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Women and *Watchmen*: Opening Alan Moore's Refrigerator

By Sally Ferguson

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April 14, 2014

Preface

Zack Snyder's film adaptation of *Watchmen* was my first exposure to the rabid side of the comic book enthusiasts. During that year, I took tottering steps towards comic books and superheroes, but the clamor of frenzied supporters of the film battling zealous purists nearly blew me off my feet. *Alan Moore* – the name reverberated through the internet and spilled onto the sidewalks in front of the movie theater. I pondered the identity of this individual for an infinitesimal amount of time before contenting myself with Batman for a few years. Years later, various enthusiasts were singing his praises to me, painting him as the god of the graphic novel, the original breaker of stereotypes. So, I settled in one weekend with a copy of *Watchmen* and braced myself. Twelve issues later, I had arrived at two conclusions: 1) I had just experienced catharsis at the hands of colorful pictures; 2) I did not feel empowered as a woman in this alternate world. A few years and a few of Mr. Moore's comics later, I am still pondering the latter conclusion.

Alan Moore, author and anarchist, is often acknowledged as *the* premier comic writer by critics. Moore packs broken character into plots that are crack from the complexity. He does not give simple answers to any unsettling questions which might peer at you from the pages; so if you find yourself confused as a fictional human being grapples with a piece of morality, you are reading it right. His series of graphic novels leave no system or viewpoint unchallenged. Yet sexism still seems to surface. Even knowing Moore's comics are not Disney fare – here there be dragons named "Unhappy Endings" – I continued to discover elements of prejudice. Far beyond fictional women enduring ill treatment because of equally fictional men, I found women who lacked power or voice.

Sexism: Best Served Cold

American Heritage Dictionary defines sexism as “discrimination based on gender”. If we break the provided definition down, discrimination is “partiality or prejudice” or “treatment based on category”. Persons are typecast, e.g., all Arabs are terrorists. Gender discrimination, however, is a bit more complicated. One definition according to the American Heritage Dictionary is “Either of the two divisions, designated female and male, by which most organisms are classified on the basis of their reproductive organs and functions; sex.” I believe this is the definition we are most familiar with. But if we read further, AHD’s next definition reads “One’s identity as female or male or as neither entirely female nor entirely male.” The terms “sex” and “gender” have come to represent these two definitions offered, with sex being used for biological identity. Gender, on the other hand, represents either sexual identity or the sociocultural roles of feminine and masculine so that one can describe himself with varying degrees of masculinity or femininity. Sexism also occurs when culture assigns specific roles to men or women based on assumptions about sex and gender. That is, a man’s masculinity is measured by what culture terms as masculine, such as increased muscle mass or eating large portions of meat. (Apparently real men skip their vegetables or disguise them with A1 sauce.) In comics, refrigerators are surprisingly what preclude sexism.

In 1999, writer Gail Simone coined the phrase “Women in Refrigerators” in response to a 1994 Green Lantern comic, issue #54. The term references the literal occurrence of a woman being stuffed into a refrigerator, shown in Figure 1, which troubled Simone after she began looking at the number of females in comics who met gruesome ends. She later said on her

website¹, “...I can't quite shake the feeling that male characters tend to die differently than female ones. The male characters seem to die nobly, as heroes, most often, whereas it's not uncommon, as in Katma Tui's case, for a male character to just come home and find her butchered in the kitchen. There are exceptions for both sexes, of course, but shock value seems to be a major motivator in the superchick deaths more often than not. It got me to wondering, honestly, why it was OK, or even encouraged somewhat, to kill women, more than men, statistically.”

