

Suicide Squad and the Birds of Prey
The Male and Female Gaze in Pop Culture

The character “Harley Quinn” first debuted in the Batman animated series in 1992, designed by Bruce Timm and Paul Dini. Originally designed as a throwaway character, she was so popular with fans that she became a canon sidekick and love interest to the Joker. Bubbly, blonde, and dangerous, Harley eventually inspired her own comic series, an adult cartoon, and two feature films.

Appearing mainly as a sidekick and romantic foil to the Joker during her early run, the animated series episode *Harley and Ivy* introduced the long-standing friendship between the two femme fatales, and developed her independence as a character; as well as introduced the off-again on-again dynamic of Quinn and Joker’s relationship. Her backstory was later revealed in Bruce Tim’s 1994 comic *Mad Love*, adapted in the animated series in 1999. This story reveals her origin as Joker’s psychiatrist, a brilliant woman who fell in love with the madman and entered a cycle of romance and abuse. The comic was praised for adding depth to the character, who had been shown being manipulated by her lover several times earlier in the series. Her 2001-2003 solo comic run featured the young woman leaving the Joker to start a new life with Poison Ivy, who would later become a love interest to Quinn.

Harley’s evolution from hopelessly-in-love sidekick to an independent antihero has in many ways represented the ever-changing landscape of pop culture, specifically in comics. In recent decades, more female creators and creators of color have been able to write and publish their work in the industry; resulting in more diverse storytelling within the medium. To many fans the depth added to Harley’s character following the release of DC’s New 52 reboot, and the

exploration of her abusive relationship with the Joker and subsequent liberation, signified a changing attitude towards female characters in comics; Harley was no longer just a sidekick purposed for slapstick humor, but rather an independent and powerful protagonist of her own story.

Harley's comic success and popularity as a character lead to the development of two films; 2016's *Suicide Squad*, directed by David Ayer, and 2020's *Birds of Prey*, directed by Cathy Yan. Using theories from Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema*, as well as John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, I intend to analyze the different means in which these films portray the same character acted by Margot Robbie.

Beginning with the male-directed 2016 film *Suicide Squad*, one can note a severe underlying feeling of animosity towards powerful women. In the opening scene introducing the audience to the team, we see a flashback in which Harley is first offered to a colleague of the Joker as a sexual favor, and then abandoned by her lover in a chase with Batman before being promptly punched in the face by the caped crusader. This is not the only instance of violence towards women in the film; we see an unnamed female guard slapped by male character Slipknot for comedic purposes, we witness Harley's torture and implied sexual abuse during her time imprisoned at Belle Reve, and in a flashback sequence we witness Joker torturing Dr. Harleen Quinzel before manipulating her into jumping into a vat of chemicals, emerging as Harley Quinn. Harley's harsh treatment at the hands of her lover is not inconsistent with their comic book relationship; but the issue many critics found with this film's portrayal is that it appeared to glorify the relationship between Joker and Harley, taking the term "mad love" and attempting to twist the dynamic into something to aspire to.

The movie was a huge box office success, earning over six times back its budget, and created many new young female fans of the Harlequin; many of whom, in their admiration of a strong and fun female character, also romanticized her relationship with her green-haired boyfriend. Despite achieving some measure of character growth and independence in her time with the Suicide Squad, Harley still spends the majority of the film waiting for Joker to rescue her (seemingly forgetting that he abandoned her, resulting in her incarceration in the first place). A deleted scene taking place after his supposed death via helicopter crash was supposed to show Joker returning for Harley, and leaving after she refuses to abandon her new friends. Instead of this scene, the movie ends with the Joker returning for Harley, and she embraces him like a swooning damsel.

In contrast, *Birds of Prey* only mentions Joker in flashbacks, and portrays their relationship for what it was; manipulative and abusive. The film opens with Harley and Joker breaking up for good, and the rest of the movie centers around the young woman searching for independence; symbolized in a scene in which Harley blows up Ace Chemicals, the home of the “chemical bath” flashback in *Suicide Squad*. A particularly memorable moment of the film, in which a villain forces a young woman to strip and dance in public, has been praised for its brilliant and sensitive execution; the woman is not sexualized, but shown as rightfully traumatized and humiliated by the event. The scene was not used to motivate a male love interest, but rather to demonstrate the evil of the villain and serve as motivation for one of the female leads to turn against him; further promoting one of the film's central themes of women supporting each other. The scene is quiet and uncomfortable to watch, but makes an important statement about the impact of the male gaze; in a different film the female character would have been shot exploitatively for the sake of the male viewer.

