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Sep 22nd 2011 By: [Laura Hudson](#)

## The Big Sexy Problem with Superheroines and Their 'Liberated Sexuality'

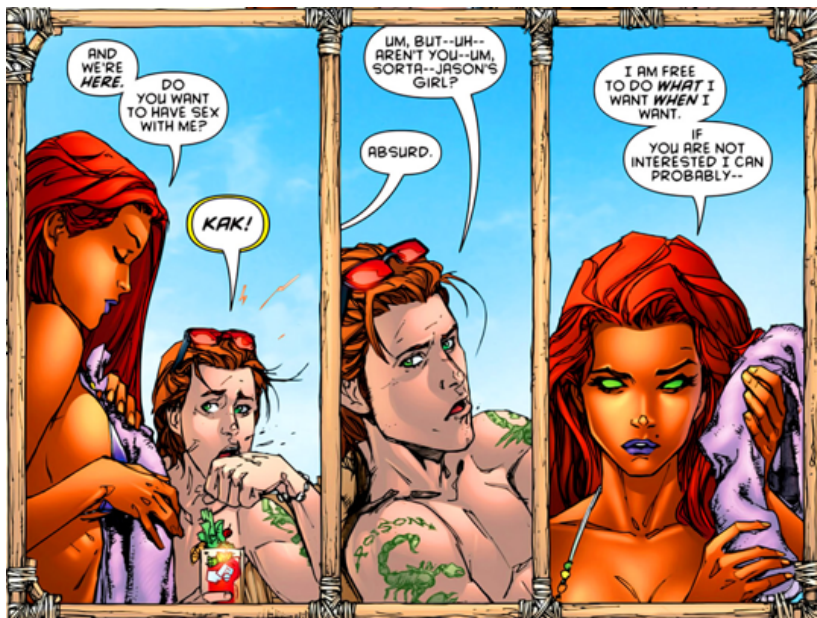
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2264



Red Hood and the Outlaws #1

Yesterday, two new comic books from the "New 52" relaunch of DC Comics provoked some online controversy: **Catwoman** and **Red Hood and the Outlaws**. They were controversial in particular because of the way they depicted women, notably with the aggressively fanfictiony on-panel sex between Batman and Catwoman, and Starfire's transformation into a promiscuous *tabula rasa* who can't even remember the names of the men she sleeps with, and seeks out emotionless sex with both of the two male main characters while they essentially high five about it.

Since pointing out my [issues with Starfire](#) yesterday, I have received numerous e-mails -- from men -- accusing me of slut-shaming. Since there are a lot of people who don't understand the sexual dynamics that are in play here both creatively and culturally, I'd like to dissect this a little bit and explain **why these scenes don't support sexually liberated women; they undermine them**, and why after nearly 20 years of reading superhero books, these may finally have been the comics that broke me.

I would like to say first and in the strongest possible terms that I absolutely support the right of women to embrace and act upon their sexual desires in whatever way seems right to them, within consensual boundaries. My sense of justice is *inflamed* by the double standard that tells us that every person a man



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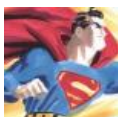
Parting Shot: A 7-Year-Old Girl Who Loves 'Teen Titans' Reacts Sadly to the New Starfire



The Morning After Catwoman #1' By Eric Canete [Art]



DC Comics On Starfire Controversy: 'Pay Attention To The Ratings'



Best Art Ever (This Week) - 10.14.11



There's a Lot of B\*tching About Catwoman in 'Arkham City'

sleeps with makes them more of a stud, and every person a woman sleeps with makes them a little less valuable and less respectable. I know this in particular because unlike all the guys who sent me angry messages last night defending the sexual honor of an imaginary character, that double standard is something I have had to live with and be judged by for my entire adult life.

And that is why books like *Catwoman* and *Red Hood* make me so goddamn angry.



