

5-2022

## GIRL POWER?: 2017'S WONDER WOMAN AS A FEMINIST TEXT AND ICON IN AN ERA OF POST-FEMINIST MEDIA

Rachel Richardson

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AND ICON IN AN ERA OF POST-FEMINIST MEDIA

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
Communication Studies

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by  
Rachel Kristin Richardson  
May 2022

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Approved by:

Dr. Ece Algan, Committee Chair, Communication Studies

Dr. Charles Metts, Committee Member

Dr. Julie Taylor, Committee Member

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## ABSTRACT

Media, including film, have the incredible potential to influence viewers and disrupt or contribute to dominant ideologies. In an era of post-feminist media where women are seemingly empowered under the guise of 'girl power,' there continues to be very limited social, financial, and professional options for women and girls. The same can be said for film when female characters appear to be in control of their own lives and bodies, though they are pressured into making the 'correct' choices. The 2017 film rendition of *Wonder Woman* directed by Patty Jenkins intended to change that. This textual analysis of the film identified feminist and post-feminist themes within the text. This is followed by a critical discourse analysis rooted in feminist theory that examines viewers' reviews of the film.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people I must thank for their contributions to this work. First and foremost, I must thank my amazing wife and best friend. Despite my months of household neglect, the dishes have been cleaned, laundry has been washed, and pets have been fed. I can honestly say that I have not been a functioning human being since November, and I greatly appreciate the many instances where you have picked up my slack. And boy oh boy, there has been a lot of slack! Thank you for persisting in areas I have fallen short. For the first time in a long time: don't worry about the dishes. I can take care of those!

Secondly, I must thank my colleagues. Our bi-weekly venting sessions have been of great comfort. Though the brain cells we share have been strained, they have carried us through to the end and I could not be prouder of us. In a dark tunnel of sleepless nights, caffeine addiction, and endless pages of reading, you have all been shining stars. Keep on rolling struggle bus!

Next, I must thank my friends. Though you have little to no idea what I have been writing about, your cheerleading and encouragement have never wavered. We are doing amazing things out there and I am so proud of us. I often think about how lucky I am to have such wonderful, supportive women in my life.

Additionally, I must thank my parents. Without our weekend movie outings, I may never have discovered my passion for superheroes and films. Who knew that a hobby could have such far reaching implications? Here she is,

your little girl saving the world. Although it was probably not in the way you had imagined!

Lastly, I must thank my committee who have worked tirelessly to take this thesis to new heights. Without your contributions, I never could have made it to this point without your insight. It has truly been an honor to work with you all.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

According to a recent study conducted at the University of Southern California, film writers, producers, and directors are overwhelmingly male (Ramakrishna et al., 2017). Because movie creation is a predominantly male profession, it frequently displays a masculine point of view. Western societies have experienced many incarnations of feminism, and while women seem to have more financial, sexual, and social freedom as a result (McRobbie, 2009), their perspectives are often dismissed from the silver screen (Mulvey, 1975). However, Ramakrishna et al. (2017) concluded that movies that are written, produced, or directed by women have more “balanced gender ratios” (Ramakrishna et al., 2017, p. 1676) when compared to their male counterparts. It seems as though the masculine nature and male gaze of films are not set in stone. If these gender ratios can be adjusted to include more women, perhaps gendered perspectives can become more flexible to include more feminine perspectives.

While attempting to create a film promoting feminist ideology, it makes sense that women would make the best cast and crew. When Patty Jenkins and her team created the blockbuster *Wonder Woman* (2017) starring Gal Gadot and Chris Pine, they had a lot to live up to. *Wonder Woman* has lived through many incarnations, from comic books to television shows, each with its empowering

and problematic storylines (Di Placido, 2017; Hanley, 2014; Lepore, 2014; Morgan, 2017). When Jenkins directed the film, she had a vision for upholding the beloved feminist icon, but did she manage to do it?

With its lengthy history and a budget of \$150 million (Tiffany, 2017), Jenkins and her team had plenty of pressure to deliver on an incredible film when creating *Wonder Woman* (2017). After just its first weekend in theaters, the movie was already a box office hit and became the most successful opening weekend for a woman-directed film (Tiffany, 2017) when it earned \$223 million worldwide (Kelley, 2017). Just four months after its release, it had earned \$821.74 million, making it “the highest grossing superhero origin film” ever made (Hughes, 2017). These numbers are impressive considering its cold welcome in the overseas market. The film was banned in several countries, including Lebanon, Tunisia, and Qatar, as well as a film festival in Algeria, due to Gadot's controversial Israeli military background (Al-Mahadin, 2018). This market typically accounts for two-thirds of a film's revenue, but *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017) produced less than half (Al-Mahadin, 2018).

While Gadot's history as a soldier *and* feminist has attracted plenty of media attention since the film's release, there was very little discussion about it in the data collected. Though two users mentioned it, they only concluded that it would have been helpful in her getting the part in the first place. So, the viewers who shared their thoughts seemed largely uninterested in Gadot's past and Zionist political views.

The film depicts Wonder Woman, or Diana as she is first introduced, on her very first journey to save the world. Her life changes forever when she meets British Intelligence spy, Steve Trevor, after his plane crash lands into the water surrounding her home island known as Themyscira. He tells the Amazons about WWI, the millions of lives lost, and the devastation left in its wake. Diana concludes that it must be the work of Ares, the god of war. When she demands that she and her fellow Amazons do something, no one will listen to her. She leaves the island with Trevor and the pair assemble a dream team, consisting of a smuggler, a sharpshooter, and a conman. Together the team battles German soldiers, infiltrates enemy lines, kills Ares, and ends the war.

During production, seemingly every detail was carefully considered. Warner Bros., one of the production companies responsible for the movie's creation, insisted on a female director after deciding that a male director would defeat the entire purpose of a feminist film (Low, 2018). After the film was put into the hands of Jenkins, she too made very strategic decisions. When casting the heroine's fellow Amazons, they selected female athletes. From Olympians to professional boxers, the warriors were a women-identifying powerhouse (Low, 2018). Their clothing was inspired by ancient Greek female leaders, as well as pieces of men's armor (Low, 2018). Diana's contemporary looks were also inspired by powerful women, with attire reminiscent of the Women's Auxiliary Corps (Low, 2018). Diana's armor is a bit sexy, as it has always been to boost

sales (Lepore, 2014, p. 196), but a scantily clad costume does not automatically discount her as a sexualized object.

The film was met with rave reviews from critics and moviegoers. The popular movie rating site Rotten Tomatoes awarded the film a 93% fresh rating by calculating nearly 500 critics' and bloggers' reviews. Barker (2017) for *Variety* claimed that the film was a much-needed success for Warner Bros. and their line of DC films while Robinson (2017) for the *Verge* proclaimed that the film was a "tremendous win." For those who are not convinced to watch based on critics' reviews alone, sites like IMDB provide a platform for fans to share their opinions on films. When moviegoers share their thoughts on platforms like these, they contribute to the discourse surrounding the film's popularity and ideology. In the case of *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017), viewers shared their views of the movie and also became a part of the conversation surrounding female leads and feminism. With over 2,500 reviews from viewers, it is clear that fans have a lot to say. Combined with *Wonder Woman's* long history and dedicated fan base, the film was bound to evoke socio-political conversations.

Before *Wonder Woman's* film debut in 2017, she was saving the world in a different way. She was created during WWII in the wake of shifting gun regulations in the United States (Lepore, 2014). There was a national fear that comic books were too violent and fascist to be considered safe reading for children (Lepore, 2014). Dr. William Moulton Marston, a troublemaker and male feminist, believed the best way to dispel comic book fears was to create a female

superhero (Lepore, 2014). While male heroes were strong, their masculinity eclipsed their ability for love and compassion. Unlike skeptical parents and journalists of the time, Marston thought that the idealistic and comfortingly familiar storylines of comic books were a fun and entertaining way to instill values like justice and ethics in young readers (Lepore, 2014). He set his sights on creating a superhero that could still inspire young readers in an unassuming, guard-dropping package and Wonder Woman was born.

After her release in the fall of 1941, Wonder Woman became one of the most popular characters, only surpassed by Batman and Superman (Lepore, 2014). By spring of 1943, she was reaching millions of viewers in her own comics, and as a part of the Justice League (Lepore, 2014). After the first Wonder Woman comic was published, Marston opened up about his inspiration, claiming he wanted to “set up a standard” (Lepore, 2014, p. 220) for women and children. His argument “[she] wasn’t meant to be a superwoman; she was meant to be everywoman” (Lepore, 2014, p. 220) touched readers far and wide. More than eight decades after her creation, Wonder Woman continues to be an icon for feminism, female power, and body positivity. But has her latest rendition, directed by Jenkins, been able to uphold the feminist standards originally set for her back in the 1940s? Has she continued to be a strong beacon of equality for all?

Why does something like this matter? Wonder Woman displays the power and strength that all women are capable of, but this representation is important

for other oppressed groups as well. Though inspired by the women's suffrage movement, Wonder Woman represents more than feminist ideals; she represents the demolition of man-made hatred, regardless of gender, nationality, and so on. A character who speaks out on behalf of equality for an oppressed population, women for example, can become a character who speaks on behalf of oppressed populations everywhere. Superheroes' fictional worlds connect to the real world more than some realize when they address war, gender equality, mental health, sexual identity, and other hot topics.

A strong, feminist Wonder Woman presented onscreen means that people everywhere, and especially women and girls, have a powerful role model to reflect upon. Meanwhile, a Wonder Woman who succumbs to typical Hollywood tropes is hardly empowering for those seeking representation. When viewers ask themselves if Wonder Woman as she is presented today is representing ideals of feminism and gender equality, they are really asking themselves if their role model has an active voice instead of becoming another objectified, over-sexed, pretty woman in an action film. How does Diana in the 2017 rendition of *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017) compare? Is she everything feminists want her to be, or is she another example of a seemingly empowered woman who cannot have it all? And how do the film's feminist and post-feminist themes contribute to the conversations surrounding gender politics?

This thesis will address these questions through a textual analysis focusing on feminist and post-feminist themes in the 2017 film *Wonder Woman*

(Jenkins), and through a feminist critical discourse analysis of online social discourses and their negotiation of female power. I will begin by reviewing pertinent literature on male-dominated films and their reproduction of women as image, feminist film as an opposition to these patriarchal ideals, post-feminism as a covert form of female oppression, and Wonder Woman's involvement in them. After a brief overview of methodology, I will conduct a textual analysis employing feminist film theory, followed by a critical discourse analysis that focuses on viewers' contributions to conversations around feminism in media. Lastly, I will conclude with implications and limitations.



## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Film is an especially critical area of feminist studies because of its production of images and its “reproduction of woman as image” (De Lauretis, 1984, p. 63). Like advertisements, photojournalism, television, and other man-made visuals created and captured for spectators’ view, films exist within a larger societal context in which they are not immune. They perpetuate or disrupt ideologies and start conversations among viewers. Though audiences may not realize it, media are created with common ideologies in mind and encourage viewers to internalize and reproduce them. Patriarchal societies create media messages that promote patriarchal views, and while viewers may resist encoded meanings, they also may internalize and reproduce these ideologies. Their contributions to dominant ideology also contribute to the media it forms and the cycle continues.

Even in recent years, men hold the top spot on the metaphorical leaderboard of film. A quantitative study by Ramakrishna et al. (2017) analyzed nearly seven-thousand characters in close to one thousand films to determine that male characters held twice as many roles and lines of dialogue than female characters. Furthermore, male and female actors and characters were vastly different. They determined that male actors were significantly older than their female counterparts and were significantly more masculine on average

(Ramakrishna et al. 2017). The lack of gender equality reaches beyond the action on-screen. The study determined that male writers, directors, and producers vastly outnumber females in the same positions (Ramakrishna et al. 2017). With so many men in these leadership and creator roles, the points of view and worlds they create speak to masculine audiences. However, there appears to be potential for change. Films with female directors and writers had a far more balanced ratio of genders compared to male directors. In the case of Jenkins' 2017 *Wonder Woman*, this appears to be a good sign.

