



DIVERGING THE POPULAR, GENDER AND TRAUMA AKA THE JESSICA JONES ANTHOLOGY

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“My Greatest Weakness? Occasionally I Give a Damn”: (Super)Heroic Duty, Responsibility, and Morality

Sarah Stang

Jessica Jones is unquestionably an unusual hero: a bitingly sarcastic, unapologetically cynical alcoholic who refuses to consider herself a superhero, preferring to use her powers of super strength and incredible jumping solely in the service of her shady work as a private investigator. While Netflix’s series encourages audience identification with Jessica as the protagonist, it quickly becomes clear that she is a person of questionable moral integrity. Her own self-doubts and skewed sense of self-worth are directly related to the abuse she suffered at the hands of the first season’s mind-controlling villain, Kilgrave. *Jessica Jones* fits well within the film noir genre, presenting a heavy-drinking, cynical, self-pitying private eye who has a “heart of gold” buried under layers of anguish and rage. In many ways, *Jessica Jones* is similar to DC’s *Watchmen*, a groundbreaking comic written in 1986 by Alan Moore. *Watchmen* was an attempt to subvert the superhero genre by presenting heroes who are not really “super,” but who are instead deeply flawed, psychologically damaged individuals who happen to wear costumes and fight crime. Writing about *Watchmen*, Iain Thomson asks an important question: “What does it mean when we seek not just to destroy our heroes—gleefully expose their feet of clay, their human, all-too-human failings—but to *deconstruct* the very idea of the hero?” (2005, 100–1; emphasis in original). That same desire to deconstruct superheroism can be found in other series like *The Boys* and *Umbrella Academy*, suggesting that perhaps this is a cultural moment in which audiences want to see “bad”—that is, petty, egotistical, and emotionally damaged—superheroes, at least on the small screen. Certainly, several films have

attempted to do the same thing, such as *Hancock*, *The Dark Knight* trilogy, *Man of Steel*, and several of the Marvel superhero films, especially *Captain America: Civil War* and *The Avengers* franchise, but television series allow for a slower, deeper look at all the flaws and failings of their characters, and seem to especially focus on the cynical aspects of genre deconstruction. This chapter offers an exploration of how the first season of *Jessica Jones* embraces that cynicism and attempts to deconstruct the idea of the (super)hero, particularly in its complicated exploration of duty, responsibility, and morality. As I demonstrate, while the season engages with the themes of superpowered anti-heroism, instead of simply dwelling in cynicism and presenting a protagonist whose trauma prevents her from being a “proper” superhero, it instead presents a cautiously hopeful exploration of how one could be heroic despite one’s traumatic experiences. In this way, *Jessica Jones* presents an alternative and perhaps more nuanced vision of who and what a superhero can be, and what it means to be one.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the superhero genre, which has historically been dedicated to the triumph of good over evil, with the superhero primarily defined by their goodness and sense of righteousness. Much of the “goodness” attributed to superheroes is tied to their unwillingness to kill, even when it would be the most logical and efficient choice. As Jessica discovers throughout the show, holding to such principles can cause more harm than good. Although Jessica is certainly not the first reluctant or self-doubting superhero, she embodies a very different articulation of duty, responsibility, and morality than any other superhero in the Marvel Universe, to the extent that she could be considered a kind of anti-superhero, superpowered, but not heroic in the traditional sense. As this chapter demonstrates, *Jessica Jones*’s unique approach to these questions is directly related to its thematic and stylistic design as a neo-noir series and Jessica’s characterization as a noir “hero.” In order to underscore Jessica’s uniqueness as a superhero, this chapter compares her sense of, approach to, and articulation of duty, responsibility, and morality to those expressed by the superheroes in two of Netflix’s other Marvel series, *Daredevil* and *Luke Cage*. While Jessica shares similarities with the other characters, particularly the reluctant Luke Cage, she remains a uniquely ambivalent superhero.