No-Face

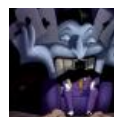
Let's start with *Catwoman*. The writer and artist have decided that out of all possible introductions to the character of Selina Kyle, the moment we're going to meet her is going to be the one where she happens to be half-dressed and sporting bright red lingerie. That is in fact all we see of her for two pages: shots of her breasts. Most problematically, we are shown her breasts and her body over and over for two pages, but NOT her face. No joke, we get a very clear and detailed shot of her butt in black latex before we ever see her face looks like. Can't you show us the playful or confident look in her eye as she puts on her sexy costume? Because without that it's impossible to connect with the character on any other level than a boner, and I'm afraid I don't have one of those.



Still haven't seen her face

Like I said, I'm on board with the hot ladies; part of what got me into comics back in the day was being a 12-year-old girl who looked at strong, beautiful characters like Rogue and Jean Grey and Storm and wanted to be like them in large part because they were so sexy and confident and had exciting romances. Those books managed to offer characters that I'm certain appealed to men as well, but always felt like people instead of window dressing. I have long maintained that to bring in more female readers, superhero comics don't even need to specifically target women as much as they need to not actively offend them. This is not an insanely hard thing to do, and yet here we are.

The money shot that most people have latched onto in *Catwoman*, however, is the one where Batman and Catwoman have sex on a rooftop. "What's wrong with Batman having sex?" You might ask. There's nothing wrong with Batman having sex. Or Catwoman, or Starfire, or any other hero. The problem isn't the plot point. If you're an adult, you've probably seen dozens if not hundreds of movies that included sex scenes. The mere fact that a piece of media depicts a sexual act doesn't tell you very much about how that scene is going



## Mark Hamill Retires From His Role as The Joker After 19 Years

There's a Lot of B\*tching About Catwoman in 'Arkham City'

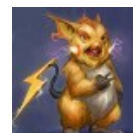
Mark Hamill Retires From His Role as The Joker After 19 Years

Warner Bros. Officially Greenlights White 'Akira' As More White 'Akira' Films Propagate [Video]



## The History of Captain America

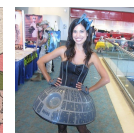
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## The 10 Best Comics of 2010

A countdown of the must-read books of the year.



to make you feel. You might be titillated, or bored, or grossed out, or any number of things. Your reaction depends not on the facts of what happens, but on the way it's presented. And while as with all aesthetic opinions your mileage may vary, this does not look sexy to me; it looks like a creepy fanfiction drawing.



Here's the question, though: Why? I know why Catwoman and Batman would have sex; there's nothing wrong with the idea. We saw him hook up with Talia in *Son of the Demon* and that was pretty cool. I mean literally, why is that last page a full-page splash of Batman actually penetrating Catwoman? Why do we need to see that? What does it accomplish or tell us about the characters that would have been lost if that page had been omitted?

The answer is nothing. They just wanted to see Catwoman and Batman bang on a roof. And that is the whole problem with this false notion of "sexually liberated" female characters: These aren't those women. They're how dudes want to imagine those women would be -- what *Wire* creator David Simon called writing "men with t\*ts." They read like men's voices coming out of women's faces. Or worse, they read like the straight girls who make out with each other at clubs, not because they enjoy making out with women but because they desperately want guys to pay attention to them.

This is not about these women wanting things; it's about men wanting to see them do things, and that takes something that really should be empowering -- the idea that women can own their sexuality -- and transforms it into yet another male fantasy. It takes away the actual power of the women and turns their "sexual liberation" into just another way for dudes to get off. And that is at least ten times as gross as regular cheesecake, minimum.

Here is what it looks like just before Starfire tries to initiate sex.

