

Invisible Girl's Quest for Visibility: Early Second Wave Feminism and the Comic Book Superheroine

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In her 1963 consciousness-raising classic, *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan called the plight of the suburban housewife the "problem that has no name." These women were cooks, cleaners, diaper changers, and lovers, but they lacked identity as individuals. Their hopes and dreams remained secondary, blending with the needs of the families they nurtured. In a figurative sense, they were invisible, even to themselves. After Marvel's Fantastic Four character Sue Storm follows her love interest into outer space, her genes mutate, and she becomes a superheroine whose power makes her literally invisible. With that change, she renames herself Invisible Girl and becomes one of the most powerful females in the Marvel universe during the early 1960s ("power" in this sense refers to the ability to do extraordinary things, not necessarily its more traditional connotation as "strength"). However, she also becomes a caricature of feminine ambiguity. Neither wholly professional nor domestic, Invisible Girl's identity as both strong and invisible depicts the confusion with which many women in the early years of rising feminist consciousness were contending.

Scholarship about superhero comics has been overwhelmingly focused on maleness, and feminist analyses are only just beginning to appear. Within even that small body of work, very little has been written about the superheroines of the 1960s. Recent criticism of strong female characters (comic, film, and television) tends to revolve around post-feminist consciousness. For example, Sherrie A. Inness, editor of *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture* (2004), credits second-wave feminism with questioning "the notion that women are 'naturally' not aggressive, incapable of handling the same challenges of men...question[ing] the status quo" (5). Since the 1970s, more and more women have taken on what had previously been considered male roles, particularly in the workplace. Inness argues that the female action hero was popular culture's answer to this transformation in "women's real lives." However, her analysis is primarily focused on such post-feminist characters as Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Xena, and Lara Croft. This study of the early years of *The Fantastic Four's* Invisible Girl, on the other hand, examines the subtle, unconscious influences of what could be called a pre-feminist awakening. As such, the following discussion of Invisible Girl's transformation exemplifies how culture both shapes and is shaped by its own representation of itself.

Sue Storm did for the Fantastic Four “family” what Friedan’s 1950s mother did for hers; she kept them “together,” admonished them for fighting, apologized for her own (insignificant) role, and reminded them of their moral duty. Indeed, the Fantastic Four is fashioned on the “family” image; Sue Storm and her brother Johnny are literally family, she marries Reed Richards solidifying him as legitimate family, and the Thing – the feisty, short-tempered, problem “child” – is the surrogate kid/uncle. Sue was the superhero equivalent of the suburban housewife, who, although a veritable CEO in the home, was uncompensated and unrecognized for her successes. Sue’s importance to her superfamily was clear; she was the morale-boosting beauty who was usually welcome to tag along for the ride, even if she could not be of any real use. During these early years, Invisible Girl’s power of invisibility rarely helps her family in times of trouble, and in fact she often finds herself weakened by her own superpower, or captured by the enemy. Comic artist, writer, and scholar Trina Robbins notes that “Sue Storm’s power and flaws were almost a caricature of Victorian notions of the feminine, an invisible woman who faints when she tries to exert herself” (114). Like Friedan’s subjects, Sue is unappreciated in a world of and for men.

The demographic for *The Fantastic Four* during the 1960s was largely college males (Robbins 125). While these readers seemed to enjoy the spectacle of Sue, they were ambivalent about her role as a superheroine. When Marvel began printing fan letters in *The Fantastic Four* comics during the early 1960s, a debate quickly emerged among fans about Sue’s “worth” to the series. In September 1962, the first anti-Sue letter was published, urging editors to get rid of her since “she never does anything” (*The Fantastic Four* #6, 1962, 25). In early 1963, fans voted overwhelmingly to keep her (639 for, 8 against), but her value to the group remained a topic of fan controversy throughout the decade (*The Fantastic Four* #10, 1963, 25). She was a commodity to be measured against the productivity of her fantastic family, which was not a fate the male members had to endure.

