

From villainess to Eco-icon: the blossoming Poison Ivy

punctum.gr

BY: **Alessandra Richetto**

ABSTRACT

Nowadays, the entertainment industry produces countless works, many exploring well-known stories or characters from different perspectives and through different media. In order to sell, superhero comics must be able to adapt to their audience. Through recurring narrative events, in which characters are rearranged by different authors, different relevant traits are gradually selected, afferent to varying codes of reading reality, which change as the semiotic field of reference changes. Thus, the ways of coding and decoding the same character at the diachronic and synchronic levels are different. This paper aims to analyse the case of Poison Ivy in terms of the differences between encoding and decoding. Created in 1966 as a femme fatale associated with venomous plants, the enemy of Batman, and a deadly poisonous seductress, it turns out that she is perceived differently today. Poison Ivy, alias Pamela Lillian Isley, is seen by today's writers and readers as a bearer of very different values and, above all, as a bearer of strong ecological messages of hope and activism on behalf of Planet Earth. Therefore, the referential reading models and the shifts in the semiotic field that could explain how the character's perception has changed will be studied.

ARTICLE INFO:

Volume: **09**Issue: **02**Winter **2023**ISSN: **2459-2943**DOI: **10.18680/hss.2023.0023**Pages: **143-164**Lic.: **CC BY-NC-ND 4.0**

KEYWORDS:

Comics**Ecology****Reading models****Semiotic field****Anti-heroes**

1. Introduction

The official website dedicated to DC Comics characters has a feature that allows the reader to sort them according to their moral alignment. They were previously separated into 'heroes' and 'villains.' Still, recently, a new section labeled 'it's complicated' has been added, with Poison Ivy listed among these complex fictional personalities. This paper examines the portrayal of Poison Ivy in American comic books through the years, a character conceived as an evil femme fatale in Batman's Rogues Gallery. Still, nowadays, her motivations could be read as euphoric. This analysis will mainly consider two different, chronologically distant texts in which she is heavily featured, beginning with examining the character's first appearance in 1966 and then moving directly to the most recent appearance in her first solo series, which started in June 2022. Besides the two primary texts examined, other character representations will be mentioned to understand better the flow of writers and stories that have led Poison Ivy to her current framing. In our study, we will consider her representations, the reactions of the fans, and the cultural changes influencing her writers, then confront them to identify the elements that are deemed pertinent, making them emerge thanks to a sociosemiotic scrutiny of the textual isotopies, which are, as Greimas defines them: "a bundle of redundant semantic categories subjacent to the discourse under consideration" (Greimas [1970] 2017). They allow "the still very vague, but necessary concept of the meaningful whole set forth by a message" (ibid.). Subsequently, different texts circulating at their time will be addressed to better retrace the cultural context in which Poison Ivy is written and read.

The first part of our study addresses theoretical issues pertinent to the comic book medium: time, authorial continuity, and canonicity in the storytelling practices of superhero comics. Next, Poison Ivy's first and latest appearances are analyzed in depth to understand the restyling processes she has undergone over the years. The study focuses on the plastic level of her representations and the values related to her moral alignment and characterization. In addition, it explores her bonds with planet Earth and ecological issues as a character embodying Mother Earth. We will also consider fans' reactions and interviews with the writers to support this argument.

2. Comics as modern mythology

Since this essay will attempt to understand the shifts in Poison Ivy's portrayal in comics, it is essential to address the problem of temporality and continuity within this medium to address a central issue later: the debatability of what can be established as canonical among the narratives of what will become a transmedia franchise, which has happened regarding superheroes histories. Commenting on the structure

of comic books, Eco argues that the iterative scheme of their narrative conceals frequent isotopies that generate a communication of high redundancy, messages that give away little information and tend to confirm what has been said before with an excess of elements (Eco 1984: 253).

Comics have tended to depict the same character for many years, and Eco (1984) points to Superman as the emblem of comic books' storytelling stasis. The hero was created by writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster in 1938. Today, the Kryptonian is the co-protagonist of a new animated series called *My New Adventures with Superman* (2023). The alien reporter retains his thematic and topical characteristics: he is the alias of Clark Kent, a goofy reporter in love with his colleague Lois Lane. He has superhuman strength, laser, and X-ray vision; he can fly, and when villains threaten Metropolis, he is at the forefront, ready to protect the defenseless residents. But it is crucial to bear in mind that Superman, as well as other protagonists of superhero fiction born in the last century, have been passed from hand to hand by several authors, Poison Ivy included: she was a plant-themed villain originally written by Kanigher, but then she was entrusted to Neil Gaiman, Alan Grant, Paul Dini, Marguerite Bennett and to many others. Artists and writers have created these characters in slightly different ways. This can be confusing and overwhelming for new readers eager to delve into the history of their favorite superhero or for scholars who want to study a specific portrayal of a character.

Two aspects need to be addressed regarding the issue of continuity: time and authorship. The first has been discussed by Daniele Barbieri (1992) and Marcello Serra (2015). While Barbieri ties his findings to Eco's theories, Serra follows a Lotmanian perspective. Serra distinguishes two different levels of temporality: the first is based on vertical isomorphism, which guarantees the coherence of the singular episodes in relation to the whole universe of events (ibid. 75). This approach is addressed as vertical continuity and conceived as a diachronic instance (ibid. 76). The second level considers the synchronic aspects of the narrative and is exemplified as horizontal: heroes and characters must deal coherently with different issues and events according to what is happening to their colleagues in another corner of their universe. For example, in his current comic series, Batman is busy fighting the Riddler in Gotham City. Consequently, he can't simultaneously appear in a Justice League issue to help Cyborg and the Green Lanterns ambush Steppenwolf.

