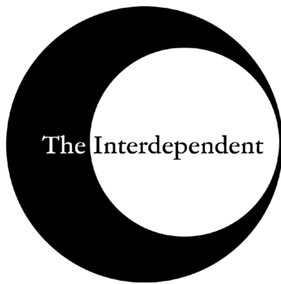
What Lies Beyond Their Hurting: Representations of Female Pain and Personhood in Animation



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Abstract

The representation of women in art is a fraught one. This article analyzes the relationship American society has to female pain, using four cartoon series as case studies to argue that cultural perceptions around women's suffering are shifting towards viewing women as more than the sum total of their pain. The methodology of this analysis relies on Simone de Beauvoir's *Second* Sex and Leslie Jamison's "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain" as a theoretical framework that illuminates cultural manifestations of female pain and the stereotypes that perpetuate these models, specifically applying them to female characters in *Avatar: The Legend of Korra*, *Rapunzel's Tangled Adventure*, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, and *Steven Universe.* Animation analysis demonstrates how portrayals of women in media have evolved, yet continue to rely on female pain as a plot device for character development and plot progression. This analysis throws into relief the concept of the "post-wounded woman," a modern opposition to the "wounded woman" trope that asserts societal notions of female pain have rendered women's relationship to their emotions full of disadvantage as they must yield control over how they are perceived. Emotions such as rage and anger are deemed impermissible by society because they challenge essentialist notions of the female condition. However, new female archetypes are appearing in animation alongside classical depictions, placing the medium ahead of traditional sexist societal views in this respect.

Keywords

"Wounded Woman"; "Post-Wounded Woman"; "Female Pain"; Animation; Feminist Aesthetics; *Rapunzel's Tangled Adventure*; *The Legend of Korra*; *Steven Universe*; *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*; Simone de Beauvoir; Leslie Jamison

Animation is often synonymous with fantasy in the collective unconscious, partially because it involves the surreal process of breathing life into inanimate models through a succession of images giving the illusion of movement, but primarily because the medium tends to be utilized to portray stories and characters as fantastical as the process of animation sounds.[1] Yet, regardless of content, the core themes of animation are heavily grounded in reality. Cultural historian and film critic Leo Braudy describes visual media such as film and TV as a "sounding board or lightning rod for deep-rooted audience concerns," affirming that "there is a constant interplay between the stories told in film and fiction and the stories in journalism, on television news, in casual conversation and in classrooms."[2] Because animation is reflective of current social norms and attitudes, this article analyzes how female suffering is portrayed in animated series and argues that these depictions are indicative of a tentative societal shift towards reimagining women as multifaceted beings defined by their character instead of by their pain. Art and politics have long engaged in a reciprocal relationship where political belief has influenced and inspired artistic practice and, in turn, artworks and aesthetics have bolstered political messages and theory, though the use of animation as a tool for analyzing contemporary sociopolitical issues has been historically controversial.

Plato, Pain, and the Persuasive Power of Art

Plato famously denounced all forms of representational media in *The Republic*, condemning its ability to emotionally engage the viewer as a form of manipulation, remaining

[1] The collective unconscious refers to shared mental concepts common to mankind as a whole or within certain communities. DK, *The Psychology Book: Big Ideas Simply Explained* (National Geographic Books, 2012).
[2] David Whitley, "Learning with Disney: Children's Animation and the Politics of Innocence," *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society* 5, no. 2 (Autumn 2013): 77, https://www.proquest.com/docview/1768238989/fulltextPDF/E710FDD4CC69412APQ/1?accountid=12768.

willfully ignorant of the extent to which art and politics engage in meaningful dialogue, informing one another.[3] Plato's disdain for the mimetic nature of the theater is rooted in a preference for that which engages reason, associated with the mind, over that which engages emotion, associated with the body; this mind-body binary is often linked to gendered attributes, emotion being equated with women while rationality is equated with men. Plato is not unique in his implicit contempt for what he regards as female emotions; women and their emotions are often overlooked or derided in society in much the same way these philosophers ostracize them in their theories. The philosophies laying the intellectual groundwork for our social contracts adhere to restrictive, misogynistic views at odds with efforts to reform social structures to align with present conceptions of gender and equality. In contrast, American novelist Leslie Jamison writes at length about the contradictory social impediments that restrict and orchestrate manifestations of female suffering in her essay "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain."