“With Great Power There Must Also Come—Great Responsibility!”¹

Although this chapter focuses on the Netflix adaptation of the *Jessica Jones* comics, a brief detour into the history of comic book superheroes is useful. Comic book superheroes have almost always been bastions of truth and justice (and the American way),² particularly since the Comics Code Authority (CCA) was formed in 1954 by the Comics Magazine Association of America (Daniels 1971; Nyberg 1998). Established in response to public concern over violent comic book content, the CCA was a self-regulating organization headed by New York magistrate Charles Murphy. Murphy specialized in juvenile delinquency, a rising problem that had recently been associated with violent comic books by the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency. The subcommittee held public hearings in 1954 to investigate graphic violence in crime and horror comic books, and these hearings led to unfavourable press coverage, including a front-page story in the *New York Times* on September 17, 1954. In response, comic book publishers opted to form a self-regulatory body, rather than risk being submitted to government regulation. The code was revised and loosened in 1971 and again in 1989 to allow for more sympathetic criminal activity, corruption of public officials, seduction, and violence. Marvel Comics abandoned the code altogether in 2001, and DC Comics followed suit in 2010, both adopting their own private in-house rating system instead (Nyberg n.d.; Wolk 2011).

Similar to the Hollywood Production Code, which established the moral guidelines for cinematic content from 1934 to 1968, the Comics Code developed by the CCA banned graphic depictions of violence, sexuality or sexual innuendo, and, most importantly for our purposes, declared that “in every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal [shall be] punished for his misdeeds.”³ As Jeff Brenzel (2005, 149–50) points out, this provision explains why the notion of “goodness” is central to the superhero genre, though it evidently did not detract from the form’s immense popularity. Clearly, the narrative set-up of good versus evil, with good winning every time, resonated with American society’s desires and values both in terms of what content moderators felt was appropriate and what mainstream audiences were looking for. This was certainly shaped by a very specific definition of “goodness” as that which adhered to American cultural norms and values, as well as a narrow vision of the ideal hero; in the United States that hero was (and still

is) likely to be heterosexual, white, male, and able-bodied. This is important because, as Iain Thomson (2005) states, referencing Heidegger, “the heroes we choose focus our common sense of what is most important in life, shaping our feel for which battles we should fight as well as how we should go about fighting them” (100). Superheroes, then, embody idealized heroics—how our heroes would act if they had the power or technology to do nearly anything they wanted—and communicate ideologically laden messages regarding ideal (i.e., normative) behaviour.

Many superheroes have an origin story to explain why they chose to fight crime. Sometimes it is simply because they were raised by good people who instilled in them a strong sense of morality, like Superman or Spider-Man (Finger 1948; Lee 1962). Other times it is due to some horrible trauma they experienced, like Batman helplessly witnessing the deaths of his parents as a child (Finger and Fox 1939). For both the comic book and Netflix versions of *Jessica Jones*, the same accident that killed her family gave her preternatural abilities, though Netflix’s Jessica never feels any internal drive to use those abilities for the greater good (Bendis 2003; ep. 1.11, “AKA I’ve Got the Blues”). After months of psychological torture at the hands of the villainous Kilgrave, who used her as his personal companion, dress-up doll, sex slave, bodyguard, and henchwoman, Jessica finally managed to break free of his control. The catalyst for her liberation appeared to be the horror at her own actions, as Kilgrave had ordered her to “take care of” a woman named Reva, an order that Jessica carried out by murdering her (ep. 1.03, “AKA It’s Called Whiskey”). This event is gradually revealed to the audience through a series of flashbacks that clearly suggest that Jessica suffers from overwhelming feelings of guilt and self-loathing. This self-loathing, combined with the survivor’s guilt she feels from the accident that killed her family, has left Jessica psychologically damaged. She suffers from PTSD, anxiety, paranoia, and moral injury,⁴ causing her to self-medicate with excessive alcohol consumption and push away everyone who tries to help her.

Marvel’s comic book auteur Stan Lee (1975) has written that, “in writing the typical Marvel type of tale, it’s almost impossible not to become involved in some extraneous philosophical or moralistic side issue” (188). These “side issues” often reveal a superhero’s stance regarding duty, responsibility, and morality, particularly in the case of Spider-Man, a reluctant hero who has often questioned the ethics of his own actions. Just as Jessica uses her powers to solve cases for money, Peter Parker uses his powers for his own financial

gain since his job is to photograph Spider-Man in action. Although Spider-Man occasionally waffles and gives up being a superhero, he always returns to it, reassuring audiences that he is still the hero they know and love. Jessica, on the other hand, continually fails and disappoints the people around her. While the main struggle in *Jessica Jones* is between Kilgrave and Jessica, there are many “side issues” that intertwine with the central narrative and serve to reveal Jessica’s own dubious sense of moral responsibility.

