

Sexy, Sterile, Sacrificed: Black Widow in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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COM 497 Capstone Project

Natasha Romanoff, AKA Black Widow

- Most prominent woman in MCU, seven film appearances
- Standalone film *Black Widow* will be eighth film
- Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. and Avenger
- Former spy and assassin, morally grey background



Objectification

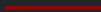
- Introduced in *Iron Man 2*, sexualized from beginning
- Crafted for male gaze, object of desire
- Sexualized through films' text, cinematography, and aesthetic features like costuming
- Consistent objectification in all films





Costuming & Fight Choreography

- Primary costume is skin-tight leather catsuit
- Sexualized fighting style
- Frequently wraps her thighs around enemies' necks and heads



Monstrous Feminine

- Backstory revealed in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*
- Committed crimes and wrongdoings as spy before S.H.I.E.L.D.
- Red Room “graduation ceremony” - sterilization surgery
- Tears in her eyes, she says, “It’s efficient. One less thing to worry about. The one thing that might matter more than a mission. Makes everything easier, even killing”

- Role as a mother would have to come first
- Being a mother would be so emotionally compromising that it would be impossible for her to commit the violent acts that her career requires
- Calls herself a monster

Since maternity implies penetration, the superheroine's pregnancy presents a vulnerability and is framed as "problematic because they challenge the strictly enforced bodily boundaries that are fundamental to the heroic fantasy" (Brown). This presentation of pregnancy as a compromising invasion is what makes the superheroine's pregnancy abject and monstrously feminine.

Jeffrey Brown, "Supermoms? Maternity and the monstrous-feminine in superhero comics".

Paternity and Clint's Family

- Clint (AKA Hawkeye) has a wife and kids
- Paternity favored in superhero genre (Brown)
- Clint's wife is pregnant
- Intentional juxtaposition of societally accepted maternity and monstrous femininity
- Life and family that Natasha can never have



Sacrificial death

- *Avengers: Endgame*
- Both discuss past mistakes
- Natasha's character arc built around repenting for past career
- Family central to scene





Self-sacrifice is driven by her desire to redeem herself and prioritizing Clint's family. Clint's paternity is once again favored, and Natasha's monstrous femininity can only be redeemed through her self-sacrifice.

Conclusion

- MCU franchise earned roughly \$22.59 billion in the box office alone (Whitten)
- Global success, fixture of pop culture
- Superheroes “have become iconic symbols to be reiterated and recycled in popular culture to mobilize and reflect themes, tensions, and anxieties of American ideology in terms of genre, gender, sexuality, class, politics, science and culture” (Lebel)
- Feminist analysis of Natasha’s role in the MCU is significant because the representation of women in these films both reflect and impact cultural attitudes towards women

Conclusion & *Black Widow*

The impending release of *Black Widow* indicates that Marvel has not yet concluded Natasha's character arc and story line, but prior to the film's release it is impossible to determine if the film will seek to remedy some of the flaws with Natasha's character arc and role within the MCU, or if it will be a posthumous celebration of a character who has suffered more than that which can be repaired.

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Sources listed are complete works cited from original research paper. All images in the presentation are screenshots from the films taken by the author.