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Half media exploration, half diary entry, Jamison's essay grapples with the nuanced relationship women have with their pain while addressing the secondary feelings and behaviors that arise from the varied ways society reacts to displays of female suffering. Jamison searches for a path away from trite retellings of the same beautiful hurt: "[H]ow do we talk about these wounds without glamorizing them? Without corroborating an old mythos that turns female trauma into celestial constellations worthy of worship?"[4] Attempts to step out of this cage have led to its

[3] Plato, *Republic*, ed. R. Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 359, https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199535767.book.1.
[4] Leslie Jamison, "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 90, no. 2 (April 2, 2014): 115, https://www.vqronline.org/essays-articles/2014/04/grand-unified-theory-female-pain.

antithesis: the newly played-out trope of the jaded woman, "post-wounded", unfeeling, and pointedly bitter at the prospect of fulfilling the stereotype by emoting. Jamison maintains that neither the jaded woman nor the wounded woman is the answer, expressing that "[r]elying too much on the image of the wounded woman is reductive, but so is rejecting it—being unwilling to look at the varieties of need and suffering that yield it. We don't want to be wounds…but we should be allowed to have them, to speak about having them, to be something more than just another girl who has one."[5]

Using "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain" as the primary framework to understand the position of female pain in Western culture, this article will analyze four animated series prominently featuring female characters—*Avatar: The Legend of Korra*, *Rapunzel's Tangled Adventure*, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, and *Steven Universe*—as case studies to assess commonalities in the way women and their pain are portrayed in media. For the purposes of this article, the focus will be exclusively on female characters; no analysis of male characters will be offered as the aim is to cast light on an issue particular to women without falling into cultural patterns of comparing them to men.

This article will focus on animation as an indicator of social trends because of its unique status as a transformative medium and its marginalized position within the motion picture genre that enables a focus on minority perspectives. Animation remains largely overlooked in film theory, leading to ambiguity as to how to concretely define the genre beyond relegating it to the techniques and materials associated with digital production.[6] In the same way that feminist theory seeks to challenge the biases camouflaged as impartialities within dominant philosophical theories,

[5] Jamison, "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain."
[6] Eric Herhuth, "The Politics of Animation and the Animation of Politics," *Animation* 11, no. 1 (February 18, 2016): 7, https://doi.org/10.1177/1746847715624581.

animation—from its sidelined position—lends itself to the critical analysis of orthodox normative formations.

The animated woman is an amalgamation of personal and widespread understandings of the attributes of womanhood. The connotations attached to her role and actions within the context of her animated world illuminate the position of real women in society, customs around their self-expression, and overarching attitudes around these cultural frameworks.

Animation makes the personal political by employing its marginal status within cinema to bring nuance to politics by focusing primarily on discord around representation. This proves crucial for subsequent analysis of the ways animation reflects the constructions of women's suffering in a larger societal context beyond the screen, as the politicized marginality of animation's structure and the application of the medium to address such political issues—or rather, the politics of animation and the animation of politics, as Herhuth cleverly addresses it—"can intersect, of course, and with significant real world implications; for instance, when animation's marginal status within film and media studies bolsters the expression of marginalized views and modes of being in animated media."[7] The personal is inherently political for women—their experience is sequestered from the everyday analogous to how animation and its political interrogation are sequestered from the larger conversations of film and TV.

"Art is philosophy visualized," as Rachel Kearney states in her essay.[8] Animation artists communicate philosophies to viewers through a visual medium that strikes a balance between illusory qualities and emotional authenticity. Kearney details the reciprocity between animation

[7] Herhuth, "The Politics of Animation and the Animation of Politics."
[8] Rachel Kearney, "The Joyous Reception: Animated Worlds and the Romantic Imagination," in *Animated "Worlds"*, ed. by Suzanne Buchan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), https://muse.jhu.edu/book/58581.

and its viewership, where the medium asks its consumers to suspend their disbelief and in turn offers opportunities for introspection. In this sense, animation acts as a prescriptive medium as much as a reactive one, philosophy in its purest form.

Personal Vanishing Point: Women's Pain in Media

The idea of wounded women has prevailed through each new manifestation of media, with prominent examples found throughout anglophone literature. In her *Illness as Metaphor* American writer Susan Sontag describes the ironic Victorian penchant for vitalizing characters by accessorizing them with melancholy or disease: "Sadness made one 'interesting'. It was a mark of refinement, of sensibility, to be sad. That is, to be powerless."[9] These glorified representations of women's pain are deeply rooted in Christianity, a prominent pillar of much of Western society. Though Jesus is the central suffering figure of the Bible, with the Passion of the Christ encapsulating the sanctity of enduring pain, depictions of female pain are equally integral to biblical narratives, from Eve's Original Sin to the trials and tribulations of the disciple Mary Magdalene, the most eminent being the Virgin Mary, mother of Christ. She is immortalized as a figure of "bright sadness" in Christian art, most commonly portrayed cradling the body of her dead son after Jesus was removed from the cross.[10] Mary's sorrowful contemplation in the Pietà is meant to recast an event of intractable pain as reverential empathy: "Her grief was not a sign of weakness, but a sign of love and compassion for her son as well as for all humanity. Love was considered to be the core Christian virtue, an inclusive emotion that was not merely an act of will but a state of

[9] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Random House, 1979), 31.