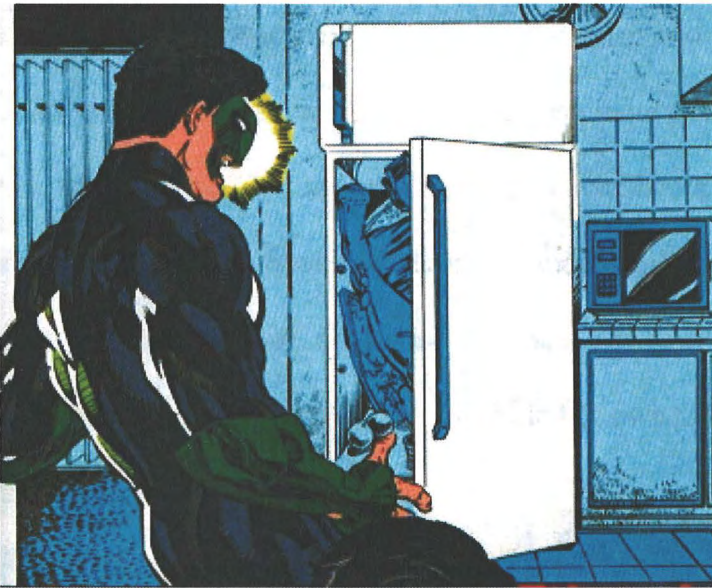


Figure 1

The trope has expanded beyond a character's death to represent any violent action committed against a female character for the sake of plot. The men, such as the Green Lantern, are spurred into action to avenge their wife/girlfriend/sister (who may or may not need thawing), experiencing emotional turmoil at seeing a loved one suffer such brutality. However, the integral piece of the story missing is that of the woman's. You watch the man react, reading every thought balloon that relates to the situation, but you do not see the woman again until the end of the comic, if she is even alive. You as a reader do not bear witness to her emotional journey. The

¹ <http://lby3.com/wir/>

core thought behind this trope is that women are deprived of action. Instead of being *doers* in their fate, they are *done to*. They are objects rather than subjects. An example of this is found in “The Killing Joke”.

Batman and Joker are perhaps the most famous hero/villain combination in comic books, if not all of fiction. The duo is synonymous with yin-yang; they represent an immovable force constantly met with an unstoppable action. In 1988, Alan Moore took the reins of their eternal conflict for one quick ride. The result is “The Killing Joke”, giving us one background story for the Joker that is now widely accepted – though he remains a character of a thousand laughs and a thousand pasts – and one paralyzed Barbara Gordon, also known as the first Batgirl. The story outlines Joker’s attempts to drive James Gordon mad in an effort to prove that one bad day can push anyone over the edge. To accomplish this, he first shoots Barbara while she is at home with her father then takes several photos of her in the nude, which he parades in front of James. Conflict must happen in a story, otherwise it is stale. The conflict presented here, though, involves a popular superheroine being surprised in her own home by a madman before she is “shot” with a bullet then a camera lens.



Figure 2

A disappearing act follows, for she is not seen again until the end (unless you count her photos) where we are able to learn her thoughts on the matter. Her paralysis here extends beyond her body – a perfect example of a Woman in a Refrigerator. Throughout Moore’s comics women find themselves in situations where they lack the ability to act or contribute. It is as though they are frozen – an apt term for the women partially crammed into Alan’s refrigerator – any capability seemingly vanishing.

In our new Dark Age of comic books – so named for the anguish and the grim themes that are explored – *Watchmen* is respected as a momentous work of art. Yet I wonder if the comic fails to permit female characters to fully flourish outside a male sphere of influence. As shown with “The Killing Joke”, Moore has written comic that contain a subtle sexism. The task now is to go through three of Moore’s comic book series to identify any discriminating patterns present in the writing, particularly where women are concerned. *V for Vendetta* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* will help to bridge the subject to *Watchmen*. Thankfully, Moore has supplied a variety of female characters for us to study.

V for Vendetta - 1982

V for Vendetta, one of Moore's first major comics², is incidentally the last of his works that I read. The post-apocalyptic society of England is under stringent control by the government which has "cleansed" society in a manner similar to the Nazi tactics in the Second World War. One unidentified anarchist who refers to himself only as "V" challenges the fascist state, all the while wearing a Guy Fawkes mask. At the comic's opening, we are introduced to Evey, a sixteen-year-old girl who is preparing to prostitute herself because she is so desperate for finances. V rescues her before she is murdered, sheltering her before eventually making her his protégé and, ultimately, successor.

After Evey objects to the number of people V kills in order to bring about the government's collapse, he guides her outside before he leaves her in the middle of a dilapidated portion of a town. Evey manages to move in with a smuggler whom she soon begins sleeping with. Her lover escorts her to raunchy pubs where skimpily clad women parade onstage for a male audience, but Evey herself is never forced into performing for a living, unlike other character we witness. Her attachment to this man is so great that after he is murdered she lashes out by attempting to kill someone she believes responsible. V stops her before she is able to fire her gun. As the panel zooms in, as he subdues her, we see him smile in approval. At this point, V brings Evey back to his hideout. He then proceeds to strip away her defenses in an effort to set her free from the bondage the government has wound tightly around its subjects.