“Sue as captive,” “Sue as beauty,” and “Sue as housewife” are recurrent themes throughout the 1960s. In May 1962, Sue finds herself a helpless prisoner of Prince Namor, the Sub-Mariner, who is determined to take revenge on humanity for destroying his undersea kingdom (*The Fantastic Four* #4, 1962). Though Sue tries desperately to make invisibility work in her favor, she soon realizes she has no power with which to defeat the villain and she becomes visible. Visibility, in this particular instance, represents Sue’s weakness. The Sub-Mariner is instantly smitten: “You’re the loveliest woman I’ve ever seen! If you will be my bride I might show mercy to the rest of your pitiful race!” (*The Fantastic Four* #4, 1962, 29/6). In that moment, Sue becomes the currency through which the human race retains its hegemony. It is her body, her beauty that enthralls the villain, and her superpowers are useless against him. Selfless as the mother of humanity sacrificing her freedom for theirs, Sue offers herself as the ultimate prize of war. At that moment, with the purity of their woman threatened, the male members of the family – enraged and empowered – take action to free Sue. In 1963, Sue’s position in the Fantastic Four is summed up by a U.S. Military General who claims, “Miss Storm, a pretty young lady can *always* be of help – just by keeping the men’s *morale* up!” Reed Richards, the leader of the group, agrees with him, saying, “That’s just the way *we* feel about Sue, General!” (*The Fantastic Four* #12, 1963, 10/3). Sue’s real strength is as the

perfect complement to men.

Early on, in 1962, Sue declares that “[o]ne Invisible Girl can sometimes accomplish more than a battalion” (17/6), but by the end of 1963 readers have little reason for confidence in this proclamation. Sometimes she hardly seems super at all, so entrenched is she in old habits. Invisible Girl’s power to render herself unseen merely allows her to sneak around to collect information. It does not make her invaluable, like Mr. Fantastic who can maneuver himself out of extremely tight jams, and contort his body into endless shapes and uses; or like the Torch who “Flames On!” and embodies all the power of a Supernova; or like the Thing, whose raw power and strength makes him the ultimate enforcer. During the first half of the decade, Invisible Girl lacks even the strength of villains and always relies on the intelligence of patriarch Reed Richards to outsmart the enemy. She is the mother figure, the calming influence, the eyes and ears of the family. Without her intervention, her hot-headed male counterparts would argue themselves out of cooperation with each other. The family would be shattered. Though Sue wears a superhero costume, her identity is unfulfilled in both public and private spheres; while expected to take on the domestic role, she is not ultimately fulfilled as a legitimate mother for several more years. And although a superheroine, she is not valued as an equal member of the team. That ambiguity renders her invisible figuratively and literally.

Signifying the problem of balancing the oppositional characteristics of physical strength and passive domesticity, Sue Storm’s creators offset her marginally credible chasing and fighting scenes with the kinds of images with which readers could more likely identify. After returning from a successful space mission in 1963, Sue feels an overwhelming need to do some housecleaning (*The Fantastic Four* #14, 1963, 5/7). In this scene, there is a very specific message being promoted about the place of all women as not only domestically responsible (socio-culturally), but naturally domestic (biologically). Sue’s feminine urges have nothing to do with the requirements of her station – after all, she lives in a Manhattan penthouse – but rather with her inherent nature. Women cook and clean, period. Apparently, so do superheroine women.

In addition to the positive reinforcement her body gets from Reed, the Sub-Mariner, and other male characters, Sue Storm is also the target of fantasies for male readers. Although all the members of the Fantastic Four wear skintight suits, Sue endures a great deal more physical objectification. In September 1963, she is shown bikini-clad, pulling on her costume in preparation for a Hawaiian vacation with Reed, who appears fully covered in the same panel (*The Fantastic Four* #18, 1963, 3/4). A few pages later, editors printed a fan letter calling for more girls in the stories because girls were more fun “to look at” (32). Later that year, Sue spends her downtime trying on wigs, gazing at herself in the mirror, wishing Hollywood would call her to be their next Liz Taylor (*The Fantastic Four* #21, 1963, 3/5). In June 1964, as Reed tests an invention that projects people’s thoughts into a visible holograph, we are shown Sue – again, clad in a bathing suit – as Reed’s subconscious imagines her (*The Fantastic Four* #27, 1964, 2). Her identity is inseparable from her physical appearance, her beauty, and her preoccupation with her own attractiveness.