[Laura Hudson](#)

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Why is she contorting her body in that weird way? Who is she posing for, because it doesn't even seem to be Roy Harper? The answer, dear reader, is that she is posing for you. News flash: Starfire isn't being promiscuous because this comic wants to support progressive notions of gender roles. Starfire is being promiscuous so that you can look at pictures like this:



If you really want to support Starfire's "liberated sexuality" like she's somehow a person with real agency, what people should really be campaigning for is more half-clothed dudes in suggestive poses to get drawn around her, since I'm sure that's what she'd like to see. But people don't really want that, do they? Because it's not about what Starfire wants. It's about what straight male readers want. And they want to see Starfire with her clothes falling off. And hey, hey -- there's nothing wrong with that specifically, but let's be honest about what's happening and who we're serving (or not serving) and at whose expense. And let's be honest about the fact that this treatment happens almost exclusively to women, which is a huge part of what makes it so problematic.

Incidentally, while the Starfire here wants emotionless, casual sex with people whose names she can't remember, that's very much a departure from her previous incarnation, where she came from a culture that was primarily about love, not being available for joyless hookups with random dudes:





Conversely, if you would like to see an example of an extremely well-done superhero sex scene, check out the Spider-Man/Black Cat hookup from [Amazing Spider-Man Present Black Cat](#) #1 by Jen Van Meter and Javier Pulido, where Felicia is presented as a tough, sexy lady who knows what she wants sexually and unapologetically goes out to get it. Visually, the morning after is presented on a level playing field with Spider-Man hilariously hanging out in his boxers. Note: This is also a scene where the two superheroes have sex without knowing each other's real identities, and yet it couldn't feel more different from how that happens in *Catwoman*.



There's lots of room for these books and I welcome them, the same way I welcome [Empowered](#), which I think is particularly successful at having fun with cheesecake in a very self-aware way. It's good for comics to have well-executed sexy books just like it's good to have well-executed sci-fi comics and well-executed horror comics and good comics in any genre. The only reason there might be a problem with a sexed up superhero title like *Empowered* was if that was the way women were depicted *all the time*. And the problem is that in a lot superhero comics, it kind of is.

Below on the left, I submit to you one of the starkest visual differences between men and women in superhero comics. On the ground, we see how the editors and writers and artists have chosen to dress a male Lantern, and standing above him we see how they have chosen to dress a female Lantern. These characters didn't appear out of thin air one day; someone designed them to look the way they look, and designed it for a very specific reason. And those design choices shape the way that the universe treats women generally. And on a more personal level, it also plays a big role in **how DC Comics tells me they see people like me**. Because I know that institutionally, they don't treat men like that; we're never going to see a major hero like Hal Jordan in a costume like one on the right as imagined by Deviant Artist [Bionarri](#).



But the problem isn't Star Sapphire. Or Catwoman. Or Starfire. Or Dr. Light raping Sue Dibny on the Justice League satellite or that stupid rape backstory Kevin Smith gave Black Cat or the time Green Lantern's girlfriend got murdered and stuffed in a refrigerator. The problem is all of it together, and how it becomes so pervasive both narratively and visually that each of these things stops existing as an individual instance to be analyzed in a vacuum and becomes a pattern of behavior whose net effect is totally repellent to me. As an anomaly, maybe Starfire could be funny, the way the big-breasted, over-sexed Fritz (who even got her own porno comic, *Birdland*, which is pretty good if you're into that) is often funny in *Love and Rockets*, mostly because the series is already packed full of incredibly diverse, fully-realized female characters. But as the 5,000th example of a superhero comic presenting female sexuality in tone-deaf ways, it's just depressing.

In *Red Hood and the Outlaws*, this is DC Comics tells me a male hero looks like, and what a female hero looks like:



In *Catwoman*, this is what DC Comics tells me a male hero looks like, and what a female hero looks like:







This is not an anomaly. This is the primary message that I hear. And it is one that I only hear about the people who are like me -- the women -- and not the men.

