

ENTER THE PHOENIX: AN ECOFEMINIST ANALYSIS OF *X-MEN: THE DARK*  
*PHOENIX SAGA*

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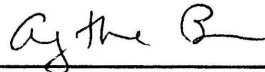
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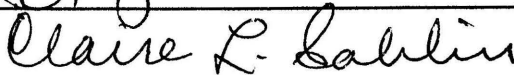
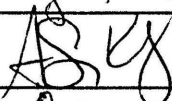
I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Whitnee C. Lowe entitled "Enter the Phoenix: An Ecofeminist Analysis of *X-men: The Dark Phoenix Saga*." I have examined this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts with a major in Women's Studies.



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Dr. Agatha Beins, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:



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Department Chair

Accepted:



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Dean of the Graduate School



## ABSTRACT

WHITNEE C. LOWE

### ENTER THE PHOENIX: AN ECOFEMINIST ANALYSIS OF *X-MEN: THE DARK PHOENIX SAGA*

MAY 2014

My thesis examines two characters from the graphic novel *X-men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* through an ecofeminist lens. I first explore the negative and positive metaphors concerning women and nature represented through the character Jean Grey and her two alternate personas. The second part of the thesis introduces the character Wolverine and explores the man-nature metaphors he represents. Finally, I conclude by analyzing the different facets of the man-nature and woman-nature metaphors. Though there is a great deal of research on the man-culture/woman-nature dichotomy, ecofeminism has yet to establish a substantial body of academic work on the man-nature/woman-nature dualism. My thesis, therefore, generates new discourse within ecofeminism about gender essentialism, new dualistic pairings, and their depictions within graphic novels, thus raising awareness of contemporary media's simultaneous objectification of women and nature.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION: ECOFEMINISM, COMIC BOOKS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS .....	1
II. WOMEN, NATURE AND THE MANY FACES OF JEAN GREY .....	16
III. THE PHOENIX AND THE WOLVERINE: WOMEN, MEN AND NATURE .....	34
IV. CONCLUSION: THE ACADEMIC POTENTIAL OF COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS .....	47
WORKS CITED .....	51
APPENDIX	
Image Panels .....	54

CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION: ECOFEMINISM, COMIC BOOKS  
AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

Comic books are a form of contemporary media that can be produced digitally but are mostly available in print. While a complete tale is sometimes told within a single issue of a comic book, there are other instances when an issue begins where the previous issue left off or ends with a cliffhanger, to be continued in the next issue. A print medium akin to the comic book is the graphic novel. Following the same visual format as comic books, graphic novels utilize illustrations, dialogue and text captions to tell stories. As opposed to the short narrative of comic books, graphic novels tell the story of a specific event in its entirety. On the surface, comic books and graphic novels may appear to be nothing more than entertainment. Although popular belief may trivialize the genre, some scholars recognize these genres as a source of social commentary and political discourse (Duncan and Smith). In acknowledging scholarship on comic books and graphic novels, how might we analyze messages that reinforce age-old axioms, such as men dominating women and culture exploiting the natural world? For my thesis I not only intend to expand on scholarly discourse on essentialist constructions of social identities, but I also plan to use ecofeminism to investigate how these social constructions are portrayed through graphic novels.

Ecofeminism began as a compilation of theoretical work in the 1970s and later established itself as an ecological and political movement during the 1990s (Gates). Since its inception, ecofeminism has continued to evolve, branching into other areas of study. Karen J. Warren notes how it “has found diverse expression in the arts, literature language, science and philosophy” (xiii). Within all of its forms, whether it be a practice, theory, or expression, one objective of ecofeminism is to investigate various connections between the exploitation of the natural world and the oppression of women and marginalized groups. Since ecofeminist analyses tend to focus on the exploitation of subjugated groups and the, what does ecofeminism have to do with the investigation of literature and/or media? As I will demonstrate, there are several ecofeminist studies that utilize literature to expose stereotypes and the subjugated status of women and nature, and there are also ecofeminist analyses of comics and graphic novels.

With specific regard to literature, ecofeminist scholars have assessed the representation of the natural world, animals, and humans. To be more specific, ecofeminism looks at the dynamics of power in association with social constructions of nature and human identities. Analyses stemming from ecofeminism recognize and frequently expose how patriarchal ideologies about women and nature are embedded within traditional forms of literature. For instance, in Jane Smiley’s novel *A Thousand Acres* the author highlights, through the struggles of the main female characters of her story, the hardships and restraints of women under patriarchy. Deborah Slicer’s analysis of the novel takes the issue of oppression a step further as she utilizes ecofeminist literary

criticism to point out how “women’s bodies and the land literally merge” as the victims of oppression and exploitation under institutions of patriarchal power (64). Another ecofeminist analysis scrutinizes how seventeenth century poetry communicates “metaphors that render both women and land as passive and exploitable” (Phillips 51). That is, Phillips’s study of Colonial-era poetry presents how written works by John Donne and John Milton reproduced oppressive imagery that gave women and nature an inferior social standing within Western, patriarchal cultures (Phillips 49). While there are several ecofeminist investigations of Western philosophy conveyed through traditional literary genres, the study of comic books and graphic novels has yet to receive a comparable amount of attention in the academic world.

In this thesis I focus on the graphic novel *X-men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* (Claremont and Byrne), specifically analyzing Jean Grey, a key member of the X-men and a mutant with the ability to read thoughts and move objects with her mind. In *The Dark Phoenix Saga*, a series of events lead to Jean Grey’s transformation into her two personas, known as the Phoenix and the Dark Phoenix. For my thesis, I apply an ecofeminist analysis that uses Jean Grey as a central conduit in investigating essentialist constructions of women, men, and nature. The thesis is two-pronged. The first part assesses the ways in which Jean Grey and her two personas embody negative and positive constructions of women and nature. In other words, the first part investigates imagery that devalues and venerates woman and nature and shows how Jean Grey and her personas represent both negative and positive interpretations of the relationship between

women and nature. The second part explores socially constructed dualisms. That is, in analyzing the man-nature and woman-nature dualisms, I execute a comparative character analysis that concentrates on the male character Wolverine as a representative of the man-nature connection, while Jean Grey and her two personas remain the focus of the woman-nature connection.

The X-men is a comic book series in the Marvel Comics franchise. The series, originally created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby during the early 1960s, focuses on a mutant taskforce headed by a powerful telepath known as Professor Charles Xavier. The goal of the mutant team is to stop the persecution of their kind while striving for a peaceful coexistence between mutants and non-mutants. The X-men series focuses on politically charged themes that allude to real life social inequities. For example, the efforts of the X-men to create a peaceful coexistence between mutants and non-mutants are analogous to the real life efforts of Civil Rights activists' to fight racial prejudice and segregation. Even the series' presentation of mutant-hating groups like the Purifiers and the government's issuance of mutant-hunting robots known as the Sentinels are a few fictional examples that mirror hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the government's sanctioning of police brutality against people of color.

In the graphic novel, *X-men: The Dark Phoenix Saga*, the team's responsibilities extend beyond Earth as they face a cosmic threat from a power possessed by one of their teammates, Jean Grey. The story begins in the aftermath of a space mission when Jean Grey undergoes a drastic transformation upon using her telekinetic powers in a sacrificial

attempt to save her teammates. At the start of *The Dark Phoenix Saga*, the X-men gain a more powerful ally in the newly restored Jean Grey. However, an encounter with an evil syndicate called The Hellfire Club warps her into a destructive force, the Dark Phoenix, which threatens the existence of the cosmos. The X-men utilize every ability and resource they have to subdue her, but they fail to prevent the Dark Phoenix from devouring a star, demolishing a space fleet, and destroying a civilization from a distant planet. Jean Grey eventually regains control, but the actions of her more negative persona incur the judgment of an alien empire called the Shi'ar. For the remainder of the graphic novel, the X-men fight to save her from execution by that empire. At the end of the saga, however, Jean Grey feels the Dark Phoenix emerge from within her and she chooses to commit suicide in order to save the universe.

As I mentioned earlier, literary analyses that focus on the portrayal of human identities and the environment often look toward traditional literature as a subject of research. Recent studies, however, have shown an emerging academic interest in comic books. Some investigate ecofeminist themes within graphic novels address “myths of Mother Nature” and caution against the mechanized, oppressive culture of Western patriarchy and the extreme exploitation of women and nature (Jones 4; Round 1). Others explore how language, rhetoric, and imagery shape the plot. In *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture*, Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith provide information on visual metaphors or “the collaboration of text and pictures to carry off as metaphors” (160). Duncan and Smith’s insight helps explain how the combined use of illustrations,

character dialogue, and narrative captions acts as a symbolic system that visually communicates various ideologies associated with women and nature. A second book edited by Duncan and Smith contains a chapter that specifically analyzes how “plot points represent philosophical themes and ethical theories” within *The Dark Phoenix Saga* (McLaughlin 109). These sources share insight and provide confirmation that graphic novels and comic books are valid literature to study from a scholarly perspective.

