Frank Miller is a legend in the comic industry, in fact many of his graphic novels have been praised by the critics. He draws himself many of his comic books and he has even directed two movies adapting his *Sin City* series, composed by the comic books that will be discussed in this article. All these reasons make him a complete and extraordinary artist. Miller, as a pioneer of the comics aimed at an adult public, overtly displays sex, more blood, and more violence in his works than it was ever conceivable in the graphic novel world. Part of that violence depicted in his comics is directed against women, as in the case of the *Sin City* series.

In an article called “Violence Against Women” published in the WHO’s webpage, The United Nations define gender violence as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (“Violence Against Women” 2017). Unfortunately, this is a situation suffered by many women in the world every day. The American psychologist Lenore E. Walker affirmed that “the single most powerful risk marker for becoming a victim of violence is to be a woman.” (1999, 23) This is a very revealing and powerful statement; according to Walker, a woman, just because of her gender, has more chances to become a victim of violence than any man. Therefore, in this article I am going to analyze the different cases in the series in which female characters are victims of physical gender-based violence.

*Sin City* (2005), was a film directed by Robert Rodriguez, Quentin Tarantino and Frank Miller himself, in which some of the stories from the *Sin City* comic book series are adapted. The film starts with a scene from the story “The Costumer Is Always Right” (Miller 1998, 29-34) from *Frank Miller’s Sin City Volume 6: Booze, Broads & Bullets*, in which a man and a woman, who have apparently just met, are talking. Seemingly interested in each other, the two kiss and a few seconds later the man tells the woman...
that he loves her only to kill her right after the kiss. Because of the kiss, readers might think that they pretended to be strangers but they had some kind of a past link.

However, in the extras of the DVD edition of the movie Miller revealed the untold story: the woman had an affair with a member of the mob but when she found out about his job, she ended their relationship. As a consequence of the breakup, the mobster hired a hitman—the man in the story—to murder her in the most unexpected way. Therefore, this violent death is the result of male revenge for not accepting that a woman can freely choose when or why to end a relationship. It remains unknown who this woman was and what kind of life she conducted; nevertheless, her former lover used his more powerful position as a man and as a member of a crime organization to arrange her murder.

The case described is not the only occurrence of physical violence against women in the series created by Frank Miller. It is important to underline that most of the men in Basin city—the fictional urban setting of the stories—are depicted as violent. Even Sin City heroes hurt women both physically and psychologically. An example could be found in Frank Miller’s Sin City Volume 2: A Dame to Kill For (Miller 1993). In this story, Dwight, the main character, meets Ava, a woman he had an affair with and who left him for another man. As she gets close, Dwight punches her but, a few moments later, he has sex with her. Dwight’s reaction can be defined as “expressive violence” (Echeburúa and Fernández-Montalvo 1998, 78). Echeburúa and Fernández-Montalvo distinguish a type of model based on violent behaviour called “Model of Psychological Mechanisms of Gender Violence”. In this study, the authors define “expressive vio-
lence” as an aggressive behavior motivated by feelings of anger which reflects difficulties in controlling impulses or affective expression; this type of reaction is usually followed by remorse in the perpetrator.

Later in the graphic novel, we learn that the same woman wants Dwight to kill her husband in order to inherit all his money. Through this plot twist, she becomes the villain of the story and the reader feels almost gratified when she eventually dies. However, in spite of her future actions, that punch is not justified in any way, as it is an act of sheer violence. He beats her because he cannot accept that she does not love him anymore, as if men naturally acquired some kind of right of possession over a woman once they fall in love with her.

This type of male possessive attitude is highlighted in Frank Miller’s Sin City Volume 3: The Big Fat Kill (Miller 1994) as well, when waitress Shellie reveals that Jack ‘Jackie-Boy’ Rafferty, her former lover, beats her on a daily basis because he is jealous of her customers at the strip club where she works. The display of violence results even more shocking when the reader finds out that he is married. According to his pretentions, Shellie must accept the fact that he lives and has children with another woman.
whereas he has the right to beat her because of her job. It is worth noting that it seems very likely that they met at the same strip-club while she was working. Moreover, when she gets tired of this situation, she breaks up with him, nonetheless, he does not accept it, behaving as if they were still together.

Jackie-Boy embodies what Luis Bonino called the “Traditional Masculine Model”. According to Bonino (2001, 2) there are certain beliefs that men acquire through masculine socialization, a process that produces the development of this type of identity as a result. The first belief is related to self-sufficiency; being a man means to be self-sufficient, successful and powerful. As a man, the individual must be ambitious, competent and have control over himself and the others. Assumedly, men have the right to set rules and limits, as well as the right and responsibility to have control. Jackie-Boy takes for granted that he can have Shellie. Her opinion does not matter, as he has the right to have her whenever he wants. For that reason, he is knocking on her door in the middle of the night regardless of the fact that Shellie has broken up with him.

