

Gender Representation in Illustration

Workshop



Intentionality

Illustration, unlike photography or film, involves deliberate acts of construction. It is not just the chosen content, but every line, colour choice, and composition is a decision that communicates meaning. This is particularly relevant to depictions of gender.

Illustration is a complex and nuanced practice for examining how gender is designed, performed and reimagined.

A historical context of gender in visual culture

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, illustration became a key component of popular print media such as magazines, advertisements, children's books and propaganda posters. These early forms of commercial illustration reflected and reinforced dominant binary gender ideologies:

- **Men** were often depicted as rational, authoritative, and public figures — businessmen, explorers, or soldiers.
- **Women**, conversely, were portrayed as emotional, domestic, and ornamental — mothers, homemakers, or muses.

Many of the illustrations of Norman Rockwell and JC Leyendecker promoted these archetypes

Norman Rockwell



JC Leyendecker



Gender Theory: The Male Gaze

Borrowing from Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze in cinema, we can analyse illustration as a visual field often structured by a masculine perspective.

It promotes, without question the perspective of a notionally typical heterosexual man as embodied in the audience, or intended audience, for films and other visual media, characterized by a tendency to objectify or sexualize women.

Characters, especially women, are frequently positioned as objects of visual pleasure rather than as subjects with their own narrative power.

Gender Theory: Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity suggests that gender is not an inherent trait, but a set of repeated behaviors and visual cues.

Butler argues that being born male or female does not determine behaviour. Instead, people learn to behave in particular ways to fit into society. The way we fit into gender is an act, or performance.

In illustration, gender is performed through stylization: body proportions, clothing, colour palettes, gesture and even line quality.

Gender Theory: Semiotics of Gender

This is achieved through specific choices in visual signs like clothing, setting, and body language to convey meanings that often link women to domestic, submissive, or emotional roles, while men are associated with authority, professional success, and outdoor activities.

Semiotics helps us decode how these signs, such as long hair, muscular bodies, curves, colour coding (blue/pink) and facial hair communicate gendered meanings.

Illustrators can either reinforce or subvert these codes.

