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The Super-Male and the Super-Female:

Gender Criticism in *Watchmen*

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Abstract

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This essay aims to analyze if the graphic novel *Watchmen* criticizes the conventions of the superhero comic genre in regards to gender. The literary theory applied is gender studies. The essay examines the visual portrayal of male and female characters, as well as the male-dominated narrative. The novel does, to some extent, satirize the genre conventions. This can be seen in the hyperbolic visual portrayals of the characters, as well as the comments made on them. However, as there is a lack of self-aware criticism, the novel could not be considered as a satire of the visual representation of genders within the genre, but rather a reinforcement of them. Furthermore, the male-dominated narrative is present in *Watchmen*, and Laurie could be seen as satirizing this genre convention, as she is a hyperbolic interpretation of the girlfriend archetype. However, there is little change or self-aware critique against the genre norms here as well, thus it cannot be considered satire. Laurie does, however, show criticism of the violence against women within the genre by making a number of comments on the attempted rape of her mother. This may not be satire but she does provide commentary of this trope. In conclusion, while there are instances of criticism, the novel as a whole cannot be considered satire of the superhero genre.

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Introduction

Watchmen, written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons, is a graphic novel with a different portrayal of superheroes. These are not the conventional heroes usually associated with the genre. Most of the superheroes are ordinary human beings that, for one reason or the other, started donning costumes and fighting crime. On the surface, however, the heroes in this world continue the trend of over-sexualized women and masculine supermen, although this may not be the only conclusion to draw from it. In this essay, I will analyze how *Watchmen* applies the conventions of the superhero genre in regards to gender and whether they are criticized or reinforced.

The concept of a graphic novel that satirizes social and political issues is not uncommon. Jill E. Twark discusses satire in graphic novels and comics and argues that it can be seen as part of cultural history. She explains how satire can allow its creators to explore parts of contemporary society that are otherwise overlooked by creating their own version of society in their works where their message can be heard more clearly (176). Kalman Goldstein further discusses the topic of satire in comics. He states that one of the ways satire can be read is that it exaggerates things in the world to show their ridiculous nature (82). As Twark and Goldstein suggest, satire in comics is sometimes done by enlarging certain topics to disproportionate levels to showcase them more clearly. The method of creating a world where certain social issues are highlighted is something that this essay will explore in *Watchmen*, such as how it highlights the genre conventions.

At this stage, it is important to establish what view superhero comics as a genre has expressed regarding gender. Aaron Taylor analyzes this topic from the visual sense, he states that superhero bodies have always had a close link to gender. Drawing superheroes in a highly gendered way has been done ever since Superman arrived in the 1930s, where he was depicted with a highly muscled body. This supersexuality of the male and female characters was established to allow for clear binaries between genders in superhero comics (345). Taylor also suggests that the increasingly clear gender differences were drawn in superhero comics to separate the women as “other” in order to define the “male subjectivity” in a western masculine culture (353).

Taylor references *The Comic Book Heroes* by Will Jacobs and Gerard Jones, when discussing the gendered traits associated with the genre. Their definition of the

genre conventions of gender is that it depicts male characters with “pin-heads and boulder muscles and steroid-veins [that are] drawn with a deadly earnestness, and with none of the charm of caricature” and female characters “perpetually bending over, arching their backs and heaving their anti-gravity breasts into the readers’ faces” (Taylor 345-346). The physical body construction in regards to the illustrations of these characters changes constantly, however, and Taylor links these changes to the ever-changing body ideals of western society (351). For my study, these visual gendered traits will be analyzed in *Watchmen*.

Apart from the gendered illustrations of superhero characters, it is also important to address that this genre is mainly male-dominated. Brad J. Ricca addresses this topic in one of his studies. He states that the superhero genre is often praised for its portrayal of women, as they are quite often seen as powerful depictions. Despite this, Ricca further mentions that they are still subservient to the male characters, and to some extent to the readers, who are also generally male. According to Ricca, many of the female characters within the genre started out as love interests or sidekicks to the male characters, but then took on the masculine traits of their male counterparts, thus starting to become more independent (182). In the 1980s and 1990s, however, a trend of violence towards the female characters in comics occurred that left them once again to be defined by the male characters, this time through mourning (183).

The representation of female heroes in comics was the groundwork for a study by Carolyn Cocca where she showcases the history of representations of female heroes in different media. She states that media overall need to represent all aspects of the female identity and not only as “supportive, interested in their own looks and in romance, in need of rescue, and emotional” (4). Regarding the superhero comic’s genre, Cocca mentions that, in the 1960s, a theme that became prominent was that female characters were often given the suffix “girl” in their superhero name rather than “woman” in order to appear less threatening. Additionally, the female characters’ personalities were generally timid despite their powers, such as Supergirl who was just as powerful as her male counterpart but was held back due to her gentle and insecure nature (9). Similar to what Ricca stated, Cocca mentions how the theme of violence toward the female characters became quite prominent within the genre later on. Female characters were, more so than the male characters, subject to harsh

violence in forms of murder or severe injuries. Cocca claims that this partially served to empower the male characters, as this would often lead to revenge stories (12).

