

Harley Quinn season 4 would like to remind you who the fourth pillar of DC's universe is



The very existence of the *Harley Quinn* animated series has always been a testament to its titular chaos agent's status as one of the most wildly popular characters Warner Bros. and DC have ever created. Instead of trying to directly adapt any one specific plot that's defined Harley over the years, the show has woven many of her now-signature quirks, like her love for Poison Ivy and her dalliances with antiheroism, into a definitive take on who she is.

As has been the case in the past, a big part of what makes *Harley Quinn's* fourth season sing is its ability to toe the line between celebrating and taking potshots at the larger superhero genre. But the thing that really sets this chapter of *Harley Quinn* apart and makes it feel like the series is still nowhere near losing steam is the way it steps back to have more than a little bit of fun with the reality of how

large Harleen Quinzel looms in the grand scheme of the DC brand.

Now that she's dumped the Joker (Alan Tudyk) for good, established herself as an independent villain, and finally made it official with Poison Ivy (Lake Bell), *Harley Quinn's* latest season sees Harley (Kaley Cuoco) reinvent herself as the newest member of the Bat Family.

With Batman (Diedrich Bader) still absent from Gotham, Batgirl (Briana Cuoco), Nightwing (Harvey Guillén), Robin (Jacob Tremblay), and Alfred (Tom Hollander) need all the help they can get keeping the city's cutthroat criminals in check. But with Ivy now leading the Legion of Doom, Harley's hero turn isn't just a matter of switching teams – it's her signing up to punch out loved ones in the name of justice, and much of this season revolves around what a precarious situation that is.

As season 4 opens, *Harley Quinn* seems like it's just poking fun at how Harley Quinn™ has gone through multiple reinventions that made her a far more morally complex character as she jumped from *Batman: The Animated Series* to DC's comic books and beyond. But woven into the show's jokes about how uncomfortable Harley's fixation with Nightwing's ass makes him or the kinky strain Ivy and Harley's new jobs put on their relationship is an interesting bit of commentary about what Harley Quinn has come to represent for DC Entertainment and parent company Warner Bros. Discovery.

When DC Comics' artist-turned-publisher-turned-president Jim Lee referred to Harley as the "fourth pillar of [DC's] publishing line" back in 2016, he was talking about how significant a presence she'd become in the publisher's monthly books, where she was then starring in four different ongoing series. Unlike the other three pillars – Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman – the proliferation of Harley-centric comics spoke to a relatively recent but undeniably consistent growth

in interest from fans rather than her being a foundational part of DC's brand identity.

Harley didn't have a particularly deep canon compared to her peers in her early days of fame, and it wasn't until writer Amanda Conner and artist Jimmy Palmiotti took over the *Harley Quinn* comics in 2014 that it felt like that was beginning to change. But almost as soon as she debuted, fans were as ready to devour new stories about her as they were eager to drop cash on merchandise emblazoned with her face. Unsurprisingly, DC Entertainment has spent years seizing on this opportunity with projects ranging from kids shows like *DC Super Hero Girls* to more mature fare like *Batman: The Enemy Within*, both live-action *Suicide Squad* films, and Cathy Yan's *Birds of Prey* feature.

What's funny about *Harley Quinn* sending Harley off to the Batcave to be scolded about her inability to refrain from killing is how the show's tapping into the idea of her being more of an antihero than a straight-up villain and making fun of how that shift for her across DC's brand has sometimes made it seem like the company doesn't know what to do with her.

As Batman's more traditional proteges begrudgingly accept Harley's help tracking down a masked psychopath who's mutilating rich and beautiful Gothamites, *Harley Quinn* repeatedly emphasizes that her criminal background actually makes her pretty damn good at hero work. Similarly, Harley's own twisted moral compass is what makes it somewhat easy for her to take "no" for an answer when Ivy refuses to give her details about who the Gotham butcher might be.

In both situations, you're meant to understand that – more than her athleticism or analytic mind – Harley's innate adaptability is what makes her formidable and capable of doing things that others can't. For all that capability, however, you're also meant to understand that Harley's determination to become a member of the Bat Family isn't working – at least in

part – because she's been pushed to this point in her life by a forward-moving momentum that's out of her control.

Harley Quinn stops short of flat-out saying that its central character's popularity can only do so much to counteract her feeling overexposed and stretched thin by an enterprise that knows how much value she brings to the table. But as Harley's stressing about whether she's being true to herself by working with the Bats, it seems very much like *Harley Quinn's* trying to make a point about how a character becoming a big fish in the IP pond can lead to their ending up in messy situations that don't exactly feel "right" or true to who they are. What does feel very on-brand, though, is *Harley Quinn* digging into all of this while sticking to its guns about keeping Harley's queerness, crassness, and irreverence regarding the rest of DC's brand quite intact – all of which are feats, especially in Warner Bros. Discovery's David Zaslav era.

The first three episodes of *Harley Quinn's* fourth season are now streaming on Max, with new episodes dropping every Thursday.

<https://www.theverge.com/23815375/harley-quinn-season-4-dc>