

Wonder Woman's Epic Introduction Is Undercut by a Perpetually Helpless Lois Lane

Eliana Dockterman - March 27, 2016

What Batman v Superman gets right and wrong with its female characters

Spoilers for Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice ahead

Wonder Woman is easily the highlight of Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice. When actress Gal Gadot finally shows up in Wonder Woman's outfit — a scene teased heavily in the trailer — audience members in my screening cheered. (It was, in fact, the only time they cheered throughout the film.) She outshines the boys, delighting in her own ability to kick bad-guy butt. It's a glorious moment for fans who have been waiting many years for a female superhero to get a worthy big screen treatment.

But for every Wonder Woman, there is a Lois Lane. Poor Lois. Like the many damsels in distress who have populated superhero movies before her, the character can't catch a break. She has to be saved by Superman four different times over the course of the film: once during the flashback to Man of Steel, once when she's captured by a terrorist group while doing her job, once when she's thrown off a building by Lex Luthor and once when she tries to help Superman by retrieving a weapon and winds up getting trapped in a collapsing building. Heck, even when Lois tries to help, she gets into trouble.

It's a typical female archetype we've seen in dozens of superhero movies from both Marvel and DC over the years. Fans, especially female fans who make up nearly



Henry Cavill and Amy Adams in Batman v Superman

half of comic book readers, are disheartened by the lack of powerful female figures with whom they can identify on screen. A little boy might come away from Spider-Man wanting to be Peter Parker, but who wants to be dangled from high heights like Mary Jane?

I fear Lois's perpetual damsel status will become a major plot point in the new Justice League franchise: Lois keeps getting into trouble and Superman, blinded by love, makes stupid decisions in order to save her. Lois says as much in the bathtub scene when she questions if Superman can really be a hero to the world when he'll abandon any mission to save Lois.

To be fair, Lois is an intrepid journalist who pursues stories about government-conspiracy theories, and actress Amy Adams has defended the character as a "powerful woman." But she's still a plot device. In 2014 I interviewed comic-book writer Kelly Sue DeConnick, and she pointed out that if your female character can be replaced by a sexy lamp, she's not a real character. Lois Lane comes dangerously close to sexy-lamp status.

And it's not just Lois — several other women in the film serve as convenient plot

points. Lex Luthor has a coy-looking assistant who is sacrificed halfway through the film. (The character's name is Mercy Graves, a fact I had to Google since she has maybe two lines in the film. Graves is a formidable bodyguard in the comic books, but we don't see that on screen.) Senator Finch (Holly Hunter) winds up being a Lex Luthor victim: her grandstanding can't match his cunning.

Superman's mother gets kidnapped by Luthor and spurs the final showdown between the Man of Steel and the Caped Crusader. And then of course it's their mothers who, in the most contrived plot twist of all, bring them together: Batman refrains from killing Superman once he finds out both their moms were named Martha. (Is this really enough for the Dark Knight to set aside his qualms about Man of Steel's dictatorial potential? Apparently so.) These women have no inner life, motivations or even

personalities. They merely propel the story of the men's lives forward.

I have high hopes for the Wonder Woman film next year. Though Zack Snyder should have given her more screen time, he did afford Diana Prince the perfect set up for her own spinoff. DC released a photo of Wonder Woman with her fellow Amazonians, including House of Cards star Robin Wright, and they look badass. Wonder Woman inspires the kind of excitement I have rarely felt for a superhero on screen before. And if DC's endeavors on the small screen with Supergirl are any indication, they know how to do a female superhero justice.

But I also hope that Snyder and DC don't feel comfortable relegating the rest of their female characters in this franchise — there are 11 films planned for the next five years — to boring and cliché roles just because they have one major female hero. One shouldn't be enough.

Discussion Questions:

On a separate piece of paper, please address the following questions. Make sure your answers are cohesive and complete. Feel free to spend time on answers that you feel strongly about and don't worry about answering every question.

Question 01—What is Eliana Dockterman ultimately saying about this film?

Question 02—What is *Batman v Superman* saying about women?

Question 03—Ultimately, what does Wonder Woman say about women?

Is she a positive or negative role model?

Is her costume adding to sexual objectification?

How would she change if she was depicted by a plus-sized actress?

What if Batman and Superman showed an equal amount of skin in their costumes?

Question 04—How do films for a female audience depict women vs their depictions in male-oriented films? Is it any better?

Question 05—What other films back up Kelly Sue DeConnick's "sexy lamp" theory? Explain.

Question 06—On balance, do the women have agency, or are they perpetually needing rescue?

Question 07—What needs to change in Hollywood and how do we change it?