In order to understand the conceptions surrounding the woman-nature connection, it is important to address its ties to gender essentialism. According to Lucy A. Tatman, essentialism can be defined as the belief or “understanding of essence as being a necessary property shared by all members of specific categories of entities” (Tatman 308). In relation to social constructions of gender and the environment, one gender essentialist perspective proposes that “women are inherently closer to nature than men” (Armbruster 100). As I will later show, some ecofeminists have adopted notions of gender essentialism and social constructions of the environment as a means to empower women while giving respectful regard for the natural world. However, because of the negative social implications of essentialism, especially for women and other members of marginalized groups, there are many ecofeminists who caution against the adoption of essentialist views of women and nature. My analysis of *The Dark Phoenix Saga* in the second chapter investigates both the negative and positive conceptions of an essentialist woman-nature connection.



In chapter two, one aspect that I concentrate on in my analysis of the graphic novel is the “negative cultural value” placed on the woman-nature connection (Plumwood 8). Ecofeminists have observed that some patriarchal ideologies, especially those from Western cultures, perceive women as having a closer connection with nature, while men are alienated from it. These ideologies place women in an inferior social standing at the same time that the natural world is devalued and, as a result, they support men’s domination and exploitation of women, non-humans, and nature. Analyses by several ecofeminist scholars reveal how negative conceptions of the woman-nature connection are reflected through Western religious and literary texts.

Rosemary Radford Ruether is a scholar who specializes in ecofeminism and theology. Of all of the scholarly works that Ruether has produced on the woman-nature connection, her essay, "Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature," is vital to the second chapter of this thesis. Within the essay, Ruether explores conceptions of women and nature through religions that are largely Western and patriarchal. Controlling imagery from Medieval Christianity and Calvinism, for example, depicts women as corruptible creatures capable of being “vehicles of the demonic powers of nature” (4). In addition to analyzing religious symbols that present women and nature as destructive, Ruether points out that Western religions use these controlling images of women and nature to justify their subordination.

Deborah Slicer and Patrick D. Murphy are two scholars who focus on the representations of the woman-nature connection through literature. In her ecofeminist literary analysis of Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres*, Slicer explores the metaphorical and literal links between gender and the environment by examining how women's bodies, water and bodies of land are exchanged and controlled by the men within the story (63-65). Murphy conducts a similar analysis of how Margret Atwood "invariably ties the oppression of women to the degradation of the environment" within one of her novels (27). Arguing that the sources they analyze present women and the environment as agents of evil as well as materials to be exchanged, Ruether, Slicer, and Murphy offer information about symbols and metaphors that contribute to the negative perceptions of women and nature.

With particular regard for symbols and metaphors, Carolyn Merchant expounds on negative depictions of the woman-nature connection in her book, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. Writing from an ecological perspective, Merchant argues that the industrialization of Western civilization symbolically transformed perceptions of nature as a living organism into dead matter and contributed to the "exploitation of human and natural resources" (xxi-xxii). Specifically, she investigates "values associated with the images of women and nature" as well as the social, psychological, and physical metaphors linked with traditional constructions of both subjects (Merchant xxi). Concepts within *The Death of Nature* most central to my thesis are the two faces of women and nature. Merchant explains that there are non-

threatening and threatening descriptions of women and nature: on the one hand, there are “metaphors of the earth as a nurturing mother” (2) and on the other hand, there are metaphors of the “disorderly woman as a chaotic nature” (127). The former suggests that women and nature are compliant caretakers made to be exploited, while the latter depicts women as dangerous entities that must be controlled by force. Regardless of the connotations, both the threatening and non-threatening metaphors can be used to justify the forceful control of women and nature.

In consulting the ecofeminist sources listed above, I will investigate instances in the graphic novel where visual metaphors symbolically represent Western, patriarchal conceptions of the woman-nature connection. I conduct a content analysis of images and text through an ecofeminist lens to examine how Jean Grey and her personas convey patriarchal ideologies of women’s closeness to nature. Merchant’s in-depth analysis concerning essentialist metaphors of women and nature provide symbolic markers for the thesis. That is, illustrations and text represent Jean Grey and her personas in a way that corresponds with Merchant’s research on the passive and aggressive imagery of women and nature. Sources that discuss the depiction of women and nature as chaotic and destructive help me analyze how both images and words work together to represent negative ideologies of women and the environment.

Ecofeminist literary criticism by scholars like Slicer and Murphy can serve to complement Merchant’s work on the two faces of women and nature while providing explanations of metaphors represented through text. Additionally, Ruether’s work not

only adds to Merchant's information on the threatening descriptions of women and nature, but can also prove to be helpful in examining character interactions that convey justification of the Dark Phoenix's destruction or imprisonment. By using Ruether's research to examine character interactions, I will be able to present how characters and/or civilizations within the graphic novel may reflect patriarchal rationalizations for the control or destruction of women and nature.

A third assertion about the essentialist constructions of women and nature reconfigures the two subjects. While the notion that women have a close connection with the natural world remains the same, some ecofeminist reconceptualizations of women and nature deviate from patriarchal perspectives in that they create positive connotations. These reconceptualizations provide constructive models that elevate the status of or attribute a positive value to women, nature, and their connection. Just as scholarly works mentioned previously reveal representations of oppressive metaphors, I also acknowledge essentialist constructions within the graphic novel that illustrate affirming images of women and the natural world. In order to assess the more positive representations of the woman-nature connections within *The Dark Phoenix Saga*, I consult scholars like Noel Sturgeon, Val Plumwood and Sherilyn MacGregor.

While *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* by Plumwood acknowledges the negative conceptions of the woman-nature connection, it also recognizes the attempts of some ecofeminists to create positive and romantic conceptions of women and nature. For example, Plumwood makes note of the perception that "women have special powers" that

allow them to have a closer connection with nature (8). Just as romantic conceptions of the woman-nature connection create positive connotations from an ideological standpoint, other ecofeminists recognize strategic uses of reimagining the link.

In *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory, and Political Action*, Sturgeon makes note of the controversy surrounding the rejection or acceptance of essentialism. Although she is aware of the denial of essentialist constructions of gender and the environment due to its ties to patriarchy, Sturgeon proposes the possibility of using a more constructive, essentialist metaphor as a “resource for empowering women in a sexist society” (8). She also suggests that the woman-nature connection, if reconfigured by ecofeminism, can create an “oppositional consciousness” while advancing political rhetoric that not only elevates essentialist perceptions of women and nature but can use the link to encourage participation in movements for social and ecological justice (Sturgeon 9). MacGregor is another ecofeminist who touches upon the positive connotations of women’s closeness to nature, affirming women’s biological and metaphysical ties to nature. She is also in agreement with Sturgeon that essentialist constructions of women and nature that are constructive can be the driving political rhetoric that promotes earth care and ecological activism.

Plumwood, Sturgeon and MacGregor thus provide a lens for interpreting imagery in the graphic novel as positive. Constructive conceptions of women and nature are useful in analyzing how essentialist constructions can convey a more positive and powerful representation of women and nature.

While chapter two focuses on the positive and negative conceptions of the woman-nature connection, the third chapter investigates the representations of the man-nature/woman-nature dualisms within *The Dark Phoenix*. Before delving into dichotomies that deal with pairings between humans and the natural world, I examine sources on traditional forms of dualisms that help put into perspective concepts of opposing characteristics and hierarchies. As defined by Plumwood, “dualism is the process by which contrasting subjects (for example, masculine and feminine gender identities) are formed by domination and subordination and constructed as oppositional and exclusive” (31). Dualism and the concepts surrounding the term are of major interest to many ecofeminist scholars. Theorists like Karen J. Warren are particularly attentive to dichotomies originating from Western culture. In her book *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*, Warren examines Western patriarchal thought and value dualisms (24). In making note of value dualisms, Warren especially focuses on the “favored traits of Western philosophical tradition” (47), referring to the privileging of men over women, reason over emotion, mind over body and culture over nature. Additionally, Warren expounds further on hierarchies formed within dualisms by addressing “a logic of domination” or “a logical structure of argumentation that ‘justifies’ domination and subordination” (47). Though the information provided by theorists like Warren and Plumwood offers useful insight on the traditional forms of dualism, what might these sources tell us about the man-nature/woman-nature dualisms? Additionally, what is the man-nature connection?

Plumwood briefly shares insight on the man-nature connection, exploring the possibility of men having an affinity with nature through her explanation of the reversal of the traditional dualism. That is, she suggests that there is the possibility of a pairing where men are connected with nature instead of culture and women are linked to culture instead of nature. To look at the woman-culture link, Plumwood suggests the possibilities of the female human being constructed as “insipid, domestic, asexual and civilizing” (20). In contrast, men are connected to “a nature no longer viewed as reproductive and providing but as ‘wild’, violent, competitive and sexual” (Plumwood 20). While Plumwood touches only briefly upon the construction of the man-nature connection, scholars Richard Twine and Stephanie Leitch offer more information.

In “Masculinity, Nature, Ecofeminism” Twine shares insight on “hegemonic masculinity” and “the romanticized accounts of the man-nature connection,” especially through the masculine “myth of the Wild Man” (5). To describe the “myth of the Wild Man” and essentialist constructions of the man-nature connection, he makes note of how the use of nature, animals in particular, can “reinforce the supposedly inherent aggressive disposition of men” (Twine 5).

In “The Wild Man, Charlemagne and the German Body,” Leitch explores the iconography of a barbaric-looking Charlemagne, “examines the underpinnings of its use in imperial imagery” (283), and delves into the construction of the wild men’s identities within folklore and national emblems (286). Through her descriptions, the author reveals how the wild man was seen as an “appendage of nature” (284). While Leitch focuses on art and anthropology in the study, her research aids my analysis by acknowledging the

existence of the man-nature connection in ancient times and offering information on the representation of man-nature metaphors.