### Wonder Woman History

Since Wonder Woman's humble beginnings, she has represented equality for women and she has seen and experienced nearly every branch of feminism since her creation in 1941 (Lepore, 2014). Marston was inspired by suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst after watching her speak on women's rights in 1911 (Lepore, 2014). When he became involved in the debate over comic book violence, he knew a female superhero was the answer. He "believed women should rule the world" (Lepore, 2014, p. 3) and designed the character meticulously to fight the fight for equal rights. In the early stages, Wonder Woman was meant to be powerful and patriotic, but also sexy and barely clothed. Marston's supervisor at Detective Comics knew that the character was a risk and concluded that beauty and skimpy clothing would act as extra encouragement for sales. The right recipe turned out to be a combination of widely accepted female sex appeal and less accepted female empowerment. Wonder Woman has the

incredible strength of Superman, but she also has the kindness and compassion combined with the determination that Marston admired.

Despite her pinup looks, Wonder Woman is as tough as they come. Nearly unstoppable, she could only lose her powers after being literally bound by mankind, though she would always free herself from being the damsel in distress and save the day. Her kryptonite was symbolic of women's power being restricted by the man-made bonds of society, such as the socially constructed expectation for women to become wives and mothers for example. The comics would often touch on these issues and urge women to free themselves from their figurative chains. The standard 'good vs. evil' storylines of comics are comforting to readers (Rosenberg, 2013), but the good and evil do not need to be entirely fictional. Several scholars (Roblou, 2012; Cocca, 2014, Costello & Worcester, 2014) describe ways in which superheroes and their stories reflect everyday life and political issues like war and gay marriage. In the case of Wonder Woman and her Pankhurst inspiration, the character heavily endorsed feminist values that were established by suffragettes during first-wave feminism. Toward the end of WWI, many feminists urged policy makers to end the violence and bring soldiers home (Sharp, 2020). They argued that the destruction of war was no longer worth the gains and pleaded with others to focus on what made us human instead of what made us different (Sharp, 2020). This focus on compassion, love, and shared humanity was a common theme in Marston's rendition of the character.

After Marston's death in 1947, Wonder Woman fell into a slump and lost steam (Lepore, 2014). In the 1960s, Wonder Woman was invited to become a member of the Justice League of America (Hanley, 2014). Her status as the only woman on the team should have been empowering, but she was often captured and powerless or pining over her love interest, Steve Trevor (Di Placido, 2017). When she was not the damsel in distress, she was the secretary for the organization (Di Placido, 2017). After two decades of not being particularly impactful, she was rebranded in 1968 (Morgan, 2017). New writers, O'Neil and Sekowsky declared that Diana, an Amazonian goddess, was not relatable to children or women (Hanley, 2014). They stripped her of her powers, gave her a new, modern look, and turned her from 'everywoman' into the individual woman that others were capable of being. Becoming powerless meant that Diana Prince, formerly Wonder Woman, no longer felt like she belonged in the Justice League and announced that she would be leaving the team. Meanwhile, superheroes without powers, like Batman for example, never felt as though they did not belong. Ultimately, the rebranding was not as successful as writers had hoped.

In 1972, after only four years of individualized Wonder Woman, Joanne Edgar in collaboration with Marston's wife Elizabeth published a Wonder Woman based cover story for the first regular edition of *Ms. Magazine* (Lepore, 2014). Dorothy Roubicek Woolfolk, the new editor for the Wonder Woman comics, vowed to return the heroine to her original, powerful, feminist status, and was ultimately fired for doing so. After Roubicek Woolfolk's success on tour speaking

on the women's liberation movement, DC published a "Women's Lib Issue" (Lepore, 2014, p. 288). In 1973, Wonder Woman was named "a symbol for feminist revolt" (Lepore, 2014, p. 287).

With Wonder Woman's powers restored, her popularity continued to grow. In 1975, Lynda Carter starred as Wonder Woman in a television series by the same name (Morgan, 2017). Throughout the 90s and early 2000s, the heroine was the focus of a few animated television shows (Morgan, 2017) as well. Her rise in popularity reinvigorated her fan base and she has once again become a role model for women and girls, especially in relation to body positivity (Rosenberg, 2013). Though her character was not a part of second-wave feminism during the 60s and 70s, she has rebounded. In recent decades, fans praised the heroine for her inspirational "[confidence] with herself and her body" (Rosenberg, p. 38). In 2016, Gal Gadot made her first appearance as Wonder Woman in *Batman vs. Superman* (2016). The cameo gave audiences a taste of what to expect in her own film the following year.

### The Male Gaze and Mainstream Film

Feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey (1975) utilized psychoanalysis to understand how psychological desires and pleasure are utilized in film to capture audiences' attention. Perhaps most importantly, she pinpoints Freud's concept of scopophilia—or the pleasure in looking—as a critical factor of the audience's objectification of bodies (Mulvey, 1975). Furthermore, Freud asserts the observer experiences a sense of pleasure and control in doing so. As a result, the living,

breathing, body is viewed as an object in which the looker can derive pleasure. Because films unravel in a world separate from ours, the characters on-screen act as though they are not being watched. This provides another pleasure for the audience: a sense of voyeurism or pleasure from secretly observing (Mulvey, 1975).

When someone gazes at a body, or at anything at all, they do so through a gendered perspective. Mulvey (1975) asserts that gendered perspectives play out on the silver screen. She declares that films are told from two possible points of view: the male gaze representing a man's perspective, and the female gaze representing a woman's perspective. Men, as the most powerful in a patriarchal society and as the most common creators of media, display their points of view most often (Mulvey, 1975). When a film is told through a male perspective, it takes the audience on a journey through male eyes (Mulvey, 1975). For example, the audience follows along with the male main character, sees his memories in flashbacks, or gazes erotically at his love interest. In contrast, a female gaze follows the story of a female main character and shares her emotions and experiences instead. Not only do audience members follow the main character's gendered journey through their eyes, they identify with them. While a viewer recognizes the main character as a mirror image of themselves, they also misrecognize them as an ideal version of themselves. Mulvey (1975) characterizes this "recognition/misrecognition" as the first step to identifying with the main character and developing subjectivity. This viewing of a human body on

screen replicates the “mirror phase” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 61) of childhood. During this stage, children recognize their image in a mirror and imagine this image as a perfect and complete version of themselves (Mulvey, 1975).

If there is a difference between the subject (or bearer of the look) and the object (or the one being looked at), the difference follows the structure of the patriarchal society that created it. According to Mulvey (1975), men are the lookers with power and women are the objects of the look. Men are active characters who move the story forward while women are passive characters who act as objects to signify sexual desire. Mulvey (1975) argues that men in film occupy renaissance space, meaning that they act, do things, and change the world around them. These characters act in “three-dimensional space” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 64) despite their actual two-dimensional appearance on the silver screen. This renaissance space mimics the “so-called natural conditions of human perception” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 64) by blurring the boundaries between the action on screen and the action viewers see in the real world.

In contrast, women do not occupy a seemingly three-dimensional space. They literally and figuratively are displayed in two-dimensional space. Rather than carrying the weight of the story, they satisfy a pleasure component and must be visually appealing by adhering to socially accepted beauty standards. Even when women on-screen embody masculine characteristics like strength and dominance, their sexy attire and shapely bodies “only moderately challeng[e] traditional gender roles” (Roblou, 2014, p. 79).

To further promote the idea of women as objects, their bodies are often shown in alluring pieces to entice the audience. This chopping into pieces promotes the belief that women are something to be looked at or investigated by onlookers. In occupying their two-dimensional space, women in film are seen as art pieces or oddities to be admired instead of human beings who act and alter the world around them. A common example is a soaking woman emerging from a swimming pool. First, the camera focuses on her face, then her breasts, then her flat stomach, then her shapely hips, and lastly, her legs. Viewers often enjoy a sense of voyeuristic pleasure in observing female characters. They are satisfied to see an enticing body, and they take voyeuristic pleasure and power in shamelessly gazing at a conventionally beautiful woman (Mulvey, 1975). Viewers are not interested in her personality or how she interacts with the world around her, she is simply something we gaze at, investigate, and indulge in.

Mulvey (1981) also notes that while films are often from a masculine point of view, women in the audience are entertained with the men. Rather than identifying with a main character based on gender recognition, women identify with characters based on a desire for agency. They long for the ability to act and progress the narrative, and they place themselves in the metaphorical shoes of a character who can. This stems from Freud's suggestion that women's desires and sexuality is the opposition from dominant male desires and sexuality. Mulvey (1981) argues that women are torn between the passive, feminine expectations and masculine, active expectations. They are encouraged to act passively so that



they may be perceived as feminine and in doing so, they must reject agency (Mulvey, 1981). Film is an instance in which women must not limit themselves to these conventions and they can enjoy the agency of characters on-screen.

Molly Haskell (1987) describes three types of films, one of which is mainstream film. These movies focus on men's escapades and adventures (and therefore feature the male gaze), and often feature a wife, girlfriend, or female loved one to encourage safety and 'settling down.' Not only does this hinder the main character's fun, it limits the audience's ability to vicariously experience the same. In a sense, it builds an image of women as spoilsports, nags, or nearly villains. As a result, female viewers identify with male characters and reject the restrictive nature of female characters. Such a phenomenon explains why audiences are not simply divided based on a main character's gender. Instead, Mulvey (1981) argues that women spectators participate in "trans-sex identification" (p. 125), where women's identification with characters in film is flexible. Because films are often told from a male perspective, but audiences are not entirely male, female audience members are accustomed to this practice (Mulvey, 1981).

### Feminism and Women's Film

Films and their male perspectives reflect a patriarchal society in which male experiences hold more value than those of women. Though feminism has evolved and existed in waves over the last century, the overarching goal has been recognition and equity between genders and gender-related identities. In

the broad context of film, feminism exists when female perspectives and identities are given just as much weight and attention as male identities. Furthermore, feminist films do not simply depict women as two-dimensional objects posed for investigation. Instead, they depict women with agency and valuable experiences and perspectives.

Freud argues that masculine sexuality is the conventional form of desire, and that feminine sexuality is the opposition to this norm (Mulvey, 1981). Haskell's second film type is the women's film, which utilizes female gazes and perspectives. Much like Freud suggests that femininity exists in opposition to masculinity, women's films exist only in opposition to mainstream films. These alternative or "artisanal" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 59) films do not rely on the active/masculine and passive/feminine arrangement. Instead, women-led films display emotions, situations, and power structures through female eyes. Unlike a traditional film that prioritizes male experience and dismisses female experience, women's films (often called weepies) bring validation and relevancy to feminine issues, identities, and sexual desires.

Molly Haskell (1987) describes the ways in which women's films display middle-class perspectives on limiting roles that are socially constructed. By depicting women as main characters who are expected to abandon their individuality for the sake of motherhood and wifely domesticity, these films exhibit the cultural limitations placed on women (Haskell, 1987). In other instances, Mulvey (1981) argues that women—who are depicted as sexual objects through

the male gaze—become sexual subjects through the female gaze. The female character's sexuality is not simply erased when she becomes the main character. Instead, her sexuality becomes a topic of exploration instead of a means of exploitation (Mulvey, 1981).

