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## Gender Differences in Comics

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**Abstract (E):** The representation of men and women in comics, particularly in early funnies, differs considerably. Young women look beautiful; men look at best grotesque. This tendency changes towards the middle of the 20th century, funny-looking men then being combined with funny-looking women, realistic-looking men with realistic-looking women. An overview over tendencies of representation in the comics.

**Abstract (F):** Dans les toutes premières bandes dessinées, la représentation des hommes et des femmes n'était pas ce qu'elle est devenue aujourd'hui. A l'époque, toute jeune femme était une beauté; les hommes étaient au mieux des êtres grotesques. Vers le milieu du 20e siècle, ces stéréotypes changent peu à peu, et on observe entre autres une tendance à plus de réalisme et à une réduction des différences entre hommes et femmes. Cet article propose un aperçu de ces transformations.

**Keywords:** Funnies, representation of women, comics history

Like all other art forms, The comic strip often reveals more about the creator than he or she intended to show. One thing it reveals is the way in which cartoonists see both themselves and people of the opposite sex. In its earliest days, the century-old comics medium was more gender-neutral than it is today, and the majority of strips in American newspapers starred children. The kids, in strips drawn by both men and women, were cute or they were little monsters, but, be they boys or girls, they were always funny. This makes sense: originally comic strips were intended to be funny, and kids are funny. Any adults in these strips were usually drawn in a funny-looking, cartoony style. After all, this is

the way that children see adults! (1)

As early as 1909, George McManus may have been the first cartoonist to introduce a new tradition to comics: the beautiful woman and the funny-looking man. Three years earlier, when he had drawn the strip, *Nibsy the Newsboy*, McManus' art still displayed the strong influence of classic *Little Nemo* artist Winsor McKay. In a strip reprinted in *The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics*, Nibsy goes to Fairyland, where both the fairy king and queen resemble McKay's dream creatures from *Little Nemo*. But in his 1909 strip, *The Newlyweds*, Mrs. Newlywed is a pretty girl while her husband is classically cartoony, with large oval eyes, a round nose and no chin. Their baby, Snookums, looks exactly like his father.

McManus continued this gender stylization when he started his famous and long-running strip, *Bringing Up Father*, in 1913. In this long-running story of the nouveau-riche couple, Jiggs and Maggie, ex-bricklayer Jiggs is round-nosed and funny-looking, as is his jug-eared son, but his daughter, Nora, is a beauty in the tradition of Mrs. Newlywed. One wonders where she got her looks, since mother Maggie shares her husband's grotesque facial features. However, it's only Maggie's face that's funny-looking; she has a perfect body. One gets the impression that McManus simply couldn't control himself when drawing women's bodies, and by the 1920s through the 1940s, he had even developed a habit of drawing Maggie in transparent dresses through which her fabulous figure could be seen in silhouette.

Bringing Up father, George McManus. 1943

### ***Bringing Up father, George McManus. 1943***

Not every male cartoonist followed the example set by McManus - - for instance, Elzie Segar's Olive Oyl remained just as visually wacked-out as her boyfriend, Popeye -- but in 1930, Chic Young drew the heroine of his new strip, *Blondie*, as a stunner, while her beau and later husband, Dagwood, was drawn in the funny cartoon tradition. In fact, every man in *Blondie* was funny-

looking, and all the young women -- but only the young women -- were pretty. When Dagwood and Blondie had children, their daughter was a pretty girl, but, as in *The Newlyweds* and *Bringing Up Father*, their son was the mirror-image of his cartoon father.

Three years later, V.T. Hamlin produced *Alley Oop*, a strip about prehistoric cave people. Alley, the hero, and the other cave men, were cartoon versions of Neanderthal-type ape men, but following the tradition started by McManus, all the cave women were beautiful. In the comic strip world of suspended belief, no one wonders what a blonde bombshell like Blondie would have seen in wacky-looking Dagwood, or what gorgeous cave girl Oola would have seen in her hairy ape boyfriend, Alley Oop.

Alley Oop, V.T. Hamlin. 1934



***Alley Oop, V.T. Hamlin. 1934***

In funny animal comics, both male and female animals were drawn in the same cartoony, and usually cute, style. Perhaps because animal comics were meant for children, the male cartoonists, instead of drawing the female animals with breasts (for which we are grateful!), identified them as female by exaggerating otherwise minor physical features. Thus, eyelashes became secondary sex characteristics. Minnie Mouse and Petunia Pig were given long, exaggerated eyelashes, but Mickey and Porky had no eyelashes at all (2).

Daily cartoon, Nell Brinkley. 1929

***Daily cartoon, Nell Brinkley. 1929***

This tradition of identifying female animal characters by exaggerating certain features is still with us today. In the contemporary strip *Garfield*, cartoonist Jim Davis endows his female cat character with grossly exaggerated lips, as well as eyelashes, as a way to show her gender. Again, readers suspend belief and ignore the fact that cats don't have lips.