V creates an environment for Evey so that she believes she is being held in confinement by the government. The "officials" (V in disguise and dummies with recording devices set on

² Publication order as follows: *Vendetta*: 1982, *Watchmen*: 1986-87, and *League*: 1999-2003.

playback) demand she tell them everything about V from her contact with the anarchist, and they – V – torture her for this information. Her head is shaved, she wears rags, she is starved, and she suffers through repeated near drownings³. By the time this period ends, she wears her skin on a frame that has begun to appear more skeletal. She is only freed when she chooses to die rather than to offer any information in exchange for a lighter sentence. Then the sham is revealed to her, at which point V urges her to embrace her freedom. He implies that facing death exposes the prison we were all born into (*V for Vendetta* 170). At the revelation of V's actions, Evey, still dressed in her prison rags (having recently emerged from the cell), confronts him.

EVEY: Don't you realize what you did to me? You nearly drove me mad, V!

V: If that's what it takes, Evey.

EVEY: I hate you. I hate you because you just talk junk and you think you're so good that you don't have to make any sense! You say you love me, and you don't because you just frighten me and torture me for a joke... You say you want to set me free and you put me in a prison...

V: You were already in a prison. You've been in a prison all your life.

...

V: Happiness is a prison, Evey. Happiness is the most insidious prison of all. (169)

Some of Evey's accusations hold merit. V attempts to dismantle a government that has molded society into a creation of its liking, whereas he is also shaping a young girl into a proper successor through unsavory methods. Fascist London has made for itself eyes and a mouth to

³ She is blindfolded, tied to a chair, and has her head forced into a bowl of water for extended periods of time.

oversee and control the population, yet V manages Evey like a marionette on strings, employing brainwashing techniques to sway her to his point of view. This control is reminiscent of “The Killing Joke”, also appearing in alter comics. By this comic’s end, V passes the revolution to Evey, yet her job is reconstruction rather than overthrowing. At the close, Evey rescues a young man up from a crowd, ready to pass the mantle on once more. A young woman has taken the burden of renewal but clothes herself as a man to do so.

V’s actions reveal a moment of self-sacrifice. While imprisoned by V, Evey finds a letter penned by a lesbian, Valerie, who was locked away by the government in its attempt to cleanse the country. Now dead, Valerie left behind this letter. Reading it when he is imprisoned is the final push for V in convincing him to escape the prison compound before he initiates the revolution he is fighting. He purposely leaves the letter for Evey to find in hopes she will experience a similar awakening. “I love you” the letter repeats as she tells her life story (159). She writes the letter in an act of selfless love to affect those beyond her help after she is no longer able to have a direct impact. This is possibly the greatest moment of female agency in any of Moore’s comics, for even as a woman is being denied rights she is using her uncompromised will to extend the chance of true freedom to others. V, after experiencing this true freedom, is determined that Evey should embrace it as well.



Figure 3

The dilemma V manufactures for Evey would have failed without the presence of Valerie's letter in Evey's cell. She discovers the slip of paper and clings to it, reading it repeatedly after the brutal sessions of questioning. Evey at this point is still unable to name what Valerie is describing to her, this ability to control your own person regardless of what those around you are inflicting upon you. V later explains the sensation (freedom), but not until after Evey develops a love for Valerie and, in a way, comes to love herself. "I know every inch of this

cell,” Evey thinks as she clutches the letter. “This cell knows every inch of me. Except one” (160). Her one inch of autonomy is what enables her to select a firing squad rather than give up her dignity by betraying a man she did not even fully trust when they parted ways. Without another woman’s example to follow, Evey would not have found this spot of free will inside of her. V’s actions would have destroyed her rather than peel away every last insecurity so that this “inch” was the only thing left. Fear is what Evey is set free from.

It is fitting that the final panel (shown in Figure 10) fades out until only Evey’s face is left with no other discerning features. She represents any person in this moment, as Valerie is able to represent any woman because for a time she is but words on paper. This is V’s ultimate goal. Individuals should be free, with that “one inch” spreading until it completely encompasses them so they are no longer identifiable by any label. One of V’s strongest assets is his mask, as it enables him to be anyone. Here, Evey’s becomes just as powerful, freeing herself from any construction of gender, race, or sexuality. For a moment in time, the concept of male or female is nonexistent. Yet for me, the contrast of this moment of empowerment with the torment Evey is suffering at the mechanizations of V is puzzling. I cannot approve the method V employs, yet I understand his actions are what allow her to breathe for the first time since childhood. A young woman is shown freedom through the words of another woman, yet Moore wheedles this outcome into being by using a male character as his main actor. At the end, Evey disguises herself as V so that she takes on the appearance of a man, reintroducing gender. I am left with a Rubik’s Cube in paper. *V*, I later discovered, is perhaps Moore’s best treatment of his female characters.

