hawkeye into working with her instead of against her ("Black Widow"), Natasha's reputation for romancing and manipulating is placed at odds with her sudden romance with Bruce Banner in *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*. The character of Black Widow as presented in the film does not sleep around as her history suggests. Instead, she seems reluctant to develop a serious relationship. For this reason, her budding romance with Bruce Banner, despite his tendency to transform into a scary green monster, appears to be less related to her profession and more to her actual love-life. Natasha places legitimate trust in the ordinary and extraordinary sides of Bruce (Rosenberg). Granted, trusting the violent green monster he becomes requires much more courage and loyalty. Of all the possible relationships she could have, with the handsome and strong Steve Rogers or the exotic and godly Thor, she chooses Bruce, who, aside

from his abilities as the Hulk, is indeed quite ordinary. Natasha's choice to not take advantage of her influence over men but instead to find and develop a sincere relationship presents a model for young women that the Black Widow comics fail to produce. As evidenced by *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Natasha does not sleep around and develop false relationships. She waits for what she knows will be a lasting one.

In the world of Marvel comics and films, Black Widow's reputation is one of both strength and seduction. As the only female member of the Avengers, Natasha Romanoff brings a feminine touch to plots that rely on the overall masculinity of the main characters. Marvel's recent attempt to produce a stronger story line for the only female protagonist resulted in a difficult romance in *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*. The dangerously volatile Hulk and delicately strong Black Widow develop a romance that many find to be a stereotypical storyline for female characters. Despite the romance on screen, Black Widow's overall strength and cunning makes her character admirable and interesting to viewers. While Black Widow from the comics lives a life of promiscuity and espionage, the Black Widow from the films seems to be a role model for women. Natasha Romanoff is clever, skilled, and a budding romantic. Her character is, in a sense, attempting to "have it all," and appears to be succeeding with a successful career and a loving relationship. The contrast drawn between Natasha and the rest of her teammates on the Avengers highlights her feminine qualities and roles as the seductive spy and strong feminist. The evolution of the Black Widow character, in a sense, represents the changing expectations from audiences. No longer are female supers intended to be nothing more than examples of promiscuity and eye candy. The new Natasha Romanoff presents a distinctly new kind of heroine, one whose personal life could be set as a model for women everywhere.

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