Sue is objectified by the male gaze in a highly sexualized manner, privileging her to-be-looked-at-ness over her

identification as a powerful superheroine. In 1975, Laura Mulvey developed a theory of the gaze, intended initially for its application to film. She argued that the patriarchal structure of film production – from male directors, writers, and producers, all the way to the privileging of a male audience – masculinized the camera lens (44). The way that women were seen on film was how men wanted to see them. Comics did the exact same thing. Men created, drew, inked, and marketed this early incarnation of Sue Storm's body, for a predominantly young male readership. Her image is disproportionately eroticized, and her body is possessed by both the group's male identity and the male comic book reader.

To this point, it is evident that the representation of the superheroine closely follows dominant, mainstream cultural expectations of the post-war, white middle-class woman. The myths that had been propagated by 1950s television, women's magazines, and parenting books are widely recognizable on the pages of Marvel's *The Fantastic Four*. In *Where the Girls Art: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, Susan J. Douglas recalled 1964 as a sort of "parting of the Red Sea," in which the boy-chasing, mass-media enslaved cheerleader that she had been began to transform into the feminist who would read *Ms.* and get passionate about politics (3-4). Invisible Girl's characterization represented a lot of these on-the-brink qualities of the middle of the decade, evoking an early 1960s pre-feminist contentment with categories of femininity, beauty, and convention, while subtly suggesting a need for something more. From her 1961 inception, Invisible Girl mirrored cultural expectations about gender. However, given a couple of years to gain a toehold in the industry she also begins to deflect it. Many comics scholars, such as Amy Kiste Nyberg and Bradford W. Wright, have noted that comic book consciousness of the time adhered to the status quo, to upholding traditional values, but by 1964 the essence of growing rebellion began to seep through.

As early as February 1963, fans clamored for a stronger Invisible Girl. One fan wrote: "My complaint is that her potential is seldom utilized. I object chiefly to the fact that in eight tries she has been captured by four of the villains. I think that she would make a better action character than a hostage" (*The Fantastic Four* #11, 1963, 15). These early days of *The Fantastic Four* illuminate Invisible Girl's tenuous position; while her very existence in an overwhelmingly male comic book universe provides her with a strong female identity, which could be construed as feminist, she is dramatically underused and underappreciated in comparison to her counterparts. Her position within the comic is reminiscent of conventional, conservative values in American culture insofar as she takes on the maternal, domestic female role. But just as growing awareness of global anti-Semitism on the eve of WWII arguably influenced the creation of a superhero like Superman, as documented by such scholars as Danny Fingeroth, Jose Esteban Munoz, and Simcha Weinstein, so too could Stan Lee and Jack Kirby have been shaped by the zeitgeist of civil and women's rights in the early 1960s. As a result, *The Fantastic Four* becomes an ideological battleground for what Invisible Girl, and in relation other superheroines, could become. Even without taking an overt counter-cultural political stand, Invisible Girl finds a way to grapple with some of the early issues of feminism.