In her analysis of *Caught* (1949) and *Rebecca* (1940), Mary Ann Doane (1981) describes ways in which women's films have adopted female perspectives by literally showing a female character's point of view. She describes the unusual format of *Rebecca* (1940), in which a male character (Maxim) acts as the narrator, and the camera portrays the world through a female main character's (Rebecca) eyes. For example, Maxim narrates that Rebecca stands from a sitting position on the sofa. The camera moves forward and upward as if looking through Rebecca's eyes while she carries out this motion. Not only does this allow for the audience to quite literally see through a female's eyes, it displays everything she experiences. Emotions, beliefs, and everything else that makes her herself is shared with the audience. Films adopting a female perspective may do so by displaying complex socio-economic issues through women's eyes, or by simply displaying a woman's existence complete with emotional standpoints and personal experiences.

As long as masculine points of view reign supreme in film, women's stories will continue to be the 'other' (Mulvey, 1975). Molly Haskell's (1987) remaining film type is the better women's film which resides between mainstream film and weepies. Traditional women's film dwells on the plight of women's

inability to escape their domestic boxes. Tied down to expectations of becoming a wife and mother, weepies provide an outlet for discontent wives to wallow in their sadness while watching female characters endure the same fate.

Somewhere in between mainstream and alternative movies is the better women's film. In this type, women are victims of circumstance, but they adopt agency—much like masculine characters in mainstream films—and turn their situation around to become the hero of the story.

### Post-feminism in Film

After several waves of feminism, ideology from the movement has seeped into pop culture and become mainstream. This popularity is seen as social acceptance, though women continue to be scrutinized by societal norms. Women depicted in media in an era of post-feminism seem to 'have it all' by having everything they could ever want at their fingertips. Despite limitless opportunities, women continue to be restricted by what is socially acceptable. They are encouraged to reach for the stars and do it all, though they must make the right choices when they do so.

Angela McRobbie's post-feminism argues that the feminist movement has been overtaken by media institutions that derail feminism's progress. While these institutions hide under the guise of 'girl power,' they purposefully limit women's ability to empower themselves. Post-feminism is a brand of media and society that considers feminism to be a spent force that has already fought its battle and "passed away" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 11). Due to the degree to which

conversations of feminism have been integrated into popular culture, it seems as though the issue of women's rights has been resolved and "things have changed" (McRobbie, 2011, p. 180). After all, women can receive an education, enter the job market, and enjoy sexual and financial freedoms with less government intervention than in the decades before. Under the guise of post-feminism, women and girls can exercise girl power and seemingly have it all (Douglas, 2010). With feminist gains now achieved, women can be conventionally sexy and appealing to onlookers and they can also enjoy voices, opinions, and options. Not only can they wear hot pants and make men drool, but they can feel empowered by their choice to do so. Although there appears to be more opportunities for women than ever, they continue to be restricted by social and cultural expectations of womanhood (Gill, 2007).

While feminist ideals have been incorporated into films, advertising, television, and so on, they have become more about the individual woman than womanhood itself. Because there are more choices and opportunities for women, the focus has turned from how women as a whole can advance, to how each individual woman can reach her potential (McRobbie, 2009). As a result, post-feminism encourages women to fight for themselves instead of fighting for women as a whole. If they cannot achieve their goals, it must be because they have not done what was necessary to achieve them, not because of political or societal bars. And if a woman does become successful, it is possible for any

other woman to 'pick themselves up by the bootstraps' and do the same (Young, 1986).

When women do venture outside of the domestic sphere and become successful in their careers, that alone is not enough. Recent "feminist manifesto[s]" (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, p. 7) describe a work-life balance as a goal for feminists. Not only must they cook dinners, clean the house, and drop kids off at soccer practice, they must wear suits with high heels and kick butt at board meetings. It appears that women must be able to manage every aspect of their lives in a socially acceptable ratio. Gill (2007) describes that while women have seemingly endless choices, "they are subject to a level of scrutiny and hostile surveillance" (p. 163). They are viewed under a social microscope and gauged based on their career choice, marital status, or devotion as a parent. In a modern world, women have an endless number of opportunities and they are expected to take advantage of every one of them.

McRobbie (2009) notes that many young women are hesitant to identify with the feminist movement. If feminism originates from a desire for men and women to be equal, then it appears that this has been achieved because women have more freedom to pursue a career, education, or other things they want. It is because of this that feminism seems to be irrelevant and unnecessary, much like it would have been if all genders were equal in the first place. McRobbie (2009) explains that it is this nature of feminism that encourages distance between the movement and young women today. The facade of equality between the genders

means that seemingly liberated women who identify as feminists face ridicule for participating in a seemingly redundant cause. Instead of speaking out and being labeled as a 'man-hater,' they embrace feminism in minute, individual ways to maintain their reputation as a "modern sophisticated girl" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 18).

Despite the appearance of equality, the "phallogocentric order" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 59) takes new forms. Though women are free to make their own choices regarding family planning, education, careers, and so on, they continue to be scrutinized (Gill, 2007). Social and cultural pressures influence women's decisions by rewarding or condemning them. While women appear to be empowered by the ability to choose, they actually have little choice at all. The power of choice emphasizes individualism and encourages women to reach their full potential by making the right choice (Gill, 2007). In the eyes of post-feminism, women 'can do' anything, and if she cannot, she only has herself and her own choices to blame (McRobbie, 2009). Many scholars have observed similar findings, that women are encouraged to 'have it all' like men because obstacles have seemingly disappeared (Gill, 2007; Taylor & Glitsos, 2021; Banet-Weiser et al., 2019).

McRobbie (2009) draws on the popular film *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001) as an example of post-feminism comfort. While the main character Bridget enjoys the freedoms granted to her by second-wave feminism, she obsesses over traditional conventions of marriage and motherhood. Overall, her brand of

feminism is about choice—she enjoys her freedoms and *chooses* motherhood and wifely domesticity. From an audience standpoint, Bridget's longing for a traditional lifestyle is a great comfort. The film features an opinionated woman with professional, social, and sexual agency, and uses the backdrop of a white picket fence dream life to avoid pushing the audience too far out of its comfort zone. Taylor and Glitsos (2021) make similar observations when analyzing female superheroes who appear to represent feminist values. While the strong, female protagonist fights the feminist fight, their battles take place in time periods before feminist gains. As a result, the feminist movement appears as though its work has been completed and the issue no longer persists (Taylor & Glitsos, 2021).

Other scholars assert that post-feminism is a more modern interpretation of empowering feminism. Fien Adriaens and Sofie Van Bauwel (2011) analyzed *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) and view post-feminist themes as positive and proud moments. Their definition of post-feminism is not a more current form of societal oppression, but instead something that “gives women the opportunity to be feminine, attractive, and feminist all at the same time” (Adriaens & Van Bauwel, 2011, p. 179) within a modern, neo-liberal market. However, not all feminist scholars agree on the definition of post-feminism. Considering the visibility that media and consumer culture have afforded to the feminist movement, other scholars like Adriaens and Van Bauwel (2011) asserts that post-feminism is simply an updated form of empowerment that includes sexual



freedoms, consumer culture, and independence. They describe how the show's main characters have the opportunities to make their own choices regarding financial, sexual, and relational independence. For instance, the four young women have the financial freedom to express themselves through couture clothing or cosmetic surgery and they are aggressive in seeking sexual gratification. Scholars like Gill, McRobbie, Banet-Weiser, and Rottenberg would disagree, arguing that their choices are made for them. The beauty standards they uphold for themselves or sexual desires do not manifest from personal choice as they might seem, but instead from societal pressures to be beautiful and sexually desirable.

With this research in mind, it is clear that feminism is still very relevant. In an era of post-feminist media, women continue to be sexually objectified and pressured by societal norms. The freedoms that women have seemingly achieved have only heightened social standards they must abide by. Therefore, against the backdrop of struggles that women experience in the contemporary postfeminist environment, it is significant that a film like *Wonder Woman*, which depicts a world where there is equity among genders, enjoyed nearly one billion dollars in profits within the first few months of its release and quickly became wildly popular. How did a film that supposedly promoted feminism become so popular in an era in which feminism has been replaced by post-feminism? And if the film did manage to promote feminist ideals instead of patriarchal ones, how did moviegoers take this? These considerations led me to the following research

questions: (1) how does Wonder Woman embrace feminist ideals in the male-dominated, post-feminist world of film? And (2) how do online social discourses address the film's feminist themes?

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

To answer these research questions, I conducted a mixed methods study that combined a textual analysis and a critical discourse analysis. My textual analysis focused on *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017) and its contributions to feminist and post-feminist ideologies presented in film. My critical discourse analysis centered on moviegoers' reactions to the film and their contributions to feminism in media that resulted from sharing their opinions. The combination of these methods is critical for understanding how media influences viewers' perceptions of socio-political issues. Man-made media, specifically films in this case, and the ideologies they perpetuate are deeply connected to social and political issues in the real world. By understanding what values the film represents and studying viewers' internalization and maintenance of these values, we can understand how media shape society.

#### Textual Analysis

A textual analysis entails an examination of the text. In this particular case, the text is the film rendition of *Wonder Woman* released in 2017 and directed by Patty Jenkins. In analyzing a text, researchers make an "educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text" (McKee, 2001). By looking at the film as a text, we can determine what meanings may be

shared with viewers and how resistant ideologies may be constructed or dominant ideologies may be perpetuated.

It is clear that media are an influential part of society. For example, De Lauretis (1984) declares that film has the ability to produce women as consumable images. In doing so, texts construct messages about what women should look like, who they should be, and so on. This is only a small example of how texts can contribute to ideologies of consumerism. Hall (1989) argues “[n]ew times are both ‘out there’, changing our conditions of life, and ‘in here’, working on us. In part, it is *us* who are being ‘remade’” (p. 225). Political and social movements like feminism are constantly changing and viewers are changing with them. By analyzing discourse around a movement, we can have a more well-rounded understanding of individuals’ thoughts toward a movement. These thoughts contribute to ideologies that continue to build the movement.

Messages constructed in Wonder Woman texts have often rejected patriarchal ideals despite her seemingly post-feminist appearance. Though some variations of the character have fallen short of feminist expectations, others have become iconic for the feminist movement. Analyzing one of the latest texts, *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017) in this case, is critical to understanding the messages and ideologies it could be projecting to audience members. Furthermore, it uncovers information regarding our current political state on issues of gender equality because films perpetuate ideologies that already exist. These ideologies are then passed on to audience members, who create their

own media messages that contribute to dominant ideologies, and the cycle continues on. An ideological analysis rooted in feminist theory can help us deconstruct how exactly the film creates meaning and shares while exposing sexist ideologies and asymmetrical gender roles.

### Data Collection

When I began formal research, I rewatched the film and took detailed notes on sets, music, costumes, lighting, and overall tone of the scenes. Throughout my analysis, I also revisited some scenes to ensure my notes and analysis were accurate. Additionally, I also obtained a script of the film to analyze lines and other verbal cues. With both resources, I could connect lines from the film to the non-verbal cues I included in my notes.

During my analysis, I paid special attention to Diana's character as a representation of feminism and her use of power in social situations and rejection of gender norms in a male-dominated era.

### Data Analysis

After collecting my data, I scanned my notes and the script for themes consistent in feminist films. After several scans, themes began to emerge. Likewise, post-feminist themes emerged. Her utilization of power appeared to reflect two main themes: use of the resistant female gaze and assertion of female agency. However, a few components of Diana's character contributed to post-feminist themes as well: displays of individualism and inability to 'have it all.'

## Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

Once the feminist and post-feminist themes in the film had been analyzed, I focused my attention on the audience's reception and negotiation of them. Feminist critical discourse is a method of study that "aims to advance a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex workings of power and ideology in discourse in sustaining (hierarchically) gendered arrangements" (Lazar, 2007, p. 141). By analyzing the discourse around a text, we can see how patriarchal ideologies relating to gender expectations are disrupted or maintained. Specifically, in the case of *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017), we can examine audiences' reception of the film's feminist themes to determine if they are welcomed warmly, or met with feminist backlash.