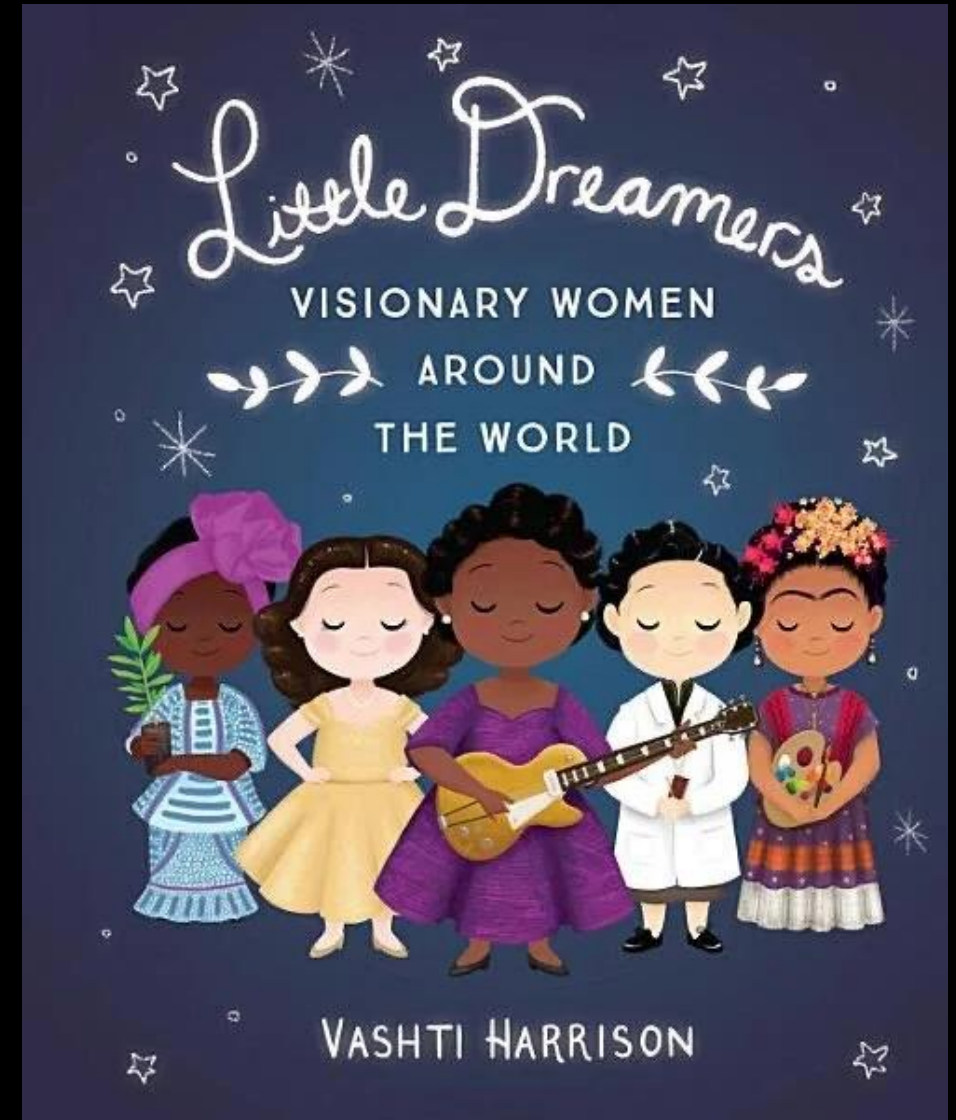
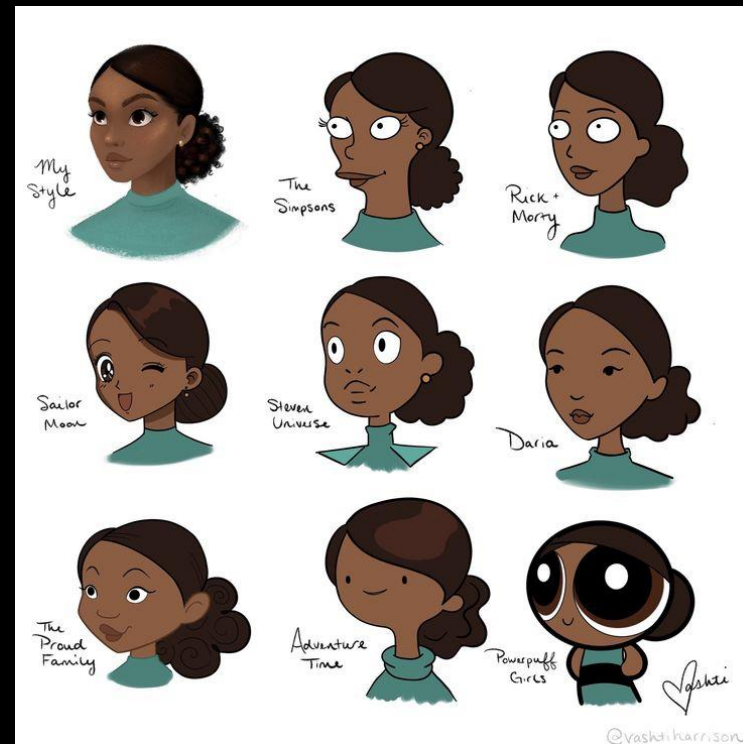
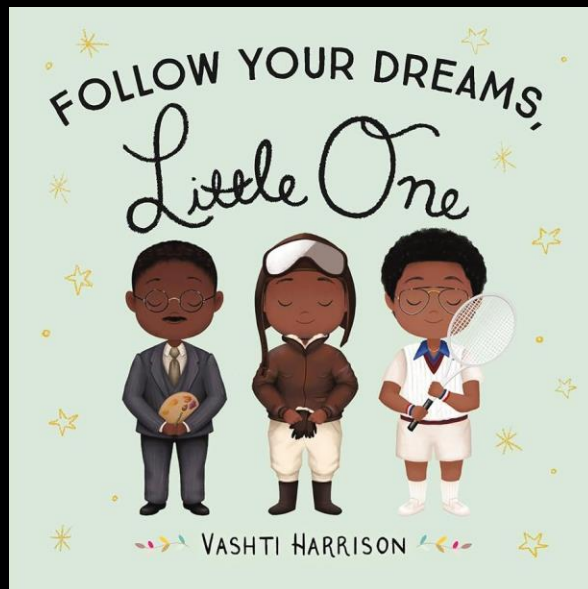


Children's Illustration

Children's books play a formative role in shaping perceptions of gender. Traditionally, male characters were active (explorers, inventors), while female characters were passive or caretaking (princesses or mothers).

Interestingly, contemporary illustrators like Vashti Harrison are redefining this by depicting diverse and empowered identities.

Vashti Harrison



Editorial and Advertising Illustration

Advertising remains one of the most gender-coded illustration spaces. Women are often sexualized or idealized, and men are portrayed as dominant or stoic.

Some recent examples, however, have embraced more fluid and inclusive depictions representing non-binary figures, body diversity, and alternative masculinities.