Taylor states that Superman was tied to his masculine gender identity already from his creation. He was, however, not the only hero to arrive in the early 1900s with a close link to gender. Wonder Woman is a character often associated with the female sex, and this is not a coincidence according to Mitra C. Emad. In one of her articles Emad argues that comic books have since the 1940s reflected culture and identity in the United States (954). She suggests that Wonder Woman's body is a continuing reflection of gender, nation, female empowerment and submission (956). She mentions how the character was originally created as a response to the masculine majority in comic books and that the original writer of the character saw it as an improvement to the previously male-dominated market (957). Emad emphasizes how the character originally served as a messenger of female empowerment that encouraged women to be more independent (959). However, unlike other male superheroes, Wonder Woman displays sexuality just as much as nationalism (979).

In "Men of Steel? Rorschach, Theweleit, and Watchmen's Deconstructed Masculinity" Mervi Miettinen applies Klaus Theweleit's theory of masculinity to the superhero genre. Miettinen states that Theweleit sees the superhero as the "new masculine ideal" with their hardened bodies (104). When describing the definition of masculinity, Miettinen claims that it varies greatly. He states that it could be the expectations that society has of the male body. It is also described as being the characteristics that differentiate men from women. Miettinen states that within the western cultures masculinity is often described as behavior that shows "proper morality, a trained body, and self discipline" (104). Miettinen also cites Emad's article about Wonder Woman, and from the evidence in her text he claims that superheroic hypermasculinity is sometimes achieved through a narrative that displays "highly misogynistic representation[s] of female characters, from the hypersexualized representation of the female character going 'berserk'" (105). Furthermore, Miettinen states that the female characters in superhero comics often serve as a means of motivation for male characters rather than being independent characters of their own (105), which was also stated by Cocca and Ricca.

Regarding *Watchmen*, previous research tends to focus on the male characters and masculinity. There are, however, several female characters in the novel that need to be analyzed as well. Sarah Donovan and Nick Richardson carried out an analysis of

two of the female characters, the first and second Silk Spectre. In this analysis they examine whether or not these two characters can be considered feminist portrayals. As a conclusion Donovan and Richardson claim that there can be many different feminist interpretations of these characters, without any of them being the singular correct one (183). While they display traits that are associated with different forms of feminism, none of the female characters can be said to be a complete representation of any of these.

Aeon J. Skoble states that *Watchmen* was part of a movement that aimed to “rethink” the superhero comic book genre. He claims that it, along with *The Dark Knight Returns*, revised the genre and asked new questions of how a superhero should be (29). However, it must be stated that the opposite of what Skoble argues has been argued for as well. This argument is that *Watchmen* is a continuation of the unequal and male-oriented genre conventions. Erin M. Keating argues for this idea and suggests that the female characters in *Watchmen* are not as well established as the male ones. Furthermore, Keating suggests that the characters in *Watchmen* do not represent gender identities in society but rather those of the genre and that they are constrained by the superhero characteristics of the past (1269-1270).

Keating’s argument is further solidified by another study carried out by Kayla Derbyshire. She argues for many of the same points as Keating, such as the sexualized representation of the female characters and how the novel continues the male-dominated trends of the genre (1). Both Keating and Derbyshire highlight the issue of *Watchmen* including many themes of sexism, violence against women and an overall male-dominated narrative where the men hold all the power. In this essay I will not argue against the existence of these themes, but instead argue that they may serve a purpose, that purpose being criticism of the genre conventions in regards to gender and representation.

Previous works within the genre have generally portrayed men and women with clear sexualized traits in order to create binaries between the two genders. Furthermore, the role of women in these narratives has been submissive to the male characters in that they are only defined as characters through their relationships with the male characters. The aim of this essay is to analyze if the graphic novel *Watchmen* criticize or reinforce these genre conventions.

To analyze the genre conventions in the novel, the following questions will be in focus. The first question that will be addressed is how male and female characters

are represented visually in comparison to the genre conventions established in previous studies. Secondly, how the novel either criticizes or reinforces the male-dominated narrative.

Two characters that will not be addressed to a larger extent in this essay are the Comedian and Rorschach. Both of these characters do show the misogyny of the genre and so they will be mentioned but to delimit this essay they will not be a large part of the text. Furthermore, they have been analyzed quite extensively by previous research.

The literary theory applied in this essay is gender studies. This theory will be applied to examine female characters and their representation (Barry 135). Furthermore, the male characters will be analyzed to the same extent. As women in the genre have been submissive to the male characters in the narratives, I will also apply gender studies that to analyze women's part as "other" as well as the power relationships between the male and female characters (Barry 135). Simone de Beauvoir discusses this idea of women as "other" in *The Second Sex*, thus her work will be considered in this essay. Furthermore, Judith Butler is a central figure in the development of the field of gender studies. Thus, some of her concepts will be considered as well. Lastly, concepts such as hegemonic masculinity, developed by R.W. Connel, will be applied to analyze the constructions of the male characters in the novel.

