

**Redefining Feminine Strength and Vulnerability:  
A Gender Performative Analysis of *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020) Movie**

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*“She is clothed with strength and dignity;  
she can laugh at the days to come.”*

*- Proverbs 31:25 (NIV)*

**ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the critical issue in *Wonder Woman* (1984) in feminist perspective, by using Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity. The movie explores the interconnectedness of feminine strength and vulnerability, traditional gender roles, and the theme of power and agency. Diana Prince's journey reflects the societal pressure on women to embody both strength and emotional complexity, while Barbara Minerva's transformation into Cheetah represents the internalization of masculine ideals of power. As the results: 1) The movie demonstrates that feminine strength and vulnerability can coexist, subverting the notion that power must align solely with masculine ideals. 2) *Wonder Woman* (1984) critiques traditional gender roles by showing how women's autonomy is often constrained by societal expectations, particularly in relationships and social responsibilities. 3) The movie reveals a significant difference in how power and agency are explored between male and female characters, with male characters like Max Lord wielding unchecked power, while female characters must navigate moral and societal limitations. Through Butler's framework, *Wonder Woman 1984* critiques traditional gender norms, suggesting that true empowerment comes from redefining power and success beyond patriarchal structures. This article is expected to enhance feminist discourse in movie analysis by offering a more profound insight into how media portrayals of women both challenge and uphold societal standards. Hence, it enhances critical conversations around gender, power, and identity, encouraging further exploration of how movies can influence and reflect progressing perspectives on gender equality.

**Keyword:** *Wonder Woman (1984), Feminism, Gender Performativity, Patriarchy, Gender Roles*

**INTRODUCTION**

Literature and movies, though distinct in their mediums, are deeply interconnected as forms of storytelling and artistic expression. Both serve as vehicles for exploring human experience, cultural values, and social issues, often using similar elements such as narrative structure, character development, and symbolism (Eagleton, 2008). While literature conveys its messages through written words, movies use visual imagery, sound, and dialogue to craft stories that can evoke the same emotional and intellectual responses (Mulvey, 1975). In adaptation studies, movies often bring literary works to life, transforming novels, plays, and poems into visual narratives that can reach wider audiences (Hutcheon, 2013). Moreover, movies in terms of literature offer critical insights into societal norms and power dynamics that mirror the real human condition, making them valuable subjects for analysis in

fields such as feminism, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies (Butler, 1990). Both literature and movies shape and reflect the human condition, making their study integral to understanding the broader cultural landscape. *Wonder Woman 1984* (Jenkins, 2020) provides a profound understanding for feminist analysis, particularly in how it shows gender roles, power dynamics, and the social expectations placed on women. This analysis uses Judith Butler's (1990) theory of 'gender performativity' to examine how the movie explores the balance between strength and vulnerability in the main character, Diana Prince, and how these traits connect to broader ideas about womanhood and power.

Through the lens of feminist theory, *Wonder Woman 1984* interrogates the intersection of feminine strength and vulnerability, a key tension embodied by its protagonist. Diana Prince represents an idealized form of female empowerment, yet the narrative also delves into her personal sacrifices, love for Steve Trevor, and the emotional challenges that come with her role as a hero. This binary of strength versus vulnerability reflects Butler's assertion that "*gender is not something one is, but something one does—an act*" that is shaped by societal norms and expectations (Butler, 1990, p. 33). The movie questions whether these qualities must be in opposition, or if they can coexist within the complex identity of a modern woman.

In recent research, Smith (2023), in the article titled "*Gender Representation in Superhero movies: A Contemporary Feminist Analysis*" published in *The Journal of Gender and Media Studies*, explored the portrayal of female superheroes in recent blockbuster movies, emphasizing how these characters both challenge and reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. The study concluded that while superhero movies like *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* offer strong female leads, they often still operate within frameworks that subtly reinforce male dominance, particularly through the narrative arcs of the male supporting characters. In comparison, the current study on *Wonder Woman 1984* examines a different angle by focusing specifically on the intersection of feminine strength and vulnerability, using Judith Butler's theory of performativity to analyze the protagonist's internal conflict between personal desires and societal responsibilities. This research gap highlights the need to further investigate how *Wonder Woman (1984)* uniquely portrays the balance between *empowerment* and *emotional vulnerability*, a theme less emphasized in Smith's broader analysis of superhero movies.

