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Not So Revisionary: The Regressive Treatment of Gender in Alan Moore's Watchmen

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Alan Moore's *Watchmen* is a strikingly revisionary comic. With its flawed and egocentric characters that challenge the notion that superheroes must be selfless, morally-upright beings, *Watchmen* has changed the concept of what it means to be a superhero. In addition, critics of female representation in comics consistently hail the work done by *Watchmen* writer Alan Moore. Some go so far as to claim that he made revolutionary changes in the genre through his portrayal of the series' main female characters, Sally Jupiter, and her daughter Laurie, successive generations of the Silk Spectre. Arguably, the plot and character portrayal as a whole are representative of a new way of writing comics, rewriting their prior history. Upon closer examination, however, representation of gender through the treatment of female characters is old-fashioned, despite the important role that female superheroes Laurie and Sally play in the plot. *Watchmen* is replete with misogynistic, outdated gender roles and sexist physical representation, which effectively removes agency from women and reduces them to companions for men.

Watchmen was revolutionary for Moore's creation of morally flawed superheroes, including the sociopathic Rorschach, who enjoys causing pain in his victims, and the insecure Nite Owl/Dan Dreiberg. Moore's characters seem to act more out of egocentric than altruistic motives, with Rorschach acting out of personal motives and Dan fixating on the rush received from doing a good deed, plus the fulfillment of a fetish. In addition to its revolutionary characters, *Watchmen* features a direct, progressive social commentary, which is regarded as a comic book first; its events take place with the threat of Cold War destruction as a

backdrop, a fact that the book's characters comment on and are acutely aware of. Female superheroes also have a much more consequential and active role than is typical of past roles, including a new degree of agency for female characters found in Laurie Jupiter.

Despite this gritty, more realistic Cold-War-era New York created by Moore, careful observation reveals that Laurie's agency, and even the mere existence of her and other female characters, is not autonomous. Their lives do not exist independently of male characters, and the decisions they make are greatly influenced by those men, which is even more shocking given the largely progressive aspects of the text.

Literature Review

Criticism of *Watchmen* often takes issue with the portrayal of female characters, offering varying degrees of disdain for select aspects of female presentation while lauding the comic overall for the perceived changes that it makes to the comic genre. Critics Levy and Matthews prove an exception, in their "The Abyss Gazes Also: The Self-Referential Cynicism of *Watchmen*" going so far as to declare that the relationship between *Watchmen* and the comic genre "assault" as a result of what they feel is an abhorrent degree of cynicism in the text (1). Specifically, Levy and Matthews focus on the characters' costumes, and how these costumes problematize heroism in their eyes, as Silk Spectre is known for her slinky and ineffective superhero suit, which becomes pivotal to the plot for the role it plays in the sex life of Laurie and Dan. For Levy and Matthews, fetishizing costumes – and persons as a result – leads to

Watchmen becoming a highly sexualized comic, with the story being “Advanced by female characters’ expression of their sexuality, or by their sexual experiences” (12). While they observe this connection, though, Levy and Matthews do not cognizant of the disastrous effect it has for female autonomy.

Laurie Jupiter’s character is marginalized and undervalued by more than just her physical representation as written by Moore. Her agency throughout *Watchmen*, and where it stems from, is complicated. As a character, she is very pivotal for the plot climax, albeit through misogynistic means. When the world is in peril and Jon is humanity’s chance at salvation, Laurie is the only one with the power to convince him to help. Paul Petrovic, in “The Culturally Constituted Gaze,” argues that this gives her a fair degree of empowerment, and that other features of her relationships with Dan and Jon do as well. He argues that she uses sex to regain her agency after Jon leaves, and that this restores her sense of worth, while also comparing Moore’s Laurie to Gibbon’s film adaptation of her character (Petrovic 7). He asserts that the book character has far more agency, and is far more feminist, citing the scene where she comments on her old skimpy superhero costume as “dreadful.” Petrovic argues that Laurie’s knowledge of her image indicates she is aware of how society tries to sexualize her and allows her to circumvent that (11). However, this claim disregards how she is still oppressed through her situation as a character – namely, that Laurie is only valued as a sex object, regardless of her costume.