Visual Masculinity and Femininity in *Watchmen*

Watchmen includes many of the stereotypes of the genre in regards to gender portrayal. In the following paragraphs the essay will showcase how *Watchmen* illustrates the male and female characters in the visual sense and how they either reinforce or criticize the genre conventions.

Characters such as Ozymandias and Dr. Manhattan follow the genre conventions established in previous studies in regards to the visual representation of male heroes. These are the anatomically disproportionate depictions with the highly muscled body, often shown in such a way that displays it clearly to the reader. Dr. Manhattan is the only true superhero in the novel, as he is the only one to possess superhuman abilities. These powers make him a god among men, with abilities that are only limited by his own imagination. Manhattan used these powers when resurrecting himself, making a body that visually follows the genre conventions of the muscled male superhero.

Dr. Manhattan's masculine body can be seen from the first panel in which he appears. The reader is presented with a full body view from the side that depicts his muscled body clearly, as he is not wearing clothes (I 20). Most depictions of the character after this display him in this way, naked and visually at the center. At the end of chapter IV the reader is presented with a book written by professor Milton Glass, a fictional character in the novel. The book is titled "Dr. Manhattan: Super-Powers and the Superpowers". On the front cover of this book, Dr. Manhattan is depicted in the pose originally seen in Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian man" (29). The original painting depicts the importance of proportions in the human body (Gill, Moss and Naini 278), in other words, the ideal body, which in this case happens to be male. Taking the purpose of the original painting into account, it is clear that professor Glass intended to connect da Vinci's painting and the ideals it represents to how the world views Dr. Manhattan. This interpretation means that Manhattan now represents the new ideals of the male body in this world.

As stated in the introduction of this essay, Emad and Taylor contend that superheroes are reflections of the body ideals that exist in society. As Professor Glass made an association between Dr. Manhattan and body ideals with the cover of his book, it can be concluded that they serve a similar purpose in the world of *Watchmen*. The paradox of this is evident from the fact that no human within the world of

Watchmen would be able to achieve the ideals Dr. Manhattan displays, physically or otherwise. In this picture, Dr. Manhattan represents the masculine property of superheroes that emasculates ordinary men, as they depict unachievable physical ideals. Professor Glass mentions in the book, from which the cover picture previously discussed derived from, that “we are all living in the shadow of Manhattan” (IV 32). This statement shows how everyone within this fictional world is looking up to Manhattan and his godlike essence in power and body.

Evidence in the text also suggests insecurity of masculinity shaped by the arrival of Dr. Manhattan. This can be seen when some of the other superheroes are asked about their opinion of this new godlike being. Captain Metropolis is seen responding with insecurity that he is “very pleased” whilst pulling at his collar (IV 13). This reaction further illustrates the insecurity felt by men when facing the true superman. Metropolis does not want to express his fear or sense of insecurity publicly, as admitting to it would showcase his inferiority.

This indirect expression of fear of emasculation is also seen in the character of Bernard, a newsstand vendor. When the rumor of Dr. Manhattan spreading cancer to people near him reaches the newspapers, Bernard takes this chance to speak badly of the superhero. In one article, it is suggested that Manhattan and his first girlfriend Janey Slater could not connect sexually. Bernard exclaims that Manhattan is “[as] queer as a three dollar bill” and continues to express his disbelief of his own wife’s sexual fantasies of the godlike man (III 18). Bernard tries to make Manhattan smaller in his mind by making claims that he is queer, which could either be interpreted as strange or homosexual. However, the reference to his wife’s sexual fantasies does suggest that it is the latter. According to Judith Butler, there is often a form of distinction made between heterosexuality as “normative ‘self’” and homosexuality as “rejected ‘other’” (Barry 147). In other words, homosexuality goes against the norm. Furthermore, this connects to the idea of hegemonic masculinity discussed by R.W. Connell. According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity is the idea of the dominantly accepted type of masculinity that exists in society at a specific time (77). In this world, that masculinity is most likely connected to the ideals that the heroes such as Dr. Manhattan display. Connell also mentions that in this hegemonic system masculinities that associate with homosexuality are often subordinated and viewed in a negative way (78). The claim is thus made by Bernard to belittle Manhattan and

associate him with a subordinated form of masculinity, separating him in some way to make him feel better about himself and his masculinity.

As stated in the introduction of this essay, previous studies, such as the ones by Emad and Taylor, show that superheroes in comics are reflections of disproportionate gendered ideals of society. Characters such as Superman and Wonder Woman show what people wish to be rather than what they are, once again connecting to hegemonic masculinity. Dr. Manhattan represents this aspect within the world of *Watchmen*. His characterization could serve as criticism of the idolization of some sort of masculinity that is unachievable. Kevin Alexander Boon addresses this aspect of hero worship and states that:

“Despite the hero figure’s practical benefit to a culture as a whole, it is injurious at the level of individualized masculine identity, as the qualities of the idealized hero figure are always and necessarily absent from individual men” (304).

Boon’s statement illustrates why characters that display unachievable ideals are just as dangerous as they are inspirational. While Manhattan serves as a means of security to the world of *Watchmen*, his presence alone makes the idea of masculinity in this world complicated. Ordinary men, such as Bernard, are compared and contrasted with Manhattan and none can live up to him.