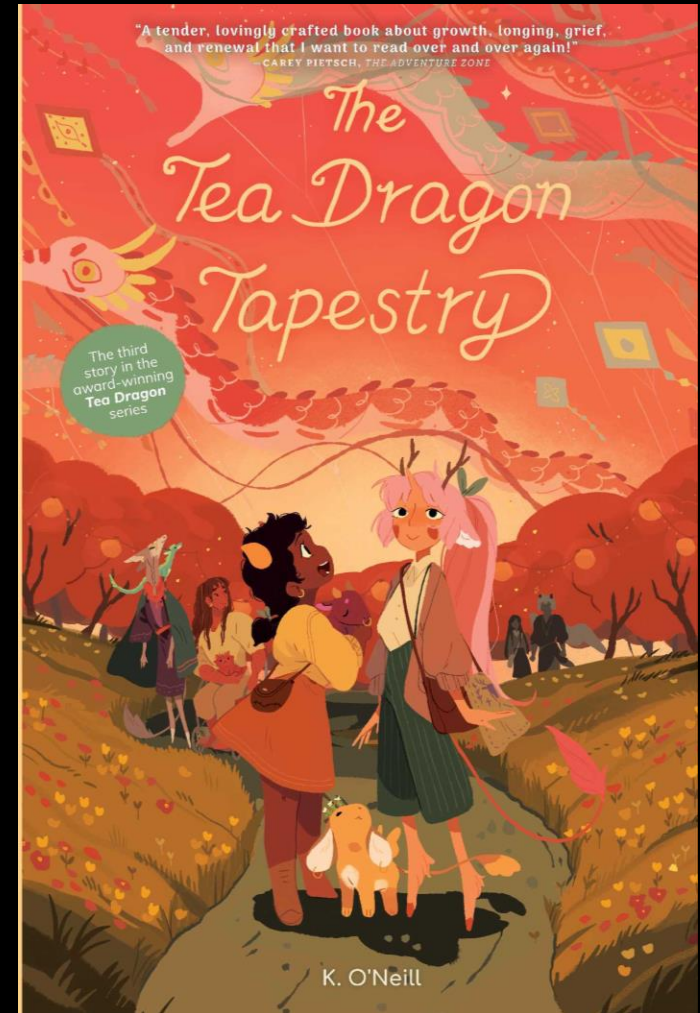
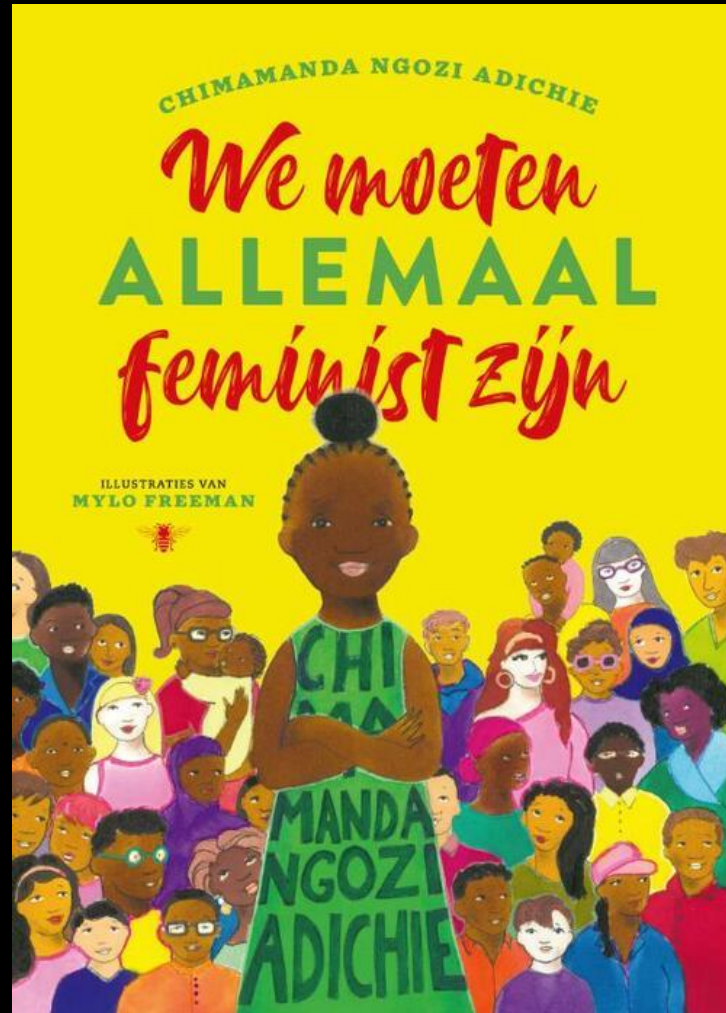
Examples