Luke Cage, the man with unbreakable skin, was first introduced in *Jessica Jones* as Jessica’s love interest, though their relationship quickly sours when Jessica reveals that Kilgrave had forced her to murder Luke’s wife, Reva. Jessica’s impact on Luke’s life was entirely negative: lying to him, emotionally manipulating him, causing him to lose his beloved bar, and nearly killing him with a shotgun blast to the head. By seducing the husband of the woman she murdered—an act that haunts her—Jessica reveals her weak sense of moral responsibility. While she clearly feels guilt and distress at her actions, particularly when she sees the picture Luke keeps of his late wife, she only feels compelled to tell him the truth to prevent him from murdering someone else he mistakenly blames for Reva’s death. While this intervention does indicate that Jessica feels some moral responsibility, it seems to only emerge in extreme life-or-death situations. When Luke calls Jessica “a piece of shit” for lying to him, spying on him, and seducing him, both Jessica and the audience cannot help but agree (ep. 1.06, “AKA You’re a Winner”).

A second side story that reminds audiences of Jessica’s anti-hero tendencies sees Jessica nearly kill an innocent woman in order to frighten her into signing divorce papers (ep. 1.07, “AKA Top Shelf Perverts”). As a favour to the high-powered lawyer who feeds her cases, Jeri Hogarth, Jessica agrees to help expedite Jeri’s painful divorce by making her wife sign the divorce papers by any means necessary. Jessica dangles Jeri’s wife over subway tracks, threatening to drop her if she does not sign the papers. Unfortunately, Jessica accidentally drops her, though she manages to toss her out of harm’s way at the last moment. As media critic Alyssa Rasmus (2016) has observed of this scene, “this show[s] us what kind of person Jessica is without Kilgrave: how far she’ll go and how much she’ll hurt someone.” This is an extremely dark moment for Jessica, in which her sense of self-loathing has undoubtedly reached its peak. For a second or two, Jessica stares at the oncoming subway train, contemplating whether she should bother jumping out of the way at all.

These moments of moral weakness certainly indicate that Jessica is no superhero, though she is not exactly an anti-hero, either. The archetypal Marvel anti-hero is Frank Castle, also known as the Punisher. One of the main antagonists in the second season of *Daredevil*, and also the protagonist of his own series, Frank is burdened with guilt for failing to protect his wife and daughter, who both apparently died as innocent bystanders of a gang war, but who were actually killed during an attempt to assassinate him. This kind of survivor's guilt is a common motivation for superheroes to dedicate their lives to fighting crime, but for Frank, the guilt drives him to swear vengeance on those responsible. He embarks on a killing spree, mercilessly murdering everyone who he feels deserves to die. Although both superheroes and anti-heroes fight evil, the key differences are that anti-heroes generally fight for selfish reasons, believe that the end justifies the means, and are willing to kill for their cause. While anti-heroes and superheroes share a sense of duty and responsibility, their moral compasses are calibrated very differently (DeScioli and Kurzban 2008). These questions are addressed in many superhero comics, films, and television series, but the willingness or unwillingness to kill is the most commonly articulated tension within the genre.

Refusing to kill is part of a sacred ethical code that many superheroes adopt, perhaps to convince themselves that they really are the "good guys." Instead, they insist on turning the criminals and supervillains over to the authorities, even when those authorities have proven to be ineffectual at detaining and convicting them. As Peter DeScioli and Robert Kurzban (2008) observe,

[Superheroes] fail to kill evildoers even when they know the villains will escape prison and that innocent lives will be lost in the next round of capture. . . . Superheroes don't kill even when their restraint risks others' lives. Yet somehow we all admire superhero restraint, despite the reckless endangerment to humanity entailed by leaving villains like Lex Luthor or Kingpin alive. (256)

For most of the season, Jessica attempts to abide by this code, though not in order to hold herself to any higher standard of moral responsibility. Jessica wants to capture Kilgrave alive to prove to the world that he and his powers are real, thereby proving the innocence of Hope, who murdered her own parents while under Kilgrave's control. Proving Hope's innocence and revealing