As stated earlier, a number of studies show that the conventions of the genre depict male superheroes visually as muscular and in great condition. These criteria are not only present in Dr. Manhattan, but the effect his body has on mortal men is clear throughout the novel, such as in the examples above. As stated by Miettinen, the superhero serves as a sort of masculine ideal to modern western society (104). This could therefore be seen as criticism of the genre as the visual conventions are highly emphasized. It could, however, also be seen as the novel reinforcing these conventions as there is little self-conscious criticism of this particular convention. Regardless, the comments on Dr. Manhattan made by the other characters do raise questions on how male superheroes are perceived by ordinary men.

Similar to Dr. Manhattan, Ozymandias, also known as Adrian Veidt, is often depicted in a way that aligns with the genre conventions. An example of a display of his muscled body is at a point where he performs a demonstration on TV. While

Laurie and Dan are about to have sex for the first time, the TV is on in the background where Ozymandias is doing an acrobatic demonstration. Adrian continues to receive praise for his performance by commentators while, at the same time, Dan is unable to perform sexually, which leads to the sexual act stopping (VII 15). Throughout these pages the reader is allowed to see Ozymandias' body from different angles, all showing his highly muscled body. The commentators on the TV point out that Adrian is in his forties, as well as how his face displays "confidence" (VII 14-15). These parallel acts show a connection between Dan's inability to perform sexually and Ozymandias' visual masculinity. In other words, it illustrates Dan's subordinate masculinity compared to Ozymandias. Once again, a form of hegemonic masculinity can be seen, as one is seen as superior to the other. This is further cemented later on in the chapter when the reader is provided with an illustration of Dan's body that shows him naked (20). While he still has apparent muscularity, it is nowhere near Adrian's or the conventions of the genre.

At the end of chapter XI, the reader is presented with an interview with Adrian in a newspaper article. The front page of this article is a full body shot of Ozymandias' body that further illustrates his highly muscled and trained body (29). Later on in the interview, the interviewer states that "[e]very girlfriend I've had in the past four years wanted to lay this guy, more than Jagger, more than Springsteen or D'Eath" (30). This statement is similar to the one made by Bernard regarding Dr. Manhattan. This also illustrates how Ozymandias, similarly to Manhattan, displays a masculine ideal that is desired and idolized.

These examples illustrate similar points to the ones raised in the example discussed earlier regarding Dr. Manhattan. Dan does not live up to the ideals that Adrian displays in his acrobatic show, and therefore he can be considered less of a man. Going back to Boon's statement regarding the detrimental features of the hero figure, Adrian similarly displays these unachievable ideals. As Boon stated, hero figures that depict ideals that are unachievable are more harmful than helpful to the individual man, and this can be seen clearly in *Watchmen*. This also connects similarly to Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinity. This could be seen as a form of critique, such as the one suggested by Twark and Goldstein in the introduction of this essay, where certain issues are emphasized, as both characters are visually hyperbolic interpretations of the genre conventions. However, as there is no clear self-aware commentary on it in the novel, they could also be seen as reinforcing these tropes of

the genre. Even this, however, does bring attention to the issues of representation of these conventions. The comments made by characters such as Bernard illustrate the same issues that were raised by Boon, such as how superheroes make ordinary men feel inferior.

The theme of sexualized female characters in superhero comics is also part of the genre standard. The readership of these comics largely consists of young heterosexual men, as stated by Taylor (346), which could be an explanation for this. With that specific audience in mind, it would be logical to market comic books with sexualized women on the cover. However, as stated in Emad's study, referenced earlier, while Wonder Woman may have been designed highly gendered and sexualized it was never the core of her character. She originally served as a symbol for feminism and inspiration for women. Her gendered portrayal in the drawings was simply a byproduct of the readership and cultural norms of gender at the time of publishing. In *Watchmen*, however, there is a character whose characterization is based around her sexual portrayal. This character is Sally Jupiter, the first Silk Spectre.

The first time the reader is introduced to Sally is in chapter II, when her daughter Laurie comes to visit her. Her first line in their interaction is to point out that her daughter has kept her figure (1). From this statement it is clear that Sally focuses on body image, whether it is her own or her daughter's. Later on in this interaction, she shows Laurie a short pornographic comic book where Sally is the main character. Laurie expresses her disgust with the book while her mother states that she finds it "flattering" (5). This shows how Sally is not only sexualized, but that she embraces it.

Further on in the same chapter, the reader is presented with a look into Sally's past. In these panels the visual design of Sally's costume is revealed. Similar to the descriptions from previous studies, regarding the conventions of female superheroes, Sally's visual portrayal is highly gendered and sexualized. Her body is shown to follow the curvaceous body proportions. Her costume is designed in such a way to make her gendered body emphasized, with a short skirt and fishnet stockings (5). Later on in chapter IX, it is stated in a newspaper article that Sally's intentions with dressing up in this costume were to expand her name and eventually move on to modeling and acting (29). She was, in other words, using her exposure in media as a superhero to become a model or actress.