To begin my investigation of the man-nature/woman-nature dualisms, my first objective in the third chapter is to explore constructions of the man-nature connection. In examining the representation of man's closeness with nature in *The Dark Phoenix Saga*, I conduct a content analysis that investigates how some of the male characters embody essentialist views of men's affinity with nature. Next, I conduct a comparative character analysis to evaluate how the man-nature/woman-nature dualism is depicted through Jean Grey and her interactions with male members of the X-men. My intentions are to expand the exploration of essentialist constructions of gender in connection with nature and dualisms outside the traditional model of the man-culture/woman-nature paradigm. As I discuss later in the concluding chapter, another purpose of my thesis is to see what comic books and graphic novels can reveal about social constructions, especially with regard to metaphors of gender and its connection with imagery used to describe the natural world.

The thesis is a qualitative research study, using content analysis that focuses not only on textual data but also on information provided by illustrations. My thesis is similar to eco-critical/ecofeminist studies of traditional forms of literature in that I reveal metaphorical representations of the woman-nature and man-nature connections. My examination of *The Dark Phoenix Saga*, however, provides original research on both literature and ecofeminism. One distinctive aspect of my study lies in the medium itself. Unlike literature that analyzes only the printed word; my research demonstrates the unique ways the graphic novel uses pictures and text to communicate gender essentialist



metaphors. With regard to the third chapter of the thesis, I also identify and piece together metaphors and imagery associated with the man-nature connection. Another significant aspect of the study is an examination of how man-nature metaphors are represented through the visual and textual elements of a graphic novel.

Furthermore, the thesis contributes to ecofeminism in analyzing the man-nature/woman-nature dualism. Though there is a great deal of research on the man-culture/woman-nature dichotomy, ecofeminism has yet to establish a substantial body of academic work on the man-nature/woman-nature dualism. In examining the human-nature dualism, I aim to identify the essentialist traits that come from the dualism as well as assess how the pairing is represented within the graphic novel. To take the assessment a step further, I also scrutinize the power dynamics within the human-nature pairing to determine the ways in which the dichotomy reinforces or challenges hierarchies created by oppositional forms of dualism. While I do not intend to generate definitive answers to questions that may occur throughout the thesis, I do aim to generate new discourse within ecofeminism about gender essentialism, new dualistic pairings, and their depictions within graphic novels, thus raising awareness of contemporary media's simultaneous objectification of women and nature.

## CHAPTER II

### WOMEN, NATURE AND THE MANY FACES OF JEAN GREY

Chapter two highlights instances within *The Dark Phoenix Saga* where visual and textual metaphors reflect notions about the woman-nature connection. I examine visual aesthetics, captions for the graphics, character dialogue, and character interactions that revolve around Jean Grey, the Phoenix, and the Dark Phoenix. In the literature review of chapter one, I acknowledged that there are various essentialist constructions of the woman-nature connection that are both negative and positive. Here I would first like to assess the detrimental constructions of women and nature initially created by a Western, patriarchal culture. Specifically, I will start by exploring how Jean Grey's character embodies masculinist perspectives of the two faces of women and nature (Merchant). Later in this chapter I will investigate how Jean Grey and her personas portray positive constructions of the woman-nature connection that stem from ecofeminism.

As Carolyn Merchant acknowledges in *The Death of Nature*, there are two opposing views of nature. Generally, one perspective describes nature as "a kindly beneficent female who provide[s] for the needs of mankind in an ordered, planned universe" (Merchant 2). A second prevailing image presents "a wild, uncontrollable nature that could render violence and general chaos" (Merchant 2). For the first part of the paper I focus on several conceptions of the harmless woman and an exploitable nature by examining women and the environment as brides and mothers.

I first describe a series of six illustration panels in Figure 1. The key characters within the panels are Jean Grey as the Phoenix, Scott Summers as Cyclops, and Warren Worthington III as Angel. The scene in Figure 1 takes place at an estate Angel owns in New Mexico (Claremont and Byrne 61). Angel welcomes the mutant team to take refuge on his property after a fight with the White Queen and her minions.

In the first panel, Angel uses his wings to fly away from the top of the arid plateau while bidding farewell to Jean Grey and Cyclops (65). Aesthetically, stylized contours of Jean Grey's hair indicate that she is indeed herself in the picnic scene. She does not display the flame-like hair that signifies her persona as the Phoenix. In panels two and three, Cyclops observes Jean Grey as she prepares the picnic blanket and food. At this point Cyclops inwardly expresses his worry over the strength in Jean Grey's powers by noting how she uses her telekinetic powers to rearrange the molecules of her clothing, changing her combat costume into a bathing suit-like blouse and shorts (65). Jean Grey senses Cyclops's contemplation and soothes his uneasiness by telling him to "enjoy yourself" (65). Next, Cyclops is shocked when Jean Grey suddenly lifts his visor, an eye shield that helps him to control his ability to shoot energy blasts from his eyes. Cyclops is surprised that his energy blasts have been contained without his visor and Jean Grey lovingly cups his face as she explains that she can use her telekinetic powers to "keep your optic blasts in check" (Claremont and Byrne 65). The last panel shows the couple embraced in a kiss, with Cyclops's thought bubble expressing his disbelief at the power of his lover, while Jean Grey alleviates his worries with both words and physical displays of romantic affection.

Domestication is one construction characterizing both women and nature that stems from Western patriarchy. In *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, Susan Griffin addresses land cultivation and other technological managements of nature by men. Later she makes a connection between a domesticated nature and a subservient female by pointing out that “nature has made it natural for a woman to seek only to be a good wife and mother” (24). Parallels can be made between Griffin’s explanation and the scene I describe above. For instance, deserts are normally viewed as a barren wilderness, unwelcoming to humans, yet the establishment of Angel’s estate in New Mexico has made the inhospitable landscape a sanctuary for the X-men and in particular for the owner of the land. The presentation of the arid region as a safe haven is further emphasized in panels where Jean Grey sets up the picnic sheet and food. Though Jean Grey appears to be contributing to the domestication of the land, her preparation of a recreational spot in the middle of the desert, as well as her concerns for alleviating Cyclops’s worries, still emphasizes that her actions are done for the sake of Cyclops and not herself. Jean Grey’s actions further reinforce the idea of woman as the subservient wife, while nature has been made into a restful, private space.

Panel three also highlights a barren wasteland being turned into a spot for human relaxation, as the illustration shows both Jean Grey and Cyclops reclining on the picnic mat. Again, Jean Grey and Cyclops’s use of the desert as a place of relaxation further emphasizes the domestication of a natural environment that can be a harsh wilderness for humans. In the case of women’s domestication, the image in panel two of Jean Grey kneeling (a position of prostration and subservience) as she prepares a place for

relaxation while Cyclops is standing (a position of ascendancy and dominance) over her as he observes her setting up the picnic visually emphasizes Griffin's statement about women taking on subservient gender roles such as "good wives" (24). In addition, the last panel displays Cyclops on top of Jean Grey as the two kiss on the mat, which can also communicate women's roles as deferential in that their accommodation to men also means making themselves intimately and sexually available (65). The illustrations displayed in Figure 1 convey how New Mexico's desert was "transformed to benefit man" (Griffin 24), while the portrayal of Jean Grey represents the argument that "woman should be an enthusiastic slave to the man to whom she has given her heart" (Griffin 33).

The pastoral environment and the amiable, mythic spirit of nature in the guise of a beautiful female human are other controlling images and metaphors that reflect a tamed nature and a docile woman. In *New Woman New Earth: Sexist Ideologies & Human Liberation*, Ruether cautions against "women adopting a romanticized symbol of women and nature created by male-defined alienation" (203). Within this representation, "women are asked to be the 'natural' wood-nymph[s] and earth mother[s]" who "create places of escape from the destructive patterns of the dominant culture" (Ruether 203). Merchant also makes references to the pastoral symbolism that constructs woman as the benevolent "female earth nymph" and transforms nature into a cultivated garden that provides both spiritual and material comfort (Merchant 8). Through character interaction, visual presentation and the use of her mutant powers, Jean Grey exhibits characteristics that align with Ruether's and Merchant's explanation of how women and nature are constructed in pastoral symbolism.

Character dialogue between Jean Grey and Cyclops shows further evidence of how she represents women as “brides whose primary function was to comfort, nurture, and provide for the wellbeing” of men (Merchant 9). For instance, when Cyclops admits that he has a lot on his mind about the X-men and the recent dangers that they have faced, Jean Grey insists that he should “stop being Cyclops, leader of the X-men, for awhile” and enjoy himself (Claremont and Byrne 65). The dialogue, coupled with the relaxed setting and the act of the two characters resting on a picnic mat, conveys women and nature as nurturers who “comfort and soothe the anxieties of men distraught” by the demands and stresses of life (Merchant 9). The combination of the arid region as a serene resting place and the presentation of Jean Grey, as well as the use of her powers for the benefit of Cyclops’s leisure, reveals how *The Dark Phoenix Saga* corresponds to pastoral imagery of women and nature as acquiescent.

