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English 235

Misogyny in Heroes: A Look into the Objectification of Women in
The Watchmen

Robert Parker defines objectification as the “treating [of] someone as an other” (167). While not always an unnatural response or relationship between people, problems arise when the objectification becomes abusive. Famous feminists such as Laura Mulvey have investigated objectification of this type. This sort of exploitation arises from rampant misogyny. In Alan Moore’s *The Watchmen* the heroic landscape is dominated by normalized misogynistic ideals, which leads to its women becoming objectified as little more than interests of the male characters.

Historically, superhero comics have been rather unfriendly to women. *The Watchmen* is guilty of perpetuating this trend. According to Geoff Klock in *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, *Watchmen* is a “revisionary superhero narrative,” or “a superhero text that [. . .] is a ‘strong misreading’ of its poetic tradition, a comic book whose ‘meaning’ is found in its relationship with (an)other comic book(s)” (25). Erin Keating in *The Female Link: Citation and Continuity in Watchmen*, for the most part, agrees with Klock, in that *Watchmen* successfully challenges and misrepresents many comic book tropes. However, Keating points out that Klock widely ignores the lack of revisionary attention in case of female characters (1267). The women of *Watchmen* maintain a sense of continuity within the comic book tradition, consistently being in a subservient position to the male leads. This submissive position women fill in the novel is

highlighted by the obvious patriarchal structure that defines interactions between its characters. The patriarchy is steeped in the concept of “hegemonic masculinity,” an idea based on the notions that “women exist as potential sexual objects for men” and that “women provide heterosexual men with sexual validation” (Donaldson). With this definition, it is easy to see the apparent misogyny in the patriarchy observed throughout *Watchmen*. This misogyny affects not only the way the female characters are treated, but how the male characters act as well. Keating suggests that women are under examined by Klock, and, while I agree, it is also possible to inspect how the males of the novel conform to the normalized ideals of misogyny through the means of objectifying women.

Despite their personality, each male character objectifies women in some way, and thusly reinforces normalized misogyny. Whether it be Edward Blake’s (The Comedian) ruthless amorality, Jon Osterman’s (Mr. Manhattan) overwhelming capabilities of power in comparison to his human counterparts, or Dan Dreiberg’s (Nite Owl) shy passivity, the male leads fulfill misogynistic societal ideals that encourage a sexual stratification which places women below men. The influence of women in the novel is thereby reduced down to terms of how their sexuality is utilized by their male relations, all of whom take advantage of their positions on top of the normalized patriarchy.

The character of Edward Blake acts as the stereotypical violent male. When inspecting his relationship with his overseas mistress that he acquired during his employment in the Vietnam War, this is especially evident. The chronologically earliest interactions between the two are displayed on the fourth panel of page nineteen in chapter four. They are shown smiling and embracing each other (IV. 19). This image strictly contrasts the end of their relationship. His mistress approaches him as he prepares to leave Vietnam as the war came to a close. She

assaults him in response to his insistence on leaving her to tend to their child alone, to which he responds by shooting her between the eyes. He screams “whore” and “bitch” at her before her execution (II. 13-14.). The stark difference between these two scenes points to the abusive-masculine trait of being dominant and in control. The Vietnamese woman was sexually objectified by Blake. He felt the need for sex while overseas and feigned compassion to the woman in order to get what he wanted. Once he was through with her, he exposes his true intentions towards her, desiring no lasting ties to the woman, despite observable responsibilities towards her. His expletives used towards her before her murder emphasize her sex and sexuality, furthering Blake’s objectification of her as a commodity that only has its sexuality to offer. Blake’s ruthlessness leaves no room for him to display respect towards women, implying his entrenchment in a patriarchy that he recognizes and takes full advantage of.