By making Jon and Laurie’s past romantic life the Earth’s only chance at salvation, Moore thus connects Laurie’s sexuality

with the fate of humanity. In “Sex and Transgression in Blake and Moore,” Matthew Green argues that the connection equates to “the psychological and political liberation of humanity” (Green 1), and is also progressive in the comic sphere by virtue of a woman’s action being pivotal for a superhero to save the day. He claims that Laurie Jupiter’s character can be set apart for her authoritative voice that stands up to the powerful men in her life, which is arguably feminist and progressive. However, her will is complicated, and other factors, such as the consequences of arguing with Jon, may be an influential factor. Green does not acknowledge this part of the plot in his essay, instead declaring that Laurie’s decisions were made by a strong and independent woman.

Showing the diversity of critical opinions present over gender in *Watchmen*, Erin Keating holds the opposite views of Matthew Green. She finds it strange that, while *Watchmen* is a revisionist text in Moore’s treatment of superhero tropes, particularly since Moore’s superheroes are given weaknesses, and cannot operate independent of one another in the text (Keating 2) the characterization of female superheroes is such that it “reveals a conservative, heterosexual framework operating as a foundation for moral ambiguity” (1). Many of the characters are modern and revised, yet Laurie – the main, and sometimes only visible, female character – is an example of the sex symbol archetype. Where others assert that Moore’s writing gives Laurie value and power, Keating cites Laurie’s physical depiction in addition to her relationships as features that prevent her from holding autonomy. It is Laurie’s relationship with Jon that gives her status in the

community, and in fact, her whole status is based on relationships with men. When she walks out on Jon, severing their romance, Keating says that she forfeits this role. Keating's observation, though, does not recognize that even in leaving Jon Laurie is not actually surrendering her status as a sex symbol, and has only performed the act of having power.

Role as a Superhero

Laurie Jupiter, also known as the Silk Spectre, wears a tight-fitting and low-cut silk-and-latex costume designed by her mother Sally, who had been the Silk Spectre prior to her retirement and forces the role of a sexy superhero on Laurie from an early age. Laurie's gender has little impact on her crime-fighting ability, for she proves herself just as capable as the other Watchmen she works with (Moore 234-6). She becomes more than co-workers with some of the Watchmen, entering romantic relationships with Jon and Dan at different points in the text. Combined with the Comedian's (another male member of the Watchmen) treatment of her as a sexual object in his near-rape of her, this focus on her sexuality damages any power or recognition her prowess permits her as a crime fighter. The inclusion of a superhero who would treat women so violently extends the revisionary aspects of *Watchmen* beyond creating imperfect to creating nefarious people in a way that devalues women. Jon and Laurie break up due to Jon's perceived lack of emotion, which causes her to feel as if she is an object. While she has more autonomy and dialogue in her subsequent relationship with Dan, their relationship and even their intimacy is based in and revolves around their status as

superheroes. Beyond conservative, her relationship with Dan is an instance where portrayal of women is degrading and very regressive.

As society continues to crumble, the government realizes that Jon, the only Watchmen possessing truly superhuman abilities, is the Earth's last hope before destruction. Since Laurie and Jon's break-up is the reason he is on Mars, reconciliation with Laurie is seemingly the one thing that could motivate Jon to help the Earth which he has distanced himself from. It can be conceded that the gravity of her choice places a lot of power and responsibility into Laurie's hands, giving her agency. However, the fact that Laurie both makes the decision to talk to Jon and possesses the ability to convince him, does not mean *Watchmen* is a feminist text, even if it may appear so at surface level. When consequences are large, it is more difficult to make a neutral, thought-out decision. Consequently, with the lives of millions of people in her hands, Laurie may not be going to Jon solely out of personal desire to be with him or attempt reconciliation. Often, Laurie's decisions are not her own, as evidenced by Jon's behavior while they speak on Mars, and thus her agency is at times revoked.

Sally Jupiter

Becoming part of the *Watchmen* was not Laurie's independent choice, because her mother Sally brought her along to events and started marketing her daughter from a young age. In *Watchmen*, Laurie expresses her disdain for her mother's decisions when talking to Dan. She describes the anxiety and discomfort her mother's prodding elicited, as well as the dangerous situation her

youth and position placed her in when she was nearly raped by the Comedian (133, 295). Her mother's actions show men were not the only people in Laurie's life who controlled her decisions, since even female characters have inhibited her personal agency by influencing or making personal decisions for her.