Women and the environment as mothers are other metaphors associated with patriarchal constructions of both subjects as “beneficent females” (Merchant 2). Visual appearances and actions of the main heroine throughout *The Dark Phoenix Saga* exhibit two variations of women and nature as motherly caretakers. One aspect of the social construct that is fashioned from masculine ideologies that women and nature are non-threatening nurturers. As an unassuming nurturer, the character may show aesthetic qualities that are passive and motherly. Her demeanor, interaction, and dialogue with others are generally nurturing and empathetic in offering emotional support or alleviating distress. Although not as submissive as the non-threatening nurturer, the motherly protector characteristic also shapes the broader Mother Nature paradigm. The scene in

which Jean Grey reunites with the X-Men as Phoenix offers a powerful example of both models of the Mother Nature paradigm.

Toward the beginning of *The Dark Phoenix Saga*, Jean Grey reunites with the X-men as the Phoenix. In her newfound form as the Phoenix, Jean Grey's demeanor is slightly altered into a more assertive personality. Along with her change in personality and the exponential growth in her mutant abilities, Jean Grey uses her newly-granted powers as the Phoenix to aid her teammates in fighting evil, when the X-men encounter a series of conflicts with minions of a group of villains known as the Hellfire Club. It is the conflict with the Hellfire Club that initiates a chain of events leading up to the Dark Phoenix crisis. A series of illustrations, presented in Figures 2 and 3, show the X-men both saving and inducting a new young mutant named Kitty Pryde into the group. Both figures also reflect woman and nature as the nurturer and protector through Jean Grey and the Phoenix.

A sequence of illustrations in Figure 2 shows minions of the Hellfire Club pursuing Pryde by car as she runs through an alley to escape (44). At one point within the chase, after Pryde falls and is nearly run over by the cars from the minions, the Phoenix intervenes. In one panel, Phoenix is shown blocking the path of the car, preventing it from hitting the girl. Using her telekinetic powers, the Phoenix both halts and crushes the car. Aesthetically, the character's voluminous and vibrant red hair, as well as the aura of fiery light emitting from her body, shows the union between Jean Grey and the fiery entity that is the Phoenix Force. While the fusion of Jean Grey's body and the fiery hair signifies the fusion of women and nature, it also points out that both women and nature

physically act as one in their protection and comfort of the young Kitty Pryde. In portraying Mother Nature as the protector in this instance, however, the Phoenix's appearance and display of force in crushing the car show some hint of the essentialist view that both women and nature are unpredictable and capable of violence (Merchant 130). Despite traits that show the Phoenix's potentially wild nature, more maternal aspects of women and nature are also reflected within the graphic novel.

Following the Phoenix's protective yet abrasive intervention, displayed in Figure 2, another scene shows the character's more nurturing side resurface when she is sent to search for and retrieve Pryde. Figure 3 shows the Phoenix's appearance and demeanor change as she reverts to the gentler Jean Grey. A more passive-looking Jean Grey enters the warehouse, searches the area, and cautiously approaches the frightened teen. In panel six, Jean Grey embraces a distraught Pryde in a consoling hug (46). This particular portrayal of Jean Grey coincides with the essentialist views of a woman as a kindly, maternal entity that sustains life and provides comfort.

The depictions of the character in both image samples reveal visual representations associated with gender essentialist traits and the Mother Nature archetypes. Instances within the graphic novel that present the Phoenix working with other members of the X-men coincide with the essentialist notion that women are cooperative with others (Plumwood). Additionally, the Phoenix's assistance aligns with the notion that "the purpose of nature [is] to serve the interests of humanity," similar to how humans use fire (Merchant 2). Fire is an element from nature that, once harnessed, can be a tool for comfort (Jean Grey transformed into an unassuming form to comfort



Pryde) or can be used as a weapon (Phoenix's destruction of the car to protect Pryde). The "disorderly woman and chaotic nature" are other metaphors for women and nature that are not beneficial for the interests of culture and patriarchy (Merchant 127). One example of the threatening qualities of women and nature are manifest in Dark Phoenix's confrontations with other characters, which symbolically convey negative images of women and nature as chaotic.

A polar opposite of the compassionate Mother Nature that wishes to protect mankind are images linked with destruction, disorder, and lust that "symbolically associate an unruly nature with the dark side of women" (Merchant 132). The Dark Phoenix highlights two primary attributes related to uncontrollable nature and women. The first characteristic, dealing with more malign representations, reflects "the witch as the symbol of the violence of nature" (Merchant 127). Representations of women as the witch that causes disorder in the world are displayed through the Dark Phoenix's power to harm allies as well as create disasters that threaten the inhabitants of both the earth and the universe. A second negative interpretation reasons that women's closer connection with nature means that they are "imbued with a far greater sexual passion" than their male counterparts, suggesting that women are more inclined toward wickedness (Merchant 132). I will also equate patriarchy's claims of women's immense sexual lust with the Dark Phoenix's corruption by the lust for power.

Events show Jean Grey and the Phoenix Force living as one powerful yet compassionate being. As the novel progresses, however, psychic infiltration from members of the Hellfire Club distorts the psyches of both Jean Grey and the Phoenix. As

a result of this invasive manipulation of her mind, the character is warped into the uncontrollable Dark Phoenix. After this transformation, the situation for the X-men spirals out of control as she turns on her fellow teammates and unleashes the full force of her power on earth and throughout the universe. Everything is thrown out of balance and the universe is under the threat of complete destruction at the hands of the Dark Phoenix, leading the X-men to join others in an attempt to stop her rampage.

The graphic novel presents several occasions when the Dark Phoenix commits acts of violence against her allies while causing mass destruction of her surroundings. One caption communicates how the Dark Phoenix is in a state of ecstasy as she causes a supernova and describes that she is thrilled to display and experience “the absolute power that is hers” (127). Such language describes the emotional state of the character as lustful as she casts her destructive powers. While this particular panel best represents the connection of a chaotic nature with women’s sexuality, another panel uses an illustration and dialogue boxes to encapsulate the primary characteristics of negative essentialist constructions of women and nature.

In the last panel on Figure 4 an image and its caption provide a great example of how the Dark Phoenix represents the destructive witch who serves as a “vehicle for the demonic power of nature” (Ruether 4). Aesthetically, the Dark Phoenix appears seductive yet maniacal and threatening. Her hair is fiery and voluminous as it spreads wildly about her head, and her body is clad in a skintight suit of dark crimson and gold. The Dark Phoenix’s eyes are darkened in an intense glare as she displays a menacing smile. The caption states that “she reaches for the sky—summoning the lightning—laughing as the

awesome bolts of energy caress her body like a lover” (Claremont and Byrne 119). This particular portrayal of the character communicates the negative archetype of women as witches “raising storms” as a destructive force of nature (Merchant 127). In tandem with depictions of women and nature as being violent, narrative captions also convey patriarchal notions from a religious standpoint that suggest the disorder in nature is associated with the “sinful and corruptible nature of female sexuality” (Ruether 4). It is through the depictions of women and nature as violent that men and society can justify the domination and/or destruction of both subjects.

Throughout *The Dark Phoenix Saga* several characters express their uneasiness as they witness Jean Grey’s growing power as the Phoenix. The full expression of fear, however, emerges when the Dark Phoenix begins her wanton destruction on earth and across the universe. After she causes a supernova that destroys a planet and its inhabitants, there are several instances when characters voice fear or attempt to control or destroy the Dark Phoenix. Seeking help in his mission to save Jean Grey from her more destructive self, Cyclops enlists a former member of the mutant team to create the “mind-scrambling diadem, a device designed to limit her mutant powers” (Claremont and Byrne 141). In another instance, Professor Xavier, a telepath and leader of the X-men, voices his urgency in subduing the Dark Phoenix while engaging in an intense psychic battle. During the heat of combat between the two telepaths, Xavier expresses his feelings about the dangers of the Dark Phoenix’s lack of restraint, morals, and rational thought, as well as his determination that he “must fight and win” against her (Claremont and Byrne 147). On the following page, a caption explains Professor Xavier’s plan to “bind the Dark

Phoenix within an unbreakable network of psionic circuit breakers” to restrain her (Claremont and Byrne 148). In a third example, several rulers of intergalactic civilizations reach a consensus in their decision “to destroy the Dark Phoenix” (Claremont and Byrne 135). This taskforce is charged with protecting mutants and non-mutants from any threat, so what makes the Dark Phoenix’s case so significant, especially with regard to the negative metaphors of the woman-nature connection? One answer may lie in examining the involvement and treatment of a key member of the Hellfire Club, Mastermind.

The Hellfire Club is a small group of mutant, upper-class industrialists who are “dedicated to the acquisition of power” (Claremont and Byrne 68). Mastermind is a key member of the syndicate and is behind Jean Grey’s transformation into an intergalactic threat. A mutant with the ability to create vivid illusions and manipulate memories, Mastermind’s deception brings out Jean Grey’s negative side. As a result, Jean Grey turns into the Dark Phoenix and eventually turns on Mastermind. Although the X-men at first focus on the Hellfire Club, the taskforce intended to stop the evil organization by thwarting their efforts and apprehending them. While the X-men managed to regain Jean Grey from the influences of Mastermind, they fail to apprehend the Hellfire Club. Even as the villains manage to escape, Mastermind falls victim to the dark side of Jean Grey as she incapacitates him with her psychic powers before fleeing from the Hellfire Club headquarters with her friends. Shortly after the incident, the X-men turn their attention to stopping Jean Grey as she becomes the Dark Phoenix. Additionally, the Shi’ar Empire steps in to destroy the Dark Phoenix when the X-men fail in their efforts to stop her.