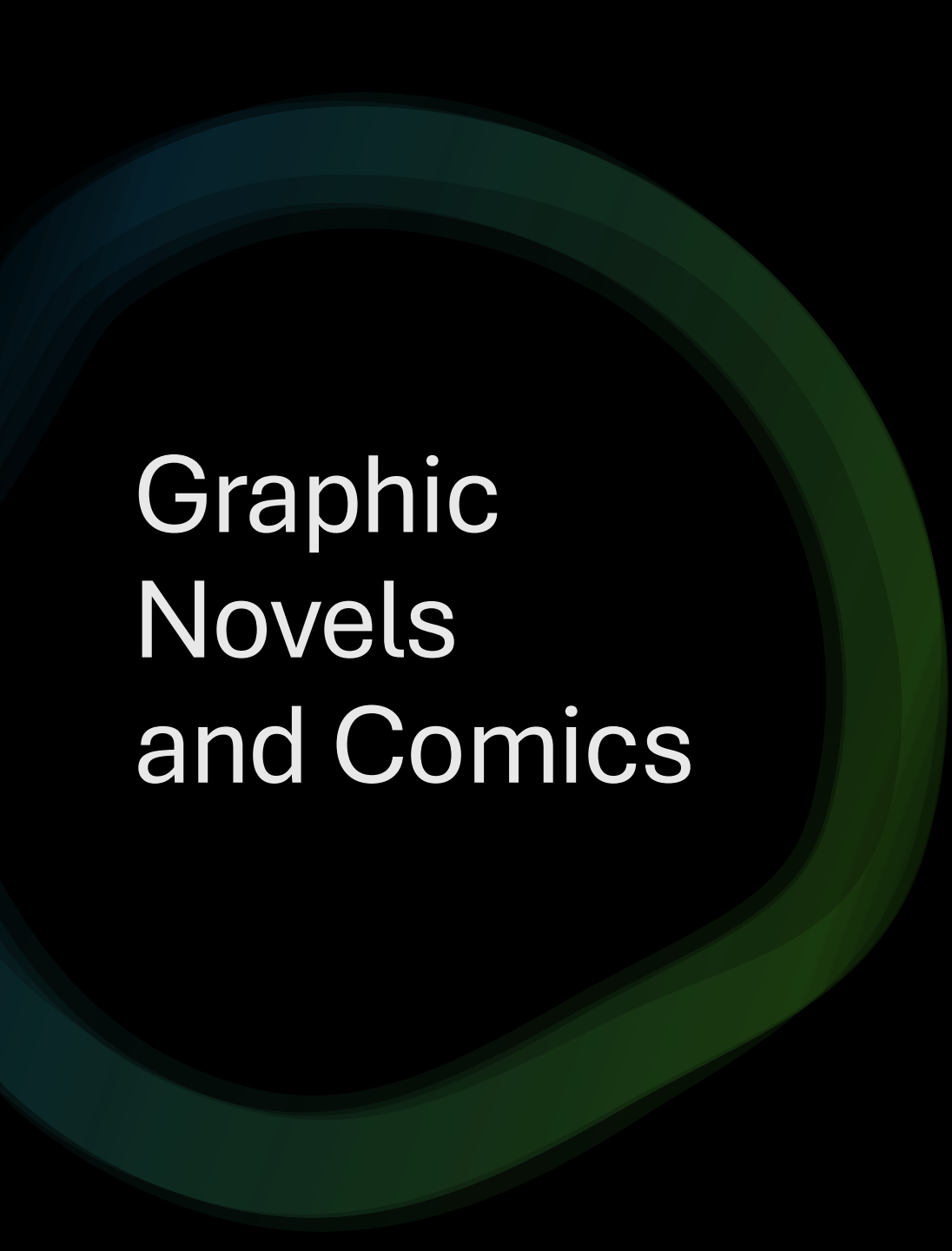
“We Should All Be Feminists” (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie illustrated edition) – combines literary feminism with delicate but assertive visuals.

Dove’s Real Beauty Sketches Campaign uses illustration to challenge narrow beauty standards but raises questions about authenticity and corporate branding.

LGBTQ+ webcomics – such as The Tea Dragon Society (Katie O’Neill) or Heartstopper (Alice Oseman), which normalize queer relationships in charming, accessible ways.

(It would be a good idea to research examples like these.)