Sally Jupiter is the only other female character with significant dialogue aside from her daughter, another dimension of *Watchmen* that is a continuation of the genre's sexist norms rather than a revisionary update. While Sally has been a victim of misogyny and violence because of her gender, she does not act to keep her daughter from these same forces that caused strife in her own life, though she does protect Laurie from the violence as much as possible (295). The forces of misogyny and sexism have thus impacted Sally to the point where she is not cognizant of them, and embodies the stereotype of a brainwashed, oppressed woman.

For instance, in a very harrowing scene, it is revealed that Sally was raped by the Comedian, and that Laurie is their daughter. Sally is also subjected to sexism as the Silk Spectre in the way that executives and other *Watchmen* objectify her appearance, showing that women are bossed around and regarded as lesser than men. In a sickening twist, as a teenager new to the *Watchmen*, Laurie is nearly raped by the same man before being rescued by her mother. Despite the mistreatment she endured, Sally put her daughter into the same situation, further perpetuating the misogynistic belief that women are inferior, in contrast to the humanizing treatment that the comic's male superheroes receive.

Evolution of Misogyny

While Sally and Laurie are both sexualized as in their progressive turns as the Silk Spectre, critics will argue that Laurie exhibits progress by virtue of the decisions she is able to make. For instance, after a hiatus, she makes the conscious choice to return to superhero life, not influenced by her mother. Prior to this, she leaves Jon, her lover, because she feels that he is not respecting her autonomy, making decisions without consulting her and being emotionally distant. In this way, she is a strong female character, and an improvement upon her mother. However, this does not mean that she is wholly independent from male influence, particularly evident by the conversation she holds with Jon while on Mars, in which through coldly informing Laurie of how their conversation will progress before she can explain herself, Jon's lack of emotion and super-humanness as a character marginalize Laurie once again (286).

Sally Jupiter is arguably more of a second-class citizen than her daughter is in *Watchmen*, believing and pushing for the outdated, misogynistic treatment of women that her daughter at times fights against. Her relationship with her daughter exhibits Sally's sexist thoughts most clearly, and shows her inhibition as a result of her sexuality. Where Laurie may seem forward thinking when she asks her mother how Sally can stand being degraded by appearing in a pornographic comic, Sally shows no regret. In fact, Sally's incredulous response "What about your image? At least I don't sleep with an H-bomb!" (50) implies that Laurie is not the feminist icon she is sometimes portrayed to be, for despite her outspoken nature, her sexuality still defines her. In fact, Laurie's

value in life is best summed up in her mother's rebuttal after Laurie insists that Jon is not an H-bomb, debasing Laurie by quipping "Honey, the only difference is that they didn't have to get the H-bomb laid every once in a while" (50), projecting Laurie's value as society sees it onto her.

Agency and Gender Bias

Laurie's entire existence in *Watchmen* is founded in the male characters who are a part of her life. She never is an independent woman as an adult, being connected to Dan within a day of leaving Jon. This demonstrates that she is written by Moore only as a companion to male superheroes. She never acts independently of these men, instead serving as a romantic attachment who is sexy and does as she is told. Even what we see of Laurie as a teen shows that she was always expected to act in deference to male authority or the expectations of a patriarchal society. A common metric for evaluating the presence of women in fiction and other media, as well as gender inequality, is the Bechdel test. As an evaluative tool the Bechdel test requires that a work of fiction have the following, or it contains gender bias:

- 1) two women
- 2) who talk to each other
- 3) about something other than a man

Alan Moore's *Watchmen* fails this feminist metric due to the third requirement: Sally's and Laurie's lack of character development is such that these two women never converse about anything other than a man or men's expectations for them – thus embodying outdated, offensive, and ultimately regressive norms.

Physical Portrayal

Silk Spectre's costume is the bane of Laurie's existence because it is impractical for action, as is typical of most female superheroes' costumes. Laurie's distaste is clear when she asks Dan "You remember that costume? With that stupid little short skirt and the neckline going down to my navel? God, that was so dreadful" (83). Even when she is not wearing this small costume, though, Laurie is portrayed wearing sexualizing short skirts and tops that reveal a fair degree of cleavage. In addition, she is typically drawn so that other objects enhance her sexuality, such as reflections from a mirror or smoke from a fire (163, 237). These environmental factors work with her costume to continually reinforce a much-sexualized image of her in the reader's eyes, suggesting that this is her value as a character and superhero.