The discourse about temporality can be developed in different directions. DC Comics and Marvel Comics, the two major comic book publishing companies, deal with it in divergent ways; consequentially, their use of repetition is entirely dissimilar. Marvel tends to have a continuity that gives more weight to future events, while their storytelling emphasizes a flow of events that seems teleological. Marvel characters evolve because they always seem to advance into an uncertain future. Instead, DC

Comics's depiction of internal time evokes mythic narratives. This has been discussed both by Barbieri (1992) and Eco (1984) in more depth: "reference to an original event is much more insistent in DC Comics' seriality than in Marvel's since the iterative model has always been dominant in the latter" (Barbieri 1992: 125). The protagonist is dealing with something that has already happened in an unknown time, which appears to the reader as blurred and difficult to grasp. The question that the story wants to ask the reader is "Where does it come from?" instead of "What will be happening?" (Barbieri 1992: 125). The mythization of comic storytelling could be related to the writing of the myth itself. DC Comics's mythical ecosystem is reinforced in its blurred and elusive perception of time by the mythopoetic act of writing what could be considered modern mythology, for instance, superheroes' adventures. Eco argues that myths are universal and common to all cultures because they, historically, have been grassroots phenomena, while today are not generated but fabricated *ad hoc* (1984: 225).

As regards the issue of authorship continuity, it is well known that different authors write comics through the serialization of the mythical hero. This modern mythology is understood to be a product of mass industry. Still, prominent authors called to create new narratives for such a hero typically decode and encode characters by introducing various and often unnoticed changes. This practice of successive multi-authorship reveals the authors' changing codes of reading reality (Santangelo 2014: 95). Consequently, by reading the evolving adventures of comic characters, we understand different meanings and shared values because mythic and narrative structures reflect given social contexts and issues (Eco 1984: 247). We may, then, consider a comic as a text that affirms the cultural architecture found at the center of the 'semiosphere,' as conceived by Lotman. Eco quotes Lotman for his proposal to view "the whole semiotic space... as a single mechanism (if not an organism). It is then not this or that brick that plays a primary role, but the 'big system' called semiosphere" (Lotman 1985: 58). The center of the semiosphere is where hierarchically the highest texts of a given culture are located, which are hierarchically related to each other and predominant over texts located in the periphery (*ibid*).

The inhabitants of the comics' mythical universes are often rewritten. DC Comics narratives have proved keener to emphasize the characters' origins rather than their future (Barbieri 1992: 125, Serra 2016: 650,651). Then, the characters must undergo a conscious resemantization process to be introduced to new generations of readers. DC Comics invented pivotal crossover events called "Crisis," which were used to reboot its chronological consequentiality; following these significant events, some characters were rewritten to fit the new canonicity or editorial guidelines better.

Many researchers dwelled on the issue of the canon. Eco identifies solid canonicity and refers to the shift from it as "untold tales," peripheral narratives that do not fit into the universe's canon but are written to satisfy the readers' curiosity (Eco 1984: 257).

On the other hand, given the different nature of the texts that support the structure of modern mythology, media studies researchers argue that canonicity is built around the perspectives and opinions of the writer and the audience (Turcotte 2021). Mittell (2014) views the canon as the layer that stays on top of a complex stratification of texts, and what is not included must be treated as paratext. How the creators position the paratexts in correlation with the original text and how the audience reads them establishes canonicity (ibid.). He also states that the redundancy of communication in comics and the frequency with which the characters are featured across their universes is essential to ensure that nothing crucial is lost in the process (ibid.). In other words, traits coded as pertinent in a particular culture can be noticed as part of an isotopic structure that supports them.

The ability to communicate systematical and redundant information about a storyworld is typical of the transmedia storytelling strategies because the comic book medium needs the information to be negotiated and recontextualized in a flow of continuous information (Turcotte 2021: 138) and semiotic activity. This flow shows how the changing semiotic field of a given cultural context has affected the elements an author or reader finds pertinent. These shifts are tiny and silent, but as Ferraro argues (2001: 205) in discussing Thompson's research on animal mutations, differences involve not adding unrelated transformations but a process that incorporates the whole spectrum. On a semiotic perception, micro-shifts that could be read as unrelated can be explained as the consequences of changes that happened on a higher level, shifts on a field from which they are subjected (ibid. 206, Ferraro 2019: 216). In other words, writers and audiences select elements as pertinent following the reading models of their cultural field of reference, the values they frame as euphoric. Then, by analyzing what is euphoric and dysphoric and the relative tension between values, we can reconstruct different grammars of codification and decoding (Veròn 2004), avoiding the theory of a rupture that divides different ways of representing and reading the same text.

3. The villainous origins of Poison Ivy

Poison Ivy, alias of Pamela Lilian Isley, was conceived as an enemy of the Caped Crusader in the Sixties. As a comic book character, her storyline depends on the rhythm and time dispositions of her native medium: comics. The character has also appeared in animation, video games, and live-action series or movies. Still, she was not part of the transmedia strategies (Jenkins 2014) until her first animated appearance as a villainess in *Batman: The Animated Series* (1995-1998), which became a pivotal moment not only for her but for all the inhabitants of Gotham City and American children's animation (Perlmutter 2014).

Starting from the beginning, the motivations behind the creation of the character can be found in the live-action show *Batman* (1966-1968), created by William Dozier, which was very popular during its run. Among other Gotham City characters, the show featured Catwoman, the quirky thief who quickly became a favorite among viewers and readers. Because of her, fans began asking for more female villains in Batman's adventures, and DC Comics editors wanted to please the readers. Poison Ivy was born (Infantino 2016, McCabe 2017), and her appearance was reportedly inspired by the pin-up model Bettie Page, a supposed bondage model highly appreciated in the '50s (Knights 2019). Poison Ivy was introduced in 1966 in *Batman* #181, where she confronted the Caped Crusader in the story "Beware of – Poison Ivy!", written by two of the most prolific superhero writers of their time: Robert Kanigher, writer for *Wonder Woman*, and Sheldon Moldoff, ghostwriter for Batman's creator Bob Kane (Figure 1).