Kilgrave to the world will also allow Jessica to vindicate her own actions and, possibly, even begin to forgive herself. Proving that Kilgrave's powers are real becomes an obsession for Jessica, partially because even those who know about him—Trish, Luke, and Jeri—do not fully believe her until they experience his mind control for themselves. Early on, the only person who fully understands the threat Kilgrave poses is Officer Will Simpson, another victim of Kilgrave's powers. Under Kilgrave's control, Will attempted to murder Trish and then commit suicide. Jessica thwarted both attempts, but the experience left Will traumatized, haunted by his own powerlessness. Instead of using alcohol to drown his sorrows, he turns to experimental combat-enhancement drugs to increase his own power. Will is (correctly) convinced that killing Kilgrave is the only way to stop him, though his obsession with doing so leads him to abuse the drugs and turn against Trish and Jessica, who both get in the way of his plans. In his ruthlessness, pragmatism, and willingness to kill, Will is undoubtedly an anti-hero, and while Jessica refuses to kill Kilgrave for most of the season, in the end their approaches align.

Episode 10, "AKA 1,000 Cuts," is a turning point for Jessica. Kilgrave takes Hope hostage to trade her for his father, the scientist responsible for giving him his powers and who may have a way to increase their potency. Although Jessica is immune to Kilgrave's powers, she is willing to risk making him more powerful in order to save Hope. Realizing the other woman's folly, Hope kills herself in order to "free" Jessica to finally murder Kilgrave. Hope's self-sacrifice is the catalyst that finally spurs Jessica's willingness to get her already dirtied hands even dirtier. In the following episode, "AKA I've Got the Blues," Jessica's sense of moral responsibility has changed: she declares her intention to "rip Kilgrave's throat out" and her antagonistic neighbour Robyn, whose brother was forced to slit his own throat at Kilgrave's command simply for being in love with Jessica, challenges her, asking, "No matter who gets dead along the way?" Jessica retorts that "it's less people than he'd kill," though this response comes rather late, as Jessica's unwillingness to kill the villain up until that point had already caused the death and suffering of countless people. Becoming an anti-hero (or, at least, a hero who is willing to kill) right away, rather than at the very end of the season, would have been the more ethically pragmatic course. As Will remarks later in the same episode, "You could have killed him a dozen times. Now I'm just doing what has to be done. Someone has to." Although Simpson is by no means a bastion of moral integrity, he is right—Jessica could have killed Kilgrave many times but chose

not to. Again, this is not because she holds herself to some higher ideal of morality like Superman or Batman; rather, it was to prove the innocence of one person, and, vicariously, to vindicate herself.

In the final episode, “AKA Smile,” Jessica finally succeeds in killing Kilgrave, snapping his neck after tricking him into thinking she was back under his control. The scene, although perhaps not as spectacular as the deaths of other villains, is appropriately intimate. Although “gifted,” Kilgrave was not a supervillain—he did not have any grand scheme for world domination—rather, he was a delusional, narcissistic sexual predator who had convinced himself that Jessica was his soulmate. He was consumed with the desire to make her love him, and, failing that, to destroy her. This final confrontation between hero and villain, so central to superhero narratives, was, like the rest of *Jessica Jones*, very atypical of the genre. However, a scene from *Wonder Woman* vol. 2, no. 219, from September 2005, provides such a blatant parallel that it likely served as inspiration for this violent yet unsettlingly emotionless murder. Maxwell Lord, a supervillain with mind-control abilities, takes over Superman’s mind, forcing him to carry out his criminal schemes. He tricks Superman into believing that Wonder Woman is a villain threatening his beloved Lois Lane, causing him to attack her. Wonder Woman manages to fight Superman off and catch Lord in her Lasso of Truth, with which she learns that his mind control is irreversible, and the only way of freeing Superman is to kill Lord. Not wanting to leave Superman as an omnipotent weapon in the hands of a villain, Wonder Woman makes the only choice she can: she murders Lord by snapping his neck. Like Jessica, Wonder Woman’s face remains cold and impassive as she kills the villain, yet unlike Jessica, she has broken a moral code that she and her cohort had always lived by. While those who understood the extent of Kilgrave’s threat supported Jessica’s choice, Wonder Woman’s actions were met with disgust and scorn from her allies, Superman and Batman, who felt that she should have found another way to defeat Lord. The weight of her sin is so heavy that Wonder Woman gives up her superheroics for a year to meditate on her actions and redeem herself. As Marco Arnaudo (2013) observes, this segment “clearly demonstrates the high price superheroes must pay for defying their most sacred rule” (89–90).

