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The Damsel and the Dominatrix: How Catwoman in *Batman Returns* Serves Simultaneously As  
a Feminist Icon and a Victim of the Male Gaze

First appearing in the 1940<sup>1</sup> comic *Batman #1*, Catwoman has one of the longest running histories of a woman in comics. She was first brought into the comic world as a mysterious and morally ambiguous love interest for the titular Batman. Introduced simply as “the Cat,” her petty crimes made her a palatable foe for Batman to fight without her being deemed too evil or unfavorable. While her debut in the comics serves as a fascinating introduction for the femme fatale, her real world impact was far greater. She was initially created as a way for DC Comics to entice more female readers to the comic world. Over the past eighty years, however, her image has morphed and evolved, often reflecting new ideas of femininity and power. Her new image depicts a sexually-liberated woman, often attempting, or at least claiming, to find independence from men; although, of course, she is never made to stray too far from Batman. Her character seems to embody a difficult question that many female comic fans may find themselves asking: can we find empowerment in cultural productions through the male gaze?

Catwoman plays a prominent role in Tim Burton's 1992 film *Batman Returns*. Here, the audience watches meek and abused office worker Selina Kyle, portrayed by Michelle Pfeiffer, transform into the iconic Catwoman, suddenly becoming empowered by her own strength and

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<sup>1</sup> Introduced the same year as Wonder Woman, another iconic female character in the DC Universe.

newfound mystic abilities. Catwoman's presentation in this movie, however, is a double edged sword. She becomes a figure of female self empowerment as well as a victim of abuse and the extreme sexualization. The complexities and nuances of her character as an animal-human hybrid both highlight her strength as a woman and her "othering" as a hybrid being. This particular production of Catwoman highlights important debates in feminist theory and how they impact the female audience as members of a community involved in the culture surrounding comic books and their franchising. Cultural productions both reflect modern views of women and hybrid beings while also creating them as distant, unattainable figures.

As the only developed female character in *Batman Returns*, Catwoman deviates significantly from her rather simplistic comic origins as a petty criminal and love interest; instead, what is offered is a more complex iteration of the character who has survived consistent trauma and is driven by a desire for personal justice. Historically, she is depicted as morally ambiguous with her actions being primarily self-serving. The alliances she forms are for her own personal gain or survival. In *Batman Returns*, she attempts to unite herself with the Penguin as a means of destroying the only thing standing between her and revenge: Batman. By the end of the film, she has aligned herself with Batman before going off on her own. She is typically designated as a "Straightforward Criminal," motivated purely by money and material possessions (Rosenberg). While this is certainly a part of her character's motivations, it ignores the complexity of her identity as a survivor of repeated abuse. This rather simplistic characterization is reiterated by Glenn Wilmott who says that she is "strictly non-violent" and "more particularly offers the fantasy of identifying safely with transgression... not safe violence to others, but violence to property, and without containment by moral or institutional law" (Wilmott). While

these descriptions fit with her initial origin story<sup>2</sup> in the comics, they fall short of describing the complexity of Michelle Pfeifer's iteration of the character.

The historical representation of cats in culture adds significance to the complexity of Catwoman's existence as a hybrid being in Gotham's underworld. Maria Nikolajeva examines the role of cats through a literary perspective. She examines their frequent ties with mysticism and witchcraft and notes how widespread and varying the depictions of cats as elements of myth and folklore are. The diverse cultures in which cats are depicted with supernatural ties have created conflicting depictions of the morality or decency of the animals. Nikolajeva writes, "The cat, especially the black cat, became one of the many transformations of the antagonist, while the hero can also in some situations metamorphose into a cat," thereby highlighting the seemingly at odds ethics of the animal. However, in *Batman Returns* these two depictions seem to coexist and build upon one another in the creation of Catwoman. The historic view of cats as beings able to transverse certain seemingly strict boundaries is carried into her character. Her moral ambiguity and ability to switch sides mirror the dual nature of cats as well as her dual identity as a hybrid being.