In her first encounter with the Dark Knight, she immediately acts greedy and provocative. Poison Ivy is depicted as a femme fatale dressed in a corset made of bright green leaves and publicly declares her intention to be recognized as the greatest criminal in Gotham City. She can bewitch all men and make them desperately fall for



Figure 1. Moldoff, Sheldon, and Robert Kanigher 1966. Beware of Poison Ivy. *Batman* 1(181). Burbank, CA: DC Comics.

her with just one toxic kiss; even Batman cannot resist her. To fight, she uses the tools in her makeup kit as weapons: her lipstick is imbued with intoxicating chemicals, and its bottle contains a flashlight that can blind men. Her villainous name is Poison Ivy, and precisely like the poisonous plant, she is beautiful, dangerous, and lethal. She has red hair, a trait linked to wickedness and sinister intentions, often attributed to temptresses and seductresses (Ayres 2022). These were the elements that the writer selected as relevant for her character, as they were significant in their cultural context.

In the '60s, each DC Comics issue reserved a column called 'Letters to the Editor' that featured messages and comments from fans. *Batman* #186 featured readers' reactions to the introductory story of Poison Ivy. She was instantly compared to other characters circulating among contemporary audiovisual texts, most notably the *James Bond* films, which had been screening in theaters every year since 1962. The first reader to comment on the new female villain associated her with a Bond girl, stating that he has found it interesting that, unlike the femmes fatale represented in *James Bond* movies, Poison Ivy looked like a spoiled child who was not capable of doing anything evil because she was solely looking for a way to add some excitement to her whimsical life.

Almost all the writing fans compared the Vixen woman to Catwoman's portrayal in the TV show and appreciated her differences. Readers preferred Poison Ivy's outfit and physical aspect, her being driven not by the desire for money but for fame and recognition, and finally, her infatuation with Batman. The love triangle between the Caped Crusader and Bruce Wayne, since she didn't know Batman's true identity, added some spice to their interactions, according to the fans. In conclusion, readers recognized Poison Ivy as a woman driven by the desire to be at the center of attention, a pretentious villainess who was probably bored with her everyday life and wanted to add some thrills to her routine.

In her essay on femmes fatale in noir movies, Julie Grossman argues that this archetype links sensuality and danger, primarily through the use of seduction and beauty as weapons to subjugate men and turn them against each other. This could lead to a particular reading of the character, where Poison Ivy is represented as a threat to gender conventions, but her actual drive is her desire for power and ambition (2009: 45), as this could be the case. Fan letters, conversely, seem to undervalue her capability of committing actual crimes. Tedeschi argues that the understatement of women in superhero stories was a reaction to the '60s feminist movements (2019). His assessment reflects how those minimal shifts can be associated with significant shifts in the semi-otic field. In this case, women's self-awareness movements had caused a succession of culturally noticeable changes and modifications, which led authors to encode the character of Poison Ivy as a coquettish spoiled femme-fatale and the audience to decode her as criminally innocuous but sexually dangerous.

Readers also selected her relationship with the protagonist as a pertinent trait. Poison Ivy falls instantly in love with both Batman and Bruce Wayne. In the second part of the story, she becomes obsessed with the Caped Crusader, especially when he wakes

up from her charms and rejects her. In response, Poison Ivy actively seeks to challenge and defeat him to avenge her broken heart. Her relationship with men is shown to be tainted by hate because of her hidden desire for love. She constantly remarks, even in subsequent stories (Conway et al. 1977), how “cute” her evil colleagues from the Injustice Gang of the World are. The character embodies a duality of desire: she is a woman who wants to be desired and can’t avoid desiring other men, but for them, she is poison: the only ones immune to her charms are women and the Boy Wonder, Robin. He is “too young to drool” over women, as Batman himself says. The only antidote to her weapons is to be prepubescent, unable to be a victim of her deadly beauty.

This can also prove that Grossman's (2009) and Tedeschi's (2019) previously mentioned readings of the femme fatale could be understood as modern decoding of the archetype, applied retroactively to older representations. Poison Ivy, when conceived, was coded according to the reading models of her own time. The femme fatale's infatuation with the protagonist was a widespread cliché in noir narratives. In noir movies, the evil seductress often falls in love with the main character, and this is decoded as a form of punishment for her devious behavior, a way to tie her with the ropes of normativity (Mercure 2010).

The character is further explored as the publication history of the Caped Crusader continues, and a few years later, readers can grasp something more about her past for the first time. According to her origin story (Conway et al. 1978), her real name is Lillian Rose,¹ and she is the only child of wealthy parents who spoiled her. In college, she pursued her passion for plants until she was betrayed and nearly poisoned to death by her biology professor and lover, Marc Legrand. The venom did not kill her but made her immune to poison. After the accident, she reinvented herself as a femme fatale, seeking revenge not only on the man who betrayed her but on all men. Legrand was then turned into a mindless golem made of bark by the betrayed woman, who used his research on human-plant hybridization to enslave him. Poison Ivy goes from a whimsical maiden who desires fame and celebrity to an evil and mourning witch who turns men into plant subjects, forcing them to be at her side forever because “no one can leave Poison Ivy” (ibid.).

This aspect of her origin story was then engraved in her later portrayals. She became a villain due to what she had suffered, seeking attention and mindless loyalty out of fear of oblivion and abandonment. Other female villains in the years to come would eventually turn evil after being mistreated, Harley Quinn more than others (Cruzand and Stoltzfus-Brown 2019: 207), a jester who would become a pivotal character for Poison Ivy's development in the '90s and also her romantic partner.

¹ British gothic writer Neil Gaiman later cements her ultimate name as ‘Pamela Lillian Isley’ in *Pavane* (1989). It was the first official origin story dedicated to the character after the first “Crisis” event that rebooted the entire universe. Gaiman's approach to Pamela was darker and more profound, far away from the simplistic writing of villains that could be found in children's comics.