It is important to remember, however, that Jessica Jones is *not a superhero*; at least she does not consider herself one, nor does she aspire to be one. In her chapter in this collection, Catherine Jenkins discusses the comic book version of Jessica as a modern, post-human superhero who allows us to

recognize ourselves in her habitus. Jessica's many flaws are vital components of this relatable disposition, especially when she recognizes herself as a complex individual: a survivor, a murderer, and, to others, a hero. Jessica's journey is one of self-recognition, and the process is undoubtedly painful. Her final voice-over monologue of season 1 reveals that killing Kilgrave did not alleviate her sense of guilt and self-loathing:

They say everyone's born a hero, but if you let it, life will push you over the line until you're the villain. The problem is, you don't always know that you've crossed that line. Maybe it's enough that the world thinks I'm a hero. Maybe if I work long, and hard, maybe I could fool myself. (ep. 1.13, "AKA Smile")

Indeed, if refusing to kill is a sacred rule of the superhero, it is obvious that committing murder would not make Jessica feel more like a hero. She is still "a piece of shit"—even Luke's apparent tender forgiveness of Jessica was sadistically orchestrated by Kilgrave. No one forgave Jessica for her sins, so how could she ever forgive herself?

Jessica Jones as a Neo-noir "Hero"

Jessica's inability to heal psychologically is at least partially due to her refusal to ask for help. Although she is indirectly responsible for starting a support group for Kilgrave survivors, she refuses to join them, acting as though such weakness is below her. Her self-imposed isolation is heavily critiqued by those who care about her, particularly Trish and her neighbour Malcolm. Whereas Jessica sees her isolation as a mark of strength and independence, it is actually a sign of weakness—she is too afraid to let others get close to her. Many superheroes keep their distance from others in order to protect them from becoming targets, and while this protective impulse does motivate Jessica to an extent, she also struggles with emotional detachment and an inability to express her affection to others. This emotional distance is used as a plot device in the final episode: Jessica uses "I love you" as a code to prove to Trish that she is not under Kilgrave's control, since it is a phrase she would never normally say. After losing her entire family, being raised by a cruel foster mother, and suffering psychological and sexual abuse for months, it is not surprising that Jessica is emotionally withdrawn. It is also a characterization that connects *Jessica Jones* to the film noir genre. As Paul Arthur (2001) observes, in film noir "a cynical and soured individualism, however disoriented or distorted

by underworld affiliations, takes precedence over communal goals” (162). Indeed, film noir protagonists are often anti-heroes, unpleasant and blatantly self-destructive detectives or private eyes who walk a tenuous line between hero and criminal. Noir protagonists are often described as “hard-boiled” detectives, though, as media critic Laura Durkay (2016) correctly observes, “[Jessica] is not so much hardboiled as she is broken.”

Like many noir protagonists, “hard-boiled” or not, Jessica’s darkest, most insecure moments are almost always also violent moments, such as when she almost beats Kilgrave to death while trying to force him to use his powers (ep. 1.09, “AKA Sin Bin”). Jessica loses control, like a true noir “hero,” and Trish must electrocute her to make her stop. As Arthur (2001) points out, the film noir universe is blanketed in a “shroud of personal insecurity” that reinforces “the treatment of physical brutality as a pervasive, endlessly refractive existential crisis” (168). The tonally ambivalent ending of *Jessica Jones* fits perfectly into the noir genre: the villain is killed in a final confrontation that occurs beyond the control of the incompetent authorities, bypassing the justice system, yet the narrative tension is not fully resolved. Jessica is still traumatized and bitter, and she may even face murder charges. While other film genres, such as the Western, often involve a final, fatal confrontation between hero and villain that takes place outside of any legal process, in film noir this ending is never really presented as heroic. To illustrate this point, Arthur (2001) contrasts film noir endings with Richard Slotkin’s description of endings in the Western genre:

What is crucially absent from most noir endings is any sense of a “regeneration through violence,” the consummatory act as “*necessary* and *sufficient* resolution of all the issues the tale has raised.” While concluding violence in Westerns contributes to the reassertion of stable personal identity, in noir it often adds to the burden of self-abnegating loss, the final stage in a process of assuming the mantle of criminal “other.” (160; emphasis in original)