The film itself might be a beacon of feminist resistance, but audiences' perceptions of it might stop the revolutionary momentum in its tracks. Bell (1995) asserts that discourse surrounding media is important to consider for several reasons. One of which is its ability to "tell us a great deal about social meanings and stereotypes projected through language and communication" (Bell, 1995, p. 3) and "reflect and influence the formation and expression of culture, politics, and social life" (Bell, 1995, p. 4). Studying the discourse around the film is critical for understanding how viewers perceive the text as a feminist text. Mulvey (1975) mentions that feminist film often exists only in opposition to mainstream film because their messages do not align with popular ideology. On websites like

IMDB, viewers' praise or disdain for the film and its values contributes to the discourse surrounding the feminist movement.

### Data Collection

When conducting my critical discourse analysis, I focused specifically on the popular movie rating site IMDB. I specifically chose this site for research because it is a place where moviegoers can post their "honest" opinions of the film and encourage or discourage potential viewers from watching. According to Pentheny (2015), viewers are more influenced by reviews by other viewers than paid reviewers. These viewers' opinions influence other viewers, which contributes further to the construction of discourse surrounding feminism.

At the time of writing, *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017) had 2,503 user reviews and a 7.4 out ten rating on IMDB. For the sake of a more in-depth analysis, I chose to focus specifically on reviews written during the United States opening weekend which took place from June 2nd through June 4th. This narrowed the field of reviews to 236. In these, I searched for mentions of Diana's characteristics and negotiation of power in a male-dominated time period. This search further narrowed the field to 105 reviews.

### Data Analysis

With the field of reviews narrowed, instances from user comments were then coded for themes of feminism and power negotiations to determine viewers' perceptions of Diana as a feminist character. Comments that addressed her feminist perspectives regarding war, politics, and social life were included.

Additionally, comments that referenced the same feminist themes that I recognized, those being female agency and gazes, were included. Comments that included this and similar information were condensed into themes which included: empowering female leadership, instances of female agency, and spreading of feminist pacifist messages.

Through my analysis of the text and the discourse surrounding it, several feminist and post-feminist themes materialized. By connecting the text's ideology on feminism to moviegoers' perpetuations of ideologies on feminism, we can have a broader understanding of how meaning encoded in the text contribute to meanings within socio-political issues. Participatory culture displayed in online discussion forums like IMDB provide a unique insight into fan's thoughts and publicizes their opinions on the film and on feminism. This innovative combination brings the path of meaning-making together, from ideologies a text constructs or perpetuates to the influence it has on moviegoers to their construction or perpetuation of ideologies, and so on.

#### Researcher Position

Due to the qualitative nature of this analysis, I believe it is important to address my stance as a researcher. While some scholars differ, I am of the thought that unbiased, objective qualitative research is not possible. With this in mind, I fully accept that my personal experiences, my passion for superheroes, and my stance as a queer feminist woman may have influenced my interpretations of the data. As a critical researcher, I believe that any media text



can be improved, even those that already try to counterbalance power asymmetries.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ANALYSIS

When conducting a textual analysis of *Wonder Woman* (2017), two feminist and post-feminist themes were identified. Feminist themes included the resistant female gaze and displays of female agency. Post-feminist themes included Diana's individualism or 'can do' attitude and her inability to 'have it all.' As mentioned above, feminist texts center on a woman—or women—as main characters, validate women's experiences, and call attention to women's issues (Haskell, 1987). Furthermore, this call to attention connects on-screen issues to similar ones in the real world (Taylor & Glitsos, 2021). Post-feminist texts also center on women as main characters in the story, though their stories are often told in times after major feminist gains, as though the movement has already been "taken into account" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 10) and feminism is no longer necessary. Because of this, female leads are shown to have agency and social, sexual, and financial freedom while their actions are carefully regulated—or controlled—by societal norms (Gill, 2007).

First, attention will be paid to the text and its feminist themes followed by its post-feminist themes. This will be followed by an analysis of IMDB comments from the United States opening weekend that mention Diana's position as a feminist icon. From these comments, several feminist themes emerged.

## Feminism

*Wonder Woman* (2017) features several exhibitions of feminist resistance to typically male-dominated film practices, like the utilization of the female gaze, displays of female agency, and juxtapositions of gender roles. The film uses a female perspective to replace commonly used male gaze and by doing so, allows its main character Diana to assert herself as an active participant instead of an object. Furthermore, Diana exercises female agency by using her own body and mind for her own purposes. In these ways, she is an independent character who relies on her own abilities to move her narrative forward, instead of 'inspiring' a male character to move their narrative forward.

### The Resistant Female Gaze

Films can display a female gaze in a number of ways. One way is by portraying female perspectives, emotions, and experiences at the forefront of the story. These perspectives can also be displayed very literally with audience members seeing through a female character's eyes or watching as female characters exercise power with their gaze.

The first instance that audience members see men through Diana's eyes is when she comes face to face with a man for the first time. Steve Trevor, a spy for British intelligence, is saved by Diana after his plane crash lands into the ocean surrounding Themyscira. She swims him to a nearby beach unaware that a hoard of German troops are close behind and hoping to capture him. The Germans rush the beach and the Amazons are forced to take action. In battle,

the warriors are triumphant, but face several losses. Diana insists that WWI must be the work of Ares, the god of war, and demands that the Amazons do something to help. A frustrated Queen Hippolyta is hearing none of it.

Meanwhile, Trevor is recovering in the glowing, healing pools. He wiggles his feet and toes in the water and smiles while it glows around his movement. Diana, searching for him to relay the news, enters just as a nude Trevor emerges from the water. He recoils and covers himself in shock, proclaiming that he did not see her come in. While he is clearly uncomfortable in the situation, Diana is unphased. Unaware of the subtleties in social norms, she blatantly asks if he is “a typical example of [his] sex” (Jenkins, 2017, 0:30:00), and Trevor declares that he is “above average” (Jenkins, 2017, 0:30:08). Diana then asks “what is that?” (Jenkins, 2017, 0:30:18). Trevor, still uneasy about the situation, takes a moment to consider what to say. It is then that he realizes she is referring to his watch. He awkwardly covers himself with his hands and quickly makes his way to a nearby towel.

This scene takes the male role—as bearer of the look—and female role—as object being looked at—switches the genders. In this case, it is not a man watching and enjoying voyeuristic pleasure at the sight of an unsuspecting woman’s body. Instead, it is a woman who is unbothered looking at a man’s body, despite the fact that the man in question is clearly uneasy about being the object of the gaze. Trevor, a spy, would have made a living by stepping out of his everyday life and becoming someone else; strange situations should be nothing

new to him. Even while asking questions about where he is, why the water glows, and so on, he remains calm. It is only when he is stark naked in front of a watching woman that he is metaphorically thrown off balance.

The juxtaposition of two things rarely seen together, a shamelessly gazing woman and awkwardly objectified man, draws attention to the strangeness of any person becoming an object of another's gaze for voyeuristic or sexually satisfying purposes. Trevor's obvious discomfort is reflected by women's discomfort when they find themselves as the object of the male gaze. In a time of post-feminism, women's bodies are seen as an example of their success. Not only are people invited to look at women's bodies, they are invited to scrutinize every detail to identify their level of self-control, sex appeal, or femininity. Diana does the same when she inquires about Trevor being an average man. She uses what she has viewed in her gaze to inquire more about him as a man. By displaying Trevor as an unwilling participant in the gaze, Jenkins draws attention to off screen women falling under the same scrutiny.

Another layer to this is that Wonder Woman as a character seems to invite the male gaze. During her creation, Marston was aware that the character was risky and would need to present herself as conventionally beautiful. Rather than depicting Diana as an object to be investigated, the film deflects this gaze by placing her as the looker and Trevor as the looked-at. In an instance in which the main character could become wildly popular because she is a subject of investigation, the investigation is diverted and Diana becomes the investigator.

This investigation continues throughout the film as Diana navigates the strange new world that is WWI Europe.

The female gaze is not always taken so literally. Viewers may also see Diana's perspective through emotionally impactful moments in the film itself. After she chooses to leave the island and help Trevor stop the war, they make their way to London, England. Trevor still holds a journal containing the Central Powers' chemical warfare secrets. He believes that by delivering the journal to his superiors, that they can prepare for the enemy's upcoming attacks, gain the upper hand, and end the war. The pair manage to convince cryptographers to take a look at the notes written in code. When they cannot decipher the combination of languages, Diana assists and explains that it is a recipe for a hydrogen-based mustard gas.

Trevor and a Colonel try to convince a general to send troops into Belgium where the gas is being produced. Soldiers' gas masks and protective gear could never keep them safe from such warfare. The general is having none of it, and explains that they cannot continue to fight on enemy territory when they are desperately trying to convince the Germans to agree to peace. When Trevor explains how many men could die as a result, the general claims that death is simply "what soldiers do" (Jenkins, 2017, 0:58:34). Diana is shocked and appalled at the general's lack of empathy for soldiers who may die awaiting an armistice. Unlike Trevor who backs down, Diana speaks up and calls the general a 'coward' who should be fighting alongside his men instead of sacrificing them.

The scene displays two perspectives of war, though the audience is most familiar with Diana's. During WWI, many feminists believed that the war had led to, or would lead to, unspeakable damage and loss (Sharp, 2020). The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (hereby known as WILPF) was an activist group that argued that whatever could be gained by war would be overshadowed by death and loss (Sharp, 2020). Diana, who acts as a pacifist against war and violence, shares the same belief. This is juxtaposed with the masculine perspective of war and the belief that soldiers are indispensable and lives must be sacrificed for the sake of freedom. The general argues that freedom is not free, and that soldiers should be prepared to die. Meanwhile, Diana believes that every human life is valuable.

Seeing war through Diana's eyes is a critical moment for a feminist text. Much like many feminists during the first world war, the Amazons have a long standing history of opposing war and violence. The audience follows the story from Diana's perspective and from the idea that war and its devastation need to be stopped. By taking the audience on this journey, they are looking at war through a feminist perspective that opposes war and violence. Instead, the focus is on shared humanity and an emphasis that all lives have value. American women in the WILPF organization even reached out to women from countries in the Central Powers (Sharp, 2020). Despite these women being wives, sisters, or mothers of the enemy, they appealed to shared human emotions like compassion and love for one another (Sharp, 2020). Even when Diana is angry

with humankind for the losses she has faced, she reminds herself to spread love and compassion instead of more anger and violence. When she faces Ares again, she is confident in her stance: it is not humankind who are evil and spread hate, it is those who fueled the war in the first place.

When Diana and her team are making their way to the front, there is a very specific instance in which viewers see war through Diana's eyes. Diana has heard many awful things about the war, but she has not yet seen it with her own eyes. Trevor leads the way, seemingly unphased while Diana follows and watches in horror. As the team walks forward, they see several soldiers making their way out of the warzone. The camera focuses on Diana's face; she looks horrified and scared at the sight of the men coming her way. The camera view changes to show the men, muddy, battered, and exhausted as they support one another's weight. They look back at Diana with expressions of pity for what she is about to witness.

In this instance, viewers quite literally see the war through Diana's eyes. As she walks forward, she sees worn-down soldiers pass her. When the camera angle changes to show the soldiers, it continues to move forward. In seeing the soldiers, the audience sees them in the same way that Diana does, even down to the angle. The men make eye contact with the camera, much like they make eye contact with Diana as they pass her. The soldiers walk by in slow motion while heavy music plays. Not only do viewers see the soldiers and their ordeal through Diana's eyes, the addition of *how* the footage unfolds adds layers to the



experience. Viewers are invited to feel the heavy feeling through Diana's eyes. They experience the horror and carnage of war for the first time with Diana.

