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as Portraits of America's Youth.*

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## From Sweethearts to Troubled Hearts: Betty & Veronica and Enid & Rebecca as Portraits of America's Youth.

Cristián Valenzuela<sup>1</sup>

Twentieth century American pop culture has had its fair share of teenage icons, young characters that have undoubtedly represented the nation's youth and impending mood. While many of them can be found in television and literature, some paradigmatic characters can also be encountered in comic books. This is the case of Betty & Veronica from *Archie Comics*, created by Bob Montana in 1941, and Enid & Rebecca from *Ghost World*, created by Daniel Clowes in 1993. Both pairs of best friends are loyal portraits of teenage America, each in their own way. While Archie's girlfriends bring to life society's teenage and family values of the American Dream era, *Ghost World*, through its protagonists, addresses teenage angst, lost identity and individualism as its central themes.

Through this essay I shall show how Betty and Veronica, as well as Enid and Rebecca, are two pairs of best friends which can be appreciated as key depictions of teenage girls in the United States, coming from different moments in American history. While the former embody the rise of the 1950s' 'all-American girl' values, the latter represent the spread of teenage angst, a phenomenon typically associated with the eighties and nineties pop culture.

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Though *Archie Comics* and *Ghost World* are both comics that revolve around the lives of American adolescents, their origins are completely apart, and that is what defines their major differences. Both depict a pair of teenage friends as leading ladies: Betty and Veronica (B&V), and Enid and Rebecca (E&R) and even though both are duos of best friends living in American suburbia that engage in regular teen activities on a daily basis, they do not seem to share any further similarities.

## **Youth and comics**

The study of comic books and graphic novels in academia is still a fairly recent matter. While comics have been around in the western hemisphere for over a century (Duncan & Smith 22), only in recent decades have they become an area of academic interest. In fact, the first academic journal dedicated exclusively to the study of this medium, *The Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics*, has existed only since 2010.

In the past few years one of the main areas of research has been in regards to the relation between comics and youth, specifically teenagers. While many academics study the relation between teens and comics, according to the scholar P.L. Thomas, the relevance of this link is mainly twofold: on the one hand, comics have a strong influence on young, and on the other hand, comics have shown to reflect social norms of American Culture (190). In fact, a great deal of studies in social sciences and education have reaffirmed the strong influence that comic books and graphic novels have on teenagers (Lavin 32; Brozo 78). This relation has been historically reinforced constantly by a great deal of graphic literature which not only caters to a young audience, but also depicts various teenage characters in a large variety of contexts and storylines.

The analysis of graphic novels and comic books, therefore, is rich in content of major themes involving adolescence. In the same way that it has occurred with many means of communications in pop culture, -such as magazines, radio and television-, comics have earned significance in media and cultural studies as vehicles through which we can interpret the social, particularly social trends in youth.

Thus, through the analysis and comparison of Betty & Veronica, and Enid & Rebecca, I shall show how major social themes related to American teenagers from different historical contexts are depicted in and inscribed in each of these characters.

### **Betty and Veronica: America's Sweethearts**

*Archie Comics* debuted in December 1941, in the same month Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour occurred, and during the months that followed two of America's favorite sweethearts were born: Betty and Veronica. The publication depicts the suburban adventures of its sixteen-year-old protagonist Archie Andrews, his gang of friends and his two on-and-off again girlfriends, Betty and Veronica, in the town of Riverdale. During the 1940s, both of these girls became famous through all the United States: the "Betty v/s Veronica" rivalry had kids, teens and parents taking sides all over the nation. Not only did B&V turn into Archie's girlfriends, but they became the whole country's girlfriends.

As America's young sweethearts, B&V represented the ideal of what America's youth had to be like: polite, smart, witty, active, secure, pretty and, last but not least, entertaining. Both girls and their friends have the power to "offer an escape from reality and spark [one's] imagination of the perfect teenaged life" (Geppi 4). War times are not particularly the happiest times in a country, but Betty, Veronica, and all of their gang kept America's spirit up, staying joyful, exciting and happy. Given that *Archie Comics* emerged during "the same month America was thrust into World War II, Archie remained upbeat and optimistic during war years and throughout the subsequent Cold War" (Scarpelli 4).