4. From Poison Ivy to 'Pamela': this monster is by your side

Previously, Poison Ivy appeared as a villainess or a supporting character in other characters' stories: a nuisance in Gotham City, a member of some criminal league, but only for the heroes to shine. Since 2022, she has been the titular character of a comic book series written by former Wonder Woman writer Willow Wilson and illustrated by Macio Takahara. The series is called *Poison Ivy* (2022 - present).

Her solo adventure takes place after the happenings of a peculiar DC crossover event called *Fear State*,² primarily written by James Tynion IV, in which Poison Ivy underwent complex transformations. She was split into two halves: one is the vengeful and deadly Queen Ivy, the embodiment of nature's wrath which threatens to destroy Gotham City; the other is Pamela, keeper of her best and human side: according to her wrathful half, human emotions are weaker because they "care about things that have no meaning" (Ram V and Perkins 2021). The only way to save the corrupted city from Queen Ivy's fury is to reunite the two halves that have come apart. Harley Quinn, as the only person capable of taming Queen Ivy's rage because of Ivy's deep love for her, can finally speak to the woman's heart and persuade her to reunite with Pamela, restoring balance to the natural forces she represents (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Tynion IV, James, and Jorge Jimenez 2021. *Batman 3* (117). Burbank: DC Comics.

² Begun in 2021, is the second-last crossover event in the DC Rebirth rebranding. The event affected a significant part of the DC Comics comic book series, but the main storyline took place in *Batman* #112–117 and was further expanded through a series of tie-in issues.

Willow Wilson's writing begins where James Tynion IV's *Fear State* ends. The story is told in first person, as a series of written confessions Pamela makes to the only human she loves as much as plants, Harley Quinn. Ivy temporarily leaves her partner because she blames her for weakening her: Pamela claims that Queen Ivy is more powerful than ever. Now, she must live with her human weaknesses again, interfering with her mission as Nature's avenger. In addition, her human side has diminished her poison resistance, leaving her unable to fight a deadly micellar toxin secreted by her own body. Dying and desperate, she decides to complete Queen Ivy's plan and kill all humans along with her. Then, she embarks on a journey that will lead her to confront humans' misbehavior against natural resources and corporate greed. Still, she ultimately renounces her genocidal project when she witnesses a young boy caring for her, even if he thinks she is a monster. The spark of hope for the future of the Planet returns to ignite within her: as she says in the first issue, "This is a story about love." In fact, at the end of the course, she begins to believe in love and humans again, accepting her humanity and recognizing some strength in it. Later, she discovers that her illness was caused by her nemesis, doctor Jason Woodrue,³ driven by devious motives. Pamela, to save humanity, endangers herself as she eats her disease, revealed to be the Floronic Man's lethal outgrowths.

The *Poison Ivy* series began as a short run of six volumes until it was outsold. According to various reviews and comments on pop-culture websites,⁴ fans were interested in the emotional storyline, especially liking the female hero's vulnerability⁵ and moral ambiguity (Herbison 2022). As Pamela herself comments, "I am not a hero [...], not a villain either. I am myself. I am Poison Ivy, and I will do what is in my power to save this world in my own way" (Tynion IV et al. 2021). Fans have also positively commented on how she is allowed to do bad things to pursue her goals outside the laws followed by heroes. She is driven by precise objectives perceived as altruistic: She fights to save the planet and is willing to use drastic methods out of desperation.

The character's traits are understood as deeply intertwined with ecology rather than ambition and fame. Those are the elements the authors selected as pertinent in response to the shifts in their contemporary semiotic field. More specifically, she is

³ Also known as the Floronic Man, Woodrue was created as a plant-alien from a planet and enemy of the Atom. Then in *Pavane* (Gaiman 1989) he was established as an ambitious and mad scientist who used Pamela's body for his hybridization experiments which did not kill her but granted her the power to connect with flora and bend them at her own will. He is often featured as her nemesis and dark foil.

⁴ For example, this thread on Reddit with comments on the series: https://www.reddit.com/r/DCcomics/comments/1039rom/poison_ivy_current_run/

⁵ Excerpt from an anonymous online review: <https://comicbookdispatch.com/poison-ivy-4-review/>

associated with The Green, a primordial force born from the tree Yggdrasil, which, by its own undoing, generated the world and the protectors of nature, the Parliament of Trees. Author Alan Moore first introduced The Green in his cult series *Swamp Thing* (1989) and then briefly connected to Poison Ivy thanks to Neil Gaiman's *Black Orchid* (1988) and *Pavane* (1989).

The connection between the woman and the green primal energy is now deeply rooted in the character's mythology. For example, Pamela no longer uses technology to spread spores and pheromones; she can do it like plants, secreting them through her skin and breath. Other authors have engraved these elements as defining of the character: as more contemporary origin stories emphasize, one of her most pertinent aspects is her connection with nature (Moore and Apthorp 1997, Nocenti and Van-Fleet 2004, Marx and Šejić 2015, Tynion IV and Ward 2021).

Her behavior is still determined and zealous, but her actions are encoded because of her burdens and responsibilities. She has been entrusted with a critical mission that comes as a side effect of her abilities, and it requires a great deal of control: she could destroy Gotham City with a thought, as Miracle Molly claims (Tynion IV and Jimenez 2021);⁶ Poison Ivy is also capable of exerting mind control over every inhabitant of the Earth (Kin and Jan 2018), but she refrains from doing so, struggling with her hybrid nature. Pamela is constantly portrayed as torn between her plant and human sides: the former gives her power, and the latter, embodied by her genuine love for Harley Quinn, makes her weak but also offers her hope and a support system.