### Displays of Female Agency

Not only do viewers see Diana's origin story through her eyes, they are invited to see her motivations and actions as her own. When female characters exercise agency, they make decisions and act through their own motivations instead of following the lead of others. In this way, Diana exists in Mulvey's (1975) renaissance, action space instead of existing in a two-dimensional, objectified space. Throughout the story, she exercises by making her own choices and doing what she thinks is right even when it defies social and political norms.

In some cases, Diana's female gaze coincides with her exercise of agency. In one instance, Diana, Steeve, and their ragtag team of heroes have successfully saved the day after defending Veld, a small Belgian village, from German soldiers who have claimed it as their own. The villagers, ecstatic and freed from enemy hands, spend the evening celebrating with the heroic team as guests of honor. Steve and Diana 'sway" (Jenkins, 2017) to the music Charlie plays on the piano. She asks "is this what people do when there are no wars to fight?" (Jenkins, 2017, 1:26:56). Trevor, slurring his words slightly, explains that they do many trivial things, such as waking up, eating breakfast, and reading the paper. As the two settle in for the night, Trevor escorts Diana to her hotel room. He lets her in, then turns as if to leave. Diana faces him and looks at him with a

smoldering gaze. Trevor silently decides to stay and closes the door. He meets Diana in the center of the room, where the two share an intimate kiss. Before the audience has a chance to see more, the scene cuts to a view outside of their hotel.

During this particular scene, Diana and her female gaze challenge the gendered roles of sexual initiation. She is the looker, not the one being looked at. This look places Diana in a sexually aggressive position where she initiates the encounter, much like men often initiate sexual encounters in mainstream films. This gaze allows her to command the renaissance space of the screen and embrace agency by silently asking Trevor to spend the night with her. She is not simply an objectified body that ends up in a man's sexual fantasy, instead she is control of her body and sexual exploration. She is leading and he accepts his role as a follower when he closes the door and agrees to stay. Several earlier instances of the film display Trevor as awkward and uncomfortable engaging in seemingly sexual activities, such as sleeping adjacent to a woman, or even having conversations about sex and pleasure. Diana understands that engaging in this activity is out of Trevor's comfort zone, but she initiates nonetheless. Not only is the male/sexual aggressor and female/sexual object dichotomy flipped on its head, the male/active and female/passive dichotomy is flipped as well. Diana is not passive and simply accepting of what goes on around her, she is active and makes things (like a sexual relationship with Trevor for example) happen. As

an active part of the story, she also occupies renaissance space by propelling the narrative forward.

Even when Diana was a child, she has always been an active participant in her destiny. Throughout Diana's time on her home island, Themyscira, her mother is constantly worried about her safety. Not only is Diana the only child on the island, she is a precious treasure gifted to Hippolyta by Zeus. Diana believes that she was created from clay to satiate her mother's desires for children, but she later learns that she was created to protect the Amazons from Ares. Diana watches her fellow Amazons train for battle and she wishes to do the same. Despite her pleading, her mother insists that Diana forget about fighting. Antiope, known for being the best warrior of them all, works with Diana in secret for years. After being caught, Diana's mother recognizes that her daughter is far too determined to be stopped. Up until Diana leaves the island, her mother challenges her at every moment, especially when it comes to Trevor and helping humankind. When she finally leaves to join the world of humanity, she proclaims "I'm willing to fight for those who cannot fight for themselves" (Jenkins, 2017, 0:37:14), and her mother relents once again.

From Diana's childhood, her mother tried to contain her physically and mentally. When she was young and wanted to learn how to battle, her mother did not even want her to see other Amazons training. Hippolyta declared that there was no use for such a thing, though Diana persevered in the name of her destiny. As an Amazon, she understands her place in the world and feels a

burning responsibility to learn and protect others. According to Greek mythology, Zeus created the Amazons to stop violence and bring love and acceptance to humankind. Since first-wave feminism, many women have identified with pacifism and the belief that whatever could be gained from war was not worth the loss it created (Sharp, 2020). Diana shares the same thought: that time is better spent spreading love and compassion instead of hate and devastation. She feels a need to act based on her identity as an Amazon and her beliefs of an ideal, peaceful world. She even tries to convince others to join her by reminding them that “as Amazons, this is [their] duty” (Jenkins, 2017, 0:28:58).

Furthermore, her need to act positions her as the sole driver of the narrative. She rejects the passive nature of womanhood often seen in film and chooses to pursue her destiny of saving the world. This is especially clear during the battle between the Germans and the Amazons in Themyscira. While Hippolyta demands that she stay away from soldiers and Trevor requests that she stay put in a safe space, Diana makes the choice to fight with and for her people. Throughout the film, she often ignores the advice of Trevor, politicians, and others because they do not align with her goals or identity. She is steadfast in her belief that humankind has the potential for great love and compassion, even when she experiences their potential for great violence and coldness.

After Diana decides to leave her home island in yet another display of agency, she and Trevor make their way to London to deliver the notebook full of Central Powers' secrets. Upon their arrival, spy Trevor is determined to keep a

low profile. The pair meet with his assistant, Etta, and go shopping. While Trevor is away finding his own attire, Etta is tasked with helping Diana blend in.

Unaware of the bodily expectations for women regarding modesty in the early 20th century, Diana begins to publicly undress. When Trevor and Etta panic and cover her, she smiles amused with their silly reaction. While trying on dress after dress, Diana makes a scene. She kicks her legs, rips skirts, displays her fluffy cotton undergarments, and asks “how can a woman possibly fight in this?” (Jenkins, 2017, 0:49:57). Etta, confused at the idea, offers that they use their “principles” (Jenkins, 2017, 0:50:51). After returning, Trevor spots Diana in the only acceptable outfit found. He recommends a pair of glasses, hoping that they might make the beautiful Amazonian a bit less eye-catching.

While Diana agrees to go shopping based on Trevor’s demand, she maintains her agency throughout the experience. She does what she is told, but only on the condition that she does it her own way. She seemingly follows Trevor’s lead, but her actions must align with her purposes before they align with his. Whichever outfit she selects must cover her armor so that she may disrobe and use it at any time, and it must be practical in case she does not have time to do so. Diana recognizes the importance of blending in, but she understands the importance of stopping the war and Ares as well. Saving lives is of paramount importance, and so the theme must carry through everything she does. She remains dedicated to her mission, even while helping others accomplish theirs. Even in a situation where her body could easily become policed or investigated

by audience members and other characters, she remains in control and displays it however she deems appropriate. Furthermore, her motion to undress in front of unsuspecting shoppers is a nod to second-wave feminist's argument to take back their bodies and utilize them for whatever purposes they please.

The direction of the scene is also important to note for feminist media. While female bodies are typically dissected into visually satisfying pieces that promote women as sexual objects instead of human beings. In a scene that is focused on Diana's body and its appearance, her body is not traditionally sexualized with slow motion video, camera angles and movements, or dramatic music. Her body is not styled to encourage a "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 1999, p. 63) because it is not posed passively for spectators to enjoy. Instead, Diana's body remains active and the camera focuses on her and her character and not her body and its physical appearance. Sections of her body are displayed on camera, though they are not displayed in a way that encourages audience members to investigate her body as an object like Mulvey (1975) suggests.

Diana also exercises agency by actively fighting for what she believes in instead of complying to other's requests when they ask that she behave passively. Diana and her team of heroes make their way to the war front. Injured soldiers scream and beg for God or passersby to help. Civilians, desperate to escape, trudge their way through mud and crowds. Diana spots a horse and wagon carrying belongings stuck in the muck. While the horse's handlers whip to

encourage it to carry onward, she is appalled and condemns them for hurting the animal. The rest of the team tells her to continue moving forward, despite her desire to stop and help. The devastation is overwhelming and she listens to them. The five of them make their way into the trenches where the warfare is most intense. There are more people begging for help, including a mother with her child. When Diana stops to speak to them, she is told of their losses and how everything dear has been taken from them. By this point, Diana has had enough. Again, Trevor pushes her onward, but his attempts are in vain. She demands that they stop and do something. He explains that the soldiers here have been fighting for just shy of a year with little to show for it. Despite his begging to move forward, she removes her cloak, descends a ladder out of the trenches, and bolts across the field of “no man’s land” (Jenkins, 2017, 1:13:28). Taking all the fire from the Central Powers’ soldiers, Steve, his companions, and the Allies’ soldiers are able to descend into enemy trenches and take back land and villages claimed by the military.

This is yet another example of Diana acting, not on others’ accord, but through her own motivations and responsibility. When Trevor tells her that crossing no man’s land is “not what [they] came here to do” (Jenkins, 2017, 1:13:55), Diana is firm in her responsibility to do something and claims “it’s what I’m going to do” (Jenkins, 2017, 1:14:14). Fully aware that Amazon’s can die from human weapons, Diana occupies renaissance space by selflessly erupting into her warrior state. She has seen her people die from gunfire and battle just days

earlier on the beach; she knows that she is not an invincible force against the soldiers. Trevor, concerned for her safety, desperately calls after her to stop her. Like the British soldiers in their trench, she has witnessed the war's devastation. But unlike them, she feels a desperate responsibility to stop it. She and her team know that she could die from her efforts, and against their wishes, she takes it upon herself to do something.

Once again, she adopts female agency by staying true to her identity. The audience has seen the wreckage of war through Diana's eyes. Much like feminists before her have voiced their unwillingness to promote a fight that results in immense loss, Diana chooses to make a stand and stop the atrocity she sees. Instead of passively listening to her male teammates, she challenges them, asking how they can stand to do nothing. She physically turns her back on them to descend the ladder out of the trench and do what she came for. While she is part of a team, she knows that she has a choice to make as an individual. Rather than going with the flow of the men, she chooses to go against the grain to achieve her goals and follow her destiny. Little did they know that without her going against the German army, they might never have successfully made it behind enemy lines, found Ares, and stopped the war.

While *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017) utilizes feminist filmmaking by including instances of female agency and displaying bodies, gender expectations, and war through female eyes, it is not devoid of post-feminism. Often, these feminist themes exist in opposition to dominant film (Mulvey, 1975).



Because the film was written for a mainstream audience, it includes post-feminist themes that are comforting and familiar to the audience members that may not identify as feminists.

### Post-Feminism

Though *Wonder Woman* (2017) utilizes feminism in several ways, it also demonstrates post-feminism in several ways. The film displays post-feminism by presenting Diana as a 'can-do' girl. This emphasizes individualism and personal achievements over achievements of womanhood as a whole. Throughout her stories and individual experience, she also emphasizes that women cannot have it all, and that women who wish to gain or maintain power must make great personal sacrifices.

#### Individualism and 'Can Do' Attitudes

Women depicted in post-feminist media are seen as 'can-do' women who have the ability to achieve anything they set their mind to. If a woman in this media era is unable to accomplish their goals or take advantage of every opportunity, it is because she has not worked hard enough to do so. Furthermore, women in post-feminist media emphasize the experience and potential of each individual woman. This individualism spurs a sense of competition between women to be the most beautiful, sexy, strong, and capable woman of them all.

Diana's life growing up in Themyscira is very structured, especially during her early years. As previously mentioned, she is eager to learn to battle and

become a warrior like her fellow Amazons. Her mother does not approve, but finally relents when she sees Diana's determination and Antiope's willingness to train her. When the pair spar and practice in secret, Antiope constantly pushes Diana to fight harder. The young Diana is relatively unskilled and is easily overpowered by Antiope, who tells her that she doubts herself and that she is "stronger than [she] believe[s]" (Jenkins, 2017, 0:10:40). After Hippolyta finally relents and allows the pair to work together, she insists that Antiope trains Diana "five times harder, ten times harder" (Jenkins, 2017, 0:12:14) until she cannot be defeated by anyone. In time, she spars with and defeats Antiope, the greatest warrior of them all.