[10] Tish Harrison Warren, "What Mary Can Teach Us About the Joy and Pain of Life," *New York Times*, December 12, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/12/opinion/what-mary-can-teach-us-about-the-joy-and-pain-of-life.html.

heart…her humbleness, obedience and modesty were the very qualities in her character that people should strive to mimic as good Christians."[11] Mary's poignant heartache is idolized in Christian thought and entangles women's suffering with their worth in the cultural unconscious. These literary depictions of suffering women inform cultural perceptions of how women do and should behave.

Jamison summarizes that "[t]hese are the dangers of a wound: that the self will be subsumed by it ('personal vanishing point') or unable to see outside its gravity…The wound can sculpt selfhood in a way that limits identity rather than expanding it—that obstructs one's vision of others' suffering rather than sharpening empathic acuity."[12] This portrayal is uniquely feminine, as the same compression of the self does not occur for male characters, even in the same media. Women are victims of pain inflicted upon them by forces outside of their control against which they cannot defend themselves, and, as Sontag describes, in their helplessness lies a morbid fascination. This tradition has carried on, its manifestations adjusted over time to accommodate the medium and cultural context through which it is expressed. The animations analyzed in this article are newer iterations of a larger, longstanding trend of how women are portrayed across mediums within Western culture.

The sophistication of media to combine aspects of literature and visual imagery with the introduction of cinema allowed for the subsequent complication of female characters, though the progression of the latter came slower than the former.

Cinema overall holds a magnifying glass to the standards of female characterization, and the heightened creative control animation gives artists as an entirely contrived medium illuminates

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[11] Ann-Catrine Eriksson, "Materiality, Rhetoric and Emotion in the Pietà," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 41, no. 3 (2016): 274, https://doi.org/10.1080/03468755.2016.1179830.
[12] Jamison, "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain."

the essence of these cultural tropes, given that every visual is created for the purpose of articulating a specific message: “After all, there is nothing in the portrayal of an animated character—not a blink of an eye, not a tilt of the head, not even the movement of the folds of a skirt—which is not decided upon in advance, carefully mapped out, and then drawn to suit the expectations of the director.”[13] All visual aspects of an animation serve to influence audience perception of characters and plot so that they align with the motivations of their creators who represent their personal understanding of the contemporary sociopolitical themes they engage with through their work.[14] Looking back at former portrayals of women and their suffering, the classic depiction of the Disney princess as damsel in distress therefore arises from concurrent societal views of the ideal woman as ethereal and, because of this, victimized and in need of saving: “Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora/Briar Rose—all are good, simple, kind; they are what Virginia Woolf once dubbed ‘the angel in the house.’”[15] Despite technological innovations catalyzing an increase in the intricacy of plotlines, female characters remained beholden to Victorian tastes.

The idea of pain as not only intrinsic to femininity but the prior condition upon which womanhood hinges turns any expression of female pain into a cliché. No woman can be original in her hurt if hurting is a necessary condition.

Bringing this Analysis into the Present

The damsel in distress trope that typified classic Disney princesses of the last century is no longer the predominant portrayal of female pain in animation. Sleeping Beauty remains

[13] Amy Davis, *Good Girls & Wicked Witches: Women in Disney’s Feature Animation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 4.
[14] Davis, *Good Girls & Wicked Witches*.
[15] Davis, *Good Girls & Wicked Witches*, 19.

immortalized as a fragile femme in the Western cultural unconscious, but the franchise has allowed other heroines a rebrand to align with more modern tastes. *Rapunzel's Tangled Adventure* (2017) is an animated series set after the events of Disney's *Tangled*, a 2010 film that reimagines the Brothers Grimm's story of the long-haired girl locked in a tower. The film chronicles Rapunzel escaping the clutches of Mother Gothel—the witch who locks Rapunzel in the tower to take advantage of her hair's magical powers—and reuniting with her biological family with the help of wanted criminal Flynn "Eugene" Rider, while the series follows her journey to uncover the truth behind her mysterious magical hair.[16]