This scene is followed by the infamous attempted rape of Sally by the Comedian, which will be addressed further in the next chapter of this essay. There is, however, a line in this part of the novel that connects to the visual representation of Sally. Whilst attempting the rape, he states that she “gotta have some reason for wearin’ an outfit like this” (II 6). He tries to justify his act by stating that she dresses provocatively. Sally remarks on this later on and says that she felt she played a part in the rape (IX 32). Whilst believing that a woman wearing a revealing outfit is an invite to sex is a ridiculous notion, this statement does show that Sally was aware of the sexual nature of her outfit, which is why she might have blamed herself for this.

Sally’s characterization, including her career as a superhero, is based around her body and sexual appeal. Other characters within the genre, such as Wonder Woman, might be depicted visually in a gendered and sexualized way but that is rarely the core of their character. The focus, however, from the adolescent male audience is most likely going to be on this visual representation of these female heroes. Thus, Sally could serve as a satire of this trope of the superhero genre. This trope being that female characters are nothing more than sexualized bodies, with no substance or character aside from this. These characters usually have a story, and there is more to them aside from their visual representation, but from the audience’s point of view the curvaceous body is what stays in focus. Sally is of course more than a sexualized body, such as being a mother to Laurie; however, her characterization is more focused on her body and sexual appeal than other characters within the genre.

As stated earlier, Laurie is disgusted by her mother’s appreciation of the erotic pictures. This is not the only time that Laurie questions the sexual aspects of both her and her mother’s costumes. Her own costume having a similar, if not even more so, connection to female sexual appeal. Already in chapter I she comments on how awful her costume was, specifically stating the “short skirt” and “neckline going down to [her] navel” as “dreadful” (25). She later on states that she “loathe[s]” her costume and calls it a “Halloween suit” (VIII 5). Despite these continuous comments, however, she still wears the costume several times by her own choice. Laurie tries to justify her donning the costume by saying it was for other people, such as her mother who forced her into crime fighting (I 25), or when she states that she wore it to help Dan perform sexually (VIII 5). Similar to her mother, she seems quite aware of the sexual nature of her costume. The difference here lies with the purpose behind their use of their feminine costumes. While her mother used her feminine costume and its

appeal to further her own career as a model, Laurie uses it for the people around her, most often the men. Originally using it to please her mother's wishes, she wears the costume unwillingly. Later on, however, she wears it yet again to please someone, this time her lover Dan. In a way she subjects herself to a form of objectification based on the sexual nature of her costume. She exclaims that she still hates the costume yet she wears it anyway, not for her own reasons but for a man.

The question then remains how Laurie could serve as criticism of this genre convention, and the answer is complex. Previous studies seem to argue that she is not. Derbyshire argues that both Laurie and Sally are nothing more than a continuation of the "female sex-symbol archetype" (3). Keating argues for many of the same points, including that Laurie's awareness of the sexual nature of her costume does not justify her wearing it (1271). Both Keating's and Derbyshire's ideas are valid in the most apparent sense. Both Laurie and Sally do wear hyperfeminine costumes, are portrayed with the same body ideals and subject themselves to be sexualized according to the conventions of the genre. This is, however, not the only interpretation suggested by earlier studies. Donovan and Richardson analyzed both of these characters from a postmodern feminist perspective. This being that women could dress up in hyperfeminine costumes but perform hypermasculine acts to deconstruct and question gender construction. They do, however, dismiss this idea, as it requires awareness of the idea in order to perform it, which Donovan and Richardson seem to agree that they are not. Instead they suggest it is a result of the fact that in order to fight crime alongside the men they had to feminize their identities to adhere to some form of norms (176). In other words, female superheroes can only fight crime if it is apparent that they are female.

While all the studies above bring up valid points, this essay contends that these constructions in *Watchmen* could serve a purpose. Laurie could be seen as the voice of women everywhere. She does not like the costumes and she hates that her mother was sexualized, but despite this she continues to use her own costume to help men and subjects herself to the male gaze. This can be interpreted as a symbol for how despite the feminist movement's efforts of changing the view of the female body and changing the representation of women in media, the same conventions keep on being used. Her mother serves as a symbol for the sexualization of women within the genre while Laurie herself symbolizes the voice for change, but this change never arrives. Even now almost forty years later, women within the genre continue to be

portrayed in the same way. An example of this is Emad's study of Wonder Woman where she states that the character was still portrayed in a feminine hypersexualized way in 2001 (976).