This study explores three key research questions, each grounded in feminist theory: How *Wonder Woman (1984)* depicts the intersection of feminine strength and vulnerability in its female protagonist, and what does this reveal about societal expectations of women, In what ways the movie challenge or reinforce traditional gender roles through Diana Prince and her relationships with male characters and How power and agency are explored differently between female and male characters, particularly in the context of Barbara Minerva's transformation into Cheetah. These questions guide the exploration of the movie's narrative, offering insight into how contemporary media continues to shape and reflect gendered power dynamics.

The binary opposition of *strength* versus *vulnerability* in *Wonder Woman 1984* highlights the ways in which female characters navigate power within a male-dominated society. Strength, often framed as a traditionally masculine trait, is embodied by Diana's heroic actions, yet her vulnerability, particularly regarding her love for

Steve Trevor, reveals a more nuanced understanding of power. This juxtaposition echoes Butler’s argument that *"gender performativity is not a stable identity or locus of agency but a performative accomplishment"* (1990, p. 191). The movie ultimately challenges the rigid distinction between these traits, suggesting that they are not mutually exclusive but rather part of the dynamics of female identity.

By exploring power, independence, and gender roles, *Wonder Woman 1984* adds to the ongoing feminist discussion about women's roles in both public and private life. This analysis looks at these themes to help deepen the understanding of how media portrayals of women can both question and support societal expectations.

### Binary Opposition

STRENGTH	VULNERABILITY
<p>In <i>Wonder Woman 1984</i>, Diana’s strength reflects traditional masculine ideals of power, independence, and leadership. <i>"Gender is not something one is, but something one does, an act."</i> (Butler, 1990, p. 33) Her heroism challenges stereotypes of female passivity, embodying fearless physical prowess and moral integrity.</p>	<p>Diana’s vulnerability centers on her emotional sacrifices, particularly her love for Steve Trevor. <i>"The performativity of gender revolves around repetition... norms create the illusion of a stable gender identity."</i> (Butler, 1990, p. 191) The movie shows that vulnerability is not weakness but part of human complexity, challenging the notion that it is inherently feminine or inferior.</p>

### METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the feminist themes presented in *Wonder Woman 1984* (Jenkins, 2020), utilizing Judith Butler’s theory of *gender performativity* (1990) as the central framework. Butler's theory asserted that gender is a social construct created through repeated actions and societal expectations, rather than an inherent identity. In this analysis, the focus is on how *Wonder Woman 1984* portrays the tension between feminine *strength* and *vulnerability* through the protagonist, Diana Prince, and how these qualities challenge or reinforce societal norms.

Data for this study were collected by examining the critical issue found in the movie, and analyzed not limited to the character interactions, the dialogue, but also the visual components, and the cinematic techniques. The analysis specifically concentrated on the depiction of power relations, gender roles, and societal expectations of women within the movie. For example, the use of lighting, camera angles, and framing during key emotional scenes highlights Diana’s internal struggle between personal sacrifice and her heroic duties, creating a visual representation of the balance between strength and vulnerability. These cinematic techniques contribute to the movie’s narrative, making the feminist themes more visually impactful.

The analysis focuses on three main themes: *Feminine Strength vs. Vulnerability*, *Gender Roles and Relationships*, and *Power and Agency*. In exploring these themes, key scenes and dialogue were examined, including the use of cinematography to visually communicate the complexity of Diana’s character. For instance, close-up shots often emphasize Diana’s moments of vulnerability, particularly in her interactions with Steve Trevor, while wider shots are used in battle scenes to highlight her strength and independence. The contrast in these

visual elements highlighted the movie's portrayal of the tension between external empowerment and internal emotional conflict.

This study connects Butler's theory with the movie's visual storytelling, examining how *Wonder Woman* (1984) either subverts or supports traditional gender norms. The interrelation between narrative content and cinematographic choices reveals deeper insights into how media representations of women can both challenge and reinforce societal expectations. Additionally, the research compares Diana Prince's depiction with existing literature on gender portrayals in superhero movies, contributing to the broader feminist discourse in media studies.