The second belief, according to Bonino’s theory, is heroic belligerence. Being a man supposedly means to be strong and tough, as well as courageous and stoic, to defend by attacking (or competing) and to be able to use violence from time to time to solve conflicts (Bonino 2001, 2). Jackie-Boy attacks Shellie violently when he thinks that she has offended him; moreover, he does not hesitate to face her new lover even though he does not know him, precisely because he thinks he is strong and tough enough to handle any fight.

Another belief due to masculine socialization is self-perceived superiority over women and males who might be feminine, as the latter do not fulfill the masculine archetype. As a consequence, the “real man” thinks to be physically and mentally superior and to have more rights than women; he should not have any attitude that could be related to feminine behaviors and he must be heterosexual (Bonino 2001, 2). Jackie-Boy does not take a no for an answer because Shellie is a woman, and therefore his subordinate. She cannot end the relationship as she does not have that right. He sees the relationship threatened only when he realizes that there is another man in the picture.

The fourth and last belief is related to hierarchy: The stereotypical men’ orders imply subordination because they are the authority (Bonino 2001, 2). This idea is reinforced in Jackie-Boy as—perhaps surprisingly, given his unethical behaviors—he is an agent of the law. His professional authority allows him to think that he has the right to do and command whatever he wants and everyone else has to obey him. For this reason, His position as member of the police force seems to entitle even further the violence he submits to Shellie.

But Jackie-Boy is not the only character that fits in the traditional masculine model, in fact some of these beliefs and patterns are present in many of the male characters moving across the Sin City universe. It appears clear that in this fictional setting male
characters have problems assimilating and accepting the notion that a relationship ended by choice of their partners. Their actions lead the reader to assume that, in the violent world created by Frank Miller, only men can decide when a relationship is over and women have no decisional power in the matter.

In addition to this, in Basin city a lot of men do not seem to take a no for an answer. Communication scholar David S. Heineman has suggested that, in his popular *Sin City* series, Miller followed an existing trend in the configuration of graphic novels for adults that portrays particularly violent scenes to stimulate debates about violence in general and issues such sexual consent (2012, 152). In *The Big Fat Kill* (Miller 1994), as Jackie-Boy and his friends are stopped by Dwight and they are not able to rape Shellie, they take the car heading for Old Town. When they are rejected by one of the prostitutes who live and work there, they try to get her in the car at gunpoint.

Also, in *Frank Miller’s Sin City Volume 4: That Yellow Bastard* (Miller 1996) eleven-year-old Nancy Callahan is the last victim of Roark Junior who kidnaps, rapes and murders pre-pubescent girls. However, he is stopped and mutilated by policeman John Hartigan. As a consequence, eight years later, after recovering from years of surgery, the criminal tries to complete the work kidnapping Nancy once again. In this volume, Miller created a villain—once again opposing a beautiful female character—who apparently can only have sexual intercourse if women screamed because of the pain he inflicts them. As if being kidnapped and raped was not violent and humiliating enough, Nancy and the other victims, had to be tortured for Roark Junior’s sexual pleasure to be satisfied.

Shellie, Nancy and the prostitute from Old Town are represented as female characters who can take care of themselves, therefore we see them fiercely face their abusers. Nonetheless, these girls find themselves in violent and unfair situations which they are not able to handle only with their fortitude. This is due to being outnumbered, unarmed or fighting Roark Junior—the son of the most dangerous person in Basin city—not because of their inability to defend themselves. This way, Miller turns strong, unafraid girls into paradigmatic damsels in distress who need to be rescued; with the exception of the prostitute, who is saved by Miho, a fellow prostitute who kills Jackie-Boy and his friends with a katana. The other two aforementioned victims are saved by two men: Dwight and Hartigan.