Other characters, fans, and writers alike perceive this tension. They believe that her motivational drives could justify her outlaw behavior, and those could be perceptible consequences of significant shifts in the semiotic field: ecological issues are now perceived as a topic of extreme urgency, and because of this, they are strongly implied in fiction (Schneider-Mayerson 2018). However, for the reader to understand the character better, Pamela's thoughts and subjective perspective must be explored in depth. She's not seen through the lens of someone else's point of view, as she speaks in first person, manifesting her feelings and speaking directly to her audience, which could be both Harley and the comic book's reader. As she expresses her thoughts, she constantly struggles between her two identities: woman and plant, Pamela and Poison Ivy. Unlike Batman or other superheroes, she is not tied to one of them, allowing her to act more freely without hiding behind a mask. At the same time, she shares intimate struggles with superheroes: identity, purpose, and meaningful relationships.

⁶ See Issue #114.

5. Shifts in the portrayal of evilness

In the fourth episode of *Harley Quinn: The Animated Series*, developed by Justin Halpern, Patrick Schumacker, and Dean Lorey, when a reporter asks Pamela about her villainous agenda, she annoyingly replies that she is not a villainess but identifies herself as an ecoterrorist (Meza-Leon 2019). 'Ecoterrorist' is a term first used by Commissioner Gordon in 1995 to frame her negatively as a devious criminal mastermind (Grant and Apthorp 1995). Still, in the animated series' different encoding and decoding contexts, her use of the term clarifies that her ecological goals have nothing to do with malice and evilness.

Pizarro and Baumeister claim that people enjoy categorizing characters' moral alignment because it gives them a sense of order and predictability (2013: 22-33); things are black or white and nothing in between. Their argument is taken up by Holdier (2019) to confront Eco's view of Superman (1984). As we have seen, the latter holds that comic book heroes never change and never have a pivotal event that allows them to grow. This is due to the importance of DC Comics heroes living in a blurred time-space sphere, forced to be malleable for narrative needs (ibid. 241). This is how villains should behave as part of the comic books' ecosystem. However, we have seen that Pamela's morality has gone through some twists and turns. The character goes from being a straightforward villainess of *The Dark Knight* to a morally gray protagonist, recognized by DC and fans alike as anti-heroic. She has a different moral compass than heroes, but her drives are somehow marked as euphoric. She wants to save the Earth and solve the ecological crisis. These problems, such as climate change, exploitation of natural resources, and so on, are contemporary thorny issues that are difficult to confine to a dysphoric area of meaning. As Zoe Parco notes (2021:27), ecology immediately evokes a sympathetic response from the audience.

According to Parco, there are different ways to address these elements of evil. When discussing the ecological issues addressed in Marvel Cinematic Universe's movies, the reasons behind Thanos's genocide in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) were explained as his only means of balancing the remaining Earth's natural resources with its inhabitants. Thanos is portrayed as one of the Avengers' ultimate villains, but he is supported by reasons culturally recognized as good; yet, on their behalf, he cynically commits scelerate actions, and the heroes are forced to defeat him. His claim to be above the law because of a higher and altruistic purpose uses the audience's concerns about ecologism to explain his criminal actions in a way that could generate empathy. Nevertheless, the issues of climate change and overuse of natural resources became non-issues in this narrative because the heroes, by killing Thanos, solved the problem of the villain's presence and avoided engaging with the issue that the villain represents (2021: 28).

Poison Ivy's depiction of evil is quite different because she embodies the problem itself: if she were to die, her death would devalue the problem. A review of the sixth issue of her solo run states that Poison Ivy deeply explores the meaning of surrendering "to climate doomerism [...] and to eventually kindle the sparks of hope that you may be wrong" (Hochwender 2022). The character does not give any Manichean answer to the reader. Instead, she constantly struggles to understand herself and pursues what she thinks could be right, torn continuously between light and darkness. She is inherently inhabited by evil and continually fights on both sides: on the one hand, to keep at bay her primal and raw instinct to avenge The Green, daily exploited by humanity, and on the other, to accept her love for the deeply flawed human that she is. As she claims, "I am a monster, but this monster is by your side" (Wilson and Takahara 2023).

In his study about shifts between representations of evil in Western narratives, Ferraro (2008) traces different moral alignments in iconic characters such as vampires or aliens. Considering his analysis, we can suggest that Poison Ivy has undergone similar mutations, traceable to varying iterations of well-known literary characters. For instance, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's gothic novel *Carmilla* ([1872] 2011) is quite like Ivy's story. Poison Ivy was reportedly inspired by Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Rappaccini's Daughter* (McCabe 2017), an 1844 gothic novel about the tender but fatal encounter between young student Giovanni Guasconti and Beatrice Rappaccini, the daughter of a cold scientist who raised her in an environment full of toxic fumes and venomous plant spores. Beatrice's skin and breath became poisonous, and she could involuntarily charm men. The character has tragic undertones, typical of gothic literature, but Pamela didn't have these traits in her early depictions. It was only when gothic author Neil Gaiman allowed her psychological aspects to be further explored in *Pavane* (Gaiman and Buckingham 1989), her first origin story. Starting from Gaiman's authorial writings, Pamela assumed the gothic influences of the noir genre, darker and more intimate than before. This stylistic influence was also the product of a gothic wave that invested comics in those years: one of the poems that had a significant impact on Gaiman was John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), in which the author plays with the common conception of Satan and sympathetically presents them. This, along with dark themes, supernatural elements, and mysteries, were the characteristics of the new wave of gothic literature in the eighties (Figure 3). In addition to Gaiman, there was Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Return*, which put Batman under more personal and morally gray lenses; and more central for the future of Poison Ivy, Alan Moore wrote a gothic exploration of the Swamp Thing, which introduced readers to The Green and its ecological undertones.



Figure 3. Gaiman, Neil, and Mark Buckingham 1989. Pavane. Secret Origins 2: 36.