At first glance at the events taking place in *The Dark Phoenix Saga*, especially in comparing which antagonist posed the greatest threat to humanity, many readers would see the Dark Phoenix as a bigger threat than Mastermind and the rest of the Hellfire Club. Especially considering the magnitude of devastation that the Dark Phoenix causes throughout the story, readers, including myself, can understand how both the X-men and the Shi'ar Empire would direct their efforts toward stopping the Dark Phoenix. Still, delving deeper into the causes and effects of events that take place in the graphic novel, especially looking at the transformation of the Phoenix into the Dark Phoenix, reveals that there is a differential treatment of the antagonists. Moreover, the differential treatment of the Dark Phoenix and Mastermind can be compared with patriarchal culture's treatment of women and nature.

An analogy can be made between Jean Grey's situation and the twinned oppression and reactive treatment of women and nature. For instance, when a drought occurs, the patriarchal societies and institutions may blame the resultant famine on the cruel character of nature yet overlook the fact that human actions (industrialism, poor farming and irrigation practices) may be the true cause. If a battered wife murders her husband because of his constant abuse and threats to her life, a legal system based in patriarchy may condemn her yet not provide the protection and resources necessary to safeguard her wellbeing and thus preventing the murder from taking place. Can these instances not be compared with Jean Grey's situation? If the Shi'ar Empire knew of Jean Grey's potential as the Phoenix and feared the possibilities of her transformation into the Dark Phoenix, why not be more proactive? Why not have the foresight to safeguard Jean

Grey or Phoenix from negative influences like those created by Mastermind? The overriding goals of Mastermind and the Hellfire Club are world domination and the possession of power that can be instrumental in their conquest. Are their intentions and machinations not just as threatening to the future of humanity? The result of Mastermind's distortion of the Dark Phoenix's mind should be proof enough that he poses a great danger. While the X-men and Shi'ar may have dealt with the Dark Phoenix, Mastermind is still alive, giving him a second chance to distort other mutants that are just as powerful as the Phoenix when he recovers. Although the graphic novel does not state outright men's and culture's justifications for the domination of women and nature, the phobias toward chaotic women and nature are symbolically expressed through other characters' interaction with the Dark Phoenix. Additionally, the differential treatment of the Dark Phoenix and Mastermind not only emphasizes the inequitable treatment of women and nature but highlights how the subtleties of patriarchal forces and their negative effects on women, nature, and humanity as a whole are often overlooked.

Although the graphic novel depicts oppressive images and imagery of women and nature, there are instances when these representations may be seen as contradicting or defying patriarchal ideologies. The portrayal of Jean Grey catering to Cyclops in a wifely manner can signify women taking on subservient roles, but there is another interpretation of the scene that may place Jean Grey in a position of assertiveness. For instance, Jean Grey is the initiator of intimacy and her decision to use her powers to create an idyllic space for relaxation suggests that she is not merely a servant of her male companion. The representation of Jean Grey as the magical, yet benevolent nature nymph is also

contradictory to patriarchal beliefs embedded in women and nature metaphors. For example, a panel in Figure 1 that shows Jean Grey using her telekinesis to control the unstable nature of Cyclops' powers shows that she not only holds agency in possession of her own powers, but that she can also control the mutant abilities of her male counterpart (65). The example of Jean Grey as a representative of the female nature spirit conveys that even though nature nymphs can use their mythical powers to accommodate men, they also hold the potential to establish their own agency as well as becoming a challenge to men. These interpretations not only contravene patriarchal notions that women and nature are only submissive and exploitable, but they also point to a more uplifting potential of women-nature metaphors.

Even though constructive metaphors of women and nature may be viewed as too idealistic, such imagery can create positive representations that empower both human and non-human subjects. In the following section I reveal how Jean Grey and the Phoenix create constructive symbols of women and nature that resist negative metaphors. Furthermore, I investigate how the heroine's transformation into the Phoenix elevates the woman-nature connection into a sacrosanct bond instead of a mark of inferiority.

The previous section of the chapter makes note of how women and nature can be constructed as passive. While such docility may invite hegemonic forces to exploit nature and oppress women, one can also argue the contrary. Jean Grey's display of nurturance in Figure 3, especially toward Pryde, shows a benevolent strength in comfort and healing (Claremont and Byrne 46). These maternal characteristics can be seen positively. That is, just as a serene and fertile nature provides shelter and sustenance to support life, women

as mothers can be seen as nurturers who offered both comfort and life-sustaining care. Additionally, the illustration in Figure 2 of the Phoenix shielding Pryde and using her telekinesis to dispose of the pursuing villains shows motherly traits as being both protective and powerful. Moreover, the cooperation of the Phoenix in aiding her fellow teammates clearly shows that she is not merely a subordinate or an instrument completely compliant to the commands of Cyclops, the team leader.

For instance, after the Phoenix uses her powers to save Pryde, the following page shows dialogue between Cyclops and the Phoenix. Bewildered at his teammate's actions, Cyclops exclaims, "What have you done?! I told you to stop that car, not turn it into instant junk!" (Claremont and Byrne 45). In response, the Phoenix explains that he, Cyclops, did not "feel the girl's terror or the thoughts of the killers chasing her," and that her actions to stop the villains were necessary (Claremont and Byrne 45).

The dialogue is an example of women's "protective instincts toward their children from threats" (MacGregor 20). Sherilyn MacGregor points out that the moral authority of women, especially as mothers, makes them "more aware of what needs to be done to ensure a future world" for the next generation and all inhabitants (20). MacGregor's descriptions of maternalism, its insight, and mobilization against social ills demonstrate that motherly traits are not only passive, therefore negating patriarchal suppositions that equate being a mother to being acquiescent. As a result, the characterizations of women and nature as mothers present them as not only an active force but a positive strength that allows them to protect and empathize with the oppressed. The Phoenix's actions and



moral judgment correspond with this characterization in that she utilizes her mutant abilities to understand and defend the defenseless.

Another positive construction of woman and nature deals with the elevation of the human-nature link. A symbolic demonstration of what MacGregor would explain as women's "spiritual, biological, and/or psychic closeness to nature" (20) can be seen in a section of the book that recaps the rescue incident prior to *The Dark Phoenix Saga*. A flashback section of the graphic novel tells of the crisis that caused Jean Grey to "[sacrifice] her life" to save her fellow X-men (Claremont and Byrne 229). As she was near death, Jean Grey was able to connect with the bird-like fire being that was the Phoenix Force. As a result, Jean Grey was reborn into an entity in corporeal form called the Phoenix. In merging with the Phoenix Force to become the Phoenix, Jean Grey's powers increased. The fusion of Jean Grey and the Phoenix Force can also be a symbolic representation of how women find spiritual and physical strength in aligning themselves with nature.

Figure 5 displays a black and white illustration from the graphic novel of Jean Grey as she reemerges as the Phoenix (229). Against a grainy, dotted backdrop that appears to be outer space, the character's body is posed in a seemingly regal or even godlike fashion. Her arms are outstretched on either side of her body like wings and an emblem of the mythical bird is located on the torso of her altered uniform. Jean Grey's pose, as well as her flowing hair and floating ornamental tassel, indicates that she is levitating across space. Within the dialogue bubbles displayed on the same page the Phoenix declares that she is no longer the woman they once knew but is now reborn as

“fire and life incarnate” (Claremont and Byrne 229). In reiterating her statement, a dialogue box that communicates the narrator’s voice describes Jean Grey’s union with the cosmic entity as the character becoming one with a “primal, universal force” (Claremont and Byrne 229).

This prologue aligns closely with the “romantic conception of both women and nature” (Plumwood 8) in two ways. One notion of gender essentialism within the context of romanticized, ecofeminist rhetoric demonstrates what Plumwood describes as “popular contemporary green versions of virtues attributed to women” (9). This description suggests that Jean Grey and women overall embody qualities that charge them as saviors of the natural world and humanity. In the prologue, Jean Grey demonstrates her “cooperativeness and connectedness with others” (Plumwood 9) through her partnership with the X-men as well as by using her telekinetic powers to save the lives of her teammates. Jean Grey’s connectedness and empathy with nature, other characteristics of feminine virtue noted by Plumwood, are also displayed through her psychic link and communication with the sentient fire, the Phoenix Force. This symbolic closeness with nature displayed through Jean Grey’s encounter with the Phoenix Force is closely linked with a second, essentialist perception of women and nature, as well.

Another assumption that Plumwood makes is “that women have special powers” that allow them to have a closer connection with nature than men (8). Although there were male crew members aboard the damaged space-craft who were in need of rescue, Jean Grey’s telepathic powers seemed to call upon and attract the Phoenix Force. In some sense, Grey’s spiritual, psychic and physical merging with the sentient fire could also be

interpreted as a divine communion between woman and a spirit of fire. The empowerment of woman from becoming one with nature can be seen through Jean Grey's goddess-like rebirth as the Phoenix. In illustrating the pact between a spirit of nature and woman through the images of Jean Grey's transformation into the Phoenix, the images are doing more than conveying visual metaphors that display a positive construction of the woman-nature connection. Rather, they challenge negative perceptions of women and nature as subjects that can be only destructive or disempowered.