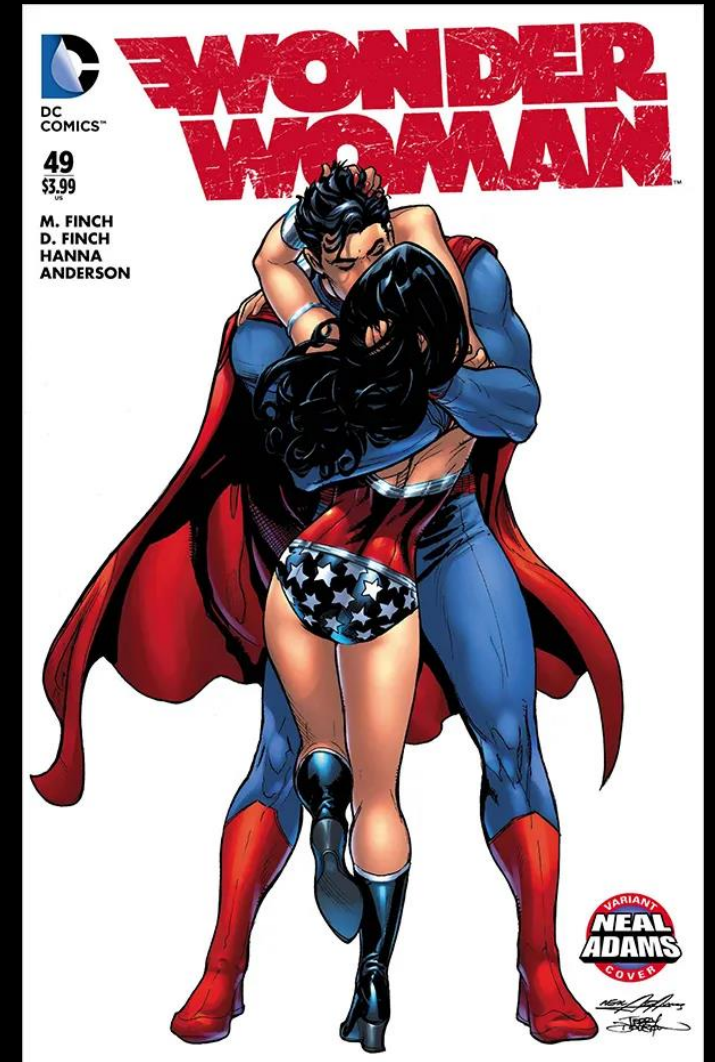
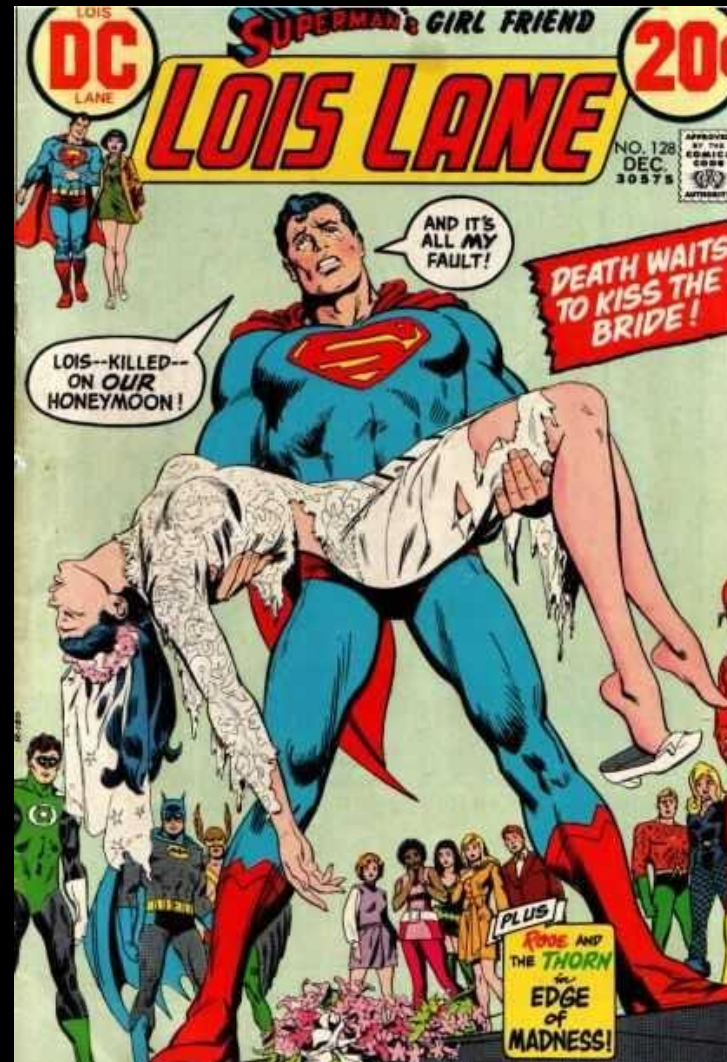