Laurie does, however, toward the end of the novel, mention that she intends to move on from the role of Silk Spectre, as it seems too "girly" to her. She also says that she wants a more practical suit in leather with a mask to cover her face, as well as a gun to wield (XII 30). According to Donovan and Richardson, the costume she describes seems to be more in line with that of her father, the Comedian, and also a more masculine approach (175). While this does signify that Laurie intends to change her costume, and in doing so she would change her feminine identity as a hero, the reader is never allowed to see if she follows through with the idea. According to Keating, Laurie's statement is only a joke (1286), although this is not specified in the novel. It could instead be interpreted as her being honest, as well as a message to the reader, or rather a question. Does Laurie need to change her costume to change the perception of her feminine identity as a hero or can she instead change the perception of her existing one through other means? This raises the question of how the genre conventions need to change in order to become more equal in regards to gender. According to Wong and Cuklanz, feminist humor sometimes "'exposes' reality in its 'desire for reform'" (72). While *Watchmen* might not be labeled feminist humor, it still follows the format by exposing the genre to show the desire for change. Laurie could be interpreted as critiquing the sexualization of women in the genre throughout the novel by questioning the tropes while also reinforcing them; this final statement by Laurie is thus left as an open-ended statement for the reader to think about these conventions and the imbalance within the genre. This could, however, also be read as a continuation of the genre conventions, as they do still reinforce the sexualized visual portrayal of these characters.

The male-dominated narrative and the subordinate girlfriend archetype

Apart from the visual differences within the genre of superhero comics, it also differs in how it applies roles to its characters with regard to gender. As stated in the introduction of this essay, in the study by Miettinen, there is a trope of creating a male-dominated narrative by portraying the female characters in a misogynistic way. Furthermore, as stated by Cocca and Ricca, this male-dominated narrative is often achieved by making the female characters subservient to the male ones in a number of ways, such as relationships and the characters' need of rescue. In other words, the male-dominated narrative is achieved by taking away the female characters' powers, both in the sense of superpowers as well as their ability to control their own lives. The misogynistic visual portrayal of the female characters is evident from what was discussed in the previous chapter regarding the female heroes' costumes and artistic depictions. The following paragraphs will analyze *Watchmen's* male-dominated narrative.

One example of how *Watchmen* maintains a male-dominated narrative is through the number of female to male members ratio. In a statistical analysis of the genre by Amanda Shendruk, the male and female representation within the genre can be seen quite evidently. In this analysis, she found that most superhero teams contained more male heroes than female (par. 7). The superhero teams in *Watchmen* follow this as well. The original Minutemen had two female members (II 5), while the other team, the Crimebusters, had only one (II 9). Thus, the narrative gives more space to the male than the female aspects of the story. Furthermore, the male characters' storylines are far more focused on. The main plot revolves around Ozymandias' plan for world peace, Rorschach's investigation and Dr. Manhattan's role on earth. All of these are male characters. The only main female character is Laurie, whose only purpose in the novel is to be a supportive character to her male counterparts. The male characters, however, are much more independent.

Almost all of the male superheroes in *Watchmen* seem to follow the archetype of the genre. As discussed in the previous chapter, Dr. Manhattan is visually hyperbolic male. Furthermore, he shows independent qualities that separate him from the dependent female trope of the genre. Dr. Manhattan's abilities make him completely emotionally distant from other humans, with the exception of an

occasional reference to Laurie as his “only link” and “only concern with the world” (IX 8). Masculine hero figures are, according to Boon, supposed to be emotionally distant and refuse relationships to “maintain the illusion of heroic qualities” to separate themselves as “other” (305-306). Thus, his emotional distance and separation from others is part of the same male hero image. This trait is not found in the female heroes in *Watchmen*, as both Laurie and Sally are continuously dependent on the male characters. Other male characters, such as Rorschach, equally represent an independent, bold male hero character. According to Miettinen, Rorschach represents a misogynistic part of the superhero genre that makes him “the extreme masculine (super)hero who must resist and reject women to survive”, thus exposing this trope of the genre (106). Furthermore, Rorschach’s ideology is often read as being extreme right wing, such as by Michael J. Prince who claims that Rorschach is an “ultraconservative of particular ilk”, which he also connects to his homophobia (822). This goes back to the idea of hegemonic masculinity discussed in the previous chapter, such as the rejection of homosexual traits. Rorschach’s overall character thus serves as a sort of symbol for the independent male hero who does not wish to be tied to anything female, whether it is through relationships or his own identity. The female characters need to be in a relationship with a male character while the male ones do not.

As the examples above illustrate, *Watchmen* has a male-dominated narrative where the male characters are the majority. Furthermore, some of these male characters represent the misogyny of the genre by making themselves detached from all female themes in both relationships and their own identities. The question that needs to be addressed then is how the novel could criticize this trend. The following paragraphs will focus on Laurie, and how she reinforces the girlfriend archetype of the genre and whether she could be seen as criticism of it.

From the first time the reader is introduced to Laurie she is shown to be dependent on her boyfriend, Dr. Manhattan. Rorschach comes to warn other heroes about the possible murderer that is after them. When meeting with Laurie and Manhattan, Rorschach barely pays any attention to her at all. Instead he continuously focuses the conversation on Dr. Manhattan. Rorschach says that he came to warn Dr. Manhattan and his “lady friend” (I 22), not even addressing Laurie properly. This goes back to what Simone de Beauvoir stated regarding the presentation of the genders. Women are always addressed as women whilst men are not always

necessarily referred to as men (15). Rorschach could have called her by name, but he specifically calls her by her gender. This is not the only instance where Laurie is seen as nothing more than Dr. Manhattan's girlfriend. When visiting her mother, Laurie ends up in a discussion of her mother's sexualization as Silk Spectre. As retaliation to Laurie her mother asks "[...] what about your image? At least I don't sleep with an H-bomb" (II 8). Her mother implies that Laurie's public image is based on her relationship with Dr. Manhattan. Laurie herself acknowledges that her life is largely based around this a number of times. One example is when she goes out to dinner with her friend Dan. Laurie states that she is a "kept woman for the military's secret weapon" and that she is only "kept around to keep [Dr. Manhattan] relaxed and happy" (I 25). In other words, her job is to be Manhattan's girlfriend.