The attitude that B&V present is definitely a positive reinforcement to a country in the midst of a war. Fun and vivacious characteristics implemented in quirky storylines that adapted to current trends cheered up millions of souls from coast to coast.

In the United States, the post-war decades brought the rise of the Golden Year values and ideals (Hobsbawm 261-290). Accordingly, stereotypical visions of families, teenagers and women were installed in the collective imagery and in various media outputs. The search for success and perfection was established all around the country. The young American girl was massively portrayed

as simple, docile, and very feminine. American sociologist Talcott Parsons states that these characteristics shape a socially accepted role of the young woman, whereas if she were to be masculine and insensitive, she would be estranged from traditional society. The ideal of femininity in young girls is such, says Parsons, that the American collective imaginary – according to his perspective, published in the forties –, does not even include alternative visions of young girls (608).

During the same era, “the portrayal of conventional families (two parents, heterosexual, child-rearing, with a “working” father and “homemaking” mother) was the rule” (Bennett, Grossberg and Morris 126): the image of the all-American suburban family at its finest.

Even though Betty is the classic blonde girl-next-door, and Veronica the snobbish rich girl in town, appearing to be complete opposites, these young women develop what seems to be an average, innocent, girl-to-girl friendship; a “proper” image for girls all around the country. They stay inside the mold of the young all-American teenage girl. Together, they participate in school activities, go to the beach, to the mall; they help each other get ready for prom, among many other predictable activities.



Figure 1. “Getting Ready.” *B&V Double Digest No. 66* 1997.



Figure 2. “Teamwork.” *B&V Double Digest No. 121* 2004.

They follow whatever fashion is in and chase popular currents. B&V also belong to what would seem to be a structurally “conventional” family: both parents at home, a stable household in a pretty neighborhood, a sibling or two (in the case of Betty; Veronica’s an only child), and an occasional pet.

As America evolved in its glory days during the cold war, Betty and Veronica played by the teenage rules of correct and predictable behavior that applied at the time. Even decades after being created, they continue to portray America’s youth in an accepted and healthy manner. As a way to reach and be accepted by readers of all ages, “Archie Comics...made it standard practice to offer

amusement that broadens the minds of children, while at the same time offering entertainment that parents can feel safe with” (Geppi 4).

America’s own grown conventional and traditional values flourished in the heart of Betty, Veronica, and all of the characters in *Archie Comics*. Due to their particular context of creation and diffusion, they fulfill the duty of not only entertaining and distracting their readers, but also of representing them in a proper and plausible manner. As the Comics’ managing editor for more than forty years, Victor Gorelick states that “[w]orking for *Archie Comics* back in the Fifties...was tenuous to say the least.” Because of strict comic book regulations, many comics went out of circulation, but “*Archie Comics* policy of producing good, clean, wholesome, family oriented comics kept the company from going under” (5).

As a comic series published during the middle of the century in the United States, Archie writers followed a certain pattern of norms, instituted by the Comics Code Authority (CCA) in the 1950s. Particular highlights of the list included “[r]espect for parents, the moral code, and for honorable behavior shall be fostered”, as well as “[t]he treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage” and “[p]assion or romantic interest shall never be treated in such a way as to stimulate the lower and baser emotions (Comics Artville).

Following these statutes, B&V are able to be characters that girls from all over can identify with, biding by what is considered to be the acceptable social norm. Also, given that they are comic book characters, B&V are capable of approaching *Archie Comics* readers through the simplicity of the drawings and strong colors through which they are presented. This way it is easy and attractive for readers to relate and connect with the characters.

As seen in figures 3 and 4, author Scott McCloud emphasizes the important link between visual simplicity and the reader’s attention. He believes that a simple image is easier to cause identification and is more effective in sending out a message that an audience will effectively listen to (36).