The intricacies of Catwoman's identity and motivations contribute to the darker undertones of *Batman Returns*. The other women presented in the film are one dimensional and serve only as catalysts for the male-driven action. As the only developed female character, Catwoman fulfills the role of "the Gothic heroine as a critique of male oppressors: a blameless victim suffering under tyranny" ("Terror, Horror, and the Female Gothic). She is victimized by

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<sup>2</sup> Bob Kane, the creator of Catwoman, as well as Batman and many others, stated in regards to the creation of the femme fatale, "I felt that women were feline creatures and men were more like dogs... Cats are as hard to understand as women are... you always need to keep women at an arm's length. We don't want anyone taking over our souls and women have a habit of doing that" (History of Catwoman!).

men throughout the film, starting when she is attacked while walking along the street during Penguin and his gang's initial attack during the scene with the Christmas tree lighting in front of the town hall. Next, Selina is violently assaulted at the hands of Max Shreck, her boss and the main orchestrator of the criminal plots throughout the film. After she discovers his illegal plans to reroute the city's power with his own plant, he shoves her out the window, shattering the glass and leaving her dead on the ground, floors below. Through no fault of her own, she faces physical and emotional abuse. It is because of this abuse that she begins to at first test, and then finally fully embody her powers. Selina takes a taser from the man who attacked her on the street and tases him, despite the fact he is already defeated, and she transforms into Catwoman after Shreck's attack. In this sense, Catwoman denies the one dimensional depiction of her character as a simple petty criminal, and rather embraces the image of cats and their "trickster nature... as carnival figures, turning order into chaos and interrogating higher authorities" (Nikolajev). Men who have power over her, whether physical, monetary, or professional, seem to constantly mistreat her. Once she gains her powers, she refutes the mistreatment she endured. This culminates in her confronting Max Shreck and using one of her nine lives to electrocute him, and herself, in the process. This is the final act of pain she endures as she fulfills her desire for revenge and eliminates the man who used his authority to continue her abuse. Catwoman often reflects the riotous, dark, and often carnivalesque nature of Gotham city. This darker, chaotic aspect of her character plays into Tim Burton's artistic choices regarding the film.

These Gothic elements of the character are highlighted by Tim Burton's direction; his highly stylized and dark aesthetic contribute to the characters' darker pasts and traumas in ways that other wide release action and comic book films do not. Burton has a unique style that runs

throughout his work that incorporates elements of gothic cinema and film noir. These influences frame Catwoman in a way that highlights her as a "morally and ethically ambiguous protagonist(s) fatalistically swept up in events beyond (her) control" (Mcroy 38). She is adaptable, constantly morphing to fit the role she needs. This, however, also opens her character to manipulation and distortion. Reflecting her history of continually shifting origins, Burton sets the character as a woman who is relentlessly abused. Before her transformation into Catwoman, Selina Kyle fulfills the gothic archetype of a damsel in distress. She is victimized repeatedly at the hands of men who disregard her worth and continually belittle her. Even her initial interaction with Batman when she is attacked by a member of the Penguin's Red Triangle gang and he saves her shines light on how they view her as inconsequential. When she thanks him for saving her, he stares blankly before turning and walking away, leaving her to remark on how "brief" their interaction was (Burton). She is consistently undervalued and demeaned by the men around her up until the point when she has endured enough and transforms herself into the feline femme fatale.

The scene in which Selina Kyle's metamorphosis into Catwoman begins marks a problematic archetype in popular media in which a woman must endure horrific trauma in order to find power. Coming into the film, Selina Kyle is portrayed as a meek assistant to the wealthy and powerful Max Shreck. Shreck's assault on Selina marks an end to her innocence. After unintentionally discovering his criminal plans to stockpile power from Gotham city, Shreck pushes her out of the window, mockingly asking her "What did curiosity do to the cat?" (Burton). The audience falls with Selina through the camera following her as she crashes through canopies adorned with the Shreck Department Store's cat logo. This is her inciting incident,

