

# Supergirl and Ideology: Truth, Neoliberal Feminism, and the Heartland Way

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## **Abstract**

This paper was originally written for Jody Baker's Communications 220 course *Understanding Television*. The assignment asked students to critically analyze the process of representation in a set of television episodes using course concepts. The paper uses APA citation style.

*Supergirl* is an action, drama, and sci-fi themed television show based off of the comic book character of the same name. The show follows Kara Danvers, Supergirl's civilian identity, as she becomes a crime-fighting superhero in National City while also dealing with extraterrestrial threats and her personal life. Kara herself is an alien, coming from the famous planet Krypton from where Superman, her cousin, also hails. The show has been praised for its strong female lead and supporting characters. It also contains notions of America, its "Heartland" values, and its politics. These two different ideologies serve as the ideological framework of the show and they are both contradictory in their own ways. This is because *Supergirl* enlists the ideology of neoliberal feminism, which is ultimately patriarchal. And, it also works within the governmental system while simultaneously critiquing how it operates. This paper will argue that despite the appearance that *Supergirl* challenges the ideological norm, it still reproduces traditional ideologies for capital gain. To explain this, I will expose *Supergirl's* neoliberal feminist and American ideologies and then show why these ideologies are present from a media production viewpoint. The episodes titled "Strange Visitor from Another Planet", "Myriad", and "Triggers" will serve as main examples for these ideologies, with the first two episodes coming from season one and the last episode coming from season 3.

Neoliberal feminism, as Miller and Plencner (2018) state, is a form of feminism that "connect[s] wealth creation to feminism as the empowerment of

individual women” (p. 55). This means that the liberation of women can only be done through their economic success. This is patriarchal because it conforms to the societal standard in which women are subordinate to men (Miller and Plencner, 2018, p. 61). In the *Supergirl* episode “Triggers”, Lena Luthor, owner of L-Corp and Kara’s friend, decides to buy and become CFO of another company called CatCo. This is shown as a power move to undermine a male corporate opponent. Because it is Lena’s choice to do this, it shows that she finds power in her dominance over a male through corporate control. Miller and Plencner (2018) talk about how this can be considered to be “subordination through institutionalized patterns of cultural value” (p. 61). This means that while Lena is challenging her male competitor, she is not challenging the corporate system as a whole. She is still participating in the patriarchal hierarchy system which sees that women are inferior to men because she is trying to “surpass her male counterparts... [instead of] merely be[ing] an equal” (p. 63). This competition for superiority is also seen throughout the show because of Supergirl’s connection to Superman. She is constantly being compared to him in both strength and performance and this is always talked about as one being higher in rank than the other. Lena and Kara are both having to compete with men in a patriarchal fashion which shows that their success can only be measured against a man’s success.

Another example of the neoliberal feminism ideology in the *Supergirl* episode “Triggers” is when Lena gives control over CatCo to her friend and co-worker Samantha. Previous to this, Samantha has internal conflict over her identity and personal life. However, when she is given control of the company, her conflicts are resolved, and she becomes stable in herself and her sense of identity. This is also part of neoliberal feminism because it shows a stable sense of selfhood and individuality as being in a leadership position that is superior to men (Miller & Plencner, 2018, p. 63). In addition, Samantha has a daughter and she is worried about her ability to protect her child. This life conflict is part of, as Miller and Plencner (2018) talk about, the wanting to have “a full and meaningful career while caring for children and attending to the demands of the so-called ‘private sphere’” (p. 63). Samantha feels that she has to be a success in every component in her life to be able to be an overall success. This is part of neoliberal feminism because although she is figuring herself out and doing it on her own terms, she continues to conform to typical patriarchal and neoliberal ideologies and does not truly challenge the social norm.