Noir endings often fail to resolve the narrative tensions and restore social equilibrium. Like Jessica, the noir protagonist is not always cleared of all criminal charges once the villain has been exposed and killed. Instead, noir endings are marked with a “sense of ambiguous or inadequate finality,” or

unsettled closure, which “has been widely recognized and debated in noir literature” (Arthur 2001, 160). Some examples of this type of ambiguous or tragic film noir ending are *Scarlet Street* (Lang 1945), in which the protagonist is left homeless and mentally unstable, tormented by the voice of the woman he killed; *Kiss Me Deadly* (Aldrich 1955), which ends with an explosion and countless deaths; *Vertigo* (Hitchcock 1958), ending with the heartbroken protagonist standing on a ledge, looking down; *In Cold Blood* (Brooks 1967), which closes with the protagonist’s hanging; *Chinatown* (Polanski 1974), in which a lead character is killed, leaving her daughter in peril; and *Night Moves* (Penn 1975), in which nearly everyone is dead at the end. The ending of *Jessica Jones* is similarly dark and ambiguous, though perhaps not quite so tragic. These noir elements, combined with the centralization of a protagonist who is far more anti-hero than superhero, sets *Jessica Jones* apart from Netflix’s other Marvel productions. *Daredevil* and *Luke Cage* do, however, incorporate moral ambivalence, reluctance, and self-doubt, albeit to a far lesser extent than *Jessica Jones*.

Jones, Cage, and the Devil

The Netflix adaptations of Marvel properties were very successful while they lasted, with three seasons of *Jessica Jones*, three seasons of *Daredevil*, two seasons of *Luke Cage*, two seasons of *Iron Fist*, and two seasons of *The Punisher* released before Netflix cancelled all its Marvel Cinematic Universe series. Netflix also aired one season of *The Defenders*, which featured Jessica Jones, Luke Cage, Daredevil, and Iron Fist working together to fight crime in New York City. *Daredevil*, *Jessica Jones*, and *Luke Cage* all ask important questions about what it means to be a hero and how to know whether or not you are one, though each series has its own particular answers. As I have discussed, *Jessica Jones* focuses on morality, whereas *Daredevil* focuses more on duty and suffering, and *Luke Cage* focuses on stoic responsibility. Because these three shows spend considerable time ruminating on what it means to be a hero, it is worthwhile to tease out some comparisons between them. I will not discuss Danny Rand, the protagonist of *Iron Fist*, or Frank Castle, the protagonist of *The Punisher*, in any depth here because neither character has the same level of overt concern for notions of superheroic duty, responsibility, or morality as Jessica, Luke, and Matt Murdock, a.k.a. Daredevil. Danny lacks the inner turmoil and self-reflexivity of the other Netflix Marvel heroes, while Frank is an anti-hero, and so *The Punisher*’s approach to morality is considerably

different, as I discuss below regarding his relationship to Daredevil. In addition, Luke and Matt share several similarities with Jessica that Danny does not, and while the extreme personality differences between Jessica and Danny make for amusing conversations and situations in *The Defenders*, it does little for my discussion here.

Out of the four series, *Daredevil* presents perhaps the most standard Marvel “superhero” type. Matt Murdock is a lawyer by day, and at night he dons a costume and fights crime as “the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen.” However, unlike many superheroes, he gained his powers as a child, after an accident that also left him blind. Although he learned to use his powers to compensate for his disability, his blindness provides another layer of protection to prevent others from uncovering his secret superhero identity. In the first season of *Daredevil*, Matt’s primary antagonist is Wilson Fisk, known in the comics as Kingpin, who believes he is saving Hell’s Kitchen by ruthlessly removing anything and anyone that he sees as tainting it. Like many of the most interesting villains, Fisk believes he is the hero, working tirelessly to save his city. Unlike *Jessica Jones*, which presents its villain as an unquestionably terrible person, *Daredevil* embraces a moral ambiguity that is rare for Marvel productions. Before the first season aired, showrunner Steven DeKnight boasted that audiences will not always be sure who to root for, claiming that “there are no heroes or villains . . . just people making different choices” (quoted in Dornbush 2014).