Laurie's role as Manhattan's girlfriend could be seen as a continuation of the genre trope that female characters in superhero comics are supposed to be dependent on their male counterparts. An example of this could be Ricca's study where he uses the example of Lois Lane and her dependence on Superman (182). However, *Watchmen* uses this convention in such a way that it becomes quite prominent. The way Laurie is portrayed raises questions of how the genre portrays women as just romantic partners to the male lead characters, as she is a reinforced version of that archetype.

Laurie's dependence on the male character is further shown when she leaves Dr. Manhattan. Laurie immediately goes to another superhero, Dan, for emotional support (III 8). This goes back to what Cocca stated in the introduction of this essay, regarding how women in all media need to be represented differently and not only stereotypically, such as being emotional. After learning that Dr. Manhattan has left for Mars she even goes to live with Dan, since she does not have anywhere else to turn, further showing her dependence on the male characters. After only a short while they show flirtatious tendencies toward each other and eventually become lovers.

Laurie is depicted as moving from one boyfriend to another instead of starting a new life on her own. This is similar to how characters such as Wonder Woman are written sometimes. According to Tim Hanley, during the 1960s Wonder Woman was portrayed as losing her powers, moving from one man to the next (xi). Laurie starts out as Dr. Manhattan's girlfriend, hired by the government to keep their weapon happy and when that ends she is left alone with nothing, which leads to her moving in

with Dan, thus becoming dependent on him instead. In this case, Laurie once again reinforces the conventions of the genre.

A moment that serves as a form of symbolism for Laurie's dependence on the male characters appears in chapter IX when Dr. Manhattan takes her to Mars. Laurie immediately clutches her throat and eventually Manhattan realizes she cannot breathe on this foreign planet and he supplies her with air (3). Keating states that this moment showcases Laurie's dependence on Dr. Manhattan (1281), even for something as essential as air. While this moment is highly circumstantial, it illustrates the idea of Laurie's dependence on the male characters for her existence in the narrative.

Keating states that "Laurie is always romantically attached to one of the other heroes" (1271), similarly Derbyshire explains it as "[Laurie's] inability to maintain a non-romantic relationships with the male heroes" (5). Both of them also link this to the girlfriend archetype convention of the genre. One could argue, however, that it is the male characters who cannot have a non-romantic relationship with Laurie. Furthermore, Keating addresses the fact that that Laurie, and her mother, serve as a bond between the male characters (1272). She also claims that all of Laurie's power in the novel derives from her relationship with others, most importantly Dr. Manhattan. Keating goes on to discuss how even with Dan she is seen as subordinate to his power, through the fact that while they are both crimefighters, Dan has an abundance of gadgets that allow him the superior role. She also addresses one passage in the last chapter where Laurie breaks down after the destruction of New York and she begs Dan to love her because they are alive. Keating suggests that this passage represents Dan's superior role in their relationship (1280). As these studies suggest Laurie is subservient to the male characters and thus holds little power in the narrative on her own.

What then separates Laurie from the genre conventions? In Ricca's study he states that Lois Lane is one of the oldest female characters within the genre, originally appearing in the late 1930s. She, just like Laurie, is subservient to and dependent on her male superhero boyfriend, Superman, as she is constantly in need of rescue from him. Despite this, however, Ricca states that Lois is still "relentless, stylish, award-winning, and career minded" and that, as time moved on, she even had her own comic book and was given more personal power separate from Superman (182). Laurie, being published in *Watchmen* much later in the 1980s, shows even more dependence on her male counterpart. Not only is she in need of rescue, such as with the oxygen on

Mars, but her job, economy and overall role in the narrative is solely based on her dependence and reliance on the male characters. In other words, *Watchmen* reinforces this trope to such a level that it could be seen as satirical. The novel showcases this trope of the genre and the flaws of it. Laurie is constantly in a relationship with a male superhero, she rarely has any power over her own life and overall follows the description by Ricca and Cocca to such a high extent that she becomes a stereotype of the dependent female superhero. This does not, however, need to be the case as it could be argued that Laurie is a reinforced version of the archetype, without being read as satire. Regardless, her portrayal raises questions of how women are portrayed within the genre.

Another convention that appeared during the 1980s was the graphic violence toward the female characters. These trends are explained by Ricca as acts of murder, suicide, physical and mental abuse. This convention once again led the female characters into the trope of aiding to bring the male characters to the forefront, once again through rescuing or mourning the female characters exposed to this violence (183). Cocca also addresses this issue and mentions many of the same aspects as Ricca. She mentions that this trope was sometimes called “Women in refrigerators” as a reference to a Green Lantern character that had been killed and stuffed in a refrigerator (12).