Unlike second-wave feminism which encourages women to stand up for and empower women as a whole, post-feminism emphasizes the importance of women focusing on themselves and their own level of self-improvement. In doing so, they can become strong and independent. By defying her mother and making her own choices to contribute to her fighting ability, she is able to become a strong warrior capable of anything. Contemporary media emphasizes that women become failures or successes based on their own actions, meaning that they only have themselves to blame if they cannot achieve their goals. Antiope reflects this when she claims that the young warrior is capable of more than she knows. When she tells Diana that she is doubting herself, she is really telling her that her inability to imagine the possibilities is what will deter her from success. She stresses that Diana 'can do' more and that she alone is responsible for her

limited success. By placing Antiope as a pivotal figure to invigorate Diana's desire to achieve what she sets her mind to, the script calls attention to society's collective individualization of women instead of emphasizing a sisterhood between women. Even on an island full of women, a sense of competition remains and serves as a reminder for our multi-gendered society.

Furthermore, Diana is not included in the sisterhood of warriors on the island. While other Amazons train with and empower one another, Diana is left out by Queen Hippolyta's orders. The other Amazons do nothing to stop this or challenge their queen; it is only Antiope who dares to do so. Instead of the island of Amazons all pushing Diana to reach her amazing potential, she must do so herself. The emphasis is not on women empowering women, but instead on women's responsibility as an individual to become strong and powerful within their own right. The sisterhood of the Amazons is beneficial to those who are included because they are successful in becoming great warriors. But Diana, who is not included in the sisterhood and must pave her own way, is rewarded for her efforts by becoming the greatest warrior of them all. Her success with an individualist stance and intrinsic motivation sets a standard for women to become powerful and independent by finding it within themselves to do so, not because societal or social bars prevent them from doing so.

Diana has a unique history. She was not created with her fellow Amazons, instead she was sculpted with clay by Hippolyta and given life by Zeus. While Diana does not know it, she was created to be the strongest of them all and

serve as a protector for her Amazonian sisters. The difference between Diana and the other warriors permeates her existence on the island. Time and time again, she is reminded that she is not like other Amazons. She is constantly relegated to the outskirts of the group, instead of being supported by them. The rejection is a tough pill to swallow and she feels an overwhelming sense of competition with the others. As a result, Diana is under constant pressure to prove herself and displays more strength, beauty, or capability than any other woman on the island. She must always fight harder, move faster, and be better than anyone else.

#### Inability to 'Have it All'

Women in post-feminist media are also depicted as those who cannot 'have it all.' During recent times, women have more traditional options (such as motherhood and child rearing) and more modern options (like an education and career) available to them. In this sea of unlimited opportunities, women are encouraged to 'have it all.' However, women post-feminist media are often shown as incomplete because they do not have it all and only feel a sense of completion after finding love, having a family, or reconnecting with 'meaningful' parts of a woman's life.

Diana leaves her home, Themyscira, to save the world, fully aware that she may never return or see her mother or fellow Amazons ever again. Her mother reminds her one final time before she leaves, and Diana solemnly declares that it is her duty.

Women in post-feminist media are often depicted as those who ‘cannot have it all’ when they struggle or are unable to keep or balance every aspect of their free and opportunity-filled lives (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019). Women who do have it all have satisfying romantic relationships, thriving careers, well maintained homes, happy children, and everything else they could ever dream of. When women become overwhelmed with the pressures of maintaining all of these, it is a reminder that they must sacrifice facets of life that are seen as more meaningful in order to maintain power or become successful. When Diana leaves home, she loses her family in pursuit of her destiny (or job) as a warrior. Though she wishes she could save the world and be able to return home at her leisure, she understands that she must choose between family life and soldier-like responsibilities. Diana has to sacrifice her family, a meaningful part of life, to become the most legendary Amazon of them all and exercise her power over Ares. After leaving and beginning her mission to stop WWI, she is fully dedicated to saving the world. While she mentions her home and their ideology, she does not reminisce in the same way that her teammates do. After Charlie fails to utilize his sharpshooter duties during the battle in Veld, Diana is confused about his inability to utilize opportunities that come his way. Sameer explains that “not everyone gets to be who they want to be all the time” (Jenkins, 2017, 1:21:56) and Diana understands that unlimited opportunities do not mean unlimited options. Instead, sacrifices must be made to maintain certain degrees of power.

The biggest sacrifice Diana experiences is the loss of her love interest. Near the end of the film, Diana battles with Ares to end the war while Steve attempts to deter a plane full of bombs from reaching London. The plane, filled with flammable hydrogen bombs must be stopped, but it cannot crash land without hurting innocent people. When the team of heroes discovers timers attached counting down to the bombs' detonation, they realize that it cannot stay on the ground either. Though it is a suicide mission, Steve runs toward the plane to stop it. He spots Diana across the tarmac and stops to give a final goodbye. She cannot hear him through ringing ears and she does not understand that these are their last moments together. He runs towards the plane again and battles to gain control of the plane. He takes the pilot's seat, leads the plane up into the sky, and retrieves a handgun from his holster. Steve pants, with terror in his eyes, and shoots into the cargo area of the plane. Diana, on the tarmac below, lies restrained on the ground. Her eyes land on the plane just in time to watch it explode in the sky. She cries out, and for a moment, she becomes just as angry with humankind as Ares has been.

Not only has Diana lost all of the family she has ever known by leaving Themyscira, she has lost the closest thing she has ever had to romantic love. In a fit of rage, she battles with the German soldiers to reach Ares. Much like post-feminist women in media are depicted as bitter and unsatisfied, Diana too morphs into a harsh, resentful character over her lost romance. Though they have only known one another for a few days, the pair already share a romantic

connection. While we know little about Steve's romantic past, this is the first relationship Diana has had that could potentially result in a love connection.

The loss of her first love sends her into a tailspin from which she only emerges after being reminded of wars' possible devastation. Ares brings Maru forth and encourages Diana to take her rage out on her. In the wind and chaos, Maru's protective face shields are peeled away, showing literal and metaphorical scars from tools of war. Only then is the spell of anger broken and Diana can once again fight for peace. Though she is victorious, she has lost her first (and perhaps her only) love connection. In order to save the day by defeating Ares, she cannot have it all. She is unable to do everything at once, and she loses Steve as a result. Her loss is devastating and temporarily deters her from her peaceful mission. Diana's inability to have it all and the sacrifices she must face for being a strong and powerful warrior temporarily change her from a woman of hope and compassion to one of bitterness and contempt. Without love, she is able to maintain power, but she is devastated and appears to miss out on romance, and therefore, misses out on one of life's greatest joys.

Nearly 100 years later, it appears as though Diana's attitude remains the same. The film opens with Diana walking through modern day Paris. Her voice is layered over the video and she describes her old, rosy perspective on humanity. She says that she used to want to save the beautiful, powerful world, but that she was unaware of the evils that she would find. She remarks that "mankind [is] another story all together" (Jenkins, 2017, 0:1:17). Before the real story begins,

she reminds the audience that “what one does when faced with the truth, is more difficult than you think” (Jenkins, 2017, 0:1:26).

When Diana first left her home, her mission was clear: she felt a sense of duty to bring peace back to humanity and stop Ares. After decades of living among humankind, little to no family contact, and perhaps little romantic fulfillment, have resulted in a more pessimistic outlook. Originally, Diana held the belief that humankind was inherently good and corruption must be caused by meddling outside sources. After her adventures with her team and the following years of blending in with humanity, she has come to the conclusion that humanity is capable of amazing and terrible things all on their own. In the end, it is each individual's responsibility to make the right choices and choose love over hate. This idea mimics the values of post-feminism: that each woman is solely responsible for their choices that result in their success or failure. Additionally, Diana's pessimistic view towards humanity are characteristics of unsatisfied feminist women who's drive and ambition have marred their ability to lead emotionally fulfilling lives. Those who are unable to have it all are seen as angry, sexually frustrated, and bitter because they are missing critical components of happiness.

#### Viewers' Contributions to Feminist Discourse

After *Wonder Woman's* opening weekend, viewers flocked to popular movie rating sites like IMDB to share their thoughts on the newest installment of the DC Extended Universe. Moviegoers recognized several aspects of feminism



in the film, including women's empowerment, female agency, feminist values like hope and compassion, and the balance of strength and beauty.

"empowering female lead" (mhajiem, 2017)

In many cases, viewers referenced Diana or the film itself as an empowering text fit to inspire girls, boys, men, and women alike (judicmr-77855, 2017; Kelevra770; sumanyup, 2017; zero-to-HERO, 2017). While connotations of the emotionally charged idea of empowerment vary from person to person, viewers commonly found empowerment in Diana's ability to do anything that men could do, and in her willingness to stand up for herself.

[M]hajiem (2017) commented that Diana was an "empowering female lead" that was well overdue. Her existence, as a lone superheroine in the DC extended universe sets her apart in a male-dominated genre. One user mentioned how uncommon it is to see a "[h]eroine [that is] important or [in] a [l]ead role [e]specially in the case of [superhero] movies" (joyalbrightt, 2017). Other users felt empowered by Diana's actions within her atypical role. Not only is Diana different because of her sex, she is different because of her performance of gender identity. [A]shleythemorningstar (2017) commented that "[a]t numerous points, Diana stood up, not allowing herself to be silenced." On a similar note, other users wrote that the switch in gender roles that resulted in a female heroine was massively empowering. One audience member mentioned that "what really struck [them] about the film was the blatant feminism of this whole thing. For I think the first time in film really, you have a male lead playing

the female role, and the female lead playing a man's role" (Syenstadt, 2017).

Another user by the name of hollywoodhernandez-70868 (2017) noted something similar when they wrote "[o]ur hero is equal to any man in the movie but it's a subtle portrayal that doesn't beat you over the head. She's simply a strong woman."

When Wonder Woman was created by Marston in the 1940s, her sex was always meant to define her. The combination of her strength and conventional beauty resulted in her becoming a role model for comic book readers and ultimately, television and film watchers. Her expression of female gender has always been purposefully obvious so that she would be set apart from other crime fighters. Nearly eight decades later, she is still a lone woman in DC's lineup of popular characters and continues to differentiate her from her male peers. Her existence in a male-dominated world of crime fighting, and film, is empowering all on its own. Diana's balance of soft feminine and harsh masculine traits became a perfect marriage of "bad-ass and just drop-dead gorgeous" (sumanyup, 2017) making her an empowering figure.

Not only is Diana an empowering character for simply existing in a male-dominated world, she is empowering in her ability to keep up with the guys and fight the fight for gender equality. Diana is not a simple-minded, passive woman in an action film. She portrays traits often seen in male superheroes, like strength and determination, but in a female presenting body. The juxtaposition of the two rarely seen together was a breath of fresh air for viewers who found Diana's

character powerful and inspirational instead of a soft, typical, portrayal of womanhood. A user by the name of Pdmajumder (2017) describes Diana as a “very passionate and warm individual but also very strong (literally, too) and aggressive when she needs to be, which is a beautiful equilibrium that somehow suits women the best.” Another commented that “Diana sets the ultimate standard of the perfect heroine - in beauty, fierceness, and heart” (inspectorbob, 2017). With her beauty and strength, Diana is a “feminine feminist” (hollywoodhernandez-70868, 2017). She is a powerful warrior who also embodies conventional feminine qualities like beauty and compassion. Diana is warm and nurturing in her complementing and encouragement of others, and she is also strong, determined, and passionate about her goals. In this way, she is a feminist, but not in an aggressive way that threatens patriarchal ideals. Instead, she embodies traditional feminine traits and hegemonic femininity that are comfortingly familiar for audiences.