We can see how the authors' different cultural backgrounds contributed to exploring these characters from various perspectives and even recreating them. Those allowed them to be examined from different perspectives: those were the changes within the semiotic field that led to a series of micro-shifts in the values perceived as dysphoric and euphoric and, consequently, in how evilness and otherness were depicted (Ferraro and Burgo 2008). For example, a literary vampire and femme fatale like Carmilla has received similar treatment as Pamela Isley. Starting as a vampire able to charm humans, she underwent some shifts in her moral alignment as long as her subjective perspective could be explored. Through Carmilla's iterations in various adaptations of the novel and as the inspiration for several characters, Ferraro comments on how the vampire girl was translated into the movie *Vampyr* (Dreyer 1932). Indeed, the film adopts the point of view of the evil vampire and frames humans dysphorically (Ferraro and Burgo 2008:140). In more recent representations, Carmilla has been portrayed as almost heroic, as seen in the web series inspired by Le Fanu's novella but set in the twenty-first century (Hall and Simpson 2014) or Emily Harris's sympathetic and heavily dramatic film (2019).

Like Carmilla, Dracula, aliens, and other representations of alterity, Poison Ivy witnesses and exemplifies the ever-shifting perception of good and evil. As an embodiment of 'otherness,' she is no longer a devious creature lurking in the shadows but a figurative transposition of mythical creatures who have become human, who connect with others, and who reveal themselves in all of their passions and flaws (Ferraro and Burgo 2008: 118). Heroes are thus allowed to be unethical and defeated (Santangelo 2013:102), just as villains are capable of heroic gestures and pure intentions. In effect, this exchange blurs the previously dominant Manichean structure. Poison Ivy is no longer a whimsical young lady or a flat, fierce vixen. She has become a morally gray figure who is aware of her violent actions and drastic methods but whose motivations are decoded as euphoric.

6. Metahuman nature and ecocritical movements

In Wilson's *Poison Ivy*, the protagonist's inner flow of thought allows the reader to be directly addressed and invited to explore her subjectivity through her own eyes intimately. However, her hybrid body is nevertheless a vital simulacrum. Poison Ivy's dual nature as half plant and half human has been read as a reinforcement of her connection to the ecological discourse. She embodies the dual opposition between nature and culture that ecofeminists locate at the foundation of the patriarchal society. A recent ecofeminist analysis of the character (Tedeschi 2019) argues that although her origins are often reassessed, Pamela Isley's core trait remains that she is the product of abuse: from Marc Legrand to Jason Woodrue, her powers and hybrid nature originated from violence and coercion; also because of this, her body ultimately represents 'otherness,' which is framed as something that needs to be tamed.

This follows the contemporary perspective on creatures and beings recognized as both human and 'other' (Ferraro and Burgo 2008), such as metahumans and hybrids. In the past, 'otherness' was an element encoded and decoded as evil, characteristic of entities that had to be exiled from society and relegated to an abandoned manor or a dangerous forest. Today, 'otherness' lives among us, even within us. When metahumans in comics were promoted as an inclusive representation of otherness and minorities, it was noted that their portrayal was not entirely euphoric. One of the most famous comic book series featuring metahumans is *The X-Men*. Marvel Comics advertised X-Men's adventures as a narrative aimed at socially marginalized readers and minorities. However, analyzing the data, Shyminsky (2006) discovered that ninety-five percent of the readers were middle-class, white male teenagers. Readers appreciated their diversity because it allowed them to vicariously confront their social problems, which, while not comparable to racial or sexual discrimination, allowed the reader to connect with the characters perceived as flawed (ibid. 391-392).



Figure 4. Mann, Clay, and Tom King 2019. *Heroes in crisis* 1(7). Burbank: DC Comics.

In her new portrayals, Carmilla still belongs to the world of the undead, but she spends her mundane life among humans: she lives, communicates, and falls in love with them. Her vampiric side is undermined by its radical aspect of otherness. For instance, she has no fangs, but the mediation of her newfound human side makes her differences more bearable to the audience without erasing them or presenting them in a negative light. The same thing happens to Dracula or Poison Ivy. In some depictions, Pamela's skin is green because she can photosynthesize like plants; sometimes, this aspect is diminished since she can regulate the amount of chlorophyll in her bloodstream. Her dual identity allows her to assume physical characteristics of both human and plant worlds, embodying typical aspects of post-humanism (Figure 4).

As many have pointed out, posthumanism is the way contemporary literature deals with the transformation of the human experience (Na 2022:2). The posthuman body represents both the challenges humanity will face in the future and its echoes from the past (Gomel 2011:340). It could be said that Pamela's hybrid nature is where recent writers locate the isotopic elements that refer to ecocritical discourse; the plant woman physically stands in the middle of two opposing sides: ecological radicality and total omission of the urgency of the issue.

In an interview about the comic book series, Willow Wilson states that she felt it “was the appropriate time to tell a story about climate change and mass extinction” because of the renewed focus on environmental issues (Wilson 2023). Pamela’s actions and methods are truly ferocious. Still, current writers understand her motives as being of the utmost urgency: they are the same that Wilson feels all of humanity shares in this new century: anxiety and fear for a changing planet (ibid.).

This may be the evidence of the perceived shift into the cultural semiotic field. Over the years, the character has been repeatedly and variously coded and decoded to ensure her recognizability despite the passing of generations and iterations. However, today, she is perceived as fundamentally different from who she was before. If, in the ‘60s, Poison Ivy was understood as disconnected from the ecological discourse, Wilson’s conscious writing of the character as fiercely ecocritical communicates her intention to entrust Pamela with an environmental message that readers have reportedly been able to decode. Because fans eventually share the author’s reading models, Wilson and her Poison Ivy have been able to convey “information about risks into intelligible and meaningful stories” (James and Morel 2020); these texts helping to create a “blueprint text” for cultural futures (James and Morel 2020:79), circulate through similar cultural models and could eventually reach those who don’t share them and change their minds.