Another factor influencing the sexualized, undervalued image of the Silk Spectre created for readers is her treatment at the hands of the other Watchmen, particularly her romantic interests: Jon and Dan, or Dr. Manhattan and the Nite Owl, respectively. Nite Owl ogles the female body in such a way to reinforce the misogynistic physical style of Alan Moore, taking away value from Laurie, and other, persons. When going through Dan's memorabilia collection, Laurie discovers an autographed snapshot of the Twilight Lady, a bombshell supervillain that Dan defeated a number of years ago. Despite Laurie's incredulous response to the photograph, which is signed "Love from the Twilight Lady," he fails to give any clear reason that he has not parted with the photo (217). Earlier in the novel, when Laurie is relating her heated feelings about the Silk

Spectre costume to Dan, albeit verbal affirmation of her feelings, he does not look directly at her, instead twisting his head and pulling at his collar, actions that indicate he might not be entirely truthful in his response. His fetish for costumed women raises questions for his opinion of and relationship with Laurie, and exemplifies the misogynistic focus on the sexual appeal of female characters, ahead of their moral and intellectual value.

Dan's fetish for costumes becomes apparent when the costumes serve as the impetus for successful sex between him and Laurie, for he is impotent until the time costumes are worn just before they have sex. Moore creates the focus on costumes to accompany the action these characters have just taken in resuming their crime-fighting careers, layering these comic elements to show that Dan's fetish is for fight-ready female superheroes, reducing Laurie to a stereotyped commodity for her actions. When this degree of focus is given to Dan's physical attraction to her, not only is her character marginalized, but the basis of their relationship becomes questionable, especially given the fast pace at which it progressed physically.

Laurie's Romantic Relationships

Multiple facets of Dan and Laurie's relationship raise questions about the level of their feelings for each other. Laurie's other close relationships, ones she holds with her mother and Jon, her ex, are damaged by the control exerted on her; she eventually breaks away because she finds their behavior oppressing. Curiously, while Dan also subverts her agency, Laurie never confronts him or otherwise

complains, because he is more subtle. Critics of *Watchmen* have largely ignored this correlation between Dan and Laurie's relationship and Laurie's continued objectification; in fact, Green argues that Laurie dating Dan represents her breaking free, and returning to superhero work as the moment she begins to make independent choices. This interpretation ignores how blatantly objective Dan and Laurie's relationship is, since her value and textual focus is based largely on how she arouses Dan – not to mention the fact that Laurie still speaks of Jon frequently, suggesting she has not fully recovered and moved on from her past.

Most problematic of Laurie's relationships is her romantic ties with Jon, the radioactive man also known as Dr. Manhattan, because it implicates her personhood the most. By virtue of the way their relationship began, Laurie is portrayed not only as very sexually despite her young age (16), but is also the impetus for Jon's marriage failing, indicating a view of women as irresponsible and rash. Not only is she much younger than Jon, Jon's attraction to her also causes the undoing of his marriage; he had become increasingly disillusioned with a wife who has continued to age while he has become frozen in time, a cause of strife for his marriage before Laurie's presence, due to focus placed on worth and sexuality. This act suggests Moore's opinions on women's value by indicating through Jon that sexual attraction can make or break a relationship. Jon, even after the pair separates, circumvents Laurie's agency by using his superpowers to inform her of her future before she even makes a decision, eliminating control over her own destiny. Yes, this ability to see the future is a result of his

superpowers, which arguably cannot be helped; however, his character is written to be superior to Laurie through his using the future as a way to frustrate her and stop her from making decisions.

Conclusion

Existing criticism of *Watchmen*, while it has focused on the troubled relationship between Laurie and Jon, largely ignores the other relationships Laurie has, which, when examined, make *Watchmen's* common categorization as a revisionary text even more questionable. With the further depth that examination of Laurie's, and other women's characters offers, it is soon clear that the only examination possible of Laurie and Sally, due to Moore's writing, is to look at their persons through the lens of their relationships to men and patriarchal structures in the text. It is absurd, then, to say that Laurie is an independent, strong woman, for any agency that she has is due to her sexuality (which is inherently misogynistic). In addition, her life's path and her decisions, if designed independently, are still a result of the direct interference of men and patriarchal norms.

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