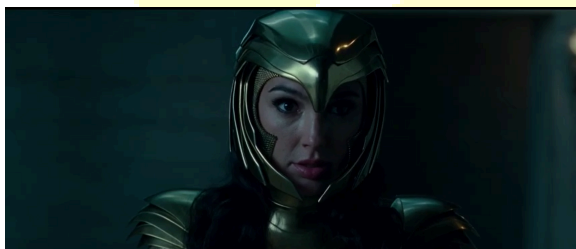
## DISCUSSION

### 1. Female Empowerment vs. Fragility

The issue of feminine strength and vulnerability is portrayed through Diana Prince's journey in *Wonder Woman* (1984), which challenges societal expectations of women. The movie presents a complex narrative in which Diana embodies both traditional masculine ideals of physical strength and the emotional complexity often associated with femininity. The scene uses lighting, framing, and costume to highlight the character's struggle between wanting to be strong and powerful, like an "apex predator," and hiding the feel of vulnerability. The close-up shows that her desire for strength is also a response to her own insecurities, reflecting seeking empowerment by rejecting traditional ideas of female weakness. These dual aspects highlight the tension between external power and internal vulnerability, a theme central to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Butler argued that gender is not a fixed identity but is continuously constructed through repeated performances (Butler, 1990), which is evident in how Diana navigates her roles as a hero and a woman. "I don't want to be like anyone," "I want to be an apex predator."



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(02:01:30) Barbara Minerva (Cheetah) highlights the societal pressure on women to adopt forms of power that align with traditional masculine ideals. Barbara's desire to be an "apex predator" represents an attempt to assert strength by embodying traits typically associated with men, such as domination and aggression. According to Butler, gender is performative, and

Barbara's transformation reflects her internalization of masculine power structures, showing that her idea of empowerment is shaped by societal norms that equate power with masculinity (Butler, 1990). The movie critiques this performance by illustrating the limitations of adopting these traits, as Barbara ultimately loses herself in the pursuit of power. "Gender is not something one is, it is something one does—an act, a performance that is repeated" (Butler, 1990, p. 33). Butler's concept of gender performativity is relevant here, as Barbara's desire to become an apex predator reflects her effort to perform strength in a way that mimics masculine ideals. This raises

the issue of whether women can find empowerment within patriarchal frameworks or must redefine power in ways that embrace traits traditionally viewed as feminine, such as emotional vulnerability.

In another scene, the camera switches one after the other the two characters talking about how true greatness comes from honesty, not lies, and focuses on each character's emotions and ideas. The character in the golden armor represents real strength, which comes from being truthful and understanding vulnerability, not just being powerful. Diana shows her confidence saying, *"Nothing good is born from lies. And greatness is not what you think."* (02:08:42) Here, Diana reflects her rejection of external definitions of greatness, which are often linked to masculine concepts of physical strength and invulnerability. Throughout the movie, Diana grapples with her personal vulnerability: her love for Steve Trevor and the emotional sacrifices she makes, and realizes that true greatness comes from authenticity and emotional depth. Butler's theory of performativity suggests that societal expectations of gender are created through repeated actions, but individuals can subvert these expectations through alternative performances (Butler, 1990). Diana's rejection of traditional ideals of strength and her embrace of vulnerability challenge the gender norms that dictate how women should behave and what traits they should value. *"The performativity of gender involves a repetition of acts that reinforce norms, but also provides the possibility of subverting them"* (Butler, 1990, p. 191). This concept applies to Diana's realization that greatness is not rooted in societal ideals of strength, but in her ability to embrace her emotional complexity. By doing so, Diana subverts the traditional masculine definition of power, offering an alternative model of heroism that incorporates vulnerability as a source of strength rather than weakness.

In *Wonder Woman* (1984), the issue of strength and vulnerability in the character of Diana Prince offers a nuanced depiction of gender that aligns with Judith Butler's theory of performativity. The movie challenges societal expectations of women by showing that power and vulnerability are interdependent. Both Diana and Barbara's journeys highlight how societal norms shape performances of gender, with Barbara adopting a more masculine form of power and Diana redefining what it means to be strong. By subverting traditional gender norms, Diana's character provides a feminist critique of how women can navigate power within a patriarchal society, suggesting that true empowerment lies in the ability to redefine strength on one's own terms.