The presentation of this neoliberal feminist ideology in the *Supergirl* episode “Triggers” is reflective of the dominant ideology that is present in reality. This is because, as O’Shaughnessy (1990) states, it is a way for the “dominant groups of any society [to] maintain and retain their power over subordinate groups” such as women and the working class (p. 89). O’Shaughnessy (1990) also suggests that this helps viewers “make sense of the world” so that they will come to terms with their subordination (p. 90). This means that because viewers are allowed to interpret the content in the way that they wish, they feel that they have succeeded enough in “challenging the status quo” (O’Shaughnessy, 1990, p. 91). In the context of “Triggers”, and the overall theme of the neoliberal feminism-laced *Supergirl*, the viewer can see women in roles of power and strength and think that it is challenging the patriarchy, but not actually challenge the patriarchy themselves. This contradiction is what fuels the dominant ideology. In addition, the ideological contradiction of the patriarchal neoliberal feminism in the show is something that both “criticizes and accepts our world” which is what keeps the reality of its dominance at a distance (O’Shaughnessy, 1990, p. 101). The neoliberal feminist ideology present in “Triggers” pulls from real world conditions of existence to fabricate imaginary conditions in which feminism is questioning the presiding patriarchal system.

*Supergirl* also employs the ideologies of America and American politics. Firstly, this can be seen in the episode “Strange Visitor from Another Planet” in which there are conflicts with an anti-alien politician and the main characters. The political debate of whether foreigners should be allowed to reside in the United States resonates in both the fictional *Supergirl* universe and the real universe. As O’Shaughnessy (1990) says, this is a dissemination of the dominant ways of thinking into the audience (p. 89). This means that these two sides are being presented as the hegemonic ideologies which come in conflict so that we can “make sense of the world” (O’Shaughnessy, 1990, p. 89-90). This means that because the two most popular opposing sides are shown, that the dominant social discourse is commonly known. The episode also features Supergirl, who is an “illegal” alien herself, fighting and capturing other “illegal” aliens. This contradiction is resolved “magically”, as O’Shaughnessy (1990) calls it, when the anti-alien politician decides to not try to deport aliens anymore (p. 97). This resolution is of the liberal mindset, which is alternative to Johnson’s (2004) description of the conservative-gathering CBS and PAX networks (p. 408). This is the hegemonic ideology in which the CW (CBS and Warner Bros.) Network bases their reality on so as to gain profit, as will be discussed later on in this paper.

One of the other American ideologies that is present in *Supergirl* is the idea of the Heartland America which can be defined as “traditionally forged attachments to God, family, and small-town community” (Johnson, 2004, p. 406). In the episode “Myriad”, there is specific focus on Kara’s family which includes her adoptive mother, adoptive father, and sister. This can be seen as a form of the nuclear family. Initially, Kara’s Kryptonian parents sent her away, which can be seen as a breaking of the traditional family. The episode also shows familial tensions between Kara’s antagonistic father and the rest of her family which also signifies a fracture of the conventional family. At the end of the episode, the conflict is resolved by the truth being revealed that Kara’s father was trying to help them all along. As O’Shaughnessy (1990) says, this ideological resolution happens “magically”, which “mask[s] social contradictions” (p. 97). The resolution solves the problems of the divided nuclear family and restores a sort of familial balance. In addition, the resolution of the conflict at the end of the episode attempts to also resolve the ideological tensions between the rural, Heartland country and urban city lifestyles and values. This relates to Johnson’s (2004) point about Heartland values and how by adopting a lifestyle that is not part of the corporate, capitalist city, that it is “authentically ‘real’” (p. 411). Kara resolves her conflicts with her past nuclear suburban life and finds peace in her new urban life.