7. Conclusion: reading models and newfound ecological hope

Comic book characters must be marketable to sell to specific targets, and to do so; their narrative universes are constantly expanding. For example, DC Comics has the Black Label publishing line, which collects stories that may be controversial for the mainstream market. Some comic books are at the borders of the cultural semiosphere, always fighting their way to the center where texts and topics hierarchically considered predominant are. What makes the transition possible is the shifting of the semiotic field, which influences the reading models of both writers and readers. This can be seen by confronting given texts with other texts that were part of their contemporary cultural sphere. As Ferraro states, when we go to the cinema, what is projected is not a story but the ways of its transformation (2008: 129).

As it has been shown, Poison Ivy was coded according to major cultural movements shared by her authors and readers: the early feminist movements of the seventies, Gothic novels, ecocritical narrative, and posthumanism. But when subjected to a diachronic analysis, as Tedeschi (2019) has done, the result is a retroactive critique through the reading models of the present because, as they claim, “Poison Ivy was the product of her own time” (ibid.).

Today, the character of Poison Ivy is fundamentally decoded as a feminist and ecologist. In the '60s, ecological issues were less relevant, and feminism was differently framed. Today, though, the semiotic field has shifted, and the character, while maintaining her core traits, has changed along the texts considered predominant among the culture of reference: upcoming ecological catastrophes and an increased gender equality sensibility have forced those topics to travel from the periphery to the center of our culture (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Wilson, Willow, and Macio Takahara 2023. Poison Ivy 1(3). Burbank: DC Comics.

The differences between the diverse portrayals of the character are not outgrowths of an origin story or a specific representation that immediately generates a rupture in the representation of the character, but through the study of her origins and narrative, it is possible to notice micro-shifts in the selection of pertinent traits, helpful in understanding the cultural models shared by readers and writers in their differences in encoding and decoding different instances.

Poison Ivy's most recent representation has been encoded according to a pattern that can be seen in other narratives, too. She is morally gray and has a complex personality that is neither black nor white. Along with other similarly flawed characters, she tries to tame the evil within her, which probably only exists in the eyes of the beholder (Ferraro and Burgo 2008). Pamela is a liminal figure with blurred qualities that lead to a portrayal of the posthuman body as a place of exploration and representation of the future, imbued with the fears of our time, especially ecological issues. These aspects have been understood by readers of *Poison Ivy*, a comic book series that depicts her as a torn character, physically embodying the hopes for the future and the risks of the present in her hybrid figure and fragile behavior. Hopefully, it can help those who deny the problem of the climate crisis to adopt Poison Ivy's codes of reading reality, but certainly not her wicked methods since Pamela herself refuses to use them when innocent people are at risk. As Morel argues, reading a work of cli-fi allows the reader to live in a world where climate change is relevant, and since the audience is directly addressed as the narrative instance, it is a relevant intellectual work (2020: 87).

References

- Ayres, Brenda 2021. The Devil Has Red Hair, and So Do Other Dissemblers in Ancient Discourses. *A Vindication of the Redhead: The Typology of Red Hair Throughout the Literary and Visual Arts*. Cham: Springer, 21–48.
- Barbieri, Daniele 1992. *Tempo, immagine, ritmo e racconto. Per una semiotica della temporalità nel testo a fumetti*. PhD thesis, Università degli studi di Bologna, Italy.
- Conway, Gerry and Ric Estrada 1978. A poisoned love. *World's finest* 1 (251). Burbank, CA: DC Comics.
- Conway, Gerry and Arvell Jones 1977. Death Times Five. *DC Special* 1 (6). Burbank, CA: DC Comics.
- Cruzand, Joe and Lars Stoltzfus-Brown 2019. Harley Quinn, Villain, Vixen, Victim: Exploring her origins in Batman: The Animated Series. In: Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner (eds.) *The Supervillain Reader*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 203–13.
- Eco, Umberto 1984. *Apocalittici e integrati*. Milan: Tascabili Bompiani.
- Ferraro, Guido 2001. *Il linguaggio del mito: valori simbolici e realtà sociale nelle mitologie primitive*. Rome: Meltemi.
- Ferraro, Guido 2019. *Semiotica 3.0: 50 idee chiave per un rilancio della scienza della significazione*. I saggi di Lexia. Rome: Aracne.
- Ferraro, Guido 2015. *Teorie della narrazione: dai racconti tradizionali all'odierno storytelling*. Milan: Carocci.

- Ferraro, Guido and Isabella Brugo 2008. *Comunque umani: dietro le figure di mostri, alieni, orchi e vampiri*. Rome: Meltemi.
- Forbes, Linda C. and Laura Sells 1997. Reorganizing the Woman/Nature Connection. *Organization & Environment* 10(1): 20-22.
- Gaiman, Neil and Dave McKean 1988. *Black Orchid*. Burbank, CA: DC Comics.
- Gaiman, Neil and Mark Buckingham 1989. Pavane. *Secret Origins* 2: 36.
- Gomel, Elana 2011. Science (Fiction) and Posthuman Ethics: Redefining the Human. *The European Legacy* 16(3): 339-354.
- Grant, Alan and Brian Apthorp 1995. Hot house. *Batman: shadows of the bat annual* 3.
- Greimas, Algridas Julien [1970] 2017. *Del senso, La tradizione del nuovo*. Roma: Luca Sossella Editore.
- Grossman, J 2009. *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: Ready for Her Close-Up*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel [1846] 2020. *Young Goodman Brown, Rappaccini's Daughter, and Other Tales*.
- Herbison, Andrew 2022. Poison Ivy is right – Humanity is to blame. *CBR.com*. June 15.
- Hochwender, Lillian 2022. Poison Ivy #6: how do you solve a problem like lamia? *Comic-Watch*. November 1.
- Holdier, Anthony 2019. Dividing Lines: A Brief Taxonomy of Moral Identity. In: Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner (eds.) *The Supervillain Reader*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 3–11.
- Infantino, Carmine 2016. Carmine Infantino Interview. *jamiecoville.com*. August 30.
- James, Erin and Eric Morel 2020. *Environment and Narrative*. Columbus, OH: Ohio University Press.
- Jenkins, Henry 2007. *Cultura convergente*. Milan: Apogeo.
- Knox, Kelly and Willow Wilson 2023. We Are the Green: G. Willow Wilson Talks Poison Ivy, Lazarus Planet, and More. *DC.com*, March 28.
- Kanigher, Robert, Infantino, Carmine Giella, Joe and Julius Schwartz 1966. Beware of – Poison Ivy. *Batman* 1 (181).
- King, Tom and Mikel Jann 2018. Everyone loves Ivy. *Batman* 5 (43).
- Knight, Rosie 2019. Brilliant Women of Batman: Poison Ivy Steals it with a Kiss. *Dc.com*. April 24
- Le Fanu, Joseph Sheridan [1872] 2011. *Carmilla e altri racconti di fantasmi e vampiri*. Roma: Newton Compton Editori.
- Lotman, Juri Michailovic, Salvestroni, Simonetta 1985. *La semiosfera: l'asimmetria e il dialogo nelle strutture pensanti*. Venezia: Marsilio Editori.
- Lioi, Anthony 2016. *Nerd Ecology: Defending the Earth with Unpopular Culture*. New York and London: Bloomsbury.