At the beginning of *A Dame to Kill For* (Miller 1993), a man has the intention of killing his lover in order to avoid his wife finding out that he has an extramarital affair; apparently, to this male character, the money his wife would obtain from divorcing him is more valuable than the life of the woman he supposedly loves. “It’s tearing [him] up!” (Miller 1993, 14) the justification he brings forth is that he “worked hard! Damn hard! And Gloria would get everything! It’s all her fault! I don’t have any choice!” (ibid).
As a matter of fact, this is not the only instance in Miller’s series that openly suggest that secrets are more valuable than human lives. In the first volume of the series, *Frank Miller’s Sin City Volume 1: The Hard Goodbye* (Miller 1991), a prostitute called Goldie finds out that a cannibal man called Kevin eats female prostitutes; when he realizes that she knows what he does, he brutally murders her. Subsequently, her lover Marv and a female parole officer set off to investigate Goldie’s murder; nonetheless, Lucille, the policewoman, is captured by Kevin and taken to his farm. After Marv is knocked out by the cannibal man in the farm, he is dragged to the basement where the parole officer is. When he wakes up, she tells him how, before Marv arrived, Kevin had cut off and ate one of her hands while forcing her to watch. Later on—as it recurrently happens in Miller’s *Sin City* storylines—the male character survives, whereas the female does not. Moreover, in this volume, it is told that the killing character pleasuringly enjoys to perform gender-based cannibalism, eating all of the victims’ bodies except for the heads; in fact, he has a display hanging on the wall of the basement with the heads of the women he murdered and ate. As a hunter exhibits his preys, this man proudly exhibits his victims as his trophies, enjoying the sight of his display.

Aside from the aforementioned expressive type of violence, Echeburúa and Fernández-Montalvo present another type of Model of Psychological Mechanisms of Gender Violence called “instrumental violence” (1998, 78) which is embodied by a planned aggressive conduct expressing a deep degree of dissatisfaction and whose performance does not cause guilt in the perpetrator. The cannibal killer Kevin thoroughly plans his very violent murders and clearly, he always wants more because he is never satisfied by their performance; moreover, he evidently feels no remorse for his murderous actions.

It is worth mentioning the presence of representations of the so-called “women in refrigerators syndrome” throughout the *Sin City* series. In order to explain what this
syndrome implicates, Aaron Hatch has described it as a trope that “objectifies female characters into simple story devices, and their character development serves to just give motivation to the male hero” (The Artifice, 2015). In practice, this means that the villain attacks a female character close to the hero in order to justify the spiral of violence he is caught into.

Analyzing the configuration of the trope in the mentioned volumes, several cases can be spotted. Goldie is a prostitute from Old Town who dies in order to justify her lover Marv’s heroism and murders in The Hard Goodbye (Miller, 1991); her death in the first pages of the graphic novel is instrumental to the male protagonist’s role in the rest of the volume. Her character is not developed at all; the readers only see her naked having sex with Marv and the following next morning she turns up dead. However, spending only one night with her is enough for Marv to seek revenge for her death. When the murder is cleared up and the murderer has been killed, Goldie is forgotten. Miller could have explained Marv’s obsession for the woman by staging further mourning expressions; nonetheless, this does not happen and the reader is left with the impression that, in reality, he was not in love with her as he claimed.

At some point in the story, Miller tricks the reader—and Marv himself—into thinking that Goldie is not dead but she pretended her own murder, suggesting a plot twist that would have reversed her instrumental role in the volume. Nevertheless, the woman that Marv sees is not Goldie but her twin sister. In a way, the readers have the feeling Goldie is present throughout the graphic novel. It is, though, just an illusion.

By the same token, all the events unfolded in Volume 3 are consequent to Shellie’s physical aggression. Dwight, her new lover and savior, goes after Jackie-Boy and his friends after they beat and try to rape her in The Big Fat Kill (Miller 1994). Instead of taking care of her, Dwight leaves Shellie alone in her apartment to perform an act of revenge that she has not requested; furthermore, the girl tries in vain to stop him as he carelessly continues with his crusade in her name.

This leads to the murder of the policeman Jackie-Boy, jeopardizing the prostitutes’ safety in Old Town as they had a truce with the police department which allowed the women to defend their own territory. Consequently, in order to illustrate Dwight’s unwanted heroism, Shellie is attacked by Jackie-Boy and the prostitutes are in danger; after that, Shellie does not appear in the story again and is forgotten, just as Goldie was.

In conclusion, Frank Miller created a series full of female characters who try to survive in a violent city, in which much of the inherent of this violence is gender-based. Some of them, such as Shellie or Nancy, are portrayed as damsels in distress who are attacked and saved by men. However, some others, such as Lucille or the prostitutes, are empowered women who are strong enough to defend themselves, but they fail and eventually die in the hands of men. Most of Miller’s Sin City men seem to embody toxic masculinity, as they do not accept rejection from women or believe that women’s
lives are worth more than their secrets; all the same, women seem to be the preferred victims of violent murderers, who target and kill them, whereas male victims of crime usually manage to get away and, subsequently, take their revenge.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES


—. 1993. Frank Miller’s Sin City Volume 2: A Dame to Kill For. Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics.