The use of the neoliberal feminist, American politics, and Heartland ideologies in *Supergirl* are indicative of a larger system at play. They are utilized for the purposes of perpetuating capitalism and a capitalist system. Firstly, the neoliberal feminist ideology does this through the supposed empowerment of women. Because, as Miller and Plencner (2018) talk about, *Supergirl* shows “corporate control *as* feminism” (p. 52). This means that because characters like Lena and Samantha are in a state of financial success, that they are empowered as women. They are not inherently empowered themselves, they are only empowered through fiscal gain. This type of “corporate logic” is linked to the history of DC (Detective Comics) Comics’, the company that owns *Supergirl*, corporate control over the *Supergirl* character and her feminist appeal (Miller & Plencner, 2018, p. 52). Miller and Plencner (2018) tell of how *Supergirl* was created to “appeal... to younger audiences, in turn increasing DC’s overall market share” (p. 55). They go on to also say that this was an “explicitly calculated use of women characters to serve profit motivated corporate interests” (Miller & Plencner, 2018, p. 56). This shows that from the beginning, *Supergirl* was meant to be a pawn in the capitalist system. One could also infer that the television show was created because of a

surge of feminist discourse, because the CW Network's other superhero shows all feature male leads.

In terms of the American politics and Heartland ideologies, they perpetuate capitalism by simply existing as the ideological framework of the program. As Johnson (2004) discusses, if the ideologies of the network and the television show align with the audience's ideologies, then they will tune in every week (p. 412). In helping to confirm viewer's beliefs, the programs keep audiences glued to their screens, therefore continuing the operation of the media companies. O'Shaughnessy (1990) writes about how the pleasures derived from this confirmation of beliefs are what keep them there (p. 99). *Supergirl* shows the audience "utopian and ideal visions" of a world with prominent women figures but also "implicitly criticizes the present" social conditions (O'Shaughnessy, 1990, p. 99). This provides them with a sort of "pleasurable learning" experience in which the pleasure is obtained from "understanding their oppression and how to challenge it" (O'Shaughnessy, 1990, p. 99). This means that because of conflict of ideologies, such as the ones seen in the episodes "Strange Visitor from Another Planet" and "Myriad", that audiences will continue to tune in. The presentation of discourses relevant to current American ideological struggles, such as immigration and family, are what entice audiences. This in turn perpetuates the production of media content, advertising revenue, and therefore the entire capitalist media system.

In addition, the serial format in which *Supergirl* is broadcast contributes to this continuance of audience, and therefore capitalism. Pagello (2017) talks about how long form programs, such as *Supergirl* with an average of 22 episodes per season, are part of an "endless cycle of beginnings and endings" that lies at the "core of both modern cultural industries and capitalism as a whole" (p. 730, 743). This means that because of the nature of the storytelling cycle of *Supergirl*, in which each episode and series has a story arc, that the overall story and production of the show could continue forever. In comparison, Pagello (2017) discusses the format for Netflix superhero shows, stating that their short form "provides the viewer with texts that adopt continuing narratives but also carefully avoid overwhelming the audience with excessive length" (p. 725). This means that short form programs adopt a "quality over quantity" type approach to storytelling rather than focusing on having a multitude of episodes to perpetuate viewership. Pagello (2017) also concludes that the "reboot" aspect of superhero television content is synergistic with perpetuating capitalism (p. 730). *Supergirl* can be seen as a reboot of a Superman television show, but with an added twist of neoliberal

feminism so as to provide ideological fodder for the audience. This goes along with the notion that content is being recycled in different ways for additional capital gain.

This paper has addressed the ways in which the television program *Supergirl* sustains the capitalist system by using neoliberal feminist, American politics, and Heartland ideologies. It contains prominent female characters who, through their corporate power, assert dominance over their male competitors and their own lives, which ultimately perpetuates the patriarchal system. It also contains American and Heartland discourses about immigration and family which include ideological contradictions that are resolved so that the balance is restored. These ways of presenting these ideologies are collectively used for the generation of audiences, and subsequently the generation of revenue for media companies, such as the CW Network on which *Supergirl* airs. This is furthered by the long form serial format of the program. Hopefully, future television content will contain ideologies that are not inherently rooted in the need for fiscal gain and instead will focus on accurate and appropriate representations of the audience.

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