Figure 3. "Identificaton." McCloud 36



Figure 4. "Simplicity." McCloud 36

After over sixty years of periodically publishing new material we can see many differences in Betty and Veronica; but we still see much of the same. Both girls (as other characters from the series) have changed in their own particular way through the decades, given certain social, political and cultural context. After feminism arose massively, Betty was attributed with new and different abilities such as mechanics and political discourse. Veronica gained entrepreneur skills, following the steps of her rich and successful father. They have also evolved with day-to-day novelties: they now have iPods, mobile phones, laptops and skinny jeans. And they also get informed of each particular fad as it comes (during the 70s they acquired hot pants and danced in disco contests; while in the 90s they fell for boy bands and digital pets).

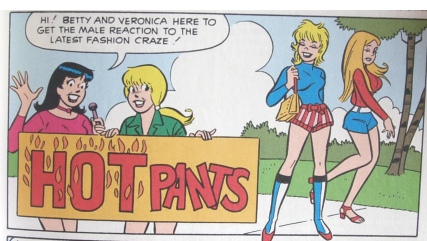


Figure 5 "Hot Pants." Laugh Mag. No. 248 1971



Figure 6 "N "Zinc Cover." B&V Double Digest No. 103 2002

Nonetheless, the core themes of these young girls, which define their identity, remain the same. B&V still revolve around the "correct" values they were born and raised with; their storylines tend to avoid personal, individualistic and controversial subjects, such as religion, sex, depression or alcohol; they always end up doing "the right thing". After six decades, their original spirit and optimistic nucleus remain. B&V are still here, day after day, week after week, year after year, to keep entertaining, to represent the all-American teenager and family, and to be the best sweethearts that the United States can have.

## **Enid and Rebecca: America's Teenage Angst**

*Ghost World* also introduces us to two young teenage protagonists and, just like B&V, one is brunette (Enid) and the other blonde (Rebecca). The comic, first published in 1993, follows the lives of both girls after they graduate from high school, as they spend their days infinitely wandering around the town they live in. Certain elements seen in *Archie Comics*, such as garage sales, diners and suburban neighborhoods, are also present, and even though superficially both of these pairs of friends may begin to look alike, they are worlds apart.

Enid and Rebecca are born in a completely different moment in time: the nineties. The 80s had seen the rise of punk, the grunge movement was at its peak and the world had already witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall. *Ghost World* centers its attention on the relationship that E&R have, and their failed search for identity (particularly Enid's). Not only do they consider themselves completely different to other teenagers, but they constantly criticize everything that happens around them.

*Ghost World* depicts adolescence as a journey for personal discovery; a process of teen anguish, a literary commonplace that had already established itself by the time Clowes work was published. This graphic novel could not have risen the way it did at any other moment, nor could it have done so without the success of prior works on the same topic paving its way.

Published during the 1950s, J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is not only the epitome but also the prequel to all teenage angst publications. Holden Caulfield's (the novel's protagonist) journey of self-discovery uncovers adolescent dilemmas and insecurities related to high school, drugs, sex, alcohol, and other matters, that are currently considered issues that most teenagers face. However, such topics had been frowned upon or downright prohibited from many American media for decades. The book caused such controversy, that it was banned in various libraries, schools and other institutions.

It is evident that *The Catcher in the Rye* addresses teenage alienation firsthand in ways nobody had done previously. Holden feels like a complete stranger in a traditional teenage world; like a constant outsider that feels the need to constantly snub his peers:

You ought to go to a boys' school sometime,' I said. 'It's full of phonies, and all you do is study so that you can learn enough to be smart enough to be able to buy a goddam



Cadillac someday, and you have to keep making believe you give a damn if the football team loses, and all you do is talk about girls and liquor and sex all day, and everybody sticks together in these goddam cliques. (Salinger 118).

The way Holden must cope with feelings of isolation, differentiation and angst while facing different experiences creates a mood and setting for all future pieces on the same topic. Decades after Salinger's masterpiece, once censorship had fallen and the matters were accepted, controversial teenage issues, and the social critique which accompanied it, spread throughout American pop culture.

Teenage isolation and anguish became a massive topic during the 1980s. Movies such as *The Breakfast Club*, *Lucas*, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, and *Sixteen Candles* put teen angst and alienation in the center of attention of American pop culture and mass media. These works (together with books such as *The Outsiders* or *Rumble Fish*, which later turned into films) bring the issue to life, something that had been fairly omitted or hidden in prior decades.