As a reminder of the objectives of the thesis statement, the first part of my argument focuses on the representation of negative and positive constructions of the women-nature metaphors through Jean Grey and her two personas. The first part of the thesis statement concentrates on the negative aspects of women-nature metaphors and instances when the depictions of Jean Grey match the descriptions of women and nature as non-threatening and exploitable. Likewise, I presented parallels between the Dark Phoenix and threatening woman-nature metaphors through illustrations, actions of the character and reactions of other characters to her negative behavior. Alternatively, chapter two also points out that Jean Grey and the Phoenix offer depictions of women and nature that are positive and empowering. Thus, my analysis of Jean Grey and her two personas has thus far revealed the fluid nature of the woman-nature metaphors.

## CHAPTER III

### THE PHOENIX AND THE WOLVERINE: WOMEN, MEN AND NATURE

While there is an abundance of scholarship that examines affinities between women, nature, and culture, theorists like Richard Twine, Robert Bly, and Val Plumwood recognize another, more elusive social construction that is just as important to investigate, the man-nature connection. Utilizing an ecofeminist lens, I begin this chapter by contemplating three questions. What is the man-nature connection? How is the man-nature connection represented within the graphic novel, and how might this connection affect hierarchal patterns such as those created by Western dualisms?

To explore some of the questions mentioned in the previous passage, I will conduct a content analysis of *The Dark Phoenix Saga* in an attempt to investigate the man-nature connection and how this link is conveyed within the graphic novel. Furthermore, I will perform a comparative analysis of one of the male characters with Jean Grey and her two personas. Through this examination, I aim to reveal how men's and women's links to the environment are represented. More importantly, my investigation delves into what the depiction of selected characters may communicate about hierarchy and socially constructed dichotomies of human identities and nature.

To explore the man-nature affinity, I focus specifically on Wolverine. Within the X-men series and particularly within *The Dark Phoenix Saga*, there are several male characters with mutant powers. Exclusively within the X-men, there are six team members that are male, so why should Wolverine be my sole focus in addressing the man-nature connection? Beast and Nightcrawler are two other male members of the X-

men that represent the man-nature connection. As I will later address in the concluding chapter, both characters represent a man-nature connection different from that of Wolverine. That is, analyses of Beast and Nightcrawler address how race plays a role in the construction of the man-nature link. Second, one goal of exploring the man-nature metaphors is to find hegemonic ideologies of the man-nature connection. Because the metaphors of both the man-nature and woman-nature connection will come from hegemonic ideologies solely concerned with the relationship between the environment and gender from the perspective of whiteness, I concentrate on Wolverine as a representative of man's closeness with nature. Though I mainly focus on representations of gender and the environment within the study, I will address the potential of analyses of race and intersectionality within the graphic novel in the concluding chapter.

Although born as James Howlett, Wolverine goes by the mononym Logan, a civilian alias that he uses when he is not in his uniform. Unlike Jean Grey, however, Wolverine's change in attire or change in name does not connote multiple personalities. With an extensive career in several armed forces groups, Wolverine is a veteran of combat and is often the foot soldier of the group. A resilient fighter, Wolverine possesses a host of abilities. Some of his mutant powers correspond with his namesake as a creature of nature. Wolverine displays above-average agility, stamina, strength, and reflexes. His regenerative healing ability not only enables him to quickly recover from potentially fatal wounds but grants him longevity, allowing him to age much more slowly than his colleagues. While Wolverine is not a mutant that is an animal/human hybrid, he does possess animal-like qualities such as sharp canine teeth, as well as a heightened sense of

smell and hearing. Additionally, retractable claws in his fists are his offensive weapons, which were made nearly indestructible when his skeletal structure was laced with a powerful metal alloy called adamantium. In *The Dark Phoenix Saga*, as in other episodes of the X-men series, Wolverine plays the role of the brooding loner of the group who is known for his military tact and forthright melee against villains.

In proceeding with the investigation of man-nature metaphors, it is important to clarify what type of man-nature link I focus on in my analysis. In Raewyn Connell's *Masculinities*, he reveals that there is more than one type of masculinity. He makes note of marginalized male identities that are subjected to subordination by those who align with hegemonic ideologies of masculinities. Ecofeminism also takes account of marginalized masculinity and connections with nature in highlighting the subordination of African-American and other racial groups throughout history. Often, negative animalization of non-white and indigenous men by white, Western patriarchy characterizes colonized men as brutish, overly aggressive, and inferior in intellect (Plumwood 4; Twine 4). While there is a man-nature connection displayed through a colonial perspective of the colonized, non-white male, is it possible that there are men connected to nature that are racialized as white? Stephanie Leitch's exploration of "the vernacular iconographic tradition," which uses the images of Charlemagne and the German wild man, for decorative and political purposes during medieval Europe and ancient Rome, hints at this possibility (283). As Leitch's work provides a glimpse of a man-nature connection different from marginalized male identities, Connell's work on

masculinities points out that there is a male identity that functions to reinforce patriarchy through hegemonic masculinity.

Connell defines hegemonic masculinity “as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77). One version of hegemonic masculinity can be found in Plumwood’s reversal of Western dualism. According to her ecofeminist framework, there is a model of the man-nature and woman-culture connection “in which an unchangeable ‘male’ essence (‘virility’) is connected to a nature no longer viewed as reproductive and providing but as ‘wild’, violent, competitive and sexual (as in the ideas of Victorianism, Darwinism and recent sociobiology), and the ‘female’ is viewed in contrasting terms as insipid, domestic, asexual and civilizing” (20). In concentrating on the man-nature aspect of the dualism, I look at two metaphors that convey the man-nature connection, as well as how Wolverine is consistent with man-nature affinity from the standpoint of hegemonic masculinity.

The first man-nature metaphor that I would like to explore deals with the hegemonic identity of the ‘wild man’. I point out instances where Wolverine illustrates the metaphor of man as an animal, particularly a predatory animal. Throughout the graphic novel, Wolverine is normally seen in a yellow and blue uniform and a black mask with pointed ears and solid, white eyes, connoting an animal-like form that is further reinforced by the character’s retractable claws. A series of pictures in Figure 6 that shows Wolverine out of costume presents how the character’s features resemble the descriptions

of the wild man. A series of panels in Figure 6 shows images of a nearly naked Wolverine, whom Kitty Pryde helps escape from a cage. After she frees him a gun blast from the villains interrupts their conversation and renders Pryde unconscious. Wolverine cradles her in one arm while unsheathing the claws of his free hand. A close-up of Wolverine's face shows that he has an eager scowl as he points his claws toward the villains.

Within this scene, Wolverine indeed takes on the manifestation of the animal-like wild man, for he is not only barely clothed but is revealed to have a hairy, muscular body (50). Thick sideburns and thick black hair shaped to resemble his pointed-ear mask seem to give Wolverine the visual image of a wild or animal-like man. His broad stature, coupled with his excessive body hair, also gives him a feral, Cro-Magnon-like air. These wild man features are tantamount to what Robert Bly calls the "ancient hairy man" who was "a large, primitive being covered with hair down to his feet" (6). Moreover, the eager grimace Wolverine wears in the final panel not only connotes the animal-like aggressiveness of the wild man but is reminiscent of the "menacing scowl" of Leitch's primitive, urGermanic man of ancient Rome (284). With regard to ecofeminist research, Wolverine seems to visually demonstrate Plumwood's description of a man close to nature as "wild and violent" (20). Such depictions of the "mythic wild man," represent a romantic or idealistic interpretation of a white male identity with ties to the natural world (Twine 5).

The second metaphor that shows man as having an affinity with nature is the depiction of Wolverine as the hunter. Textual evidence such as dialogue and word choice



are other aspects of the graphic novel that may illustrate how Wolverine corresponds to patriarchal notions of the man-nature connection. To be more specific, Wolverine's dialogue draws on the notion that men's closeness with nature is often displayed through their role as hunter. As frequently occurs throughout the X-men series, Wolverine acts as the tracker of the group in *The Dark Phoenix Saga*. Wolverine can literally sniff out his targets and thus his teammates rely on him to reveal imposters, find criminals and rescue colleagues.

For example, in one scene in which the X-men try to reunite with the remaining members of their group, Wolverine claims to have located Storm, a female mutant with the ability to control the weather, by "following her scent" (Claremont and Byrne 55). The use of the word 'scent' alludes to the man-nature connection that constructs man as a predator animal. Wolverine's primal power of smell to locate a teammate also represents the "romanticized accounts of man as 'the hunter'" (Twine 5). As Twine suggests, patriarchy, especially from the standpoint of Western culture, uses "romanticism and masculinist mythology of the hunter" to establish a connection between men and nature (5). Although Twine points out the irony of the man-nature connection through construction of man as the hunter (Twine finds it "strange that hunting has been constructed in some discourses as a way of positive identification" men have with nature), Wolverine's depiction of the natural man and hunter is portrayed as beneficial in that his powers are often used to protect his allies, defeat villains and detect danger (5). In spite of these potentially positive connotations, hegemonic masculinity's construction of

man as the hunter is still connected to a masculine power that uses violence and aggression to exercise control over non-humans.