Continuing with the idea of spectatorship and the gaze, upon examining details in costuming, one can observe a noticeable difference in the presentation of the two films' female characters. *Suicide Squad*'s Harley sports booty shorts, a jacket stamped with "Property of The Joker", a crop-top reading "Daddy's little monster", and a metal collar reading "Puddin'" (her pet name for the Joker). This costume change follows a scene in which the members of the titular Suicide Squad, Harley Quinn being the only female of the group, are forced to change into their gear in a prison yard surrounded by guards. The audience is greeted with fun music and shots focusing on Quinn's body as she dresses, framing the character as seductive and "teasing" the male onlookers rather than depicting the scene as rightfully humiliating. When she finishes dressing, she ends the scene with a playful "What?", reaffirming one of John Berger's theories¹; women in art are only allowed to be sexual if they are unwitting in their sexuality. Once a woman shows agency over her femininity or admiration of self, she becomes vain and undesirable. The director's version of female independence seems to align with many male comic artists'; in which female heroes can only express empowerment through their sexuality, but must remain submissive when the "real heroes" do the talking.

Despite the character's background as a genius psychologist, she is dismissed by more than one male character as a "crazy bitch" before being threatened with violence or told to shut up. A scene cut from the movie shows Harley psychoanalyzing one of her teammates, demonstrating her psychiatric talents for the first time in the movie. Even in the flashback



sequence where we see Dr. Harleen Quinzel's sessions with the Joker before her descent to madness, she is not depicted as a brilliant psychiatrist, but rather a starry-eyed girl willing to do anything for her patient. In Harley's first origin story, revealed in 1994's *Mad Love*, Harley made the decision to break Joker out of Arkham and follow him into his life of crime after months of being manipulated into feeling sympathy for the man. It is made clear that she made that decision believing that the Joker saw her as an equal, and she even states herself that she felt free to be herself for the first time in her life. In the New 52 Reboot, Harley's origin was changed; she remained Joker's psychiatrist, but this time the Joker pushed Harleen into the same chemical bath that bleached his skin and turned him insane; creating Harley Quinn. In *Suicide Squad*, Harley jumps into the chemicals of her own will in a desperate bid for the approval of the Joker; the same day he tortured her after she helped him escape from Arkham.

This version of her story takes two elements of her previous origins, and twists them to remove Quinn's agency. In *Mad Love*, Harleen's decision to free the Joker is clearly defined as her own choice; she even robs a costume store to acquire her signature black and red jester suit before setting him loose. The Joker is shown to have manipulated and lied to Harley during their therapy sessions, but she ultimately made the choice because Joker represented freedom and liberation in her mind. This element makes her eventual realization that the Joker doesn't care about her all the more tragic, since she risked everything to be with a man who has tried to kill her dozens of times since her 1992 debut.

Suicide Squad shows Joker ask Harleen for a machine gun, before the scene flashes forward to Arkham in chaos and Harleen strapped to a table. Harley's decision to free Joker in *Mad Love* was a critical moment of character development in the original series, and her change in personality was made more clear by the fact that Joker did not ask her to free him; when she

arrives in Arkham in her signature outfit, he laughs hysterically, realizing he has successfully manipulated the doctor into worshipping him. *Suicide Squad*'s Joker tells Harleen he needs to ask her for something, and she immediately and pathetically answers "anything"; she didn't make a choice, she obeyed a demand and played a minor role in helping the Joker liberate himself before being promptly betrayed and tortured by the man. *Mad Love* successfully explained how a brilliant psychiatrist could come to be manipulated by an expert sociopath, and her underlying emotional issues that aided the Joker in warping her mind. *Suicide Squad*'s version of this story not only removes Quinn's agency, but turns her original self into an ordinary, naive doctor who was fooled by an attractive criminal.

Similarly, Harley making the decision to jump into the chemical bath rather than being pushed removes the significance of New 52's change in origin. New 52 Harleen was a psychiatrist as well, but instead of falling in love with the Joker as his doctor, she went undercover in Arkham as a fellow inmate in order to gain the trust of the man. Despite her ambition and intelligence, the man saw through her act, and pushed her into the same vat that created him; permanently warping her brain and bleaching her skin. *Suicide Squad* shows a desperate Harleen pledge her love for the Joker, before jumping into the chemicals in a last-ditch effort to gain his respect; we see him turn away to leave after she jumps before changing his mind and jumping in after her. The scene is portrayed as romantic, and Harley is symbolically reborn as the Joker lifts her from the bath, laughing triumphantly. While many fans criticize Harley's New 52 backstory for its departure from her original story and the removal of Harleen's choice to become Harley Quinn, the origin did add more insight into Harley's character; she even explains that much of her "dumb blonde" persona was an act for Joker's benefit. Since New 52 mainly featured Harley as a solo act breaking out from the Joker, the

change in origin made sense, as it added an extra layer of sympathy to the character and further cemented that their relationship was built on manipulation and nothing to aspire to. *Suicide Squad* seems to have been inspired by this, but changes the push to a jump; further cementing Harley as an obedient, lovesick puppy that the Joker can play like a violin. If the film had self-awareness in its portrayal of Harley's origin, it could have kept these scenes as-is, and they might have succeeded in providing context to Harley's dependence on the Joker within the film. But by removing any scenes where Harley stands her ground to the madman, or experiences a moment of clarity about her relationship, the film presents the dynamic through ropes-colored lenses that glorify the Joker's abusive actions.