setting up her character arc for the rest of the film (“Illustrated Glossary of Film Terms”). There is an aerial shot, showing Selina lying on her back in the snow after falling stories down to the ground below. The snow appears grey, discolored by the grime and pollution of Gotham, representing her descent into Gotham’s gritty underground world of crime. There is a brief shot of Shreck brushing the incident off, as if it, and she, was nothing, and walking away before the shot cuts back to Selina. Cats running towards her cast their shadows on the walls of the building of which she was pushed from. This introduces the idea of the uncanny double: the audience sees Selina and recognizes her, but knows that something is not right. This is the start of her metamorphosis into something that looks like Selina Kyle, but isn’t. There is an eerie sense that she has been fundamentally altered and will be unable to return to her former naivete. When her eyes finally flutter open, they stare blankly up at the sky, devoid of life. She has split into two characters, and although some aspects of each bleed into the other, they never fully merge. We see the creation of this dual-identity, both of the former innocence and new found realization of the unjust world Selina Kyle is a part of, as well as the uncanny creation of Selina Kyle’s alter ego Catwoman, another representation of her animal-human hybrid identity, through the scene in which Selina manifests her new self.



Figures 1 and 2: Lighting and Shadows

This representation of the uncanny double is highlighted by the gothic elements of the film which mirror the harsh atmosphere of Gotham. While most of the scenes from the film that are meant to take place on the streets of Gotham are darker with low-key lighting, this scene highlights Selina with white lighting. While the area around her is dark, the audience's gaze is drawn to her with the light highlighting her pale features. The eerie element of the uncanny double is highlighted through the lighting in the moment as well. As a group of stray cats surround her, their shadows are cast against buildings and dumpsters. This emphasizes the occurrence of the uncanny double as an element of the gothic style as well as drawing the connection between Selina and the mystic element of cats.

The scene in which Selina Kyle transforms into Catwoman is a visually rich one. When she returns to her apartment after Shreck's attack, an earlier scene is mirrored where the audience watches her arrive home from work, following the motions of dropping her keys and coat before checking her answering machine. After being murdered, she follows the same routine, only this time she is numb and detached; she follows the motions of arriving home after a long day of work, but they are now empty. She only awakes from her slumber like trance when she listens to a message left on her answering machine. The ad describes "Gotham Lady's Perfume" with a scene in which a female employee using the perfume becomes so enticing that her boss is seduced by her. The message ends with the line that it is sold "exclusively at Shreck's Department Store," the very store owned by Selina's murderous boss. This sets her into an enraged spiral in which she destroys her apartment, thereby destroying her former life.



Figure 3: Selina Kyle Finds Her Claws

The audience watches her innocence violently torn apart as she pushes stuffed animals into her garbage disposal, smashes framed pictures and a mirror with a frying pan, and spray paints her idealistic pink dollhouse black. Her destructive nature culminates in her taking a black rain slicker from her closet and dumping her sewing kit onto a desk. As she tears the coat apart and sews it back together, Selina Kyle transforms herself into the powerful and elusive Catwoman. This imagery of disposal is thoroughly intertwined with the transition from Selina to Catwoman. When Selina returns home and destroys her small, pink apartment, the audience sees how drastically different her life is from those that abuse her. Men like Shreck view her as less than due to her lower financial status and identity as a woman. The destruction of her apartment stands as a destruction of her life serving under men like Skreck, enduring their abuse. It is after this self annihilation that she builds her sense of self again, merging her own identity with Catwoman. She constructs herself from spare parts and objects associated with traditional femininity. Bernardo writes “The supposedly feminine equipment of the sewing basket becomes her way to recycle her identity, for it is in the sewing materials that she finds her ‘nails’.” She



builds her main external tool of violence, her claws, from existing objects in her home. Again, this is seen in the patched-together nature of her costume. She effectively rebuilds her new identity from the rubble of her past life. The life destroyed by Max becomes distant to her, leaving her to “mend (as) an act of preserving” (Bernardo). She is able to salvage pieces of herself, picking apart her old identity and taking whatever will benefit her new persona. This mirrors the disposable nature of her character as well as her status as a working woman in a significantly lower class than the men who abuse her throughout the film. Their abuse and belittling of her abilities, despite her consistent efforts at work, are consistent up until he pushes her out the window, serving as the final culmination of him viewing her as disposable.



