

Gender Qualities and Roles of Villains: Presented in North-American Web Comic *Homestuck* by Andrew Hussie

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Abstract—In this article, using the popular North American comic *Homestuck* by Andrew Hussie (2009-2016), we look at the roles assigned to various antagonistic characters based on their gender. In the 21st century, the world has become more complicated and has ceased to be divided into black and white, absolute good and absolute evil. Literature and popular culture have become more complex, and with it the image of the antagonist has changed, the antagonist has ceased to be just a villain who does evil just because this is his role in the story. The idea of non-binary gender situations, when the usual traditional stereotypes could not describe reality, appeared. A revision of the traditionally masculine and feminine qualities took place, and feminine softness, diplomacy, and compliance began to be viewed not as a weakness, but as a privilege. At the same time, traditionally masculine qualities such as aggressiveness, self-confidence, and intransigence are no longer viewed exclusively in a positive way. This article discusses what the image of modern villains is and how their villainous role relates to their gender qualities.

Index Terms—Gender studies, popular culture, mass culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the generally accepted opinion, certain traits of character and behavior are inherent in men and women. For example, courage, determination, directness, and pronounced leadership qualities are considered to be traditionally masculine traits. In turn, women are required to be compliant, emotional, obedient and tolerant. They should be able to listen and understand the interlocutor, should be ready to compromise. Traditionally, it is also believed that a man should take the lead in a relationship, he must make non-ambivalent decisions, and the woman is supposed to be led and play a subordinate role. Often in patriarchal societies, women's qualities were negatively colored as something primitive, chthonic, and unclean, close to the animal, the biological origin of humans. At the same time, being a man, the bearer of male qualities, was considered a privilege and marked the bearer as belonging to a sublime, spiritual, rational principle. Nowadays, the active influence of the third wave of feminism and post feminism have redefined the traditional gender roles and their meanings significantly in modern mass consciousness [1].

Popular characters from Western popular culture include female characters who play the main role in the narrative (Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, the psychokinesist Jean

Gray from *The X-Men*, or Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games*). Often they, as well as positive male characters from other works, oppose female villains (for example, Cersei Lanister from *The Game of Thrones*, Mystic from *The X-Men*, the alien villain from the *Dark Phoenix* movie (2019) who is trying to draw Jean Gray to the dark side). Traditionally, both female and male negative characters were portrayed according to the same pattern in the works of mass culture. In short, they were evil initially, by nature. They appeared as villains on stage or in the narrative and there was practically no development of them as characters from the very moment of their appearance: they remained villains until the very end (for example, the Joker in the early *Batman* comics as well as the Joker played by Heath Ledger).

However, at the beginning of the third millennium, a significant shift occurred in this direction as well. The authors of works of mass culture began to demonstrate to their audience not only the rising path of positive characters, but also the background of the negative ones.

Moreover, a new type of character appeared in pop culture, an ambivalent character who could actively demonstrate characteristics of a protagonist, or on the contrary, an antagonist, throughout the story, and change their position diametrically in the end [2]. The brightest example from recent popular TV shows and franchises is Daenerys Targaryen from *The Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) and the Joker played by Joaquin Phoenix (2019).

The unexpected transformation of Daenerys from a good princess and a fighter for justice into a ruthless dictator in the final of the story surprised many fans of the series. The Joker still remained a villain, but Joaquin Phoenix showed a completely unexpected side of the character: how deeply unhappy is a person to whom society has not given any options to become good.

This complication of the characters of a popular culture, the increase in attention not only to traditionally main characters (most often positive male characters), but also to the inner world of traditionally secondary ones (women, villains) seems extremely interesting to us. Unlike more classical art genres such as mainstream literature and so on, popular culture, the main task of which is to entertain your audience, tends to depict stereotyped, simplified images, cliché images. And in this sense, for the researcher of mass culture, the process of complicating and changing these stereotypes is of great interest. It shows that stereotypes regarding certain categories of people or minorities have changed in society, and mass culture captures this process.

In this work, we analyze the images of villains from *Homestuck*, a web comic popular in North America and

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II. ABOUT HOMESTUCK

Homestuck (2009-2016) is a relatively new work, long, multifaceted, intended primarily for the younger generation of readers and viewers. It ironically demonstrates the problems of modern American consumer society. Andrew Hussie, the author of the web comic actively uses references to various phenomena of contemporary pop culture, and in this sense, *Homestuck* can serve as a kind of encyclopedia of modern culture from the turn of the twentieth and twenty first centuries. Oriented to a youth audience, it offers all sorts of types of modern teenagers for readers and viewers. As critics noted, “the web comic *Homestuck* is an enjoyable, fun read with adventure and jokes aplenty”, and “the representation of women in *Homestuck* when compared to other texts and forms of media is progressive” [3].

The comic combines static imagery, animated GIFs and chat logs, as well as music, animations and Adobe Flash games. Despite the complex structure, the main part of the web-comic is text illustrated with pictures, and as such must be identified as a piece of literature. However, the interactive element, when the reader actively participates in the narrative, which is achieved through browser video games, animated videos and musical accompaniment, sets *Homestuck* apart as a new original web-comic genre [4]. In addition, as the author was publishing the chapters in 2009-2016, he managed to keep the audience on their tiptoes due to the complicated and non-linear plot and a variety of unpredictable characters.