## **2. Gender Roles and Relationships**

The portrayal of gender roles through Diana Prince's relationships with male characters reveals significant insights into the movie's treatment of traditional gender expectations. The movie explores the societal norms that dictate women's roles, particularly in relation to love, sacrifice, and identity. Using Judith Butler's theory of performativity, we see how the movie challenges or reinforces these traditional roles through Diana's emotional conflicts and Barbara Minerva's transformation. The scene uses close-up shots to focus on the character's face, emphasizing her emotional pain and vulnerability. This choice highlights the contrast between her strong, armored appearance and the deep sadness she feels, showing that even strong people can experience intense emotional struggles. The camera work makes her vulnerability more visible, suggesting the idea that strength includes facing

painful truths in relationships. In this quote *"I've never wanted anything more. But he's gone. And that's the truth."* (02:13:49) Diana's deep emotional struggle with the loss of Steve Trevor highlights a common theme in feminist criticism—women are frequently expected to make personal sacrifices, especially in the name of love, while male characters are not subjected to the



same expectations. Diana's grief and eventual acceptance of Steve's departure underscore how women are often portrayed as bearing the emotional burden in relationships. This reflects societal norms where female characters must choose between personal happiness and responsibility. *"The freedom to act and define oneself is shaped by gendered expectations, which often limit women's autonomy"* (Butler, 1990, p. 89). Butler's idea that societal expectations correlated to women's autonomy is evident in Diana's experience. Her love for Steve forces her to set aside her own emotional needs for the greater good, emphasizing the notion that women's personal desires are frequently placed behind their responsibilities as caregivers or heroes.

Furthermore, Diana highlights the societal pressure on women to achieve perfection in all aspects of life, balancing personal desires, career success, and social expectations. *"You can't have it all. You can only have the truth. And the truth is enough."* (02:14:27) Diana's realization that *"the truth is enough"* reflects her rejection of these unattainable ideals, recognizing that true empowerment comes from authenticity, rather than conforming to patriarchal standards. This scene emphasizes the conflict between societal demands for women to *"have it all"* and the reality that these expectations often force women to sacrifice their true selves in the process. *"The body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated over time"* (Butler, 1993, p. 59). Gender performativity is central to Diana's realization at this moment. The pressure for women to *"have it all"* is part of the repetitive acts that reinforce gender norms. Diana's rejection of this narrative is a subversive act, challenging the performative expectations placed on women by society. By embracing her truth, Diana disrupts the repeated performance of gendered ideals, asserting that fulfillment and strength do not come from conforming to external demands, but from staying true to oneself.

Reflecting Steve Trevor's return, reveals how traditional narratives often depict women's happiness and desires as secondary to the decisions made by male characters. Diana's happiness is tied to Steve's presence, but his choice to return disrupts her emotional state, suggesting that women's feelings are often placed in the background while male decisions take precedence. *"The masculine subject, constructed through the repudiation of the feminine, expresses its power through the subordination and regulation of women"* (Butler, 1990, p. 18). Butler explores how the construction of gender in patriarchal systems often privileges masculinity by subjugating femininity. It aligns with the theme of male dominance and societal expectations that influence women's roles and behaviors. Butler's critique about male dominance aligns with this scene, where Steve's return and subsequent decisions highlight how male characters often control the narrative, while women are expected to manage the

emotional fallout. This reinforces the traditional gender dynamic where women's autonomy is restricted by the actions and choices of men.

The depiction of gender roles and relationships in Wonder Woman 1984 reveals how societal expectations shape the experiences of female characters. Through Diana's emotional sacrifices and Barbara's pursuit of power, the movie reflects the pressures placed on women to conform to patriarchal ideals. Using Butler's frameworks, both challenges and reinforces traditional gender roles, particularly in the way women navigate love, power, and autonomy within a male-dominated world.

### 3. Power and Agency

The exploration of power and agency differs significantly between the female and male characters, particularly in the case of Barbara Minerva (Cheetah) and her transformation. The movie highlights how societal expectations shape women's experiences of power, often forcing them to navigate a delicate balance between strength