The imagery used to depict Blake emphasizes his brutality and fertility. For example, the final two panels of page nine of chapter four depict his actions during the war effort in an aggressive manner. Panel number five pictures him posed with a flame thrower. The phallic shape of the gun, poised at his waist, and the projectile of the flame thrower being colored white, like ejaculate, ties his violence to the notions of fertility and power. In this way, Blake’s violent sexuality is suggested to be overwhelming and intense. He cares little for intimacy. Sexuality for him is more of an assertion of dominance, rather than an emotional desire. The implications of fertility imply the generational perpetuation of the misogynistic patriarchy.

Edward Blake’s patriarchal misogyny is further exposed when inspecting his relationships with the women of the Jupiter-Juspeczyk family. During the rape of Sally, Blake and the man who puts an end to the violence, Hooded Justice, exhibit hypermasculine traits

(II. 6-8.). Blake assaults Sally for defending herself as he became increasingly sexually forward. The blood imagery relates violence with sexuality, allowing for Moore to cast lust and violence in the same light. This scene mirrors Blake's reactionary abuse in the murder of his mistress that was examined earlier. Blake's abuse arises from his acceptance of his position in the patriarchy, from which stems his hypermasculine sense of dominance over the women he objectifies. In addition to the violence of Blake, Sally is rescued by the hero, Hooded Justice, who is depicted as a large, hulking, muscular man (II. 7). Hooded Justice adheres to the stereotypical ideal male image. His size and bulk contrasts the bloodied Sally lying submissively on the ground. This adherence to the stereotype further paints women as "damsels in distress," dependent on the power of men for their safety. Misogyny is thereby normalized, as the treatment of Sally, both negative and positive, puts her at the mercy of the way males treat her. Following her rape, Laurie is told by Hooded Justice to "Get up... and for God's sake, cover yourself up" (II. 8.) In telling her to cover up, even her savior suggests that the rape could be attributed to her sexuality and not the aggressiveness of Blake. The subservience of women throughout the novel is thusly intensified, with their sexuality being hinted at as a weakness, rather than a freedom that they can wield.

Brandy Ball Blake asserts in *Watchmen: The Graphic Novel as Trauma Fiction* that the graphic novel medium is especially successful in relating the experience of trauma to readers. This is done through mirroring the symptoms of PTSD, particularly through the use of repetition, both linguistically and visually. Though Blake states that this is evident in "how Laurie Juspezyk contends with the rape of her mother," this topic is brushed over and unexplored (Blake). The same is true of how Sally contends with her own rape.

The trauma caused by the sexual dominance Blake asserts over the women he objectifies further reinforces the patriarchy by exemplifying the effects men can have on women. This is evident in the ways Laurie and Sally deal with the actions of Edward Blake. Despite the brutal rape, Sally displays several instances where she expresses affection towards Blake. One such instance occurs when Sally is visited by Laurie during Blake's funeral and she remarks "Poor Eddie" (II.1). The other happens during the novel's final chapter. After the climax, Laurie and Dan visit Sally as a couple, she sees them off, and is shown kissing the image Blake in her old photo of the Minutemen (XII.30). It is thereby obvious that Sally developed feelings for her one-time sexual abuser. In doing so, Moore and Gibbons depict Sally's character as a woman that has so internalized and accepted societal misogyny to the point of developing an attachment to a male solely on the basis of his overbearing dominance. The reoccurrence of Sally's photograph of the Minutemen, as seen before the rape flashback and as well when she kisses Blake's image, further ties her lasting affection to traumatic memory. In a similar light, Laurie comes to the traumatic revelation of her true patronage through a series of repeated visual and textual flashbacks, thus mirroring symptoms of PTSD. By using the comic book medium, Moore and Gibbons were able to intensify the trauma their leading ladies experience at the hands of a society so deeply entrenched in hegemonic masculinity. Blake's dominance was great enough to hold crippling influence over the women he objectified even after his death left him unable to consciously assert it himself.