Lillian Robinson laments the "general critical silence" of feminist criticism of comics in *Wonder Women* (2004). She

calls for "an understanding of how the representation of an icon derives from and serves as well as challenges – the dominant social forces" (6). Deconstructing Invisible Girl from this historical vantage point allows us to do just that. Early feminist consciousness focused on getting women recognized for their potential strengths. In January 1964, Marvel produced what is arguably the most pro-feminist superheroine story arc of the 1960s. In testing Invisible Girl's powers, Reed Richards discovers that she has the capacity to be stronger than anyone (especially he) expected. By bathing Invisible Girl with radioactive rays from his nuclear measuring device, he unlocks immense capability (*The Fantastic Four* #22, 1964, 2). The only problem was she must be taught how to use her powers because, as all good 1960s patriarchy knows, women must be taught how to reach their full potential. In this case, Invisible Girl discovers her own power when she is caught in the midst of childish antics between the Torch and the Thing. Scolding them for their raucous behavior, she ducks to avoid being hit and in the process she instinctually protects herself with a powerful, invisible force field (3/5). The shield is so strong, in fact, that even the Thing cannot penetrate it (4/3). With practice, she finds that she can surround other objects and people with her energy shield to protect them. Most significantly, Invisible Girl finds that she can render other people and objects invisible (7/3-7).

Within the comic book pages, *The Fantastic Four* editors note that as Invisible Girl projects invisibility onto others, she must remain visible. At first glance, this appears to be a limitation – yet another weakness – but in actuality it is critical to her newer, stronger identity. This power privileges her visibility, rendering others (men included) invisible. It is the ultimate feminist fantasy, making women apparent for their strengths, while minimizing interference from others. Whereas in her altercation with the Sub-Mariner in 1962, visibility had indicated her defeat, now it makes her stronger. Her powerful energy shield shocks and amazes her male counterparts, as well as other superheroes that happen to witness it. Giant Man (who is literally giant) voices the sentiments of superheroes everywhere when he exclaims, "I never thought a *girl* would be able to trap me with some bit of invisible hocus pocus" (*The Fantastic Four* #26, 1964, 19/1). Finally, this powerful female is empowered. Susan Faludi notes that the first appearance of the word "feminist" occurred in "a book review in the *Athenaeum* of April 27, 1895, describing a woman who 'has in her the capacity of fighting her way back to independence'" (xxiii). She makes the claim that in one century, the popular connotation remains much the same. This new and improved superpower has the potential to accomplish that very feat, to allow Invisible Girl to become a self-sufficient, equal member of the *Fantastic Four* team. Her visibility is a classic feminist victory.

It is all too easy to conflate power with physical strength. A shift in perspective – namely from the feminism of today to that of the early second wave – changes the game. Danny Fingeroth reflects on the absence of "powerful – really powerful" women in popular culture until Buffy's appearance in the 1990s (*Superman* 80). This assertion ignores historical context. Invisible Girl was not physically strong, but her force field was. Symbolically, Invisible Girl was forceful. The feminist rhetoric of the 1970s mythologized the female desire to become forces with which to be reckoned, to be independent and strong (i.e. forceful). Although the early Invisible Girl explored here appears limited by her domestic

tendencies, her character development reflects the feminism of her time. Fingerroth notes that comic book publishers in future decades would "assimilate feminist attitudes into mainstream culture" (*Superman* 81). However, there is evidence of such assimilation as early as the 1960s. If we do not hold these superheroines to our contemporary expectations about strong womanhood (like Buffy), it becomes clear that representations were shifting alongside women's liberation all along. Julie D. O'Reilly treads uncomfortably close to a similar interpretation, when, in her comparison of Wonder Woman, the witches of *Charmed*, and Buffy, she states that "female superheroes operate according to a different code of heroism than their male counterparts, a code with built-in limitations" (275). Limitations are themselves defined by patriarchal definitions of power and fail to take into consideration the historical context of the gains that superheroines (and perhaps other female action heroes) made within their own time frames. This Buffy-defined contingency of female characters that gets so much attention from scholars seeking feminist analyses of popular culture are postmodern exercises in self-reflexivity. They are part of the image-making machine, evoking symbols and myths that appeal to a mass consumer audience. The reason that this moment in Invisible Girl's representation is so historically valuable is because it was not the product of decades of feminist debate. Yet it altered the course of Invisible Girl's future, and undoubtedly influenced those who followed.