Graphic Novels and Comics

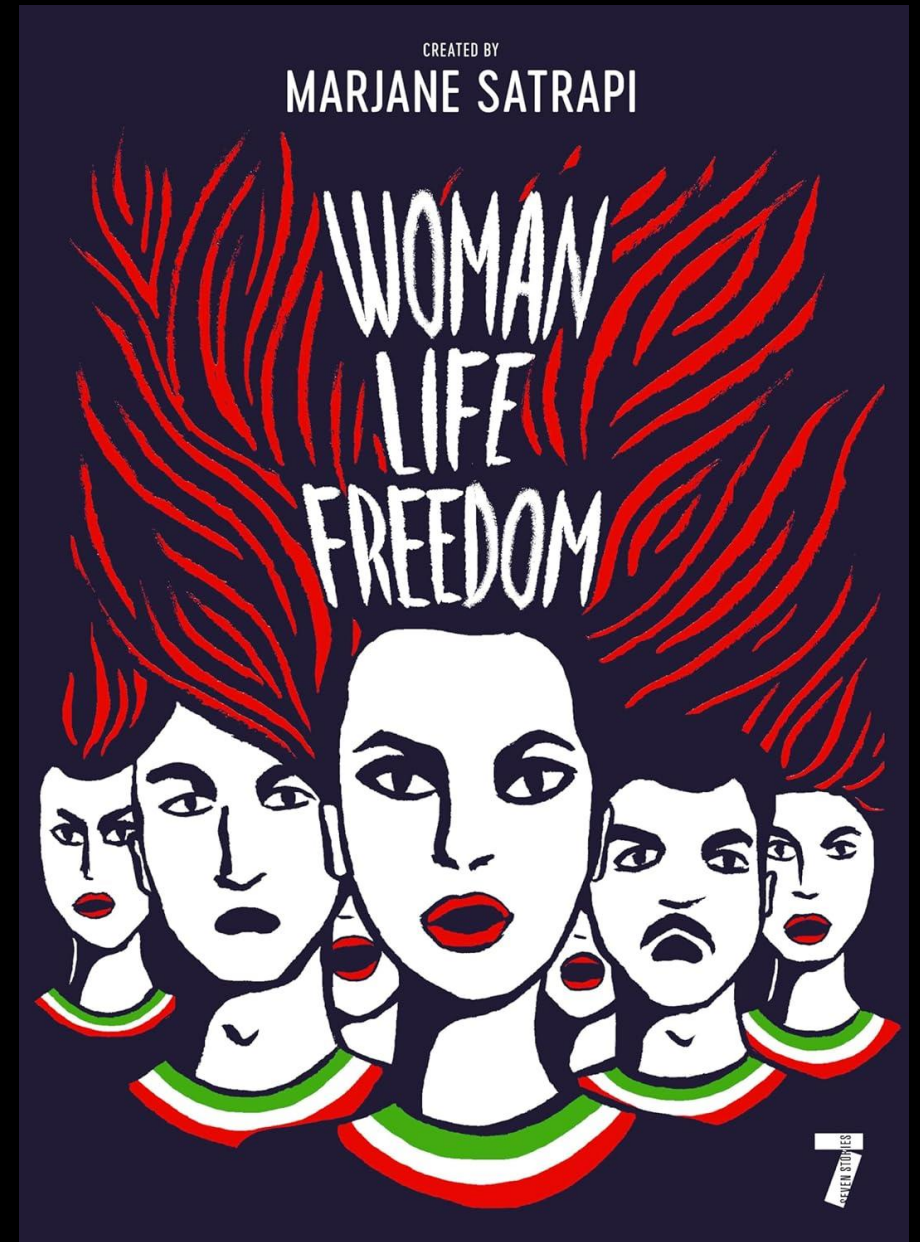
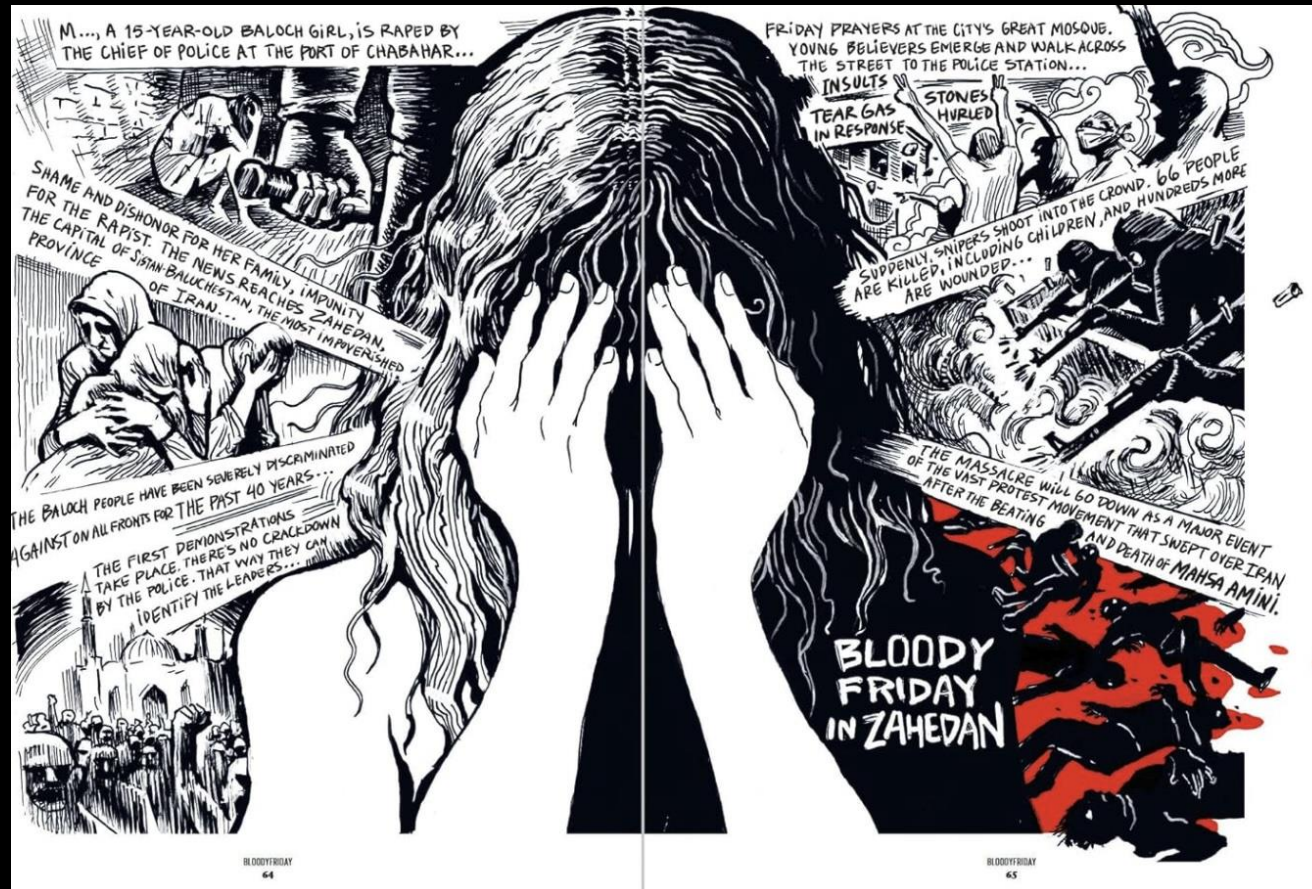
Comics, more than most other illustrative mediums, have historically perpetuated hypermasculine and hyperfeminine stereotypes. Consider the exaggerated physiques of superhero genres.