Homestuck centers on a group of teenagers who unwittingly bring about the end of the world through the installation of an upcoming computer game.

This web-comic can be attributed to such genres as action-adventure, apocalyptic, dystopia, comedy-drama and science fantasy. Its plot is complicated, and its length is considerably huge: over 8000 pages.

As it stated on the comic’s website, “it’s a tale about a boy and his friends and a game they play together.

On his 13th birthday, John Egbert starts playing a mysterious videogame called Sburb. Unfortunately, this triggers the apocalypse. Fortunately, he and his friends can make things right—if they can beat the game. They’ll need a lot of teamwork, a little luck, and some inspired shenanigans along the way to make it through this mind-bending, genre-defying adventure” [5].

As John and his friends begin to explore the world of *Sburb*, they are harassed by a group of twelve Internet trolls who have played a version of the game before. Further contact with the trolls reveals that they are not human at all, but an alien species actually called “trolls”. As the trolls gradually become more important to the story, the narrative shifts to a side story arc exploring the nature of troll society which turns to be dystopian and the specific sequence of events that led to this group to enter the troll version of *Sburb*. The trolls’ arc concludes with them winning their game and originally creating the humans’ universe.

Gradually, the plot becomes more and more complicated, new characters come into play.

The readers open the future of the planet Earth, which is ruled by the leader (in the web comic she is called Her

Imperious Condescension) of the trolls. Skillfully using human stupidity and self-interest, she seized power over the whole planet (as far as we can judge), and now humanity is on the verge of extinction (only two people are alive), and earthly cities are flooded and the planet is in decline.

Trying to save the situation and win the game, the heroes lose and die several times. For many of them, the only way to a final victory is to recognize their own shortcomings and come to terms with them.

In the final battle against Lord English (a misogynist male character), who symbolizes the absolute brutal evil, and sinister Jack Noir (a male character), who repeatedly killed the main characters and their parents, and against the tyrannical empress of trolls, their weaker opponents, whose constant defeats and losses taught them sympathy, mutual handwork and team work, manage to defeat them. Then the winners create a new universe.

III. GENDER QUALITIES AND ROLES OF ANTAGONISTS

Let us consider the three main villainous characters in the comic. Both male characters - Jack Noir and Lord English - seem quite traditional: from their very appearance in history, they behave like villains and demonstrate pronounced villainous qualities. As the story progresses, the situation with one of these characters will change, but we will talk about this later.

At first glance, the troll empress behaves in exactly the same way as the male antagonists. However, she has her doubles in other versions of the reality of the comic, and this fact allows us to attribute her (at least, one of her counterparts) to a new type of villain. We begin, however, by analyzing the image of this character with her most brutal version.

She is a cruel and powerful empress of the trolls, who has also conquered the Earth in the future, and turned people into slaves (the blood of earthlings is red, and this automatically makes them slaves in the caste system of troll society). Under her ruthless rule, the Earth fell into decay, and the human race seemed on the verge of destruction. She loves gold and jewelry; she has long beautiful hair and a feminine figure. Without regret, she subjugates the female characters among the kids who are trying to oppose her, and manipulates them to fight and kill each other. Also without regret, she herself can kill anyone who gets in her way.

Despite her feminine appearance and beauty and her genuine interest in cooking and baking, she is cold-blooded, cruel, strong, equal in strength to male villains. Unlike them, she is an empress by birthright. Her double from the present is a kind, caring, positive girl named Feferi, one of the twelve teenage trolls who, together with the main characters, the kids, are trying to prevent the apocalypse. She is treacherously killed by one of her fellow-trolls, and her character has little development.

Feferi looks even more feminine than the Her Imperious Condescension: she wears a long skirt and a beautifully decorated bodice, while the empress is dressed in a tracksuit that emphasizes her feminine forms. Both are armed with a trident, which symbolizes their ability to control the water element. However, Feferi uses a trident to fight enemies only and fails to protect her own life when her ex-friend treacherously attacks. The empress masterly wields her

weapons, and protagonists have no chance to stand against her. Even the strongest men are defeated in a one-on-one battle with her. Protagonists have to join all their forces to defeat the empress.

She ruthlessly oppresses and uses her former associates and lovers. It seems that there are no typical feminine qualities in her, such as sympathy for others and compassion. However, her double Feferi demonstrates all these qualities in full measure (for example, she is very kind to her friend hopelessly in love with her, and she stresses it many times that they are not a couple; he, however, insists and bores Feferi with his attention). Feferi behaves like an ordinary girl, playing a typically female role: despite the fact that she is also an empress by birth, she is kind to others, modest, sociable, and demonstrates the features of a “true lady”. In communication with the opposite sex, Feferi also behaves like a typical girl: she does not directly tell her admirer that he should leave her alone, but tries to spare his feelings.