- Marx, Christy and Stjepan Šejić 2015. Green Saviour. *Secret Origins* 3 (10).
- McCabe, Joseph 2017. *100 Things Batman Fans Should Know & Do Before They Die*. Chicago, IL: Triumph Books.
- Mercure, Michelle 2010. The “Bad Girl” Turned Feminist: The Femme Fatale and the Performance of Theory. *Undergraduate review* 6: 113–19.
- Miller, Frank 1986. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. Burbank, CA: DC Comics.
- Mittell, Jason 2014. Strategies of storytelling on transmedia television. In: Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noel Thon (eds.) *Storyworlds across Media*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 253–77.
- Moore, John Francis, and Brian Apthorp 1997. Batman: Poison Ivy. *Batman*. Burbank, CA: DC Comics.
- Na, Zhang 2022. *Posthuman Becoming Narratives in Contemporary Anglophone Science Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Nocenti, Ann and John Van Fleet 2004. *Poison Ivy: Cast Shadows*. Burbank, CA: DC Comics.
- Parco, Zoe 2021. *Environmental Representation in Popular Culture: An Ecocritical Analysis of Film*. MA Dissertation, York University, Toronto, Canada.
- Perlmutter, David 2014. *America Toons In: A History of Television Animation*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Pizarro, David A and Roy Baumeister 2013. Superhero Comics as moral pornography. In: Robin Rosenberg (eds.) *Our superheroes, Ourselves*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 19–36.
- Ram V and Mike Perkins 2021. The Green Amaranthine. *Swamp Thing* 3 (3). DC Comics.
- Ram V and Nina Vakueva 2021. The fight for Ivy’s soul. *Catwoman* 5 (3). DC Comics.
- Santangelo, Antonio 2014. Dietro la maschera del Cavaliere Oscuro. Modelli culturali a confronto tra il Batman di Christopher Nolan e quello di Frank Miller. In: M. Allegri and C. Gallo (eds.) *Fumetto, cinema, televisione e teatro*. Verona: Delmiglio, 93-104.
- Santangelo, Antonio and Gian Marco DeMaria (eds.) 2012. *La TV o l’uomo immaginario*. I saggi di Lexia 5. Rome: Aracne.
- Schneider-Mayerson, Matthew 2018. The Influence of Climate Fiction: An Empirical Survey of Readers. *Environmental Humanities* 10 (2):473–500.
- Serra, Marcello 2016. Historical and Mythical Time in the Marvel and DC Series. *The Journal of Popular Culture* 49: 646–59.
- Serra, Marcello 2015. Notas de la semiosfera de los cómics de superhéroes. *deSignis* 23: 73–81.
- Shyminsky, Neil 2006. Mutant readers, reading mutants: Appropriation, assimilation, and the X-Men. *International Journal of Comic Art* 8(2): 387–405.

- Tedeschi, Victoria 2019. Poison Ivy, Red in Tooth and Claw: Ecocentrism and Ecofeminism in the DC Universe. In: W. Haslem, E. MacFarlane, and S. Richardson (eds.) *Superheroes Bodies. Identity, Materiality, Transformation*. New York: Routledge, 37–46.
- Turcotte, Katie 2021. Establishing Canon through Transmedial Narrative Strategies from Television to Comics: Mighty Morphin Power Rangers and the Morphin Grid. In: R. Wiebe (ed.) *Polyptych: Adaptation, Television, and Comics*. Wilmington, DL: Vernon Press, 135–51.
- Tynion IV, James, Christian Duce, Ryan Benjamin, Guillelm March and Trevor Hairsine 2021. *Fear State: Omega*. Burbank: DC Comics.
- Tynion IV, James, and Jorge Jimenez 2023. *Fear State 5*. Burbank: DC Comics.
- Tynion IV, James, and Christian Ward. *The Gardener*. Burbank: DC Comics.
- Verón, Eliseo [1998] 2004. *La semiosis social: fragmentos de una teoría de la discursividad*. Buenos Aires: Gedisa.
- Wilson, Willow, and Macio Takahara 2023. *Poison Ivy: the virtuous cycle*. Burbank: DC Comics.

Filmography

- Dreyer, Carl Theodore 1932. *Vampyr*.
- Harris, Emily 2019. *Carmilla*.
- Hall, Jordan and Ellie Simpson 2014. *Carmilla*. Kinda TV: YouTube.com.
- Meza-Leon, Juan 2019. Finding Mr. Right. *Harley Quinn: the animated series*. December 20. HBO Max.

AUTHOR

Alessandra Richetto Ph.D. student in Semiotics and Media Studies at the Department of Humanities, University of Turin. She teaches history and theories of animation at Scuola Internazionale di Comics in Turin, Italy.