However, contemporary artists — such as **Alison Bechdel**, **Marjane Satrapi**, and **Tillie Walden** — use the medium to explore gender identity, queer experience, and self-representation in deeply personal ways.

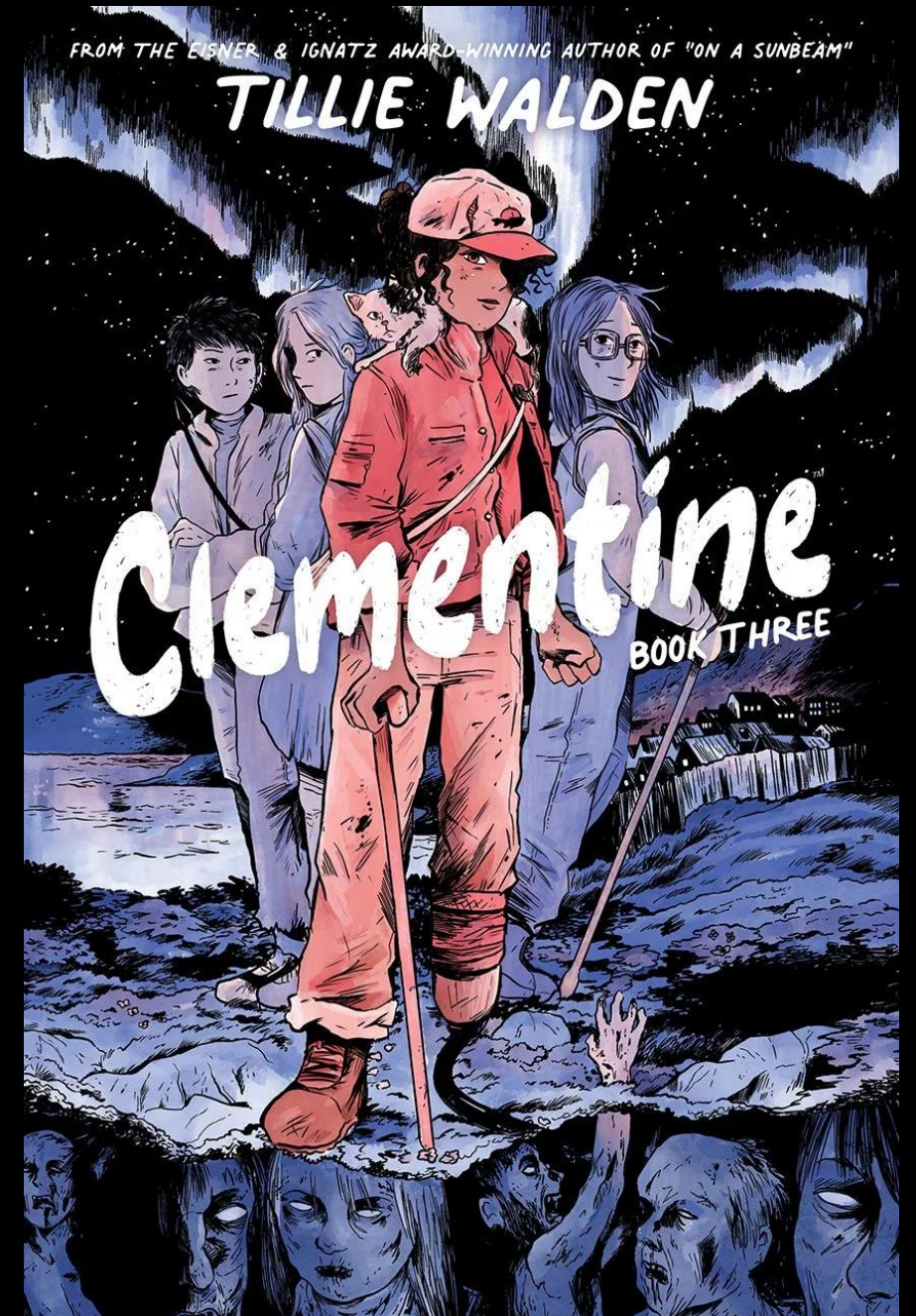
Perpetuated hypermasculine and hyperfeminine stereotypes in Marvel and DC



Marjane Satrapi illustrations



Tillie Walden
illustrations



Visual Strategies for Subversion

Illustrators can challenge gender stereotypes through several strategies. These strategies not only diversify representation but also alter the *visual grammar* of gender:

Androgyny

Blurring gender markers to question binary distinctions.

Role reversal

Depicting men in nurturing roles or women as leaders and adventurers.

Body diversity

Including various body types, ages and abilities.

Visual Strategies for Subversion

Symbolic inversion

Reclaiming visual tropes (for example, pink as power rather than passivity).

Narrative framing

Shifting the gaze; portraying women, queer, or non-binary subjects as agents of their own stories.

Challenging binary bias

Think of gender identity as a spectrum, not a strict binary of male or female. This includes identities like nonbinary, genderfluid, agender, and others, where individuals may have a gender that blends masculine and feminine traits, is different from either, or has no gender at all.

Critical Issues Connected to Gender

Commodification

Even feminist or inclusive imagery can be co-opted by brands as a marketing tool (“empowerment” aesthetics without political depth).

Representation versus Participation

Whose voices and experiences are being illustrated? Who gets to illustrate?

Intersectionality

Gender cannot be separated from race, class, sexuality, and disability. Inclusive illustration must consider multiple axes of identity.

Consider ...

- How do illustrators visually “perform” gender?
- Can illustration ever be truly neutral, or is all depiction ideological?
- What ethical responsibilities do illustrators have when representing marginalized genders?
- How does digital media alter the power dynamics of who gets represented and how?

Awareness

It is important to remember:

- Illustration shapes gender perception and identity
- Visual language is never neutral
- Contemporary illustrators can resist and redefine norms
- Critical awareness can lead to ethical visual storytelling

Today's task

Create 3 atypical character illustrations that depict:

A powerful parent A caring friend An awful boss

Think carefully about the creative decisions you make when illustrating these characters. Consider what you have learnt about gender representation and bias when creating your characters which include scale, body proportions and features, clothing, colour palettes, gesture, context, and line quality.