This ambiguity continues in the second season, particularly when Matt confronts the anti-hero Frank Castle, also known as *The Punisher*. Many of the tense conversations between the two centre issues of duty, responsibility, and morality. Frank calls Matt’s own sense of self and purpose into question many times, berating him for taking half measures by refusing to kill (his accusations are reminiscent of those levied by Will against Jessica) and for refusing to see that he and Frank are not that different. While Matt consistently denies these accusations and insists on his own righteousness, there is truth to Frank’s words. Regardless of his verbal convictions, Matt’s adoption of the devil for his alter ego, complete with red armour and horns, reveals his own complicated sense of morality. Unlike Jessica and Luke, who try to avoid violence when they can, Matt not only embraces violence, but actually enjoys beating his enemies senseless. As he confesses in the final episode of season 2, he needs to fight in order to feel alive (ep. 2.13, “A Cold Day in Hell’s

Kitchen”). Although he struggles with this guilty pleasure, Matt sees himself as an instrument of justice, both as a lawyer and a hero.

When Matt’s best friend and partner, Foggy Nelson, discovers the truth about Matt’s secret superhero identity, he is not so easily convinced. Foggy is presented as a moral voice in the series, a kind-hearted everyman who only wants what is best for the people he cares about. He is, understandably, concerned about his friend’s night-time behaviour because not only is it highly illegal (which is particularly worrisome, given that they are *lawyers*), Matt has also almost died several times. The psychological implications are also frightening, as not only is Matt secretly an incredibly violent person—he *enjoys* that violence immensely. Although Matt abides by the superhero code of not killing, his behaviour also betrays anti-heroic tendencies: he has decided that protecting Hell’s Kitchen is his duty, yet Wilson Fisk felt the exact same way; he sees himself as delivering justice, yet Frank Castle saw himself the same way. *Daredevil* demonstrates that simply having a strong sense of duty and responsibility does not necessarily make someone a hero, and while he might not make as many bad choices as Jessica, Matt is certainly not without his flaws.

Luke Cage, on the other hand, actually is a “good” person, although he, like Jessica, is reluctant to call himself a hero (as late as episode 11, he still insists that he’s “not the hero type”). Although Luke Cage actor Mike Colter claimed that his character is morally ambiguous, compared to Matt and Jessica, Luke is consistently calm, kind, and stoic (White 2016). He also chooses not to kill, though the choice is never centralized as a moral dilemma as it is in *Daredevil* and *Jessica Jones*. Like Jessica, Luke would rather keep his head down and live as close to a normal life as possible than use his powers for good. However, in *Luke Cage* he gradually decides to take responsibility for protecting Harlem from criminals who would abuse its residents for their own gain. The entire first season of *Luke Cage* sees Luke being encouraged to “take responsibility” in various ways: using his powers for good, becoming Harlem’s resident superhero, defeating his villainous half-brother who wants him dead, and, finally, by giving himself up to the authorities. Luke also has the most personal reason for deciding to become Harlem’s hero: the death of his father figure, Pop, who was gunned down by criminals working for Cottonmouth, one of the first season’s main villains. The death of a family member, especially a father figure, is a traditional catalyst for a hero’s decision to fight crime—the pain of the traumatic loss feeds into their sense of duty,

morality, and responsibility. Pop always encouraged Luke to use his powers to help people, and so his subsequent actions are fulfilling his father figure's last wish.

While each of the heroes are unique, there are overlapping elements in their stories that are worth teasing out. Jessica and Luke are both reluctant heroes, though Luke's sense of morality is much clearer and more unambiguous than Jessica's. Luke is also the most selfless of the group, embracing his responsibility as a hero without ulterior motives. While Matt also insists on his duty to protect others, unlike Luke, he does so because he is addicted to violence. Matt and Jessica both have a selfish reason for fighting, even if it might not be their primary motivation: for Matt, to feel alive through hurting people, and for Jessica, to free herself from the pursuit of her nemesis. Luke is willing to work with and rely on others for help, but both Matt and Jessica push their friends away from them. Although this is ostensibly done to protect them, both heroes clearly feel that relying on others is a weakness and a liability. Whereas Matt quickly embraces what he views as his duty and chooses the life of a superhero for himself, Jessica and Luke both initially reject the duty and responsibility that others try to force upon them. Once he has made the decision to become the hero of Harlem, however, Luke fully accepts his responsibility. Jessica, on the other hand, takes nearly the entire first season to learn that she must try her best to live up to the expectations of those who see her as a hero, even if she might never consider herself one. Each of these characters has unique powers and motivations, but their diverse approaches to duty, responsibility, and morality provide the most interesting and tense interactions between them when they come together to form the Defenders.

