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The Love Interest Tragedy

Comic books, while good at telling unique stories, are not always the best when it comes to their side characters. Many times a male hero's love interest will meet an untimely death just to further the character growth of the story's hero. This act is known as "fridging" which refers to the use of female characters as plot devices to further a male character's development. In this essay, we are focused specifically on the fridging of Gwen Stacy in The Amazing Spider-Man stories. The question proposed here is why? Why do they always kill Gwen, just for the benefit of Spider-Man?

Gwen Stacy's first appearance in the Marvel universe was in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #31 in December of 1965. The first time she was killed was in *The Night Gwen Stacy Died*, which came out in 1973. Making the first time she died only eight years after her initial release. The comic line doesn't even really focus on her death, The first comic in the line briefly shows her being abducted by the Green Goblin and dropped off the edge of a building to incentivize Spider-Man to comply. Spider-Man shoots a web off the ledge to catch and pull her up but soon realizes she was already dead. Unsure if the fall was what killed her or if the sudden jolt of the web catching her was, Peter blames himself. The rest of this storyline is about Peter dealing with grief and swearing revenge on the Green Goblin.

Why did this have to happen? Surely there were other ways to get Spider-Man's attention other than dropping his girlfriend off of the top of a building. This ties back to fridging. Fridging was briefly explained further back in the essay but is a much bigger deal than people would like to believe. Female characters are often created for the sole purpose of dying later in the story to progress the male character's story. This term originated in a 1994 Green Lantern comic in which the hero returns home to find that his nemesis, Major Force, has murdered his girlfriend Alexandra DeWitt, and stuffed her corpse into a fridge (Seale, 2018). Over 100 women in superhero books have been killed, specifically with the intent to make the male character better (Simone, 1999).

In the case of Gwen Stacy she has died seven times in the comics, and once in the movies. Three of her "deaths" are clones of herself dying in various ways, but every clone has the memories of Gwen. This makes every time she dies even more traumatic, as every following clone has some memory of dying before. Other previously mentioned deaths happen to alternate timeline "Gwen"s but still count in our death counter. What is the purpose of killing off one side character so many times? At this point, there is no way that every one of these deaths can be attributed to the growth of Spider-Man.

When Gwen Stacy died in *The Night Gwen Stacy Died* she was meant to stay dead. Lore wise she only returned because one of her old teachers - going on to become *The Jackal* after Gwen's death - figured out how to successfully clone her (Feldman, 2018). This brought her back to the story, but how did this go down in the writing room? Before Gwen's initial death, Stan Lee had not wanted her to die. His writing board needed a character to die - that wasn't Aunt May as that would get rid of Peters's only parental figure - and decided on Gwen Stacy. When Lee was proposed

this idea he had been in the middle of packing and said yes before realizing what he was answering. By the time he was back from his trip, Gwen Stacy had been killed for the first time (Sulman, 2011).

Bringing her back to life was Stan Lee's choice, as he - and fans alike - found the woman's death to be questionable (Sulman, 2011). He was insistent that his writing team find a way to bring her back, but they rebutted saying it would break the plausibility of the story. Eventually, they agreed, but only under the condition that he could kill her off again whenever he wanted. (Walker, 2010). This is what leads to Gwen's many following deaths - as the next five iterations of Gwen are all clones, that are able to be killed at any time.

The first clone goes on to continue being called "Gwen", while the others pick up different names such as "Joyce" and "Abby-L". Two more clones surface, but are only ever referred to as a Gwen Clone and not given a name. Both the clone going by Joyce and an unnamed clone show signs of "Clone Degeneration". Clone degeneration is the loss of vigor and productivity in clones with the passing of time. The unnamed clone dies of it, and Joyce is murdered before she is able to. This implies that every clone could show signs of clone degeneration and could eventually die from it, or from an impacting outside source. Showing - once again - that these Gwen clones were created for the sole purpose of dying.

Gwen goes on to die a few more times - four more not counting the movie to be exact - but most of these deaths happen in alternate timelines. While in different timelines, the deaths still occur specifically to impact the main character - Spider-Man. In *Dead No More: The Clone Conspiracy* Gwen is said to *not* be a clone, and is the

reanimated body of the original Gwen with all of the same memories. This Gwen is put into the story as a weapon - as far as the villains of this story are concerned - against Spider-Man, as his first interaction with her ends with him getting jumped by Doctor Octopus. While the Gwen in this timeline ends up befriendng Peter, it still leaves him with a sense of confusion and distrust that he has to work through during the comic - once again showing that she was only brought back as a plot point for Spider-Man's development.

Many more alternate universe stories go on to do the same thing with Gwen, including but not limited to: A.X.E. Judgment Day - where Peter is judged by *The Progenitor* who has taken the form of an already dead Gwen Stacy, *Marvel Zombies Return* - where Peter is a zombie and eats Gwen Stacy and her friends, *Powerless* - in which Gwen is put into the same "damsel in distress" trope that we see in the movies (except this time Peter is able to save her), *Spider-Man: Life Story* - where Gwen is a clone again but it is unknown until Miles Morales breaks the news to Peter leading to the end of their relationship, and the death of Gwen Stacy in *The Amazing Spiderman 2* movie - where she is dropped from a ledge by *Green Goblin* and Spider-Man tries to save her, leading to her death and the most tragic scene in any Spider-Man movie to date.

All of this information provided I believe it is safe to say that, while we could have survived without the many many deaths of Gwen Stacy, the Spider-Man storyline would be incomplete without it. There are many reasons to have kept her alive but in relation to "why" they killed her, the story would not be the same without it. Many times her

fridging is the only reason that Peter was able to finish the fight, and why New York still has its *Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man*.

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