Meanwhile, women cartoonists such as Nell Brinkley, Ethel Hays, Tarpe Mills and Dale Messick, to name only a few, working during

the same years as the men mentioned above, definitely drew their share of pretty girls. Early 20th century cartoonist Nell Brinkley, for instance, was famous for her beautiful "Brinkley Girls," which were likened to Charles Dana Gibson's "Gibson Girls." However, the men drawn by these women were equally attractive.

One can only guess at the reasons for this disparity in rendering both sexes, by both sexes. If the male cartoonists were identifying with their male characters, did they consider themselves, and possibly their fellow men, to be ugly, stunted, hopelessly geeky creatures, while thinking of women as the impossibly beautiful, unattainable other? When the women cartoonists drew both men and women as attractive beings, were they, in a more down-to-earth way, simply accepting both men and women as equal humans?

Towards the end of the 20th century, a change in the gender stylization of men and women occurred in mainstream American comic books. While comic book superheroes, both male and female, had since the first *Superman* comic been depicted as physically flawless human beings -- after all, they are superheroes -- by the late 1980s, the almost entirely male mainstream comic book artists began exaggerating certain sexual characteristics on both the male and female characters they drew. The males grew progressively more muscular, their necks thickened, while their heads grew smaller. The females, on the other hand, developed longer legs while their breasts attained incredible proportions, perfectly round in shape, and often larger than their heads. To show off these bizarrely morphed bodies, the artists clothed the women in bottom-baring thong bikinis, with as little as possible on top.

***WildC.A.T.S., X-Men, Jim Lee and Scott Williams. 1996***

Almost 20 years later, this change has resulted in comic characters who appear to hail from two different planets, neither of which is Earth. The males sport enormous muscles, most of which don't exist on real human beings, necks thicker than their heads, and chins bigger than the rest of their heads. Their expressions consist of gritted teeth and a permanent scowl. The females, on

the other hand, possess balloon breasts and waists so small that if they were real humans they'd break in half. Their legs are twice as long as the rest of their bodies, and they affect an exaggerated pose: breasts and rear both thrust out. The noses of both male and female characters are very short and their eyes are long, often without pupils. Both genders are fantasies for young male readers, the women representing sex fantasies of adolescent boys who have little or no experience with real women.

Independent, or small press American comics (the word is often shortened to 'indies'), have a smaller circulation than mainstream comics, and their interior pages are usually printed in black and white. These comics, in which most women cartoonists work today, have a completely different look to them. Whether the style is realistic or broadly cartoony, in the indies, both male and female characters tend to be drawn similarly, no matter the sex of the artist. Thus, if the males are drawn in a broad cartoon style, as in Peter Bagge's *Hate*, the females will be as funny-looking as the men, or if the men are realistic, as in *Love and Rockets* by the Hernandez brothers, or *Artbabe* by Jessica Abel, so are the women. As before, women comic creators are likely to depict males as equal human beings. But male indie cartoonists also now seem to depict women as equals.

Although the ratio of female comic readers to male comics readers continues to be comparatively small, the majority of women who do read comics tend to gravitate to the indies. They not only buy comics by women, such as *Action Girl*, *Castle Waiting*, and the aforementioned *Artbabe*, but they read comics like Dan Clowes' *Eightball*, in which the two protagonists are young women, realistically portrayed. A section of *Eightball* was adapted into a film, *Ghost World*, which is also very popular with female moviegoers. Possibly due to the fact that more women are drawing comics today than ever before, and drawing them for indies, the field of independent or small press comics has become feminized (3).



*Eightball, Dan Clowes. 1997*

Meanwhile, in American mainstream superhero comics, women readers are rare and working women artists can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Too bad for the mainstream artists, who may have to leave their studios and comic stores if they want to look at real women! And until that day happens, mainstream superhero artists will continue to expose their personal sex fantasies on paper.

## **Footnotes**

(1) This should be obvious, judging from the use of words like comics and funnies, but today's comic books are rarely funny anymore. Not having seen every comic that was published in the early 20th century, I can make no more definite statement than 'may have.' In animation, as in comics, when, for instance, Bugs Bunny disguises himself as a female by putting on a



blonde wig, he immediately grows long eyelashes. Elmer Fudd, completely fooled by this, says, 'Oh Brunhilda, you are so beautiful.' As soon as the wig falls off, revealing Bugs as male, his eyelashes mysteriously disappear.

(2) If these characters were living humans, they'd be stumbling around blindly and flying into walls, hardly fit for fighting bad guys, much less getting around at all without guide dogs. As always, there are exceptions. Cartoonist Jen Sorenson draws a character named Drooly Julie who sits on a park bench with her tongue hanging out and man-watches, commenting on passing studs: 'This guy probably just returned from a Caribbean sex farm, where nubile young maidens lovingly slathered him with coconut oil.' However, Sorenson is satirizing male-oriented comics featuring drooling, babe-watching guys.

(3) One way to judge the readership of a comic is to check the letters page. In issue #18 of *Eightball*, at least two of four letters are signed by a woman. Louisa Michaels, of Berkeley, California, writes: '...it feels like a genuine portrayal of female friendship. I take this to mean one of two things: either there is less difference between men and women or else you are a woman writing under a male pseudonym.'

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