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen – 1999-2003

The League of Extraordinary Gentleman is a comic with a conglomeration of fictional characters from other authors. Captain Nemo (*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*), Allan Quartermain (*King Solomon's Mines*), Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde (*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*), and Mina Murray (*Dracula*) are featured among many other characters that were snatched up in this interesting collection. In fact, this tag – team is basically the Minutemen 2.0, (an echo of Moore's previous comic *Watchmen*) even carrying over the group dynamics. Set in the Victorian era in 1898, the plot is in some ways similar to that of *Watchmen* (discussed later) in that a ragtag team of heroes must save the world. Their activities are ordained and even instructed by the British government that is attempting to counter various threats against society.

The initial recruitment stage is when we meet Mina Murray. After her encounter with *Dracula*, Mina divorces her husband, attracting the attention of the government so that she is named the leader of a group comprised of men (Mina being the only female), whom she proceeds to transform into a team. Her capabilities as a leader strengthen her character, yet her presentation in the comic itself is also noteworthy. Whereas Sally Jupiter and Laurie Juspezcyc, two characters who will be introduced later, have their bodies exploited by clothing, Mina's female form is displayed without crossing the line of objectification. The eye-catching red scarf would certainly be at an advantageous position for pulling your gaze further down, yet you are always drawn to Mina's startling green eyes and angular face. That is not to say there is a lack of sexuality throughout the comic (there is an abundance of it) but the characters never appear exploited for the eyes of the audience.

This is where the Alan Moore theme of abuse then subsequent affection first appears for this paper. Traces of it can be found in *V*, but Evey's platonic gratitude is easier to comprehend after reading Moore's later comics. This concept gains strength in Moore's later writings, as we see here. It is witnessed among the various interactions between Murray and Hyde. The first time they meet, Hyde believes Murray to be a prostitute and attempts to rape her. She is, in fact, posing as a woman of the night to draw Hyde's attentions in order to recruit him as a member of the League; his murder and rape of various prostitutes is what attracts the League's attention. Hyde possesses all of Jekyll's ambition squeezed into one form, seeming initially to represent bestial nature, sexual appetite included. Mina is truly afraid of him. She witnesses Hyde manifest brute force by slaughtering droves of men with his bare hands and teeth, like a manic Samson. However, as one conversation between the two reveals later, she does not hate him for what he is.

HYDE: Sometimes I think I should just rape you and behead you. But a voice in me still fiercer than my own tells me if I did that, I must next take my life. It's puzzling. Perhaps it is that I would then have killed the only living thing that did not *fear* me. D'you think that's it?

MINA: Y-you would be quite mistaken, sir. I fear you very much.

HYDE: Perhaps. Perhaps you do. But not like all the others. I believe you do not *hate* me. I believe you have perhaps met someone *worse* than me. Would that be right?

MINA: Yes.⁴ (*The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen 2.2*)

⁴ The font has been altered only as it has been portrayed in the comic itself to represent a character responding in a small voice.

The dialogue which follows reveals more of Hyde's internal conflict about his intentions towards her as he threatens her, even as he also holds her hand for a moment.



Figure 4

Encounters like this between Hyde and Mina mark the difference in their relationship compared to the later incarnations of this trope. In later “couples”, the question of consensus is never fully answered, and I am left grappling with the idea of either a woman who consented to sex only to relieve her anger (while her male partner possibly viewed it as a

triumph after all those years) or idealized the whole scenario. But in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, Moore takes time to draw parallels between the brutal nature of Hyde and the ugly cruelty of others until we are left questioning exactly *who* the monster is in this piece.

Mina has already encountered a legitimate monster (the one “worse than” Hyde) in the form of Dracula who used her; yet, her former husband might also qualify for this position. He abandons her after the events described by Stoker. This is just hearsay, though, when we have other characters presented to us. Who among these individuals meets the criteria? The Invisible Man, Griffin. Hyde and Griffin share a similar introduction to the League: both must be coerced; both are serial rapists⁵. Differences are present in each man's behavior, though. Hyde unleashes an animalistic violence akin to the Hulk whereas Griffin makes conscious decisions in his

⁵ Living in a correctional institute for young ladies, Griffin takes advantage of them most nights.

malice, appearing to derive genuine enjoyment from slitting a man's throat or bludgeoning a policeman to death just so he can steal his clothes. The differences culminate in the treatment of Mina Murray. Shortly after Griffin takes it upon himself to betray civilization to alien invaders, Mina stumbles upon him in a study, taking notes of London's gun positions.