In using Wolverine and hegemonic conceptions of the man-nature connection, my next objective concentrates on dualisms. The dynamics of power, as well as the ideological and political implications embedded within dualistic paradigms, are particularly important in the field of ecofeminism. As Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy point out, one endeavor of “ecofeminism has involved a critique of the dualisms of white Western patriarchal culture that construct white male human identity as separate from and superior to the identities of women, people of color, animals, and the natural world”(9). For my analysis, I utilize ecofeminism to investigate Western, patriarchal ideologies embedded in dualisms, yet my exploration delves into dualistic pairings that vary from the traditional twofold model of man/culture and woman/nature.

Earlier in this chapter, I briefly mentioned one type of dualism that showed the kept, submissive women of culture as well as the untamed and abrasive men of nature (Plumwood). In some respects, *The Dark Phoenix Saga* does present the woman-culture and man-nature dualism aesthetically through Jean Grey and Wolverine. The depiction of Jean Grey in Figure 3 could also be interpreted to symbolize a docile, nurturing woman of nature or an unassuming, neatly groomed woman of culture. In stark contrast, the presentation of Wolverine throughout the graphic novel (both with and without the uniform) portrays a rugged and ferocious man that is connected to nature. For the remainder of the thesis I present a comparative character analysis of the representations of Wolverine, the Phoenix, and the Dark Phoenix. I use an ecofeminist lens to assess

ideologies, representation, and power dynamics in the woman-nature/man-nature dualism.

To address the man-nature and woman-nature dualism, I contemplate two possible traits found within the pairing and then delve into the potential for a hierarchy to form in analyzing the two traits. For the first part of the comparative character analysis, I examine Wolverine, Phoenix, and Dark Phoenix in sorting out the superiority and inferiority of strength. Strength, specifically within the context of the graphic novel, is synonymous with the power and multiple uses of one's mutant abilities. It is clear that with regard to mutant powers, the Phoenix and Dark Phoenix's strength greatly outmatch Wolverine's abilities. Wolverine has a heightened sense of smell, the ability to heal quickly, and above-average athleticism. Throughout the graphic novel and as shown in Figure 7, Wolverine uses all of his powers to exert his animal-like strength and aggression against his enemies. While we see Wolverine's ability to dispatch a handful of enemies, Jean Grey's two personas not only display more flexibility in their use of powers but are able to deliver attacks at a larger magnitude.

With the increase of Jean Grey's telepathic powers after her transformation into the Phoenix, the character is able to change "from costume to street clothes by telekinetically rearranging the molecules of her outfit" (Claremont and Byrne 65). One illustration showing Phoenix disposing of an oncoming car demonstrates a significant increase in her destructive capabilities (44). Her newfound might as the Phoenix, however, is tempered by her sense of justice. The Phoenix's use of her powers to protect a young mutant from being run down by villains is a demonstration of how the heroine

uses her powers for the safety of the vulnerable (44). In contrast, the Dark Phoenix's absorption of a star and destruction of a planet in Figures 8 and 9 are instances within the graphic novel in which she expresses the full extent of her destructive powers, proving to be stronger than clawed mercenary of the group. What does the ranking of strength between Wolverine, Phoenix, and Dark Phoenix have to do with women and men's closeness with nature? More importantly, what does a comparative character analysis of strength say about the possible power dynamics of the woman/nature and man/nature dualism? One possible answer may very well lie in the metaphors described in chapter two and in the man-nature profile mentioned earlier in chapter three.

As a reminder of the metaphors mentioned in chapter two, mothers, brides, feminine nature spirits and witches are used as imagery to symbolize or describe women and nature. Ecofeminists are particularly aware that women-nature metaphors have been used as a way for patriarchy to devalue and depower women and the natural world. As the second chapter points out, however, some of the metaphors can serve as symbols of empowerment. For example, the ecofeminist and romantic metaphors for the earth goddess, such as Gaia, are symbols that elevate both women and nature to a status of power (MacGregor). The Phoenix and her display of nearly divine strength may very well convey the woman-nature metaphor of the goddess. Even as the Dark Phoenix corresponds to the more negative metaphor of women and the environment as a witch, both subjects display supremacy through strength (Merchant). On the other hand Wolverine's powers are dwarfed in comparison to the Phoenix and Dark Phoenix. As a consequence, Wolverine's alignment with the hegemonic man-nature metaphors of the

hunter and wild man suggest that the power that men derive from their relationship with nature is limited. Namely, man-nature metaphors connote the control of certain aspects of the natural world while imagery of women connected to nature indicates a power that derives from other aspects of the natural world. While Wolverine's powers relate more to biological abilities (e.g., his strength and his ability to detect scent), the powers of the Phoenix and Dark Phoenix are manifest through the creation of storms and the manipulation of particles to change the environment.

A second feature of the woman-nature and man-nature dualism focuses on moral superiority and inferiority. As far as strength is concerned, the mutant abilities of Phoenix and the Dark Phoenix far exceed the powers of Wolverine. These findings suggest that the women seem to be elevated into a position of power while men seem to be limited in their socially constructed connection with nature. How might tying in one's sense of morality with power, however, shift the hierarchal order of the woman-nature/man-nature dualism? The answer may begin with the notion "that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Claremont and Byrne 124).

At the start of *The Dark Phoenix Saga* Wolverine and the Phoenix appear to be on equal ground in terms of establishing morals. Nonetheless, as the story progresses the emergence of the Dark Phoenix shows the character committing acts that are considered immoral. The use of her powers in an attempt to kill her fellow X-men and the destruction of an inhabited planet are examples of the Dark Phoenix's abuse of her powers. Wolverine himself arrives at a moral dilemma when he is confronted with the necessity to kill the wayward teammate. Shown in an image sample in Figure 10,

Wolverine manages to restrain a temporarily weakened Dark Phoenix. The third panel shows his fist armed with claws and his arm poised for the kill as he states the Dark Phoenix is “too strong for us and is getting stronger all the time” (Claremont and Byrne 143). Because of the Dark Phoenix’s growing strength and violence, Wolverine then resolves to end the battle “permanently” (Claremont and Byrne 143). Though the X-man is performing his heroic duties at the expense of his colleague’s life, Wolverine’s choice is based on his decision to save the world from destruction at the hands of the Dark Phoenix, and readers see him wrestle with this moral dilemma. The Dark Phoenix, however, does not reflect on the potentially destructive consequences of her actions.

As Ruether reveals, patriarchy has constructed women and nature as demonic and corrupt. In particular, Western patriarchal religion perceives and produces “women as vehicles of the demonic power of nature” (“Ecofeminism” 4). Ruether’s analysis also reinforces Merchant’s metaphor of women as witches who create a chaotic environment. In other words, Western patriarchal ideologies would likely produce the Dark Phoenix through the negative metaphor of women and nature as corruptible and destructive. Consequently, the negative conception of women and nature constructs both subjects as being morally inferior. Alternatively, Leitch’s reference to the “Christian wild men as saints looking to the wilderness to retreat from worldliness” connotes the moral uprightness of men who are connected with nature (284). Additionally, “despite the wild men’s prodigious physical strength, unprovoked he posed no threat to mankind but watchfully patrolled the borders of his world” (Leitch 284). Along with the description of a principled wild man, hegemonic masculinity suggests that the aggressive, animalistic

traits of a man connected with nature are normal (Twine). On the other hand, Wolverine symbolizes a positive metaphor of men and nature as just and life preserving. As a result of the positive construction, men and nature are perceived as being morally superior; therefore, morality is gendered.

Overall, *The Dark Phoenix Saga* shows that age-old ideologies of women and nature still persist today, even in the realm of comic books and graphic novels. Using an ecofeminist lens, I was able to reveal that Jean Grey in all of her forms represents metaphors that either challenge or adhere to traditional perspectives of women and the natural world. The thesis also explores the man-nature connection and dualisms dealing with social constructions of gender and the environment. Although the comparative character analysis of Wolverine, Jean Grey and her two personas shows power dynamics of the woman-nature/man-nature dualism, results from the analysis do not yield definite answers but put forward a new direction of discussion about the models that frame human-nature relationships.

My analysis offers a great deal of new information on metaphors concerning women and nature, especially in how ideologies are communicated through the presentation of illustrations and texts in graphic novels. I give new insight on the ways in which dominant and counter ideologies shape gender and the link between humans and the environment. Further research could pursue other identity categories, such as class and sexuality. My lack of attention to other categories of human identity, such as race, class and sexuality, does not detract from the importance of analyzing such identities, but instead shines light on the multiple avenues that future explorations may take whether the

investigation continues with *The Dark Phoenix Saga* or other works within the genre. Finally, sources from masculinities and comic book studies helped to bolster the ecofeminist theoretical framework of the thesis. The combination of ecofeminism, masculinities and comic book studies also offers prospective research for future investigations of contemporary literature.



## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION: THE ACADEMIC POTENTIAL OF COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

In the beginning stages of the analysis, my intent was to use ecofeminism to expose new discourse on topics dealing with longstanding ideologies on human-nature metaphors. I also wanted to point out that contemporary media, graphic novels and comic books in particular, are agents in conveying and reinforcing age-old beliefs about women and nature. Additionally, I wanted to look at how the combined use of text and images provided by comic books and graphic novels communicates socially constructed metaphors of humans and nature. Ultimately, the results not only confirmed my initial expectations for the study, but also revealed new perspectives and possibilities. For the remainder of this chapter I elaborate, if briefly, on the new perspectives and possibilities yielded from the analysis. To begin, I would first like to address subject matter within the thesis that can be used for prospective research.