Female pain drives the plot, acting as the catalyst for much of the conflict as well as forming the contextual basis of the lore in Disney's *Tangled*. Every woman in *Rapunzel's Tangled Adventure* is nursing a wound, reflecting the psychosocial notion that pain is innate in women, a genotypical given that is always phenotypically expressed. The suffering of women in *Rapunzel's Tangled Adventure* is never resolved or reconciled, merely transmitted from woman to woman across generations in a destructive cycle that continually elevates the consequences. Nevertheless, the progression away from the submissive passivity of the original *Rapunzel* story is clear, as the *Rapunzel* of the 21st-century stories is more subject than object, taking charge of her story.[17] Yet, the series still demonstrates how female pain is capitalized upon as a vehicle for self-discovery and character exposition in modern animation, acting as motive and explanation for plot devices without relying on platitudinous depictions of histrionic women.[18]

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[16] "Tangled," IMDb, accessed January 3, 2023, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0398286/.
[17] Komal Tujare, "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, Has Finally Let Down Her Hair! The Feminist Evolution of 'Rapunzel' from the Nineteenth Century to the Twenty-First Century," *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature* 60, no. 1 (January 1, 2022): 77–85, https://doi.org/10.1353/bkb.2022.0007.
[18] Jamison, "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain."

Other animated series corroborate that the romanticization of female pain is no longer concentrated on pain enfeebling women as we have shifted away from viewing fragility as synonymous with beauty, but idealization and glorification are persistent phenomena as female pain is still central to establishing the personalities of female characters. *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018) is at its core an exploration of cycles of trauma and abuse. Suffering is central to every character and storyline and the women who hurt each other and themselves are the central focus of the show. Shadow Weaver perceives herself as a victim of a tyrannical majority when her fellow sorcerers in Mystacor attempt to stop her from using the forbidden Spell of Obtainment to stop the evil Horde. When she defies them, the dark magic of the spell permanently disfigures her physically and emotionally, warping her into a magical parasite.[19] In this injured state she joins forces with the Horde she had sought to destroy and externalizes her pain, weaponizing it against her wards, Catra and Adora. Their shared youth as child soldiers in the Horde is molded by Shadow Weaver pitting them against one another; their caretaker physically abuses Catra, whom she loathes, using the constant threat of violence against her to manipulate Adora, who is fiercely protective of her best friend and easily bends to Shadow Weaver's bidding in order to protect her. Catra and Adora hurt each other inadvertently their whole lives as a consequence of their traumatic upbringing.[20] Pain and suffering define their lives, their personalities, and their mindsets.

While female pain is a plot device in *Rapunzel's Tangled Adventure*, it is shown to be a personality trait in *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* rather than a temporary state of being. The

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[19] *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 2, episode 6, "Light Spinner," written by Nate Stevenson and Katherine Nolfi, directed by David Dwooman Woo, aired April 26, 2019, on Netflix, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80992351?source=imdb.

[20] *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 1 episode 2, "The Sword: Part 2," written by Nate Stevenson and James Krieg, directed by Jen Bennett, aired November 13, 2018, on Netflix, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80179863?source=imdb.

finales of both shows depict these hurting women rejecting this reduction and choosing to define themselves and each other beyond their pain through empathy and forgiveness of themselves and each other. These series, culminating in female characters breaking free of this century-old stereotype, exhibit a radical reappraisal of the integrality of pain to the female constitution. The message relayed to the viewer gives credence to Jamison's insistence that "[t]here is a way of representing female consciousness that can witness pain but also witness a larger self around that pain—a self that grows larger than its scars without disowning them."[21] Yet, the accentuation of this idea as a core moral of these stories underscores the notion it still faces contention.

The implication of pain being so deeply entrenched in the identities of female characters is that women's pain is ubiquitous by design. Rather than being an experience these women share, it is either the starting or end point around which the rest of their narrative unfurls; variance in how the wounds are managed and/or overcome is where personality comes into play. The creation of animated content that offers a path beyond the boundaries of pain retaliates against desensitization to real women hurting. Women who voice their pain inherit the burdens of a lineage of "wounded women," straining simultaneously to address the wound and "be something more than just another girl who has one."[22] They are expected to hurt, so the act of suffering in and of itself is not seen as momentous or worthy of attention until this expectation is challenged and new possibilities are offered. In these works, animation is questioning the cultural value of holding fast to antiquated perceptions of female pain, modeling the present reality where women must choose between exposing their pain—risking their wounds defining them in the eyes of society—or stifling the ache and suffering in silence to be seen for what lies beyond their hurting.

[21] Jamison, "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain," 128.
[22] Jamison, "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain," 126.