Laura Mulvaney discusses the dynamic of the active male vs the passive female in phallographic filmography², and how the traditional female figure in cinema is meant as an object to be looked upon while the male serves as the looker. We see this theory not only in *Suicide Squad*'s costuming and numerous closeup shots on Margot Robbie's chest and rear, but in its treatment of female characters who are not Harley Quinn. Enchantress, a major member of the team in the comics, has virtually no lines before she is immediately introduced as the villain of the movie; her only motivation being world domination for the hell of it. Katana, another major member of the team in the comics, has less than a dozen lines and spends most of the movie serving as an attractive backdrop for the main characters. Viola Davis's performance as Amanda Waller received praise from critics and fans for her powerful performance; yet, as the only female character who shows herself not to be dependent on aid from a man, she is explicitly shown to be apathetic and cruel, and serves as one of the antagonizing forces of the film. Combined with the film's tendency to portray violence towards women as comical, the implied message is thus; women must look pretty and act submissive to be considered "good", and if

they talk back to a man they should be put in their place. If they aren't conventionally attractive, or act upon goals not centered around a male figure, they must be a villain.

Many female fans and creators reacted negatively to Quinn's treatment in *Suicide Squad*; actress Margot Robbie included. In an interview, Robbie remarked on how one of the most difficult aspects of Harley's character to understand was her dependence on the Joker; "I just didn't understand how she could be such a badass and then fall to pieces over some guy. I found that really frustrating," said the actress, "Fans seem to really love that about her, that she has this complete devotion to a guy that treats her badly."³ Robbie states she came to view their relationship as based on co-dependency; but still couldn't understand why many fans romanticized the abusive relationship between the two clowns. 2020's *Birds of Prey*, directed by Cathy Yan, features Harley Quinn post-breakup with the Joker attempting to make a name for herself as a professional hit-woman. Along the way she is joined by Detective Renée Montoya, Black Canary, and The Huntress, who must team up to protect a young girl from a mafia boss. The film changes Harley's look, and the first scene shows her cutting her hair, practicing knife-throwing with the Joker's face drawn on the target board, and meeting a "New man" (a man-eating hyena she lovingly names Bruce).

Harley's look is noticeably different from her previous film; rather than focusing on sex appeal, the costumes in *Birds of Prey* are colorful and fun, showing off Harley's quirky personality.



She shows skin, but there is a noticeable difference in the presentation of the outfit and the way the actress is shot; her cloths read “Harley Quinn” instead of the jacket she wore in *Suicide Squad* embroidered with “Property of The Joker”, and she is allowed to be seen as human instead of a sexual object. One scene shows her crying post-breakup, eating a tub of ice cream while wearing bunny slippers and pajamas. In another scene, a male villain searches through her purse, and pulls out a tampon with embarrassment; to Quinn’s amusement.

Quinn is allowed to be funny in this film, and while characters continue to call her “crazy”, she is allowed to prove them wrong. She demonstrates her skill and intelligence as a psychiatrist numerous times in the film, psychoanalyzing other characters to the amazement of those around her. In one memorable scene, she screams “I have a P.H.D, mother-fucker!”⁵; and proceed’s to break the offending man’s arm. The film proves that female characters can be intelligent, funny, attractive, and powerful; directors don’t have to pick one trait. Where the previous film dumbs Quinn down to a lovesick maniac, *Birds of Prey* lets Harley be fun and independent; displayed in the previously mentioned scene where Harley blows up the chemical plant where she declared her loyalty to Joker, ripping off a “J” necklace and saying a symbolic “screw you” to her ex-Puddin. The film only mentions the Joker in passing, and revolves solely on Quinn’s search for independence and her relationship with the other central female characters. Harley has full agency over her sexuality and her decisions, and her choices define the plot of the film. Her character ark revolves around her respect and compassion towards other women, who in turn support and protect her. In turn, the other Birds of Prey each experiences their own character development, by supporting each other and teaming up against the male antagonist.

By comparing the two films, one can examine a clear difference in the portrayal of Harley Quinn and her relationship to the Joker. In Ayer’s *Suicide Squad*, Harley serves as a

passive object; to be looked at, but not to experience personal growth or agency. In Yan's *Birds of Prey*, Harley serves as the active force; even changing a "J" tattoo on her arm into a mermaid to symbolize the end of Joker's ownership over her. While not obvious, these differences represent the male and female gaze in cinema; and the need for female-centric movies directed by women. While not every male comic creator draws his female characters with comically exaggerated proportions, and not every male film director relies on flimsy costuming and lingering close-ups, one cannot deny the phallogentric gender roles imbedded in western pop culture. In order to depict female characters with proper respect and agency, there cannot be a double-standard in male and female roles in cinema; a male writer would never write a male character with an arc completely revolving around his love interest, and thus it shouldn't be acceptable from a female character. This problem is not limited to depictions of Harley Quinn; and until filmmakers and writers treat female characters as humans rather than props for male leads, it will not go away.

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Images

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