The analysis of Wolverine, Jean Grey and her two personas, and how they represent socially constructed metaphors, brought essentialist ideologies of gender and nature to the forefront of my thesis. Although race, sexuality, and other aspects of social identities were not the central focus of the thesis, the lack of attention to these features did not mean that they are unworthy of scholarly exploration. In fact, an intersectional look at race and its association with constructions of gender and nature could further

complicate the investigation of human-nature metaphors, in addition to how these metaphors are portrayed within *The Dark Phoenix Saga*.

Another direction for analysis involves a closer examination of the female characters. For example, one could look at the woman-nature connection and make a comparative analysis of Storm with Jean Grey and her two personas. Storm, a mutant with the ability to control the weather, is another female character that can represent the woman-nature connection. Storm is also African-American, which may further complicate notions of woman-nature metaphors. A comparative analysis of Storm, Jean Grey, the Phoenix, and the Dark Phoenix can bring useful insight on how race affects woman-nature metaphors and how these metaphors are presented within the graphic novel.

A similar study of *The Dark Phoenix Saga* can focus exclusively on the interpretations of man-nature metaphors. As I mention in chapter three, Beast and Nightcrawler are other characters that represent the affinity between man and nature. A possible analysis may look at hegemonic and marginalized masculinity from the standpoint of the man-nature connection while comparing the presentation of Wolverine with those of Nightcrawler and Beast. While chapter three establishes Wolverine as a symbol of the white man of nature, further study of the male identity can elaborate on men of color who are associated with nature. A close look at Beast and Nightcrawler may not only expose how they reinforce hegemonic ideologies of non-white men of nature, but may also reveal how both characters complicate these characterizations. The exploration of race in association with social constructions of women, men and nature has

great potential in contributing new discourse within Women's Studies overall and ecofeminism in particular.

To conclude the final chapter of the thesis I would like to address perspectives that emerge from the "so what" questions with regard to the study of the contemporary media. So, why should media made for entertainment be considered so seriously? Moreover, why is it important to regard graphic novels and comic books as topics for academic research? One answer is that graphic novels and comic books serve as a podium in which social and political concerns are addressed. From an aesthetic standpoint, studies of contemporary media can bring attention to the objectification of bodies, both male and female, and the perpetuation of stereotypes. Comic books and graphic novels have also been media for contemplating or expressing opinions about moral dilemmas with regard to society, whether the message is a call for social justice or for a critique of the political climate. Again, the overall political themes embedded within the X-men series provide one example of how comic books can serve as political commentary. The conflict between mutants and non-mutants mirrors the real life social issues of racial tension, discrimination, and identity politics.

Graphic novels and comic books can also be of some value within academia. That is, contemporary media can serve as an instrument for scholarly research on theories and concepts, just as it can provide sociopolitical observations. With particular regard for my thesis, a content analysis of key characters within *The Dark Phoenix Saga* revealed that ecofeminist observations on patriarchal thought and social constructions are relevant even to the study of graphic novels. Though the objectification of bodies may be evident,

readers may not recognize woman-nature metaphors, nor would they recognize how certain characters may be objectified or empowered through these metaphors unless they approached *The Dark Phoenix Saga* from an ecofeminist perspective. My investigation of metaphors and the depiction of Jean Grey, especially the second chapter's analysis of women and nature as mothers, also bring another interesting element to the converging study of contemporary media and other fields of research. Just as theories and concepts can be used to analyze various aspects of graphic novels and comic books, contemporary media can also be used to deconstruct theories.

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## APPENDIX

### Image Panels



**Figure 1**



Figure 1 shows a series of illustrations found on page 65 of the graphic novel. In the illustrations there are six panels. Source: Chris Claremont and John Byrne, *X-men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 2003).

**Figure 2**

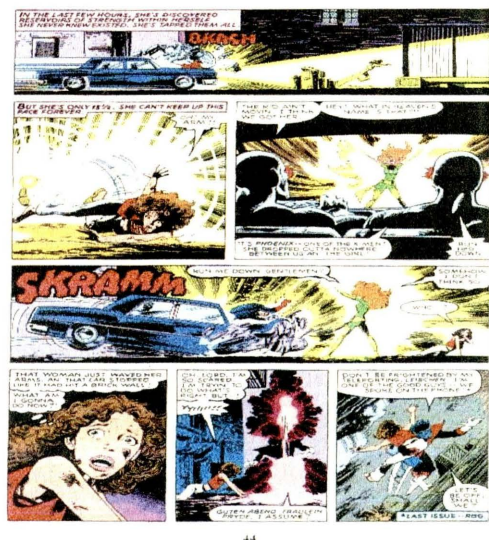


Figure 2 shows a series of illustrations found on page 44 of the graphic novel. The illustrations consist of seven panels. Source: Chris Claremont and John Byrne, *X-men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 2003).

**Figure 3**



Figure 3 shows a series of illustrations found on page 46 of the graphic novel. The illustrations consist of seven panels. Source: Chris Claremont and John Byrne, *X-men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 2003).

**Figure 4**

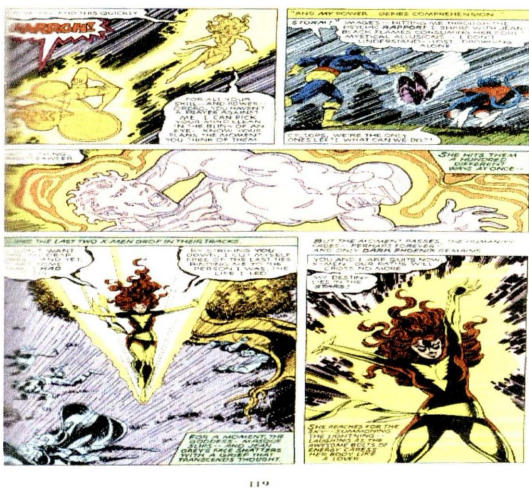


Figure 4 shows a series of illustrations found on page 119 of the graphic novel. The illustrations consist of five panels. Source: Chris Claremont and John Byrne, *X-men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 2003).

**Figure 5**



Figure 5 shows a series of illustrations found on page 229 of the graphic novel. The illustrations consist of three panels. Source: Chris Claremont and John Byrne, *X-men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 2003).

**Figure 6**



Figure 6 shows a series of illustrations found on page 50 of the graphic novel. The illustrations consist of five panels. Source: Chris Claremont and John Byrne, *X-men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 2003).



Figure 7



Figure 7 shows a series of illustrations found on page 81 of the graphic novel. The illustrations consist of five panels. Source: Chris Claremont and John Byrne, *X-men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 2003).

Figure 8

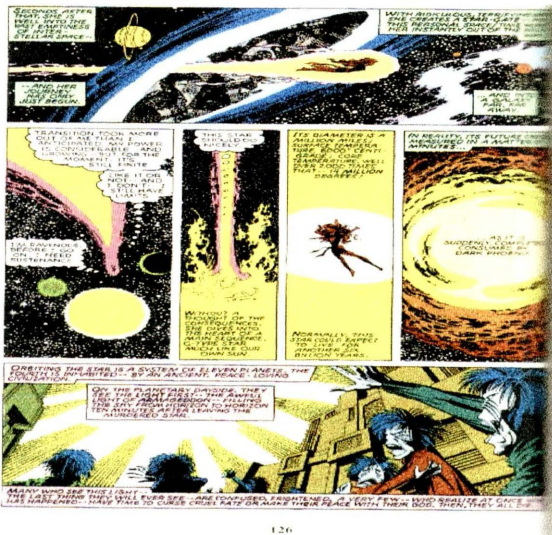


Figure 8 shows a series of illustrations found on page 126 of the graphic novel. The illustrations consist of six panels. Source: Chris Claremont and John Byrne, *X-men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 2003).

**Figure 9**

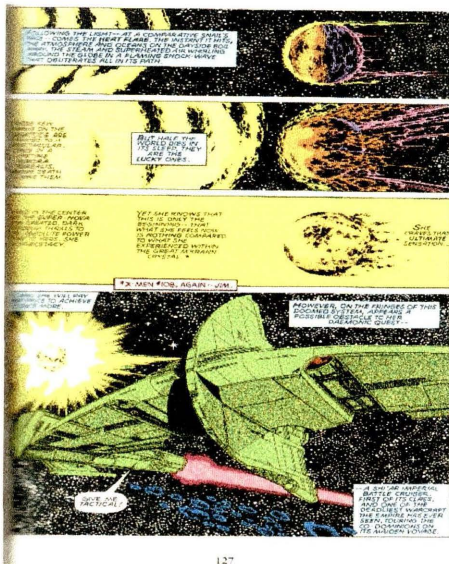


Figure 9 shows a series of illustrations found on page 127 of the graphic novel. The illustrations consist of four panels. Source: Chris Claremont and John Byrne, *X-men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 2003).

**Figure 10**



Figure 10 shows a series of illustrations found on page 143 of the graphic novel. The illustrations consist of five panels. Source: Chris Claremont and John Byrne, *X-men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 2003).