Preempting Accusations: The Post-Wounded Woman

In response to the universality of the "wounded woman" trope, an antithetical depiction of women as unfeeling has created the possibility for women to exist beyond their wounds by denying their existence altogether. Jamison refers to these women as "post-wounded," describing their disposition as follows:

> These women are aware that "woundedness" is overdone and overrated. They are wary of melodrama, so they stay numb or clever instead. Post-wounded women make jokes about being wounded or get impatient with women who hurt too much. The post-wounded woman conducts herself as if preempting certain accusations: Don't cry too loud; don't play victim. [23]

Post-wounded women represent a shift in how women and their pain are perceived, though this push away from feeling is surface-level, a mask to be worn in public to conceal how "these women still hurt."[24] Post-woundedness is a delicate armor to defend against the implications of discernible wounds that stain the identity, marking one as fragile, pitiful, or attention-seeking. Jamison sees these jaded revisions to the female character as the result of an unspoken understanding that woundedness is almost immature or gauche. The desire to exist outside of labels synonymous with such negativity is an attempt to reclaim control of one's narrative. In her classic analysis of gender and women's condition, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir writes, "[woman] is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other."[25] With men considered the default in society, their position is neutral or positive, while women are defined by what distinguishes them from men, or their perceived limitations. One such aforementioned limitation

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[23] Jamison, "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain," 120.
[24] Jamison, "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain," 120.
[25] Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949; new translation, New York: Random House, 2015), 27.

is suffering as an intrinsic aspect of femininity; women who shift away from these societal notions of what defines a woman—even superficially—attempt a shift towards power.

While Jamison asserts that "[p]ost-wounded women know that postures of pain play into limited and outmoded conceptions of womanhood," the impassivity they perform is also detrimental. Post-woundedness is unsustainable—eventually, the act must end. In animation, when post-wounded women inevitably snap, all the hurt they have held at bay overwhelms them in passionate displays. We see this at work in *Avatar: The Legend of Korra* (2012), where many of the powerful female leaders portray themselves as post-wounded. One of the first characters Korra meets in Republic City is Lin Beifong, Chief of Police of the Republic City Police Department. Throughout the first few seasons, Lin comes off as cold and judgmental, keeping everyone at a distance.[26] Her closed-off demeanor creates a facade of invulnerability visually negated by the twin scars that cut down the right side of her face—evidence that, even if she seems unshakeable, she has been hurt before.

For Lin, coming to terms with her pain and anger means relinquishing her numb facade in a rather explosive way, but releasing her hold on those feelings allows her to exist beyond her wounds—and the denial of them—rather than continuing to live in a claustrophobic limbo, unable to move toward or away from her suffering. Lin's post-wounded affect is an attempt to exert control over her relationships with others by closing herself off from further disappointment. Post-woundedness is an added plight contributing to her longstanding suffering, creating tension between her desire for control and her emotional well-being. Simone de Beauvoir describes how this tension exists within many women, explaining:

[26] *The Legend of Korra*, directed by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, aired April 14, 2012, on Nickelodeon, https://www.netflix.com/title/80027563.

> For a woman to accomplish her femininity, she is required to be object and prey; that is, she must renounce her claims as a sovereign subject. This is the conflict that singularly characterizes the situation of the emancipated woman. She refuses to confine herself to her role as female because she does not want to mutilate herself; but it would also be a mutilation to repudiate her sex…Renouncing her femininity means renouncing part of her humanity.[27]

De Beauvoir writes this with respect to subverting expectations about femininity in terms of labor conventions and the right to work, but the idea applies to conventions around female pain as well. If the emancipated woman is considered to be post-wounded, freed of the conventional tropes around feminine pain, then she is torn between embracing the full extent of herself by accepting the emotions that shape her humanity and freeing herself from the associations with female suffering that limit her in society. Lin's emotional arc demonstrates that to exist beyond a wound requires relinquishing a measure of self-control, or "sovereignty" over oneself and one's image, in favor of holding space for the pain to work through it, striking a balance of power impossible for the post-wounded woman to achieve. Lin challenges concepts of female inferiority by disentangling from the inferiority and acquiescence that "others" women through their emotional displays. The post-wounded woman presented as the main path to power in animation implies a general rule that wounded women are not afforded control or autonomy. Post-woundedness is an attempt to exist outside this powerlessness, but post-wounded women pretend they do not hurt to the detriment of themselves and the wounded women they seek to define themselves apart from. Lin's character arc towards processing her pain rather than tamping it down shows that existing with her wounds comes at a cost. She has to relinquish some of her control to do so, depicting how the female relationship to suffering is replete with disadvantages.