Figure 4: The Birth of Catwoman

The scene ends with a shot from a building across from hers, looking into her apartment window where a pink neon sign, formerly saying “HELLO THERE” now illuminating the otherwise dark set with the words “HELL HERE,” highlighting her embrace of her darker nature. Cats sit along the roof and around Selina’s window, drawn to her like they were after her accident. Selina enters the screen where the audience can see her through her window. She is

wearing her self made cat suit for the first time as she bends down to address the cats around her, coyly stating “I don’t know about you Miss Kitty, but I feel... so much yummier” (Burton).

The lighting in the end shot of this scene is crucial to understanding how Catwoman fits into her new life and criminal underbelly of Gotham. The camera is positioned on the rooftop across from Selena’s apartment building. The audience is given a direct view into her apartment through her open window, set in the center of the shot. The only lighting in the shot comes from the neon pink sign mounted on the wall of Selina’s apartment, which she previously partially destroyed. At first, the scene is outlined along the bottom by the roof of the building the camera is supposedly situated on. Cats line the roofline and sit in front of Selina’s window. As Catwoman enters the frame, she is backlit by the pink neon lights. This is the first instance the audience sees her in her Catwoman catsuit that has become an iconic part of her character. The pink light draws on its symbolic ties to femininity. However, combining this with the darker message of “Hell here” that is now displayed on the neon sign gives it an edge. Selina’s femininity has been weaponized. Her girlish connections to her gender have been transformed into an explicit sexuality that she wields throughout the film as one of her greatest tools. This backlighting highlights her new costume which in itself draws on connections to traditional femininity as a means of taking back power, as seen in her sewing supplies being repurposed as claws.

The embracing of sexuality is a key element of Selina Kyle’s projected descent into the dark world of crime in Gotham as her Catwoman persona. This is reflected in her transformation concluding with the introduction of her now infamous catsuit. It was the first of its kind within the live action depictions of the character, setting the precedent for the following adaptations by

Halle Berry, who's costume did not follow in style but mimicked the highly sexualized nature of the ensemble, and Anne Hathaway, who donned a similar skin tight catsuit without the visible stitches and tears. The costume utilized in *Batman Returns* primarily draws on the 1989 self titled comic *Catwoman*. This iteration of the character sets Selina Kyle as a prostitute in Gotham who dons a dominatrix costume in order to hide her identity while enacting revenge, similar to the arc she takes in *Batman Returns*. The costume in this film reflects the feminist debate surrounding her character. It can be viewed as a way for her to empower herself through embracing her sexuality, thereby freeing herself from the condescending and shaming attitudes of men. However, the costume is overtly sexualized and impractical<sup>3</sup>. This highlights two sides in the debate of "body politics" within feminist theory. The first is the "anti-pornography" stance. Despite its name, this position refers rather to the generally held beliefs that "gender oppression is achieved through a sexuality that caters to "male" appetites and desires" ("Kinky Geographies: Sexuality in Mediated Spaces"). Those who follow this line of feminism argue that when women are hyper-sexualized under the male gaze, they become exploited commodities. Rather than building the view of women as intelligent or capable human beings, they are dehumanized and reduced to their physical bodies. The other line of thinking is that of "pro-sex" feminists who argue that feminism and more liberal views of sexual politics go hand in hand. They argue that images of female audiences do not only cater to a male audience, but also a female audience interested in their own sexuality.