Jon Osterman, despite his godlike apathy and disconnect with humanity, maintains the normalized male patriarchy. His adherence to hegemonic masculinity derives from his stoic paternalism that is felt by his love interests.

The character of Laurie is initially introduced as an object under Jon's watch. Aside from the beginnings of their relationship, Laurie has spent the majority of her time preceding the events of the novel living with Jon dissatisfied, acting as an object for sex. Her position as a sexual object can be observed throughout her interactions with her mother and the military. Laurie's mother first zeroes in on Laurie's relationship with Jon by chastising her with the statement "the only difference is that they didn't have to get the H-bomb laid every once in a while" (II.8). Her own mother reinforces misogyny by ignoring all emotional aspects between the two, reducing Laurie's relationship to one that is purely sexual. Furthermore, the military's view on Laurie is expressed when, after Jon flees for Mars, one agent screams in her face: "Listen lady, if our psychologists are right, 'Jon' is quite possibly never coming back! Your meal ticket has flown the coop!" (III.23). The agent acts as a microcosm of the US government, representing its misogyny towards women. In addressing her as 'lady,' the agent removes her identity and diminishes her to only her gender. Likewise, by referring to Jon as her 'meal ticket,' the agent implies that Laurie is entirely reliant on the man she lives with, and exposes the government's feelings that she served no other purpose to them besides being Jon's lover. Jon's relationship to Laurie is strongly rooted in her dependence on him for shelter and her submission to his sexual objectification of her. Society observes, accepts, and encourages this relationship highly in part because Jon's supreme power turns him, against his intentions, into a beacon of hypermasculinity atop the patriarchy who is thusly allowed, and almost expected, to be dominant over women.

Another instance of Jon's paternalism over Laurie is seen when Laurie tries to convince Jon to use his power to save humanity in chapter nine. Jon is largely indifferent to Laurie's attempts at convincing him that mankind is worth saving until, in her traumatized state upon the

realization of her true parentage, Jon sympathizes with her and realizes that each life is “rare” and its own unlikely miracle (IX.26-28). Even when Laurie succeeds at convincing John to save the world, it is through no action of her own. Jon is not convinced by any action coming from Laurie’s own agency as a person, but rather by her reaction to the action of a man. Laurie essentially goes to a man for help with saving the world, and accomplishes her goal with the help of a man. By approaching Jon for help, Laurie acknowledges Jon’s paternal dominance over her by recognizing herself as helpless and in need of Jon’s care once more.

Jon is depicted throughout the novel as emotionally vacant, and cannot therefore maintain a healthy relationship. This leaves him in a position where he is unable to commit wholeheartedly to a woman, despite his best intentions, and, therefore, is left with objectifying women on the basis of their sexuality. He favors attractiveness to close, personal relationships. Upon leaving his first love, Janey, for a much younger Laurie, Jon makes this abundantly clear. Janey even acknowledges his objectification, exclaiming to Jon about Laurie “You tell her! You tell her what it’s gonna be like when her face wrinkles up and her boobs start sagging and you’re still goddamn thirty!” (IV.18). Janey realizes that Jon’s superhuman immortality and detachment leave him incapable of actual love and only interested in a woman’s sexuality. Throughout the same chapter, Jon’s non-linear perception of time is expressed via textual and visual flashbacks, of which many are repeated, such as a picture of him and Janey falling to the ground, his first moments with both Janey and Laurie, and his breakup with Janey. His perception of time mirrors Brandy Blake’s assertion of repetition in graphic novels closely conveying the experience of trauma. Jon is thereby shown to be forlorn over his inability to love, yet incapable of doing anything about it. By contrasting Jon’s trauma with his newfound preference for beauty over connection, Moore supposes that Jon’s transformation into a superhuman gave him

immeasurable strength and, with that, a compulsion to comply with society's misogynistic tendency to objectify women on the grounds of their sexuality. This compulsion exists as an outgrowth of hegemonic masculinity's ties between the hypermasculine and dominance over women.