Several users mentioned that the feminist messages of female empowerment were smartly packaged with humor at the expense of societal expectations. PyroSikTh (2017) mentioned that “[Diana’s] complete disregard for societal expectations of women at the turn of the 20th century lends to a lot of comedy at humanity’s expense rather than hers.” A user by the name of megankm-87741 (2017) commented that the poking fun at “the Virgin Mary complex that society pushes made it one of the best super hero movies I’ve seen.”

Her character is naive and unaware of the cultural norms in Europe. When Diana learns about fashion or socially imposed gender expectations, she is often surprised. Her naive character could easily become the center of the joke and male characters could easily laugh at her lack of experience. Instead, the humor is pointed towards societal expectations, and Diana's surprise is simply the vehicle. Her shock brings to light the silliness and unreasonable expectations of women and politics during the time period. The humor brings in the comfort and familiarity and makes light of a situation that might otherwise be overbearing or uncomfortable for audience members who might not agree with feminist lines of thought.

Making light of these gender inequalities was not only entertaining for audience members, but they found it a tasteful way of addressing gender inequalities and empowering women without ridiculing men. A user who goes by nikola17 (2017) wrote that "it's great they didn't make her a b\*itch" when referring to complaining about humanity or winning over a male-dominated world. Instead, they addressed women's empowerment in entertaining and thought provoking ways that allowed the message to get across instead of being shot down by feminist backlash. This is another example of how Diana is a feminine feminist: she displays feminine characteristics like humor and charm while also promoting female empowerment. Her hegemonic femineity disarms the audience and allows her feminist messages to make their way to the audience in a way that is not nagging or deriding. The message of female empowerment is harder to take

in from a bra-burning troublemaker and easier to take in from a beautiful, charming woman.

“The engineer...of her own story” (RLTerry, 2017)

Diana is an active character in her own story, meaning that she makes her own choices instead of being ordered around by men. There are many points in the film where she does not follow the status quo and decides to do what is best for her, her values, and her mission. RLTerry (2017) commented that Diana is a “female protagonist who is not merely a leader, but the engineer—the author—of her own story.” This is especially unique in a time period before feminist gains, and The-Sarkologist (2017) noticed this. They stated that in a man’s world, “she must not only prove herself, but she must also stand and fight against the male prejudice that dominated at the time.”

Additionally, users pinpointed specific scenes in which Diana resisted patriarchal ideals from the time period, and advocated for herself and others. Several users (prospectus\_capricornum, 2017; pressboard, 2017; ashleythemorningstar, 2017) specifically mentioned Diana’s confrontation with the British general as an important moment in Diana’s fight for what she believes in. One of them notes “[t]here is a great scene where she lays into the British Commander with some well placed criticism” (pressboard, 2017). Another describes how Diana “called the general-who subtly mocked her for being a woman-on what he was: a coward-informing him that true leaders do not hide behind their soldiers” (ashleythemorningstar, 2017). The same user also

mentioned the bar scene as powerful when Diana “sav[ed] her future brother in arms’ life-demonstrating that she has what it takes to go the distance” (ashleythemorningstar, 2017). Others also picked up on the agenda Diana exercises when descending the ladder out of the trenches and into “no man’s land” (Jenkins, 2017, 1:13:28) when she simply “wouldn’t take no for an answer” (ashleythemorningstar, 2017).

Diana is a warrior, and she is not content to sit idly by while others do the talking, partake in the action, and carry on the story. Instead, she leads it by making her own choices and remains determined to find Ares and end the war. Men’s apprehension of her based on her gender is preposterous to her. Coming from an island of women, she is not experienced with male-dominated politics and their dismissal of women. Upon experiencing this prejudice for the first time, she is shocked, though she is not shocked into silence. Diana immediately rejects these ideas. After all, on her home island of Themyscira, women ran an entire civilization for thousands of years on their own. Additionally, they were able to do so without war and violence against one another. As far as Diana is concerned, her opinion and abilities are just as valuable as anyone else, and there is no reason why she should not be able to express her thoughts or carry out her actions.

Once again, this draws attention to the foolishness of women’s perceived unimportance during the time period. In a man’s world, Diana is not expected to listen in on war-related politics, fight with soldiers at the front, or even speak her

mind. Not one to cower or sit in silence, she challenges men (such as the general) who do not show the compassion or humanity that she does. While she speaks her mind, she does so “tactfully...as opposed to an obvious ‘you’re sexist’ type dialogue” (ashleythemorningstar). In situations where Diana disagrees with men, the conflict is not simplified with gender in which men are wrong and women are right. Instead, there is a focus on humanity as a whole and losing touch with oneself in relation to that humanity. Though the script addresses gender equality, Diana never once mentions a distinction between genders or blames one for the world’s problems. Instead, she reminds the audience that everyone is capable of great things while also being capable of terrible evil. Because of this broad perspective, the script smartly navigates around a dialogue where men and women are pitted against one another. It addresses gender inequality and women’s agency in a different way that was respected by viewers.

The no-man’s-land scene was yet another brilliant win in the eyes of the viewers. One viewer commented that “the charge across No Man’s Land and the battle for the French village is awesome” (fredschaefer-406-623204, 2017). A user by the name of justinpkelly (2017) remarked”

My favorite scene in the film was when Steve warned Diana not to cross No Man’s Land and she climbs the ladder anyway. I got goosebumps all over and was on the edge of my seat...Wonder Woman is extremely

inspirational in this movie and that scene embodies her character. Scenes like that were the most memorable for me.

Another wrote that it was a great display of female empowerment when “Diana wouldn’t take no for an answer, and does what no man was capable [of]-- charging into the line of fire, herself a glimmer of hope much like the light reflecting off her bodice, in a dead world” (ashleythemorningstar, 2017).PyroSikTh (2017) made the same observation, calling the scene “the standout” of action scenes in the film.

Her agency is apparent when Diana turns her back on Steve and faces the enemy soldiers. She does not act based on requests from Trevor or any of her comrades, she acts because it is what she came to do. She adopts agency and chooses to fight on her own accord out of a sense of duty to help humankind. Before anyone else and without outside influence, Diana takes the chance and faces danger, and by doing so she is able to take the fire while her comrades make it into enemy trenches unscathed. In this scene, Diana’s exercise of agency was a shining moment for the film that users mentioned and praised again and again.

#### “Glorious Manifestation of Hope and Love” (nandidot, 2017)

At the heart of Diana’s optimistic and idealistic character are pacifist, anti-war values that have a long standing involvement with feminist values. WILPF, the organization of suffragettes who believed that the devastating losses of war were no longer worth the gains, spread messages of compassion and shared



humanity in hopes that the WWI could end and soldiers could return home to their families (Sharp, 2020). Audiences noticed these themes of love, hope, and compassion, and made note of them in their reviews.

The most commonly referenced feminist/pacifist theme in users' comments was love. After the film's climactic action sequence, Diana shares her lesson learned from the experience that "only love can truly save the world" (Jenkins, 2017, 2:09:52). Many users shared their agreement, or at least acknowledgment of love's power. One user mentioned four "resonating anthems...:love and peace, sacrifice and courage" (prospectus\_capricornum, 2017). RL Terry (2017) wrote "[t]he key to understanding Wonder Woman is not through her brute strength or supernatural powers, but through her love and compassion." Diana's "love and compassion" (RL Terry, 2017) promotes the pacifist values that many feminist endorsed during WWI. By including these themes, the film and fans are perpetuating ideologies that have long been intertwined with feminism. Many users combined Diana's desire to spread love with her hopefulness for a brighter, better future (PyroSikTh, 2017; jtoy412, 2017; nandidot, 2017).

Much like feminists during the WWI time period, Diana aims to end the war. While she is not intimately involved with soldiers aside from Steeve, her identity as a peace-seeking amazon. At the beginning of her origin story, she believes that simply killing Ares will be enough to stop the devastation. Nearly a century later, she understands that Ares is not only to blame. Instead, it is

humanity itself that has great capability for destruction, but they also have great capability for love. A user by the name of bigmadams (2017) writes that “the main theme isn’t that [w]omen can save the world, but rather love can save the world!” Though no users directly mentioned pacifism in relation to feminism, they did recognize that Diana’s goals align with values of peace and love. Long after WIPLF worked to end the first world war, Diana continues to believe in the feminist values of pacifism and trust feminist values of love for humankind.

Users also recognized compassion as a driving force for Diana, which is yet another characteristic of the feminist movement during WWI. The theme was paired with several other feminist themes such as courage (RLTerry, 2017; AggressivePizza, 2017), determination (RLTerry, 2017; dave-mcclain, 2017), strength, vulnerability, and intelligence (dave-mcclain, 2017).

Feminist pacifism is rooted in the belief that compassion for humanity is a vital component in ending violence caused by war. Diana clearly displays compassion for humankind, despite knowing very little about them. Her first interaction with Steve is her first encounter with humanity and she immediately feels compassion for the millions whose lives have already been lost and a sense of duty to help those who continue to fight. When users recognize Diana’s conflict with the British general over masses of lives lost at the front, they recognize her as someone who fights for the good of humanity and encourages compassion for humankind. RLTerry (2017) writes “Diana Prince’s origin story is powerful and ever so apropos in today’s socio-political climate. If only we could all have the

courage, compassion, and determination that Wonder Woman embodies and represents.” Not only are Diana’s pacifist values embraced by audience members, they are encouraged by them as well.

Furthermore, audiences were encouraged by Diana’s sense of hope in relation to feminist pacifism. PyroSikTh (2017) commented that “[s]he represents an ideal, she’s a symbol of love and hope, and her quest to kill Ares is as symbolic as stopping the war itself - not just World War One, but all wars.” Another user mentioned that Gal Gadot’s interpretation of the hero “never makes us feel that Diana is stupid or filled with angst, but instead a constant beacon of hope even when things are at their worst” (ashleythemorningstar, 2017). They later wrote “Wonder Woman is a fine example of...what a female-led narrative should be” (ashleythemorningstar, 2017). Others, like nandidot (2017) put it simply when they said “Wonder Woman is a glorious manifestation of hope, love, and the power of good.”

Despite the carnage of war that surrounds her, Diana remains steady in her ideals that good will triumph over evil and remains hopeful that peace can be restored. For many viewers, this resilience and hopefulness is inspiring. Her hope is not seen as foolish innocence, it is seen as ‘glorious’ or powerful in the same ways that her characteristics of love and compassion are. Though her positivity and pacifism sets her apart from other superheroes, her compassion is not seen as weakness. Instead, she sets an example for other female-led films. This mirrors Marston’s wishes for the character to “set up a standard” (Lepore,

2014, p. 220) for women and girls in the audience. Nearly a century after her creation, viewers express that she continues to do just that.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

#### Goals and Methodology Overview

The world of superheroes is predominantly and unquestioningly male. Female heroes like Storm, Black Widow, and Wasp are often relegated to sidekicks or simply an extra member to fill out a crime fighting team. Enter Wonder Woman: one of Detective Comic's most popular and long running superheroes who has managed to maintain her status amidst a sea of men. Though her iconic feminism has waned through the 60s and early 70s, she has seemingly regained her status as an empowering female figure. This analysis of Patty Jenkins' 2017 rendition of *Wonder Woman*, as well as the discourse surrounding it, aimed to determine how it stacked up against feminist backlash in a post-feminist era of media.