These trends are also present in *Watchmen*, most prominently through the attempted rape of Sally Jupiter. This scene has been analyzed by previous studies quite extensively. Keating states that the aftermath of the act undermines Sally as the other heroes asked her not to go public with it, to maintain the positive image of their superhero group, the Minutemen (1273). As stated earlier, the Comedian refers to Sally’s clothing when initiating the act. This was also addressed by Derbyshire, who states that aspect makes the scene “sickening” (6). She goes on to discuss the character that saved Sally in the situation, Hooded Justice, who simply disregards the event and asks Sally to put her clothes on. Derbyshire also addresses the issue of Sally later on blaming herself for the event. In general, Derbyshire sees this part of *Watchmen* as a missed opportunity of addressing this issue clearer and argues instead that the scene only furthers the genre trope of the “damsel in distress” (6-7). Donovan and Richardson also address the act. They emphasize that it illustrates the idea that some men believe women who dress in a certain way are advertising for sexual acts (178).

While all previous studies listed above bring up many valid points, they all seem to agree that it is nothing more than another example of gratuitous violence against women within the genre. This essay argues, however, that it provides different perspectives on the issue. The act is commented on by many of the other characters. Rorschach calls the event nothing more than a “moral lapse” on the Comedians side (I 21). As stated earlier, the former Nite Owl, Hollis Mason, does not seem to focus on the issue too much, besides addressing how they hid the act to protect the image of the group. Sally herself, as stated earlier, blames herself for what happened. The Comedian is confronted by Laurie about the rape later on and tries to justify it by saying he did it “only once” (IX 21).

All the characters in the novel seemingly either disregard the whole matter, try to hide it or even blame Sally herself. Only one character in the novel seems to take the matter seriously, thus providing a voice of reason, in this case Laurie. From the first scene that the act is mentioned Laurie comments on it and questions everyone’s disregard of it. When Rorschach calls the act a “moral lapse” it infuriates her and she mentions to Rorschach that the Comedian broke her mothers ribs and that her mother could have choked (I 21). Furthermore, when Laurie meets her mother, they discuss the matter as well. Sally tries to disregard it as “history” to which Laurie replies “Yeah, well so’s Dachau” (II 1-2), thus comparing it to the Holocaust and making the argument that just because it happened a long time ago does not mean it was not horrible. Also, as stated earlier, she confronts the Comedian himself about it, to which he has little to say in his defense. Laurie continuously makes comments on the attempted rape that nobody else seems to take seriously. Laurie constantly questions the other characters’ disregard of it. In that way, Laurie could be seen as criticizing the “women in refrigerators” trend in superhero comics as a whole.

It could also be read as shifting the center of attention. While previous cases of “women in refrigerators” put the male character and his mourning or revenge in focus, this time the focus is on the victim, Sally. While it could be argued that the act simply furthers the development of the Comedian’s misogynistic worldview, the narrative focus lies just as much on Sally’s part as a victim. Regardless, *Watchmen* brings new ideas and a different view on the “women in refrigerators” genre trope.

Conclusion

This essay aimed to analyze *Watchmen* through the perspective of gender studies to determine if the novel criticizes or reinforces the conventions of the superhero genre. Regarding the visual conventions, Ozymandias and Dr. Manhattan represent the portrayal of the masculine male hero seen in superhero comics. The comments made about these characters, and the way that they are seen by the world, could be viewed as a satire of the genre conventions, as they are hyperbolic interpretations of them. However, as there is a lack of evidence to show self-conscious criticism, this may not be the case. Sally Jupiter is a disproportionate representation of the female characters' portrayal within the genre, highly sexualized and effeminate. Her daughter, Laurie, follows the same pattern but also criticizes these portrayals. She is, however, helpless to change them on her own, thus following them regardless. As Laurie comments on the sexualization of these costumes, it could be seen as a form of self-conscious criticism. However, there is more evidence suggesting that they simply reinforce these visual portrayals. Regardless, the hyperbolic visual portrayal of both genders does raise questions of how they are depicted within the genre and how people view them.

Regarding the male-dominated narrative, Laurie could be seen as questioning the girlfriend archetype of superhero comics by being a hyperbolic version of that archetype, but she could equally be seen as reinforcing it. However, Laurie is the only character to question the attempted rape of her mother. Thus, she illustrates the voice for change, as she questions the silence kept regarding violence against women within the genre.

In conclusion, the novel does, to some extent, criticize the genre conventions, either by making them hyperbolic or by making comments on them. However, the genre conventions are for the most part reinforced with no change. Thus, it can be concluded that the novel, as a whole, does not criticize the genre. It does, however, raise questions through its hyperbolic portrayals of the tropes. Further research into the novel could bring more characters into the analysis, as this essay only focused on a limited number. Furthermore, the specific genre conventions prevalent at the time the novel was published could also be considered. This essay focused on two aspects, visual representation and the male-dominated narrative. Thus, a future study could focus on other aspects of gender studies, such as gender identity or sexuality.

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