And the problem is that when I look at these women, I would very much like to see confident ladies who enjoy sex and are having a fun sexy time. But what I see instead are women who give me the same impression as creepy dead-eyed porn stars mechanically mouthing "oh yeah, I want it." And that feeling of coerced sexual enthusiasm is the creepiest, saddest, most unerotic thing I can imagine. And if I were able to have a boner, seeing something like that would make me lose it every time.



Literally the first thing he says about her

When I read these comics and I see the way the female characters are presented, I don't see heroes I would want to be. I don't see people I would want to hang out with or look up to. I don't feel like the comics are talking to me; I feel like they're talking about me, the way both Jason Todd and Roy Harper talk about Starfire like two dudes high fiving over a mutual conquest (left).

I've heard people citing everything from Starfire's cultural background to her recent experiences with slavery(?) as reasons for her promiscuity, the same way I've heard that it is totes cool for the debut issue of *Voodoo*, the first black female character to get her own DC ongoing series, to open with her stripping on her knees while men throw money at her, because she has a previously established

history of being a stripper. But let's be honest -- they didn't make her a stripper because they really wanted to create a positive and well-rounded portrait of sex workers and how they exist in our culture. And you want to know how I know that? Because this is not what that looks like:



This is not the picture of that. And honestly I don't care if the final art next week reveals that she's reciting the Vagina Monologues or long excerpts from books by Gloria Steinem; it is not going to change the way looking at the image makes me -- or a lot of women -- feel, or the message it sends about how that comic regards ladies.

Female characters are only insatiable, barely-dressed aliens and strippers because someone decided to make them that way. It isn't a fact. It isn't an inviolable reality, especially in a comic book universe that has just been rebooted. In the end, what matters is what you choose to show people and how you show them, not the reasons you make up to justify it. Because this is comics, everybody. You can make up anything.

Most of all, what I keep coming back to is that superhero comics are nothing if not aspirational. They are full of heroes that inspire us to be better, to think more things are possible, to imagine a world where we can become something amazing. But this is what comics like this tell me about myself, as a lady: They tell me that I can be beautiful and powerful, but only if I wear as few clothes as possible. They tell me that I can have exciting adventures, as long as I have enormous breasts that I constantly contort to display to the people around me. They tell me I can be sexually adventurous and pursue my physical desires, as long as I do it in ways that feel inauthentic and contrived to appeal to men and kind of creep me out. When I look at these images, that is what I hear, and I don't think I even realized how much until this week.

In many ways, the constant barrage of this type of imagery (and characterization) is not unlike the sh\*tty neighborhood I used to live in where every time I walked down the street, random people I didn't know shouted obscene comments about my body and told me they wanted to have sex with me. And you know, maybe a lot of those guys thought they were complimenting me. Maybe they thought I had tried to look pretty that day and they were telling me I had succeeded in that goal. Maybe they thought we were having a frank and sexually liberated exchange of ideas. I'm willing to be really, really generous and believe that's where they were coming from. But in the end, it doesn't matter that they didn't know it was creepy; it doesn't matter that they "didn't get it," because every single day I lived there they made me feel like less of a person.

That is how I feel when I read these comics.

And I'm tired. I'm so, so tired of hearing those messages from comics because they aren't the dreams or the escapist fantasies or the aspirations that I want to have. They don't make me feel joyful or powerful or excited. They make me feel so goddamn sad that I want to cry, because I have devoted my entire life to comics, and when I read superhero books like these I realize that most of the time, they don't give a sh\*t about me.

I have been doing this for a long time, now. I have lived in the neighborhood of superhero comics for a long time. And frankly, if this is how they think it's ok to treat me when I walk down the street in a place that I thought belonged to me just as much as anyone else who lives here, then I'm not sure I want to live here anymore.

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### Jay Walker

Wow, this was a beautiful article, an intriguing read. I feel sorry for all the other men who make it through this article & still miss the point, posting disappointed (& disappointing), bashing comments about how allegedly repressed & out of touch with self they think you are.