*Ghost World* continues what J. D. Salinger began in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Both protagonists from *Ghost World* reject the stereotypical mold of the teenage girl. The idea of the "rebel girl" or the anti-model easily prospers in early 1990s due to youth movements such as grunge music and the installment of punk ideals. While grunge music plagued teenagers' stereo systems, Hollywood glamour was losing its appeal and Kiss and New Kids on the Block were losing fans. Teens sensed for the first time a "feeling of burnout in the culture at large. Kids [were] depressed about the future" (Marin 2).

In this context, the rise of middle-American punk women" in the mid-1980s helped define views such as the anti-Hollywood paradigm. As Brake states,

Working class punk women do not fetish Hollywood fashion and beauty (but emphasize their class by short haircuts, plain white T-shirts with rolled-up sleeves, army fatigues and old sneakers). They do not parody Farrah Fawcett Majors, or 'new-woman' professionalism, but reaffirm a non-traditional working-class cultural identity as women (Brake 177).

E&R were born in an era of change, a time when values were being questioned. A decade where “fuck” was already being used in massive media; sexually transmitted diseases had become a current event, and drug use was spreading in high schools. In the midst of all of this turmoil adolescents were meant to find their own way out. Enid and Rebecca portray the difficult scavenge of one’s own identity, the sentiment of an unidentifiable world and the development of individual views and styles in contemporary American adolescence.



Figure 7. “Hate” Clowes 26



Figure 8. “Fuck Everybody” Clowes 61

These alternative fads (which are actually counter-culture fads (Bennet et al. 5) turned into fads) multiplied during the 1980s and 1990s. A sense of indifference towards massive pop culture and the reaffirmation of personal styles and opinions arose. With this, societal values start to be ignored, while personal problems become the primary focus. As *Ghost World* and all its predecessors attest, whatever society’s norm is instated at the time, it is not taken into account. In the late twentieth century adolescence is not about social values anymore: it is about personal troubles; about the sentiment of loss and angst, and how each individual must overcome their own obstacles to find their own self.

### The Contrast of Two Teenage BFF’s

Enid is on the quest for self-discovery and feels the need to reject everything around her. In comparison to Betty or Veronica, she probably was not prom queen, class president, or captain of the cheerleading squad. She most definitely does not fit in with the average teenage girl that is

presented in *Archie Comics*. Enid is not only uncomfortable with the people that surround her, constantly criticizing them, but she is also uncomfortable in her own skin.

Betty and Veronica are both characters with great self-confidence and healthy self-esteem. In accordance with *Archie Comics*' acceptability, these girls are portrayed as role models for young girls across America, having great agency and a diverse range of interests. In the same way, even though they may have problems, their bond is depicted as a paradigmatic approach to strong friendship. In spite of their differences and rivalry, every storyline concludes with both of them as close friends that overcome whatever obstacles their relationship encounters. Even when their friendship is torn because of Archie himself, they always end up solving the problem out and reinforcing their alliance.

In contrast, Enid and Rebecca are an example of confusion and emotional instability. They regularly question their own choices and individualities, from university alternatives to sexual orientations, in a way that neither Betty nor Veronica have ever done. Not having any clear interests or goals, while suffering from what seems to be perpetual loneliness, E&R have a very existential attitude towards life (unlike B&V's pragmatic enthusiasm), and their relationship is cold and constantly undergoes non-resolved brawls.