[27] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 805-806.

The recurring condition where women need to behave as if post-wounded to obtain or maintain power in *The Legend of Korra* closely parallels the circumstances de Beauvoir assesses in *The Second Sex* because the cultural dynamics of the show are deeply rooted in the frameworks of our current society. Though de Beauvoir was writing in the wake of World War II, a 2021 research study analyzing the impact of emotional displays on the perceived effectiveness of leaders demonstrated female leaders showing less fear, anger, and remorse than their male colleagues, partially for fear of being seen as "too emotional."[28] Female leaders demonstrated higher levels of cheeriness relative to male leaders, though not of pride or calm, and were perceived as more positive because of their suppression of negative emotions. Even when manifesting through the more positive forms of cleverness or collectedness, post-woundedness stifles women positing as the path forward from the tragic beauty of incapability. Their fear of displaying emotion is warranted—a similar 2016 research study on the interplay of gender, emotions, and leadership found that "female leaders can be penalized for even minor or moderate displays of emotion, especially when the emotion conveys dominance (e.g., anger or pride), but being emotionally inexpressive may also result in penalties because unemotional women are seen as failing to fulfill their warm, communal role as women."[29] Negative emotions on the whole hang over women like a sword of Damocles; the existence of pain is penalized whether expressed or restrained, and the difference lies only in whether the condemnation is internal or external.

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[28] Thomas Sy and Daan Van Knippenberg, "The Emotional Leader: Implicit Theories of Leadership Emotions and Leadership Perceptions," *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 42, no. 7 (September 1, 2021): 885–912, https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2543.

[29] Victoria L. Brescoll, "Leading with Their Hearts? How Gender Stereotypes of Emotion Lead to Biased Evaluations of Female Leaders," *Leadership Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (June 1, 2016): 415–28, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2016.02.005.

Writing about women plagued by the unfortunate position where they can neither "play at being a man" (asserting dominance in a way we would here call post-woundedness) nor "play at being a woman" (embracing the traditional femininity we have linked with woundedness), de Beauvoir suggests that "[t]he real problem for the woman refusing these evasions is to accomplish herself as transcendence: this means seeing which possibilities are open to her by what are called virile and feminine attitudes."[30] De Beauvoir sees the tension inherent in female suffering. Internalized pain results in victimization, whereas externalized pain (in form of anger, for instance) leads to villainization. De Beauvoir advised that the only way to break free of the restricting binary of woundedness versus post-woundedness is to surpass the boundaries of both.

The Angry Woman Reframed as Threat

Reconstructing imagery of wounded women necessitates a habitual reimagining of feminine suffering in accordance with cultural shifts over time, yet certain aspects remain stylized, formulaic, and constant. The emotions through which women profess their suffering are clearly demarcated as either acceptable and worthy of empathic glorification or unacceptable and contemptible; sadness, melancholy, and sorrow fall into the former category while rage, anger, and fury are distinctly in the latter. The demonization of female anger is a repression tactic that shifts focus from the root of the suffering to its ill-favored symptoms, canceling out the former with the latter: "The phenomenon of female anger has often been turned against itself, the figure of the angry woman reframed as threat—not the one who has been harmed, but the one bent on

[30] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 88.

harming."[31] Imagery of the threatening nature of female anger is replete with threats of violence and tragedy intentionally inattentive to the circumstances that created the monsters depicted.

According to Jamison, these representations are portrayed so one-dimensionally because of the discord in how hurting women are perceived: "A woman couldn't hurt and be hurt at once. She could be either angry or sad. It was easier to outsource those emotions to the bodies of separate women than it was to acknowledge that they reside together in the body of every woman."[32]

Animation has followed suit in creating a distinct segregation between hurt women and women who hurt others as seen with notable character dichotomies throughout classic animation like Ariel and Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* or Snow White and Aurora and Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty*; the woman who hurts others is vindictive and self-interested while the woman whom she hurts is innocent and selfless, an undeserving target.

While old animation strictly adhered to this dichotomy, modern animation offers more holistic representations of female characters whose pain does not exist in a vacuum. While expressions of pain directed towards others continue to be portrayed in a disapproving light, some animated series subvert the established division of wounded and wicked to add intrigue and comment on these unrealistic societal expectations. In *Steven Universe*, Lapis Lazuli's character is introduced as an inscrutable figure, an emotionally turbulent Gem whose hurt is hard to comprehend without the context of her elusive past. We see her violent reactions before we see the reality of her circumstances, so we understand she is hurting but cannot fully empathize with her pain because we do not understand its source, we only fully understand the pain she is causing others seemingly unwarrantedly.