11 hours ago

### 1 reply to Jay Walker's comment



### Jay Walker

The problem you address here is not just in comics; it's in porn, music, advertising & so many other places, making it seem very common place &, therefore, making it easy to mistakenly think that speaking against it is bashing confident women & the men who love them. Thanks for standing your ground & explaining why.

10 hours ago



### TRJGAN

The writer is not impugning Catwoman alone, nor any individual comic book series/writer/artist. Each individual portrayal is fine in a vacuum: "The problem is all of it together."

She is calling attention to the larger culture of comic books that makes the hypersexualized heroine—in speech, appearance, and behavior—commonplace. Like vicand1 said (who also uses such choice phrases as "his [the hero's] women" to further illustrate the writer's point), the idealized male hero "gets the girl." One of the primary roles of women in the genre as a whole (and not in Catwoman or Starfire or whatever else individually) is simply to elevate the men by being sexy around them.

Like she says, it's a "pattern" (in more than just comic books, it is easy to argue), not a single writer, that is the problem, and it's something we need to be aware of if we ever want to change it. Some people like vicand1 are at least already aware of it; I hope that enough people can also see the damage it does and the way it alienates women.

Personal anecdote: I watched the "Catwoman" short that came with the "Batman: Year One" Blu-Ray this weekend. My girlfriend and I are both Batman fans, and she was a little perturbed by Catwoman's striptease—with some pretty heavy-handed shots going on there—while I tried defending that Catwoman has always had a sexual element (which she uses against male opponents, though I didn't articulate that piece).

In retrospect, I remember how easy it is to dismiss each individual portrayal as harmless, but it's easier for me to do it as a man, and harder for my girlfriend, who really likes comic books but is bothered by things like this. This article helped me to understand better where my girlfriend was coming from when she objected to what I thought was humorous and no big deal

and no big deal.

14 hours ago

1 reply to TRJGAN's comment



**Andre Evans**

"She is calling attention to the larger culture of comic books that makes the hypersexualized heroine—in speech, appearance, and behavior—commonplace."  
Yes and in doing it she makes problematic and incorrect claims about at least one comic that amount to slut shaming. Hence a little argument is in order imo. I also don't really think comics are the incorrect place to explore those hypersexualized men and women.

This is an old argument, but here is the rub. Your never going to change the fact that people like looking at attractive people. kinda the definition of the word attractive... but we can sure make people feel guilty for it, and if we get bored we can attack and shame those women who enjoy there own sexuality.

13 hours ago



**Soolagna Majumdar**

I'm actually surprised by the amount of "mansplaining" going on here AFTER the article has highlights some incredibly valid reasons as to why these comics are problematic. It's not about anti-sex, you can write fantastic, sexy stories of female characters without them being defiled of their personality or skills as a super hero- the problem is that both Catwoman and Starfire have had their personalities removed from them. They have no sexuality for them to work with here, it's just a sad, dead eyed performance for an assumed heterosexual, heteronormative, male readership. I mean, have these artists and writers ever seen a woman before? Spoken to one?

Ugh, again, this article is perfection and flawless and thank you.

Sunday at 5:00 AM

1 reply to Soolagna Majumdar's comment



**Andre Evans**

mansplaining?  
I like that word... has a nice anti-male ring to it. not really offensive but effective at dismissing a point of view based only on the gender of the opposition. This is also called failed logic, but it would also fall under misandry showing contempt for the male sex.... or in other words, sexist. Lot of ground to cover with just one. :CLAPS:  
So on to your argument!  
"you can write fantastic, sexy stories of female characters without them being defiled of their personality or skills as a super hero"

Ohoh! Like Catwomen right?

"the problem is that both Catwoman and Starfire have had their personalities removed from them."  
No, they have had there personalities changed... tends to happen in reboots. Catwoman also has LOTS of personality... so what is the charge that makes the Catwomen comic sexist if her having personality is true?  
Check this out.  
<http://blog.wryterra.com/2011/09/25/in-defence-of-catwoman/>

Sunday at 9:47 AM



**Andre Evans**

You scraping the bottom of the self-righteous indignation barrel when you pick up a copy of Catwomen and get upset about the overtly sexual nature of the character.