Coming so close on the heels of the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, this was a truly momentous event in popular culture. By first entrenching Sue Storm in a superhero universe plagued by the same inequalities and stifling limitations on female capability, the act of symbolically exploding the "problem that has no name" by privileging the visibility of one woman over other people and objects screams volumes about her worth. Invisible Girl was not an overtly feminist construction. This is a male-controlled medium of expression that targets a young male audience, and Stan Lee himself has gone on record saying that things like feminism never consciously occurred to him when he created characters and stories during this time period (*Time Machine*). ¹ And yet, the historical palimpsest of an America coming into feminist consciousness is evident through Sue Storm's transformation. Invisible Girl may not have been feminist, but looking back we can see the awakening of her nascent consciousness.

Friedan's insistence, circa 1963, that the suburban housewife was so much more than just a wife and mother translated well onto the pages of *The Fantastic Four*. Both Invisible Girl and early (mostly white middle-class) second wave feminists were caught between the competing identities of domesticity and self-fulfillment outside the home. The Silver Age superheroine negotiates a complicated balance between femininity and power. Invisible Girl's power is feminine and is balanced by her tendency to domesticate and her pre-occupation with her own beauty. She represents a feminist awakening that is non-threatening; this is not the post-1968, bra-burning radical villainized in the media (Douglas 159). Her characterization suggests, as early second wave feminists like Betty Friedan did, that empowerment and attractiveness were not mutually exclusive. As Mitra C. Emad notes about Wonder Woman's capability to maintain the separate spheres, leaving "femininity [un]corrupted by too much power," Invisible Girl functions in much the same manner (972). The overtly traditional gendered images cloud the more subversive

rhetorical and symbolic transformations. As such, it is critical to read her in her historical context.

The same year that Invisible Girl gained the power of her own visibility, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was amended and passed, making employment discrimination on the basis of sex (as well as race, religion and national origin) illegal in the United States. Invisible Girl's value to the Fantastic Four increased dramatically at the same moment that women in America gained more equality in the workplace. When the category of labor non-discrimination based on "sex" appeared on the bill for the Civil Rights Act, its intention was farcical; the conservative Southern democrat who added it was opposed to equal employment legislation for minorities and hoped this addition would topple the bill. Even some supporters of the bill spoke out against it, fearing that women's rights would reverse the potential victory for other hard-fought gains based on race and creed (Deitch 190-193). The amendment did not even necessarily reflect a conscious public opinion at the time, as the feminist movement only really got underway after passage of the bill the following summer. The attempt to derail the Civil Rights Act by adding "sex" to the roster failed to appreciate the "seriousness" of the concerns of women and their potential to "mobilize" to use them (Deitch 186). This lack of seriousness about women's roles is equally evident in Invisible Girl's representation, as her feminist awakening may quite possibly have been unintentional.

Although there may be no direct causal link between this event and the creation of Invisible Girl's new powers, a historical moment is visible through her representation. Feminist consciousness had begun influencing law. There is an awareness of the changing status quo that is evident in these comics, of which the beginning of Sue's transformation is a part. Comics, as a simple, formulaic medium, reflect basic, instinctual notions about gender that can appeal to a young readership. They are a particularly useful way to measure the impact – or at least the wide recognition – of social change on a general population (Wright xv-xvi). In this case, art foreshadowing politics during what was a tumultuous period in gender and race relations in the United States is not at all farfetched. In 1972, editors of *Ms.* magazine chose Wonder Woman for their inaugural cover. The superheroine represented ideal feminism since she symbolized the capable, strong woman who is on par with men in every way (although under scrutiny, such assumptions fall apart). While Wonder Woman's creation far precedes that of Invisible Girl (Wonder Woman was created in 1941 and was the manifestation of a male psychologist's antidote to the intense masculinity of superhero comics), she and Invisible Girl (and a few others) struggled against the same gendered hurdles during the 1960s. The example of Invisible Girl's empowerment was one of those influential circumstances through which the superheroine gained feminist credibility, landing her on the cover of the first mainstream feminist magazine.