Not "Super," but Certainly Human

Although Jessica is not as selfless in her approach to responsibility as Luke, in her own way she tries to fix the problems she causes. Jessica's heroism lies not in her decision to finally kill Kilgrave, but in her much earlier decision to stay in the city even after finding out Kilgrave was alive and hunting for her. She articulates this decision at the end of the first episode in a voice-over: "Knowing it's real means you gotta make a decision. One, keep denying it, or two, do something about it" (ep. 1.01, "AKA Ladies' Night"). This is a remarkable moment for Jessica, especially in hindsight, after the audience comes to learn the extent of her trauma, her selfishness, and her isolation.

By comparison, while Matt and Luke certainly have traumatic pasts, neither of them experienced trauma that made them feel worthless and tainted. Both men briefly struggle with feelings of guilt for the deaths of their father figures, but they are able to attribute their past traumas to external factors beyond their control, and so they are not paralyzed by this self-blame. Jessica, on the other hand, internalized her trauma, allowing it to warp her sense of self-worth. This distinction is important because Jessica experienced long-term gender-based abuse and sexualized trauma, which affected her in specific ways. Rape trauma syndrome is a unique kind of complex PTSD that can be exacerbated by social and cultural aspects—such as rape culture and victim blaming—and symptoms can differ even based on whether the sexual assault resulted from force, incapacitation, or verbal coercion (Brown, Testa, and Messman-Moore 2009). For Jessica, it might have felt like a combination of all three, given Kilgrave’s ability to make his victims *want* to follow his orders. While it is not necessarily useful to compare trauma and to make claims about who suffered more, it is clear that Jessica’s trauma is very different from Matt’s or Luke’s. Origin stories are central to the motivations and morality of the superhero, and so Jessica’s unique past trauma both explains and emphasizes the fundamental differences between her and the other two heroes. As media critic Roz Kaveney (2008) has observed of the comic book version of Jessica Jones, “Jessica thinks of herself as someone who is deeply unlovable and unworthy of love, even though she has friends and lovers who care deeply about her” (70). Jessica’s embittered self-loathing, as well as her repugnant and violent mistakes, are what make her feel more human than any other superhero; though Jessica is not really a superhero, at least not yet. While she is not an anti-hero like the Punisher, she might be what Rasmus (2016) refers to as a postmodern anti-hero: “not someone who’s evil, but someone who’s conflicted about how to do good, be good, and the point of being good at all.”

These questions are certainly brought up in *Daredevil* and *Luke Cage*, but *Jessica Jones* really digs into them and tears them apart. Although *Jessica Jones* was not as culturally impactful as *Watchmen*—which has, after all, been hailed as indicating “the moment comic books grew up” and ushering in the ongoing cultural obsession with graphic novels (Barber 2016)—it certainly endeavours to deconstruct the very idea of the hero by presenting viewers with a woman who is almost entirely the opposite of what a hero is supposed to be. If heroes are meant to inspire us to change and to be better than we are, however, Jessica is the perfect woman for the job. As show creator and writer

Melissa Rosenberg stated in an interview with *Variety*, “at her core, [Jessica is] someone who ultimately wants to do something good in the world, though that is buried under many layers of damage” (quoted in Ryan 2015). The fact that Jessica was eventually able to work with others, face her deepest fears, risk her life and mental integrity, and defeat an almost undefeatable enemy *despite* those layers of damage and self-loathing is far more impressive, meaningful, and nuanced than most superhero narratives. Presenting audiences with a “piece of shit” neo-noir hero who tries her best and keeps trying even when her best is not good enough is a bold, subversive, and inspirational move. Her moral compass might be somewhat broken, but then again, so is she.

NOTES

- 1 Lee (1962, 11).
- 2 This is practically Superman’s catchphrase, as he fights “a never-ending battle for truth, justice and the American way.” He always fought for truth and justice, and “the American way” was added in 1942 in the *Adventures of Superman* radio series. The series ran from 1940 to 1951 and introduced and popularized many key elements in the Superman mythos. The “American way” part was dropped in 1944 (replaced with “tolerance”), then added again during the Cold War in the *Adventures of Superman* TV series, which ran from 1952 to 1958 (Lundegaard 2006).
- 3 As of this writing, the full text of the Comics Code can be found online at <http://www.mit.edu/activities/safe/labeling/comics-code-1954>.
- 4 Moral injury refers to damage done to one’s own conscience, which usually results in intense feelings of guilt and shame. For more on *Jessica Jones* and moral injury, see Glaser (2016).

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