Figure 9. "He's Right." *Laugh Digest Mag. No. 43* 1982

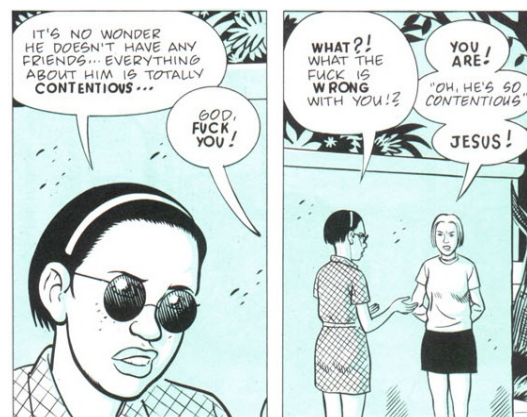


Figure 10: "Fuck You!" *Clowes 57*



Figure 10: "Difference." Clowes 74



Figure 11: "Loneliness." Clowes 52

Unlike Betty and Veronica, E&R despise whatever the mass media throws their way, ignoring pop icons and rejecting fads. They show little or no real interest in their education, or in their future whatsoever. They are immersed in their own little ghost world, but are forced to deal with the real world in which they live in. The never ending feeling of disparity between each of them and every person that they meet is enormous.

The mood set by the author is reaffirmed through visual tools, such as coloring, throughout the story. In contrast to Archie's vivid coloring, the almost monochromatic style of Clowes' graphic novel represents the negative and anguished feel that the protagonists expose. Enid and Rebecca actually look like a grim and inert version of Betty and Veronica.

In contrast with B&V's bubbly suburban hometown with clear cut mid-century values, E&R represent "Clowe's sad world of loneliness and disaffection" (Scott). Even the fact that Betty and Veronica's place of residence has a name (Riverdale), while Enid and Rebecca's town's name is never revealed, shows the difference on how the former pair of girls' identity is not an issue, while the latter duo are, both personally and geographically, lost in the middle of nowhere.

In conclusion, Betty and Veronica, as well as Enid and Rebecca, portray particular visions of America's teenagers. *Archie Comics* portrays all-American adolescents filled with family and social values that prevailed during mid-twentieth century. As the Comics' editor stated: when people think of Archie and his friends, "they think of the Fifties. Maybe that's because it was a time when families stuck together. School was fun, teachers were goofy and friendships were important" (Gorelick 5). In fact, even though censorship rules and social expectations regarding comic books loosened

dramatically during the second half of the twentieth century,<sup>2</sup> *Archie Comics* has kept its content family-friendly until the twenty-first century. "The code never affected us editorially the way I think it did other companies" says Archie Comics' president Mike Pellerito in a 2011 interview, "we aren't about to start stuffing bodies into refrigerators or anything" (Rogers "*Archie* Dropping Comics Code Authority Seal.")

On the other hand, *Ghost World* zooms in on the process of self-discovery that the protagonist must go through, emphasizing controversial coming of age dilemmas that unfold in different media during the 80s and 90s. Not only are they an illustration of cultural changes in American society and its youth, but they come to existence at a point where the comic genre has overcome its role as a family-oriented format. Given the fall of the CCA, E&R skip the imposition of traditional social value in the story's content.

E&R's quest for self-discovery occurs in a world which, according to the sociologist Ulrich Beck, is suffering a process of strong individualization. This means that the strong norms which dictated social patterns have lost their strength in defining subjective identity, and individuals nowadays, -especially women, says Beck-, must make a much greater reflexive and emotional effort when constructing their paths of life. According to the author, "[t]here is no longer any 'model' that defines women's life prospects – they are both more open and less protected than before" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 55).

As historian Eric Hobsbawm described western cultural change and how individuals began to overcome society's established values:

La revolución cultural de fines de siglo XX debe, pues, entenderse como el triunfo del individuo sobre la sociedad o, mejor, como la ruptura de los hilos que hasta entonces habían imbricado a los individuos en el tejido social. Y es que este tejido no sólo estaba compuesto por las relaciones reales entre los seres humanos y sus formas de organización, sino también por los modelos generales de esas relaciones y por las pautas de conducta que era de prever que siguiesen en su trato mutuo los individuos, cuyos papeles estaban predeterminados, aunque no siempre escritos. (336)

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<sup>2</sup> By the 1980s, many comics already included sex and violence, and publishers decided to detach themselves from the CCA norms. In 2001 Marvel Comics officially withdrew from the CCA rating system, marking officially the fall of the institution as a relevant institution in comic book rating (Rogers "Comics Code Authority: Defunct Since 2009?")

Four adolescent girls. The first two played by society's rules. The second pair had their own rules: two completely different visions of America's teenagers.

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