

Women's Portrayals in the Comic Books
(A Visual Grammar of the Heroines' Portrayals in the Selected
Comic Books Published by *Dc Comics* and *Marvel*)

Sani Satya Pratiwi*

(E-mail: sanisatyapратиwi@gmail.com/ Mobile Phone: 089657312220)

* Sani graduated in April 2013 from Linguistics Major at English Language and Literature Study Program, Indonesia University of Education, Bandung

ABSTRACT

This paper entitled “Women’s Portrayals in the Comic Books (A Visual Grammar of the Heroines’ Portrayals in the Selected Comic Books Published by *DC Comics* and *Marvel*)” is aimed at investigating how women, especially heroines are portrayed in the comic books and what the portrayals signify. The study is a qualitative study using the visual grammar theory proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and the systemic functional linguistics theory proposed by Halliday (2004). The data are in the form of four online comics published by *DC Comics* and *Marvel*. The study finds that heroines are portrayed in negative and positive ways. The negative ways portray the heroines as sex symbols, the ones who sexually stimulate men’s attention in their appearance, greedy, fragile (especially when the heroines play their character as alter ego). While, the positive ways portray the heroines as strong, brave, smart and impressive ones. The findings also show that no matter how strong the heroines, they are still in the subjection.

Keywords: *Portrayal, Comic Books, Heroines, Visual Grammar*

INTRODUCTION

Oxford Dictionary (2008:435) mentions that “stereotype (n) is fixed idea of what somebody or something is like.” While portrayal (n) and portray (v) have more meanings: “1) make somebody or something in a picture; describe somebody or something in a piece of writing, 2) describe or show somebody or something in a particular way, 3) act a particular role in a film or play” (Oxford Dictionary 2008:342). In relation to this, Stuart Hall (1997:1) defines representation as “the production of meaning through language”.

Leaning on these, portrayal and representation can be understood to relate to how somebody or something is described. Representation can appear in both informational text such as newspapers and literary text such novels and dramas. For example how Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, written by Shakespeare, is portrayed as a woman

who has sexual lust of power which gives her the image of having strong and raw power (Daniel, 2011). Representations or portrayals can also be found in comic book.

Thus, this study focuses on the portrayals of the heroines and their alter egos in the comic books published by *Marvel* and *DC Comics* from 2012 and aims at examining and investigating the portrayals of the heroines and their alter egos. A qualitative descriptive method has been used for this study.

In analyzing the data, the theory of reading images (van Leeuwen, 2006) has been applied as the primary framework. Reading images itself is a framework that focuses on the structures or ‘grammar’ of visual design – colors perspective, framing and composition. (Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, 2006). The visual characteristics used to analyze visual texts are pose, body, clothes coverage, cloth types, cloth

colors, size of frame, margin, narrative processes and salience. While systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 2004), has been applied as the secondary framework. The verbal characteristics used to analyze the verbal texts are the processes of the verbal texts and the circumstances of the texts.

FINDINGS

Based on the analysis, the heroines and their alter egos are portrayed through two ways: visual texts and verbal texts. Based on the visual texts analysis, the study shows that the heroines and their alter ego are portrayed as erotic, semi-pornographic, mysterious, tragic, weak and strong women. While the verbal texts analysis shows that the heroines and their alter ego are portrayed as confident, smart, impressive, brave, sexy, fragile, humiliating and greedy women.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings show that visually, women are depicted as erotic figures. Their erotism is shown by their big breasts, butts, slender legs, tinny waists, the outline of their crotch. All the heroines in the comics also wear skintight bodysuits made of leather or spandex; the use of this cloth material is not only for easing them in moving but also for revealing every curve line on their body. Their erotism is also shown through the close shot, in which the viewers can identify every detail of the heroines' body. Leaning on these, it can be inferred that the visual representation of the heroines in the comics is intended to attract men's attention; the heroines are sexually stimulating in their appearance. However, the erotism is rarely revealed when the heroines play their alter ego. The alter ego of each heroine usually wears blazer, trousers, loose tops or other casual outfits. The erotism of the alter ego is only shown once in a scene where Jennifer Knight (Phantom Lady) changes her

superhero outfit. In the scene, every curve line of her body reveals.

As what has been mentioned on the previous section, the alter ego of each heroine has 'black' background of life; their lives full of tragedy. Their tragic lives are presented through the black heroine outfits since black is the color of night, mystery, mournful, etc. (Manthor, 2009). While, the outfits with soft colors are usually worn when the women play the character as the alter ego. This may infer that, their lives are more secure and calmer when they play their alter ego.

Overall, the findings show that when the women play their character as the heroines, they must have great power, they can defeat villains easily. When women play their character a heroine, the narrative process that is mostly used is the role of *reacter*. However, when the women play their character as the alter ego, they are more fragile, they can be oppressed by the villains even they need others'

help. The most narrative process used by the alter ego is the role of *phenomena*. While, the role of *actor* is mostly used to introduce the heroines or the alter ego and to show the beauty of the body of the heroines or the alter ego to the viewers. When the heroines or the alter ego play the role of actor, they are usually placed alone and in larger size of image.

Moreover, this study finds that Marvel features more women (heroines and their alter ego) as *phenomena*; the oppressed. Meanwhile, DC Comics features less women (heroines and their alter ego) as *phenomena*. Women who play the role of *phenomena* are usually weak and fragile. DC Comics features more women who play the role of *reacter* than Marvel. This may infer that DC Comics is the publisher that 'respects' women by more depicting them as *reacter*; the one who does a deed to others, the one who takes the control rather than depicting them as the oppressed. When women play the role

of *reacter*, they tend to be stronger than any other men.

However, no matter how powerful women depicted in the comic books, they are actually still in the subjection. The subjection is in the form of the erotism revealed in the comics, the skintight outfits they wear, etc. Those things blur the subjection. This also means that Sievers' research in 2003 is still valid until now. In her research, she finds that women are continue to be in the minority, they are also objectified visually by depicting them with large breasts, tiny waists, revealing outfits and uncomfortable poses.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

To sum up, heroines in comics are portrayed in two ways; negative and positive ways. The negative ways of portraying the heroines can be seen from how they become sex symbols, how they humiliate the villains and how greedy they are. While the positive ways can be seen from how

brave and impressive they are in doing something, such as doing their job in the office or fighting the villain.

Further study can enlarge the scope of the study by using different objects such as printed comic books, cartoon advertisements or cartoon films that contain women's portrayals. The analysis of the data can be done by using different tools such as visual grammar and critical discourse analysis. Men's portrayals are also interesting to investigate. The data can be taken from men's supplement ads or men superhero comic books. The tools used can be visual grammar and systemic functional linguistics. All the future studies are expected to present more thorough understanding of women's or men's portrayals in media.

REFERENCES

Halliday, M. (2004). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Leeuwen, G. K. (2006). *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. New York: Routledge.

Daniel, S. (2011). *Lady Macbeth Feminism*. Available online at <http://www.dsuh2012.hubpages.com>. Current as of August 2012.

Hall, Stuart. (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. India: Sage Publications.

Manthor. (2009). *The Meaning of Colors and Which Superheroes they Fit*. Available online at <http://forums.comicbookresources.com>. Current as of 5 May, 2012.