The Big Sexy Problem with Superheroines and Their 'Liberated Sexuality'? Only problem I am seeing is yours with liberated sexuality.  
Saturdav at 9:01 PM



1 reply to Andre Evans's comment

**sporkbot**

To be honest, while there may be a decent case in defense of Catwoman:

A) This Judd Winick. Like Kevin Smith, he's been known to go with the "shock and discomfort" tactic in his writing (pedophilia mentioned in nearly every story). Not only that...this is the guy that brought Jason Todd back by having an evil alternate Superboy punch space/time. I think Miss Hudson's skepticism is understandable. This is the first impression of the "new Catwoman", and obviously not everyone thought it was a good. one.

B) You've made a case in defense of Catwoman. Fine. Maybe the sexual tones are in some way appropriate within the context. Okay. That doesn't negate all the OTHER, non-Catwoman examples cited. Starfire is quite honestly a blatant example of masturbatory works disguised as "liberation" wrapped in plain bad writing. If she were drawn to resemble Rosie O'Donnell, there would be fewer people defending the above scene.

Sunday at 7:40 AM

4 replies to sporkbot's comment

**vicand1**

Im sorry if you are offended, but I think that you must look at art in a detached way. You must appreciate that drawing is arguably based on the emotional self. Drawing erotic images is not wrong at all, and the audience dont always determine the images. If it were so, we would not have any plot to comics but just pure sex, like hentai. However, the case that makes comics so distinguished is the structure of the plot. There is a hero. And there is a female accomplice. Often, the portrayal of a hero in relation to his women must affirm the hero's identity as essentially a hero. Many motifs prove this point, such as how the hero always gets the girl, or how the girl is a temptress etc. In many aspects, the male hero should be elevated from the common character. So they would typically look handsomer, and the heroines typically sexier.

But all in all, I think the answer to your problems is quite simply, that women who are characterized as nice to men, should be sexualized.

Friday at 9:55 PM



**jonny5**

They broke me almost 20 years ago. I recal being in a comic book store in NJ where prominently displayed near the front of the shop was a rack (no pun intended) of something called Lady Death. Specifically this was the 'swimsuit issue'. One of my kids pointed and said "Look Daddy Xmen!" Thinking it was the character 'Storm'.

There is nothing new under the sun.

Friday at 1:39 PM

**ÃfÃfÃ,Âghata**

Great text!! That's why i dont read comics (and, i guess, most of women).

Friday at 10:52 AM



**Andres ZombiemanPrim**

How about the women that weren't portrayed badly? Like Supergirl, Ice and Fire in JLI, Wonder Woman, that girl in Black Hawks, that girl in Blue Beetle ( not a big fan so I don't know their names ) even Harley Quinn despite that crappy costume and that new Star Sapphire in Kyle Rayner and band ( whatever the hell is that comic called ) there was a new Star Sapphire that didn't have that stupid stripper costume that they usually have.

Two missteps and the whole 52 reboot sucks right?

Friday at 5:18 AM

## KTO

As a lesbian comic lover, I was looking forward to these new comics with lead female rolls. I thought they would be sexy, empowered and exciting to follow. Boy, I couldn't have been more wrong. I don't understand how even male readers can find them 'attractive' when they are such one dimensional characters. Wonderful article, I'm sharing it with everyone I know.

Wednesday at 6:18 PM

### 3 replies to KTO's comment

## Legal Eagle

Dunno if you have seen this post before (I'm afraid I haven't gone through all the 2245 comments to check if someone has posted this: <http://rule63rules.tumblr.com/post/10723088694/image-a-portion-of-a-comic-page-in>

Wednesday at 4:10 AM

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