and conformity. By contrast, male characters like Max Lord are portrayed as freely wielding power without the same moral constraints. This analysis uses Judith Butler's theory on male dominance to explore these themes. *"The world needs you. You know what you need to do."* (01:56:43) The scene emphasizes the woman's internal struggle with power and agency, occupying the close-up shot to capture the intensity of the moment, and highlighting her emotional conflict as she faces the responsibility that comes with her power. The man's words place the focus on her decision-making, stressing her agency in determining the course of action. The framing and composition suggest that while she holds significant power, it is her choice and sense of duty that will ultimately guide her actions, indicating personal agency. This stresses out the societal burden placed on female heroes, like Diana, to be the constant saviors. While male characters, such as Max Lord, act for personal gain, Diana is expected to fix the world's problems while still adhering to ideals of femininity and moral responsibility. This reflects the gendered expectations that women must not only wield power but also remain nurturing and selfless in the process. *"The masculine subject, constructed through the repudiation of the feminine, expresses its power through the subordination and regulation of women"* (Butler, 1990, p. 18). Butler's assertion that male dominance is often maintained through the subordination of women connects to the way Diana's power is framed. She is expected to save the world, yet her agency is constrained by societal norms that define women as nurturers first, even in roles of power. Her power is regulated by these cultural expectations, unlike the unchecked power of her male counterpart, Max Lord.

Diana's realization in this line encapsulates the feminist critique of the *"having it all"* narrative, *"You can't have it all. You can only have the truth. And the truth is enough."* (02:14:23) which places unrealistic expectations on women to balance power, success, and personal happiness. The movie critiques this notion by showing that such

expectations are unattainable, and Diana's embrace of truth over perfection represents a rejection of the societal pressure to do it all. *"The masculine subject... expresses its power through the subordination and regulation of women"* (Butler, 1990, p. 18). Butler's statement about male dominance is reflected in the societal systems that demand women to achieve everything without providing the necessary support. Diana's realization is a form of resistance against this narrative, rejecting the idea that women must meet impossible standards of strength and success.

Max Lord's philosophy of limitless expansion and power reflects the patriarchal ethos of unchecked male dominance. *"I've never been one for rules. The answer is always more."* (02:00:43) the close-up shot on the woman captures her reaction to the man's statement and focuses on her face, showing a mix of realization and concern. The bright



background contrasts with the tension in her expression, highlighting her internal conflict as she processes the implications of his words. This moment contrasts power and agency, as the man's disregard for limits contrasts with her awareness of the potential consequences, emphasizing the differing ways they each perceive and exercise power. His pursuit of *"more"* contrasts sharply with Diana's restrained and morally guided use of power, which illustrates the gendered differences in how male and female characters are allowed to exercise agency. While Max's power is portrayed as a natural right, Diana's strength is subject to scrutiny and moral boundaries. *"The masculine subject... expresses its power through the subordination and regulation of women"* (Butler, 1990, p. 18). Butler's argument that male power is often constructed through the control of others aligns with Max Lord's approach to power. His unrestrained pursuit of dominance contrasts with Diana's morally constrained use of strength, highlighting the societal double standards that govern how men and women are allowed to wield power.

Power and agency are explored in deeply gendered ways, with male characters like Max Lord representing uncontrolled dominance while female characters, such as Diana and Barbara, must navigate societal expectations and moral boundaries in *Wonder Woman* (1984). Through Butler's framework, the movie critiques how patriarchal structures regulate women's power and limit their agency, reinforcing the need for feminist redefinitions of strength and empowerment.

## CONCLUSION

In *Wonder Woman* 1984, the movie explores significant feminist themes surrounding gender performativity, power, and agency, particularly in its treatment of the protagonist Diana Prince and antagonist Barbara Minerva (Cheetah). Through Judith Butler's framework, the movie reveals how societal expectations impose limitations on women, forcing them to navigate the tension between strength and vulnerability. Diana embodies an idealized form of empowerment, but her journey highlights the complex emotional sacrifices women are expected to make in both personal and public spheres.



The movie challenges traditional gender roles by illustrating how women's ability to act independently is frequently limited by societal expectations, especially in terms of relationships and their roles within society. Diana's emotional sacrifices, her realization that "*having it all*" is an unrealistic narrative, and her rejection of patriarchal expectations reflect a deeper feminist commentary on the demands placed on women. Meanwhile, Barbara's transformation into Cheetah demonstrates the pressure on women to align with masculine ideals of power, illustrating the ongoing struggle to find empowerment within a patriarchal system.

Ultimately, *Wonder Woman 1984* challenges the binary distinctions of strength and vulnerability, power and subjugation, presenting a more nuanced depiction of female heroism. By challenging conventional gender norms, the movie presents a feminist analysis of power and agency, proposing that genuine strength comes from reshaping the concepts of success and empowerment based on individual definitions.

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