The role of masks in Catwoman's character is fascinating as it contributes both to her agency and her othering. In the comic *Catwoman*, Selina questions if she would have to wear the

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<sup>3</sup> Pfeiffer opened up about the suit stating that it was incredibly uncomfortable due to the fact that donning the costume "involved vacuum sealing her into it like a piece of meat" (Schwerdtfeger).

mask that goes with the dominatrix cat costume to the sexual encounter Stan is forcing her into. Her face is still bruised and swollen from Stan beating her days earlier. When she questions him, he retorts “He 's interested in your face, Selina. An’ anyway, the masks hide it” (Newell). The mask serves as a tool for dehumanization, distancing the cat persona from her human identity. It is utilized by Stan as a way of further abusing Selena and forcing her into submission. However, this imagery is turned around when she makes the active choice to don the catsuit as a way to hide her identity as she gets revenge on Stan. This is more closely aligned with the use of the mask in *Batman Returns*. Here, there is a sense of self-creation. Selina, after tearing apart her apartment, seemingly destroying her former self, begins to build her sense of self as a newly born hybrid being when she takes her black rain slicker and transforms it into her own catsuit. This image of self creation is one of the most compelling scenes in the film but also contributes to the character’s continued othering.

The act of self creation works to alienate Catwoman from her human persona, thereby dehumanizing her and connecting her more to the animal-nature of the character. Michelle Pfeifer discussed the role of the mask in her costume in a 1992 interview: “well most of my face is covered, so I realized that things have to be slightly more physical, you know? Tim is a firm believer and so I am that things should always be based in reality. However, it is a heightened reality” (Carter). In dramatic productions, masks are often used to connect actors to animal identities. However, in doing so, they limit their ability to express emotions and convey connections between characters through their facial expressions. This can be incredibly limiting. As Pfeiffer notes, however, this opens the door for more dramatic physical movement. Specifically in *Batman Returns*, Catwoman’s movements highlight the feline nature of her dual

identity. When visiting the Penguin<sup>4</sup>, she lays across his bed “bathing” herself the way a cat would: licking the back of her hands (or paws) and swiping them across her face and head. This direct mimicking of cat behavior further dehumanizes her by over-emphasizing her cat-persona through dramatic and almost campy movements.

The scenes Catwoman and the Penguin share highlight the similarities in their depictions as animal-human hybrids but also display the deep rooted misogyny that many of the male characters hold. These interactions between the characters help deepen the understanding of how partially non-human beings are demeaned in value throughout the film. Where Batman is simply a well trained man in a bat themed costume, these two characters embody specific non human traits that alienate them from society. The Penguin experiences abandonment from his parents soon after his birth due to physical defects and early displayed violent tendencies. Because of this, he grows up underground in the Gotham sewers surrounded by penguins and a band of misfits like himself. However, his experiences seem to instill in him a hatred towards women as a whole. He is rejected by women throughout the movie, including Catwoman with whom he insistently flirts. When she finally shuts him down for good, he attempts to murder her. Not only is her hybrid identity an alienating force within the film, her gender identity alienates her from the largely male-oriented power hierarchy. Catwoman faces the dual stigmatization as embodying a partially feline identity as well as the social judgement and alienation that comes from her dominatrix-adjacent costume and the public shame endured by sexually empowered women.

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<sup>4</sup> In this scene, Catwoman also places the Penguin’s pet bird in her mouth as a warning to him regarding her propensity for violence while also further emphasizing her feline nature. During filming, Michelle Pfeiffer actually put the live bird in her mouth and held it for several seconds, shocking both Danny Devito (the Penguin) and Tim Burton (Nasr).

*Batman Returns* utilizes religious themes, mainly ties to satanism and mysticism, to further the othering of Catwoman by connecting her to the historic connection between cats and paranormal forces. Cats have been utilized in cultures around the globe for centuries, and therefore carry a variety of connotations. In some cultures, such as Europe in the middle ages, they were seen as connections to witchcraft, while in Egypt they were associated with deities. Over time, western beliefs regarding cats, specifically black cats, as bad omens, spread and became a part of our cultural narrative. The negative historic imagery of black cats largely came forth in Europe during the Middle Ages when they “became connected with evil powers, which was based partly on the popular beliefs about cats’ lewdness, partly on their Christian association with Satan” (Nikolajeva). Here the religious association of cats as evil is combined with, or rather reinforced by, the social perception of cats as offensively sexual. This perception of cats has endured and morphed to fit into modern cultural productions of cats. As cats are most often connected with women, this became a way to condemn femininity and sexual empowerment through their connections to felines. Nikolajeva writes that “She-cats are... connected to feminine witchcraft, shape-shifting, mystery, and sexuality” (253). This combines important aspects of Catwoman’s character that are utilized in her creation as a female “villain”.