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[31] Leslie Jamison, "I Used to Insist I Didn't Get Angry. Not Anymore," *The New York Times,* August 2, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/magazine/i-used-to-insist-i-didnt-get-angry-not-anymore.html.
[32] Jamison, "I Used to Insist I Didn't Get Angry."

It is only in the third season of the show, fifty-seven episodes after her initial introduction, that Lapis shares her full backstory, revealing a lifetime of suffering the consequences of other people's conflicts, perpetually caught in the fray by virtue of being at the wrong place at the wrong time.[33] Her life story is an exemplar of the stereotypical victim storyline—an innocent, unsuspecting woman who becomes the collateral damage of external forces. Her actions and their consequences do not change, but the perception of said actions does. Her storyline illustrates that female reactions to pain require justification, seen as reflective of a woman's cruel disposition if regarded as unreasonable. Female anger is only acceptable when it is responding in kind to a prior offense, and even then, there are exceptions.

Later in the show, the message is clear that expressions of pain that hurt innocent people are inexcusable regardless of cause or intent. In season three Steven and the Crystal Gems struggle to stop the emergence of the Cluster, a super-weapon forged from the forced fusion of shattered Gem shards created by the Diamonds in a process akin to the creation of Frankenstein's monster on an exponentially larger scale.[34] The Cluster's existence is evidence of a long history of abuse and victimization against the Gems who were shattered to form it, yet it is villainized for what it has become as a result of that trauma and pain. People on all sides of the conflict are hurt and hurting others; the Diamonds create the Cluster to destroy Earth in efforts to avenge their grief over the death of Pink Diamond; the Gems comprising the Cluster risk the complete annihilation of all life on Earth by virtue of their tortured existence in this forced fusion state; the Cluster only gets help once it goes from adversary to being in distress. Steven feels sorry for the Gems in the Cluster once they articulate their pain to him through words, and once he feels sympathetic he is

[33] *Steven Universe*, season 3, episode 3, "Same Old World," written by Rebecca Sugar, Lamar Abrams, and Katie Mitroff, directed by Joseph D. Johnston, aired May 19, 2016, on Cartoon Network Studios.
[34] *Steven Universe*, written by Rebecca Sugar, aired November 4, 2013, on Cartoon Network Studios.

moved to find an alternative solution to prevent it from forming and destroying Earth. From then on in the series, the Cluster is depicted as an ally, helping Steven on occasion and battling against the Diamond Authority that created it.

This shift in portrayal evidences the drastic difference in responses to female pain depending on how it manifests. Its desperate struggle to take form is a display of the Cluster's suffering, but not one that musters empathy until it cries out. Pain that threatens to proliferate itself through its expression is seen as a force to be contained rather than a wound to be healed, leaving the "wicked" women Jamison describes without recourse unless they can prove themselves to be victims. Rather than typecasting these characters as villains, the series portrays them as nuanced beings who exist on a spectrum of good and evil rather than reducing their morality to the impact of their actions.

The Cluster is an example of how animated series are actively attempting to broaden their approaches to female pain. *Steven Universe* breaks from the typical formula of female victim/male hero by allowing the Cluster to save itself. Voicing their pain allows them to dress the wound through communication and mutual aid rather than perpetuating the idea that women must either suffer silently and fester or assert their pain and spread it.

The female compulsion to refrain from expressing anger is strong. In a 2012 study on the relationship between gender and anger, UC Berkeley psychology professor Ann M. Kring noted that while men and women self-report experiencing anger with common frequency, persisting stereotypes insist female anger is atypical and, therefore, shameful.[35] Whereas men expressing their anger expels negative emotion, women expressing their anger breeds more negative feelings.

[35] Ann M. Kring, "Gender and Anger," in *Gender and Emotion: Social Psychological Perspectives*, edited by A. H. Fischer (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 222-23, https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511628191.011.

Women perceive such displays as taboo, a view reinforced by society from very young; in two studies children report anger is more acceptable from boys than from girls.[36] Kring's study also sheds light on the fear of female rage that demands restitution: men's anger is more likely to manifest in physical aggression towards objects or verbally assaulting others while women are more likely to mitigate their outward anger response or cry—blatant female rage is defiant in its expression where the expectation is for women to stifle their anger and pose no threat. Animated series are bringing this anger onscreen and out from the sidelines, reflecting a real-world exasperation with the archaic views on female anger that result in its repression. Based on this analysis of popular animated series, the depictions of female anger on screen are diversifying more rapidly than perceptions about it are changing in the real world.