Some scholars who study post-feminism argue that media and marketing view feminism as if it has "passed away" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 11) and is no longer a necessary effort. At the same time, women are under stricter societal pressures than ever (Gill, 2007). Where does Diana fit into this? Is she a powerful woman who must bend under societal pressures, or is she a powerful woman who rejects patriarchal ideologies and promotes her own feminist ideals instead? After examining the text itself and the discourse surrounding it, Diana appears to truly be a beacon of feminist resistance.

To study Diana's character and role as a feminist icon, a textual analysis focusing on her actions, storylines, and utilization of power was completed. After identifying feminist and post-feminist themes in the film itself, I turned my attention to viewers' discourse on the popular movie rating site IMDB. This platform allowed me to see moviegoers' opinions of the film and analyze their interpretation of the film's feminist themes. By analyzing the text as well as viewer's contributions to the discourse surrounding feminism, we have a unique viewpoint into how texts like these contribute to socio-political conversations. When fans watched, what did they take with them? Did they notice the same things I noticed? Or did they find satisfaction and 'girl power' in post-feminist themes? While some reviewers wrote comments sexualizing Diana or dismissing her power, the reviews included in my selection were overwhelmingly positive. As a moviegoer who had heard many negative thoughts on the film in recent years, I was very pleasantly surprised to see the public support it was garnering.

### Discussion

Feminist film scholars have written about techniques that resist male-dominant ideologies such as including active female characters instead of passive ones (Mulvey, 1975), challenging gendered expectations (Mulvey, 1981), prioritizing female desires (Haskell, 1987; Mulvey, 1981), and displaying female points of view (Doane, 1981; Mulvey, 1981). During my textual analysis, two themes emerged in relation to Diana's feminism: her female agency and female gaze. Throughout the film, Diana has no qualms about rejecting gender roles,

challenging leaders, and doing what she thinks is right instead of passively listening to others. She is not the soft, feminine, wilting violet commonly seen beside strong, leading men—she is the leading wo(man) herself. When Trevor warns her that her only hope to end the war is finding the men who can, she proclaims “I am the man who can” (Jenkins, 2017, 0:40:08). She does not intend to follow orders, she intends to fight for what she believes is right.

Furthermore, displaying Diana’s female gaze regarding her pacifist stance on war and ideology is a monumentally feminist position for the film. While films are typically male-dominated and show masculine perspectives, *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017) displays a woman’s history, journey, desires, and beliefs. When the audience sees war, they do not do so through a masculine, heroic landscape. Instead, they see it through Diana’s view, as a devastating, inhumane, and evil event. Despite this, she is still willing to physically stand up and defend “those who cannot fight for themselves” (Jenkins, 2017, 0:37:14). The camera angles, slow-motion, and musical overtones build emotions for audience members so that they may literally see and feel what Diana does in that moment. Because the audience understands Diana’s background, they understand her motivations on anti-violence and why the war must come to an end. In this way, the audience sees Diana’s perspective through her values as well as literally by seeing through her eyes. The storyline of the film involving war and Diana’s scantily clad attire seems to invite the male gaze, though the film depicts her as an active character instead of an object to be investigated.

Through her agency and point of view, Diana displays several types of feminism. Perhaps most obviously, she embodies pacifist views that many suffragettes aligned with during first-wave feminism. While first-wave feminists were almost certainly not in attendance as viewers, the connection between the film and the movement that started it all over a century ago is clear. Diana also represents second-wave feminism by owning her body and making her own choices. In the early 20th century where women were held to high moral standards, she is not policing her body or abiding by social standards for her gender. Instead, she maintains control of her body and continues to fight for the accomplishment of her goals. This encapsulation of first and second-wave feminism may contribute to the film's success by making it relevant to as many audience members as possible.

Despite the film's feminist themes, there are a few post-feminist ones as well. With the hefty \$150 million budget (Tiffany, 2017) and Wonder Woman's well known brand, the film needed to be a success. Instances of post-feminism, along with comedic relief and a comfortingly conventional storyline of good vs. evil, made the messages of female empowerment easier to receive. From childhood, Diana has been a unique Amazon. Sculpted from clay, she was the only child on Themyscira and has always lived up to standards that her fellow warriors did not. Her mother's determination to keep her away from violence, power, and training created an environment where Diana, not unlike other rebellious teens, had to go against her orders and pave her own way. Antiope,



Diana's aunt and trainer, encouraged Diana to dig deeper and push harder, encouraging her to find it within herself to be better. This represents society's expectations of women in the era of post-feminism: that success can be theirs if they would only try hard enough. In the end, Diana does dig deep and she is rewarded by becoming the strongest, most beautiful, most powerful warrior of them all. In this way, individualism and pitting herself against her fellow Amazons worked for her as she was able to accomplish her goals.

Or did it? In Diana's quest to become the most powerful Amazon and save the day, she was unable to have it all. Women in post-feminist media are often depicted as those who cannot have it all, meaning that they can gain power and achieve great things, but with great personal sacrifice. For example, women in post-feminist media are often seen as professionally savvy, but lacking in personal and romantic relationships. Despite their ability to excel in the workplace, nearly every aspect of their personal lives is lost and they become bitter as a result. This same fate falls upon Diana when she loses her family and romantic partner all to stop Ares. When she leaves home, Diana is warned that she may never be able to return. Every relationship she knows ends when she decides to go with Trevor and save the day. When he perishes in the efforts to stop the war, Diana is at a loss. All of her personal relationships sacrificed, she briefly loses touch with her goals and turns against humanity. She eventually comes to her senses and returns her frustrations toward Ares, but she still appears somewhat bitter when viewers see her reflect on humanity nearly a

century later. While she still believes that love is the answer to humankind's problems, she believes that it is an individual struggle rather than a struggle for humanity as a whole.

After analyzing the text and focusing my attention on IMDB user comments, I was pleasantly surprised to see the warm welcome of feminist themes. By studying users' thoughts of the feminist film, we can understand their contributions toward the discourse on feminism as a whole. In this case, an overwhelming amount of the comments analyzed welcomed the feminist character warmly. Some users specifically pinpointed moments of feminist power in the film that I included in my own analysis. Several themes became clear among users: they felt empowered by Diana's character, they enjoyed her agency, and they recognized her embodiment of feminist pacifist values.

It was often said in the comments that *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017) is one of the best films in the DCEU. This was made even more impactful knowing that women were at the helm. Reviews found Diana's position as a female superhero empowering, and claimed that the "blatant feminism" (Syenstadt, 2017) was wonderful to see. Not only were the feminist messages empowering, they were included in smart, comical packages that softened the liberal blows. Diana's rejection of patriarchal ideals often led to jokes at humanity's expense instead of hers, which pokes fun at society's ideas of gendered roles while not framing Diana as the butt of the joke.

Users also enjoyed that Diana was the leader in her own story and utilized several examples in the film to claim their point. Specifically, many mentioned the scene where Diana condemns a British general for cowardly sacrificing men and the scene where Diana ignores Trevor's orders and makes her way through "no man's land" (Jenkins, 2017, 1:13:28). One user mentioned their goosebumps in response to Diana's agency in ignoring Trevor and saving the day. Not only were fans happy to see a woman taking charge and leading the narrative, they found it exciting, empowering, and entertaining.

Perhaps the most obvious theme of them all was the recognition of feminist values like hope, love, and compassion. During WWI, American suffragettes formed WILPF to spread the message that the war's gains could no longer be worth the devastating losses. Instead of adding fuel to the fires of anger and spite, they spread messages of love for others, hope for a safe end to the war, and compassion for their fellow humans. Diana and her pacifist values fit perfectly with feminist messages of the time. Users often referred to Diana as a beacon for hope, love, compassion, or all three and praised her for these values. Despite these feminine qualities, they still perceived Diana as strong and powerful. Much like Diana blends feminism and post-feminism or empowerment and humor, she also marries strength and feminism. Furthermore, she does so in ways that do not make her a giggling, bubbly, silly example of hegemonic femininity. One user even referred to this marriage of qualities and deemed Diana a feminine feminist who is a strong woman, while still appearing beautiful.

Furthermore, instances of post-feminism in the film seem to make the instances of feminism easier for general audiences to enjoy. If feminism is often met with backlash in current times due to our seemingly more inclusive social and political landscape, how did the film become so wildly popular? It appears as though the post-feminist qualities of the film, like Diana's sexy armor and 'can do' attitude, acted as a Trojan horse of sorts to attract an audience and sell tickets. While in theatres, fans received these post-feminist ideologies they anticipated along with feminist ideologies they may have not anticipated. The strategic displays of post-feminism clearly got moviegoers' attention in the first place, and according the IMDB reviews, the feminism kept their attention. The combination of feminism and strategic post-feminism in the film makes it a truly unique text.

Despite the staggeringly positive comments about Diana or the film as a whole, not all reviews were positive. I entirely expected to see reviews praising post-feminist themes and 'girl power' or reviews full of angry feminist backlash. In my assessment, viewers seemed to be praising genuine feminist contributions to the film instead of praising her individualism and 'can do' attitude. There were several comments that objectified Diana sexually, or others that claimed the film to be feminist propaganda, though none of these referenced Diana's feminism, strength, or capabilities. However, because these reviews were so sparse, there were simply not enough occurrences in the data to draw any conclusions on that front.

## Limitations and Future Research

Much like any medium can be improved, all research can be improved as well. Since her origin story, Diana has been seen in *Wonder Woman 1984* (Jenkins, 2020) and in films within the Justice League series. For the purpose of this research, and with the knowledge that Diana's origin story is richer in feminist themes and storylines, I have chosen to narrow my focus to the 2017 film.

A second limitation is my focus specifically on Diana within the fantastical world of the film itself. In the weeks and months after the film's release, many criticized Gadot for her identification with the feminist movement. While Diana stands for peace and compassion, Gadot has been an avid supporter of the Israeli army and made her Zionist political views clear on social media. Though this research has focused on Diana's feminist identity in the film's fantasy world, potential research could be conducted to see how extradiegetic knowledge influences perceptions of the film as a feminist film. With this media attention surrounding the film and its star, this could be a very rich area for future research. My discourse analysis focused on IMDB reviews during the United States opening weekend. In this specific data, viewers did not mention Gal Gadot's identity as a soldier. Therefore, this was not reflected in my analysis.

A final limitation is the way in which discourse was collected. Some users' reviews were long, clear, and all encompassing. Others left me wishing I could ask follow up questions. To get a deeper understanding of viewers thoughts

surrounding the film as a feminist text, future research could include more direct contact with moviegoers via interviews. During this time, researchers could ask questions about a viewer's thoughts on the film, if it has changed their standpoint of female leads, or what they thought about the characters' representations for example.

### Final Thoughts

I must admit that when I first saw the film in 2017 that I was skeptical. After all, how could a woman call herself a warrior in such revealing armor? And how could love save humanity from a war in which millions have already perished? Upon seeing *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017), I was pleasantly surprised. The smartly composed film and directing make it a fascinating area of research and I notice more every time I watch it.

While the goal of a textual analysis is not to determine 'good' media from 'bad' media, it is clear that the film embraces tools often seen in feminist films. Though these powerful moments are conveniently packaged in humor, 'can do' attitudes, and a scantily clad superhero costume, viewers successfully identified and praised the instances of feminism. Furthermore, they were excited and entertained by the prospect of a female-led film both on-screen and off. Perhaps the most positive reviews proclaimed that they, like Diana, felt a glimmer of hope that the film would set a new standard for films in the future. There was a desire that Diana could save our real world with the same tools she used to save her own. One user truly captured everyone's sentiments when they commented "[a]s

Diana's mother says, 'be careful in the world of men, Diana. They do not deserve you.' This rings especially true in our troubled times. We don't deserve this hero but we certainly need her" (nandidot, 2017). Though there is a long way to go, I am hopeful that this has been a step in the right direction for women, girls, and others whose voices have been silenced through male-dominated ideologies.

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