At first glance, the empress is not like that: she uses both men and women to achieve her goals. She openly uses her power and sexuality; she is almost invincible. It is noteworthy, however, that she voluntarily works under Lord English, who is portrayed as a misanthrope and a misogynist. By nature, he hates his twin sister, is consumer-minded towards other women, and, since when he was young, he was “offended” as an artist (it turned out that he was not a real creator, but an ordinary graphomaniac), he started dreaming about destroying the whole world. The empress is his servant, but she appears to hate him passionately [3]. She even attempts to collaborate with the kids to defeat of her master, Lord English. The reason for her hatred, however, is that she does not want to share power with the Lord English, but he is stronger than her, because he represents an absolute evil.

Thus, in the face of these two villains we see the traditional distribution of gender qualities and roles. The empress is strong and cruel, but she is a woman, she is weaker than Lord English, and forced to obey him. Despite the fact that she is the queen of trolls and an empress, and Lord English is just a “lord” (which is only a nickname, not a real title), in reality his position is higher than hers. In addition, she seeks, albeit cruelly and ruthlessly, to rule over her citizens, and Lord English simply wants to destroy the world. These aspirations of the characters again demonstrate that there are the characters of a typical patriarchal discourse.

The situation is different with Jack Noir and Meenah, another double of the empress. Jack Noir is a male character and at first, he behaves like a typical villain: he begins to kill others all of a sudden, for no obvious reason. “Jack has no tolerance for things he does not want to do. His vicious demeanor, sarcastic nature and nasty attitude are readily apparent, and he exhibits a lack of concern for life that is not his own” [6]. He does a lot of harm to the kids and protagonist trolls: for example, he kills the parents of the kids, as well as the kids themselves and their troll friends.

However, it gradually becomes clear that he is not as simple as it seems. For example, in the version of the troll’s reality Jack Noir even helps one of them, tells how to defeat other enemies. In addition, Jack Noir acts on his own, independently of the Lord English and the empress. He rebelled against the authoritarianism of the king and queen on his planet Derse, against the strict rules that ordered him to

work on unloved job and wear uniforms. Jack Noir is a kind of lone villain who confronts everyone: society, people and other villains. As his body transforms, he gains loyalty to one of the kids, Jade Harley, and he gradually loses his absolute senseless cruelty. In the end of the story, after a long persecution, as a heroine of equal strength defeats him, he looks bewildered and miserable, not at all evil. Although the main characters kill Lord English and the Empress, Jack Noir remains alive and even meets a woman sympathetic to him. Jack Noir is an example of a villain who turned to evil not by addiction, but by the will of circumstances. He is an ordinary man, tired of the oppression of society and not found any other form of protest than random killings.

The heroine who defeats him at the end of the story shows mercy to him and forgives him, and he acknowledges his defeat. Thus, in the image of Jack Noir and the heroine pursuing him, we can see a new type of relationship: a woman who has typically feminine qualities such as compassion and the ability to forgive, turns out to be equal in strength to a man, and prevails over him (while allowing him to accept defeat with dignity and sparing his life), and a man who has become a villain because of his typically masculine qualities such as indifference, selfishness, short temper, repents and gratefully accepts the conditions of defeat and the help of another woman [7].

And, finally, there is Meenah, a young double of the empress, the most interesting and complex character of the above. Unlike Feferi and the empress, she looks manlier: she has many earrings in her ears, a piercing, and a smooth hairstyle with one long braid. She looks and behaves like a punk, her manner of speech resembles the stereotyped manner of young African-Americans, she can afford a strong word while Feferi and the Empress communicate in a more formal style.

She is a lesbian, and has a great time with her girlfriend. Meenah loves gold and money and can easily mug someone. She is cynical and rude, but has a good heart. Despite the fact that she idolizes the empress, she nevertheless agrees to help the kids and the protagonist trolls in their struggle against the empress and the Lord English. She was supposed to be the heiress to the throne, but “she saw her future role as the Queen as nothing but a form of enslavement, because she would have to be responsible for the well being of all her subjects. She abdicated and fled to Beforus’ moon to hide” [8]. Playing their version of Sburb, she brought a lot of trouble to her co-players, as she turned out to be very aggressive and domineering. Despite this, most of her co-players maintained a good relationship with her.

Meenah is the image of an independent, strong, emancipated girl, perhaps a little uneducated and uncouth, but full of dignity. She prefers to choose her own destiny, despite all the privileges that her background gives her. She apparently has had experience baking, and she baked a cake for her friends upon the one sweep anniversary of them entering the game.

She, like Jack Noir, is a new type of villain – ambiguous, prone to the manifestation of ordinary human feelings and reactions. Her importance and novelty is also that she is a complex and lively female character, with depth, with motivation and behavior that do not fit into the stereotypical framework of an “evil” or “good” characters dichotomy.

IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, in *Homestuck*, along with traditional villains, we can see a new type of antagonist – ambiguous, complex, with their own background and reasons to behave in their own way. Moreover, *Homestuck* shows independent and strong female characters, equal in capabilities to men. Their feminine qualities, which have traditionally been considered as weakness, allow them to prevail over men and show wisdom and compassion for defeated opponents. While the negative characters acting in the traditional patriarchal gender paradigm are doomed to defeat and death.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interests

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