Conclusion

In her essay, Jamison asks how we should "represent female pain without producing a culture in which this pain has been fetishized to the point of fantasy or imperative," searching for methods to portray women without confining them to the binary of radiantly tragic wounded woman or bitter, callous post-wounded woman.[37] When the underlying societal implications are that women's identities are subsumed by their pain, it is daunting to imagine there can be something more to offer; the motifs of these animated series repudiate the idea of female pain constituting the female by proposing ways to address the wounds themselves.

Despite this forward momentum, analysis of the tropes still present in these shows demonstrates that limitations remain. These shows mark a transitional period, harkening to a new

[36] Kring, "Gender and Anger," 222-23.
[37] Jamison, "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain," 126.

era of female portrayal while still working to shed the skin of antiquated convention. *Rapunzel's Tangled Adventure* centers its plot around women who fear their suffering is the only destiny they are bound to, struggling to make their pain meaningful so that they might forge it into something better. The story ends with the resolution of their woundedness, never giving the characters a chance to truly develop past that pain or illuminating what lies beyond that. *Legend of Korra* similarly relies on the post-wounded woman trope as the starting point for several of its female characters as a means to intensify conflict in its plotlines and follow the platitudinous character development of overcoming internal strife and coming out stronger. The personalities of the women in *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* are molded by and around their suffering, festering wounds determining actions, reactions, and identities as they struggle to mollify the pain that plagues them. The same is true of *Steven Universe*. The progress made in these series is undermined to an extent by orienting their innovation around the two archetypes they seek to amend, playing into the ideas of the post-wounded woman or the wounded woman in order to branch away from them. The prevalence of these tropes tells viewers of all gender expressions watching and absorbing these notions that these are the two options for how women and female-presenting persons should behave.

Because "media is not merely mindless entertainment apart from life, but rather the very fabric of life itself, teaching values, attitudes, and lifestyles,"[38] the portrayal of women and their pain in media has the potential to influence the manner in which one's own beliefs and values regarding female pain are understood and expressed. Surveys show the average child to have

[38] Ann Marie Barry, "Perception and Visual Communication Theory," *Journal of Visual Literacy* 22, no. 1 (2016): 98, https://doi.org/10.1080/23796529.2002.11674583.

watched approximately 18,000 hours of cartoons by the age of twelve.[39] An individual's understanding of the world is shaped early in life by the animated media they engage with, and, as they age, is further reinforced by portrayals that support the narratives they have subscribed to.

Animated series reflect a vision of female suffering posited by reality, yet their exploration of portrayals of women's pain outside traditional tropes imply a critique of modern social norms around women's emotions. The progress towards healing women's wounds in animation positions these cartoons in advance of our cultural norms, offering visions of society to which we must catch up even as these ideas are introduced for the first time elsewhere. The solution to catch up is to keep writing, creating, and animating ahead of ourselves, simulating ways forward in an imaginative space to strategize and brainstorm. David Whitley, former lecturer at the University of Cambridge, writes, "the appeal of popular cinema resides not simply in its capacity to provide escapist entertainment, but also in its offering a forum where unresolved elements in a culture that are not addressed adequately within other public forms of discourse may be expressed in ways that satisfy a collective need."[40] Animation is the forum through which female pain can come to exist as more than a feminine penchant for hurting without expanding to overshadow the women who carry its wounds. Jamison admits her fixation on female pain can, as she states, "feel like I'm beating a dead wound," but agrees the only way out of the bubble of trite perceptions is to "[j]ust write toward something beyond blood."[41] The banality of a trope, after all, is due in part to its privileged position in the spotlight as the experiences of others remain unseen. In her *New York Times* essay "Regarding the Pain of Others," Susan Sontag advocates that "[n]o 'we' should be

[39] Khaled Habib and Tarek Soliman, "Cartoons' Effect in Changing Children's Mental Response and Behavior," *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 3, no. 9 (2015): 248-64, http://www.scirp.org/journal/PaperInformation.aspx?PaperID=59815&#abstract.
[40] David Whitley, "Learning with Disney: Children's Animation and the Politics of Innocence," 82.
[41] Jamison, "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain," 128.

taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain."[42] As the stories told through cartoons continue to evolve and progress to address experiences on the fringes of cultural conversation, the possibilities for the animated woman to exist beyond her hurting become more attainable. With each new series released, the concept of a woman existing beyond the reach of her agony becomes more plausible, no longer at the limits of our suspension of disbelief.

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[42] Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Pain of Others," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2003, https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/23/books/chapters/regarding-the-pain-of-others.html.