History can be experienced visually as well as textually, and comics embrace that duality. In 1972, Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs noted, in *Comics: Anatomy of a Mass Medium*, "[s]o as not to offend or annoy any citizen, sex, violence, social problems – in short all controversial matter – are brushed under the carpet" (146). They cited the Comics Code Authority – which was voluntarily adopted by the comics industry in 1956 to monitor the content of its own product after parents, politicians, and psychologists accused them of

promoting dangerous, improper behavior. [2](#). In retrospect, however, we see that these issues merely took the form of other – perhaps invisible – disguises, as comics, much like films of the 1950s, adopted masking techniques. That superhero comics can toe the line of conservative respectability while still engaging with controversial social issues of their time suggests that while they outwardly manifest cultural stability, they also absorb unrest and offer ideas about how those tensions might be resolved through change. Invisible Girl's shift in power in 1964 is such a case.

Notes

1. In *The Great Women Superheroes*, Trina Robbins quotes comic book writer Linda Fite who recalls: "Women's Lib was in full tilt boogie at the time...Roy [Thomas] and Stan [Lee] were not always trendsetters, but they would see a trend and follow it" (125). The "time" she refers to is circa 1972, when The Cat was created, and when Second Wave Feminism was a formal, well-known social movement. Here, the memory is that Invisible Girl creator Stan Lee viewed women's lib as a "trend," making it somewhat implausible that his actions on Invisible Girl's behalf in 1964 were feminist-inspired.

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2. For more information about the Comics Code Authority, see Amy Kiste Nyberg's book *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (1998) and David Hajdu's new contribution to the field *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How it Changed America* (2008).

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Comic-book companies were in the early stages of cultural expansion and many of these characters played to specific stereotypes ; Cage and many of his contemporaries often employed lingo similar to that of blaxploitation films, Native Americans were often associated with shamanism and wild animals , and Asian Americans were often portrayed as kung fu martial artists .Â Her self-titled comic book series became a cultural phenomenon, with extensive media coverage by CNN , the New York Times and The Colbert Report , and embraced by anti- Islamophobia campaigners in San Francisco who plastered over anti-Muslim bus adverts with Kamala stickers. The comic-book miniseries Watchmen and the animated movie The Incredibles commented on the potentially lethal impracticality of capes. In Marvel Comics , the term "cape-killer" has been used to describe Superhuman Restraint Unit, even though few notable Marvel heroes wear capes.Â Another seminal superheroine is Invisible Scarlet O'Neil , a non-costumed character who fought crime and wartime saboteurs using the superpower of invisibility; she debuted in the eponymous syndicated newspaper comic strip by Russell Stamm on June 3, 1940.Â In the wake of second-wave feminism , the Invisible Girl became the more confident and assertive Invisible Woman, and Marvel Girl became the hugely powerful destructive force called Phoenix.

A female superhero is sometimes called a superheroine (also rendered super-heroine or super heroine). Fiction centered on such characters, especially in American comic books since the 1930s, is known as superhero fiction. The comic-book miniseries *Watchmen* and the animated movie *The Incredibles* humorously commented on the potentially lethal impracticality of capes. In Marvel Comics, the term "cape-killer" has been used to describe Superhuman Restraining Unit, even though few notable Marvel heroes wear capes. In the wake of second-wave feminism, the Invisible Girl became the more confident and assertive Invisible Woman, and Marvel Girl became the hugely powerful destructive force called Phoenix. *Invisible Girl's Quest for Visibility: Early Second Wave Feminism and the Comic Book Superheroine*. Jan 2008. D'Amore, Laura Mattoon. D'Amore, Laura Mattoon. 2008. "Invisible Girl's Quest for Visibility: Early Second Wave Feminism and the Comic Book Superheroine." Having denounced three decades earlier the "relentless enculturation" and stereotypes of female passivity and modesty to which girls were subjected in *The Female Eunuch* (92), she identifies an equally, if not more, insidious form of indoctrination in the construction and marketing of "girl power" that is, of the paraphernalia of sexualised femininity to girls and young women by the media.