Dan Dreiberg, although quite different from Blake and Osterman, in that he displays masculine shortcomings, such as shyness and impotence, still manages to reinforce the misogyny in the superhero scene. He allows his superhero alter ego to help him achieve his masculinity by representing his sole link to the stereotypical masculine traits that define the upper rung of the patriarchy. This alter ego's grasp on the masculine is rooted in his objectification of Laurie, which is facilitated by the sexual typifying of her as a female in a heroic role. Laurie seldom displays her heroism throughout the plot. The two instances of her engaging in physical prowess and her own personal capability are beside Dreiberg. Through this tie between the normalized overt sexuality of Laurie's heroism and Dan's use of it to fulfill his expectations of masculinity he derives from existing in a patriarchy, Moore reinforces normalized misogyny.

The first occurrence is when Dan and Laurie fend off thugs while walking through New York to discuss Laurie's sexual frustration with Jon. After the fight, the illustrations of Dave Gibbons imply a certain sexuality behind their teamwork. The second occasion takes place when the two spontaneously decide to suit up and rescue the tenants of a burning apartment. Upon saving the tenants, the two begin have sex and Dan admits that "the costumes ma[d]e it good" (VII.28). When including sexuality in each heroic scene of hers, it is made evident that sex is an integral part of the female heroine. Be it with Dan or Jon, Laurie is never capable of separating her sexuality from her heroism. She is seen to express little independence, and thus allows herself to submit to objectification.

Early on in their relationship, Dan is shown to be impotent with Laurie. This can be observed during their first attempt at sex, which occurs in chapter seven. Dan struggles to perform sexually while the TV plays a program lauding Adrian Veidt in his costume for his physical prowess (VII.14-15). This, in addition to Dan's assertion explained earlier that the costumes make [sex] good," reinforce the idea that heroism is intimately linked with great physical ability. Once Dan achieves sexual fruition while in costume, he links his virility to the excitement and power he feels as his alter ego. In doing so, Dan is too made victim of the patriarchy. His alter ego's apparent success is attained through sexual conquest over Laurie, unearthing the patriarchy's knack for defining the masculine in terms of sexual achievement.

While with Dan at dinner, Laurie acknowledges the presence of misogyny in the heroic scene, but ultimately does nothing to prevent her own submission to the patriarchy. Laurie muses to Dan, "You remember that costume? With that stupid little short skirt and the neckline going down to my navel? God, that was so dreadful" (I.25). Paul Petrovic, in *The Culturally Constituted Gaze: Fetishizing the Feminine from Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's Watchmen to Zack Snyder's Watchmen*, compares this scene with its counterpart in Zack Snyder's filmic rendition of *Watchmen*, asserting that the slight changes in the film make this line from Laurie "facetious" rather than "critical," as he supposes it is in the novel. Calling Laurie's comment in the print version "critical," however, is a too-simple misreading. Though perhaps critical when first said, Laurie's later actions paint her as submissive to the patriarchy rather than combative with its expectations. Despite her awareness of society, the heroic scene, particularly, over-sexualizing her appearance, Laurie allows it to happen. She even encourages the costume's ties to attraction when it comes to curing Dan of his impotence. By allowing this to happen, Laurie is far from critical; she simply is aware of her situation and submits to its expectations regardless.

Dan takes advantage of this submission and thereby attains masculine status and fits well into the mold of hegemonic masculinity.

Throughout *Watchmen*, women are repeatedly subjected to the misogyny of the patriarchal society around them. Furthermore, each male lead, regardless of their differences in character, reinforces hegemonic masculinity through their inevitable objectification of women. This blurs the line on Klock's assertion on *Watchmen* being "revisionary." Whether it be Blake's brutal sense of dominance, Osterman's superhuman paternalism, or Dreiberg's objectification of Laurie's in order to overcome his shortcomings and reach masculine fruition, each female character acts as a lesser part in a male dominated society.

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