Catwoman’s dehumanization throughout the film is directly tied to her femininity and overt sexuality. She is consistently placed in scenarios where her sexuality becomes her tool of escape. Rather than highlighting her newly created abilities that come with her animalistic persona, Burton consistently defers to her “feminine charms” as her most advantageous abilities. This alienates her from the other characters in the film. She is not allowed to live in the same world as them as her power is consistently portrayed as coming from her femininity and not from

her gymnastic abilities or heightened senses. While the men in the film are portrayed with brute strength and highly specialized skills, such as Batman's extensive training, Catwoman's power is made lesser by its consistent ties to her sexuality. Her acrobatic skills and her mystic abilities are only demonstrated outside of the conflict with men. She is alienated from nearly everyone in the film, including the others who concurrently have animal-human hybrid identities.

This alienation felt by both Selina and Catwoman both reflects and reinforces the idea that comic book spaces are intended and designated for men. Despite the fact her character was created with the intention of drawing more female readers to comics, her extreme sexualization over her run as a comic book character has led to her becoming an unattainable and unrelatable character for women. Rather than engaging in the interests of women and creating characters that connect to aspects of women's lives, female characters often become misogynistic stereotypes, seeped in masculinity and malformed by the male gaze. Dr. Stephanie Orme looks at how gender, sexuality, and class intersect within the worlds of digital gaming and comic culture. As an expert in mass communication, she looks at how female comic book fans feel alienated by the spaces surrounding their interests. In a study of female comic book fans, she found that the stigma within comics culture often comes from men who try to gatekeep their interests. One woman she interviewed stated that entering a comic shop elicited the same feelings as walking into an auto repair shop: "It's like, I want to go into Pepboys, but I don't want to ask anybody questions because I don't wanna be talked down to. I don't want them to assume I know nothing, which is what happens. Just over-explaining. It has that specialty guys' turf feel" (Orme). Comics culture has been soaked in masculinity since its origins. Many of the men in the community assume that only other men share their interests in comics because of the fear and

alienation women feel when attempting to participate in these spaces. This creates a kind of circular problem, however: women are afraid to enter comic spaces due to their desire to avoid condescending men while men continue to believe that women do not participate in these spaces because of many women's concerns about attempting to engage.

Catwoman in *Batman Returns* serves as a fascinating embodiment of the sexualization women endure as well as the empowerment they find through their own strengths and voices. Her animal-human hybrid nature is highlighted by the campier aspects of the film as the audience watches her transform from the human Selina Kyle into the feline femme fatale Catwoman. The dark world of Gotham is highlighted by her moral ambiguity and her desire for revenge. She perfectly mirrors the difficulties of living as a woman in male centered spaces through her consistent othering. The dichotomy proposed in this portrayal of Catwoman as both a feminist and male fantasy figure can be incredibly frustrating to interpret. It is up to individuals to draw their own conclusions on whether the character is a figure of empowerment for them or if she falls into over-sexed tropes. However, rather than being dismayed by the difficulties in understanding her impact, this provides an opportunity to endorse more women film makers and creatives. Male depictions of the experiences of women, even in unrealistic worlds full of caped crusaders, fall short. This creates a dire need for positive and wholly empowering presentations of women in media through women's perspectives. While this film is nearly thirty years old, many of the debated issues with Catwoman's character still exist today<sup>5</sup>. Women deserve to see reflections of themselves that are not overtly sexualized as a source of power.

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<sup>5</sup> More recently, this debate has been brought up in regards to the portrayal of the Amazons in Wonder Woman and Justice League. Wonder Woman had a female director and costume designer who based the costumes of the Amazons on actual armor worn in ancient Greece. Justice League, on the other hand, had a man designing the costumes for the Amazons which ended up resembling bikinis more so than armor.



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Appendix

Figures Page



Figures 1 and 2: Lighting and Shadows



Figure 3: Selina Kyle Finds Her Claws



Figure 4: The Birth of Catwoman