Figure 5

Though she is unaware of Griffin's betrayal, he proceeds to beat her until she vomits then, while she is lying in a pool of her own bile, forces her to repeat "I'm a stuck-up little tart" (2.3). If a form of molestation took place, it is only hinted at by Hyde upon discovering her beaten body. Hyde says, "His smell's all over her. He was naked" (2.3). For Mina, the most traumatizing aspect was being forced to beg. She later pens in her journal that "He made me grovel...I can't even write his name" (2.3). Monstrous for Mina, then, is not a physical act of violence perpetuated upon a victim (although it is clearly still abhorrent), but it is a man dominating her, forcing her to relinquish her independence and submit her will to his. She must be completely humbled in abject servitude; her loss of autonomy – paralysis – is what Mina fears.

There are other moments when Mina encounters this fear. Mina's scarf slips aside to reveal the scars given to her by Dracula after Mina initiates sex with Quartermain. Rather than having two quaint puncture wounds, her neck is marred with webbed scar tissue that wraps around it in an ugly facsimile of a choker necklace. She is essentially frozen when she realizes her lover has seen her disfiguration, retreating inside herself until he confronts her later the next day. Even then, by the end of the comic, she chooses to abandon him. Between these events, Moore drastically reduces her actions for the rest of the comic. She no longer takes control of the group, so the men pull themselves together long enough to save the planet from further invasion before the team crumbles. Moore affectively freezes Mina for the ensuing events.

Mina's leadership, while not infallible, is a force to be reckoned with, even taming Hyde's ferocity when she stares the beast down. Yet she is always afraid of him, hovering on this paralyzed state to the very end as his shadow looms over her. In the final moment between Mina and Hyde, Hyde volunteers to fend off the invaders (who have gained a momentary advantage thanks to the now-deceased Griffin) with the understanding that this will kill him. The following exchange takes place between Mina and Hyde in this scene:

MINA: Edward [Hyde], I can't allow this. You'll be killed.

HYDE: Yes, I suppose I shall. And ending up looking rather noble, when I really want to slaughter something, eh? Miss Murray, before I go, would you allow me the honour of a kiss?

...

HYDE: ...One other thing, then I'll ask no more. Would you allow me to touch your breast?

MINA: Oh, God. Oh, God. Edward, you...you must *promise*. You must promise not to hurt me.

HYDE: Of course. I shall never hurt you. *Never*. (2.5).

Hyde is a racist, violent brute, but by the comic's end supposedly respects Mina because he offers her validation by requesting her permission rather than taking something both know he could obtain by force. Griffin, as we have already seen, lords his power over those weaker than himself. The question lingers if Hyde is toying with Mina's fragile state of mind, however. Hyde is horrid, but he is not stupid. He affectively manipulates members of the team, skillfully hiding his advantages for later use. The most horrifying scene in the comic is a result of this conservation of power. Moore presents us with a moment of paralysis in a character that is not a woman. After Griffin's betrayal, Hyde marks him for revenge. He later confronts Griffin when he has the Invisible Man isolated, revealing he is able to see the man's body heat. Hyde then immobilizes Griffin by snapping his leg and smashing his face before he rapes him till Griffin is near death.



Easily the most sickening scene in the comic is after-the-fact. As shown in Figure 6, Hyde and his surroundings at a dinner are revealed to be covered in blood when Griffin's invisibility fades away with his demise.

Coupling this action with his knowledge of Mina's torment, I am left to ponder if Hyde might be more monstrous than the first reading reveals. How much easier it is to take advantage of someone when she is emotionally vulnerable, unable to muster the strength to resist you. Hyde's final act may or may not be a ploy to ensure he is made a martyr, yet sacrificing one's life is a rather permanent action that cannot be reversed. The thing about dying is one cannot remain in the world afterwards to see if he is properly mourned or idolized; thus this action is (most likely) well intended.

In this way, *League* deviates from *Watchmen*, painting us a less opaque picture, although we are still left to grapple with painful questions. Affection between a woman and a previous oppressor does take place, but the actions preceding it, the circumstances surrounding it, and the aforementioned comparisons between Hyde and Griffin (in addition to the fact that the level of affection is a mere kiss and touch rather than the conception of a child) is a far different tone and level of maturity than one found in *Watchmen*. Of course, that story is the final string of Moore's web waiting to be plucked.

Watchmen – 1986-87

Watchmen is set in an alternate world in the 1980s. Moore has altered the course of history so that we see the emergence of costumed crime fighters who then reshape the world with which we are familiar. America has added Vietnam as its 51st state, Richard Nixon has served multiple terms after the 22nd Amendment was repealed, and the presence of the superhuman Dr.

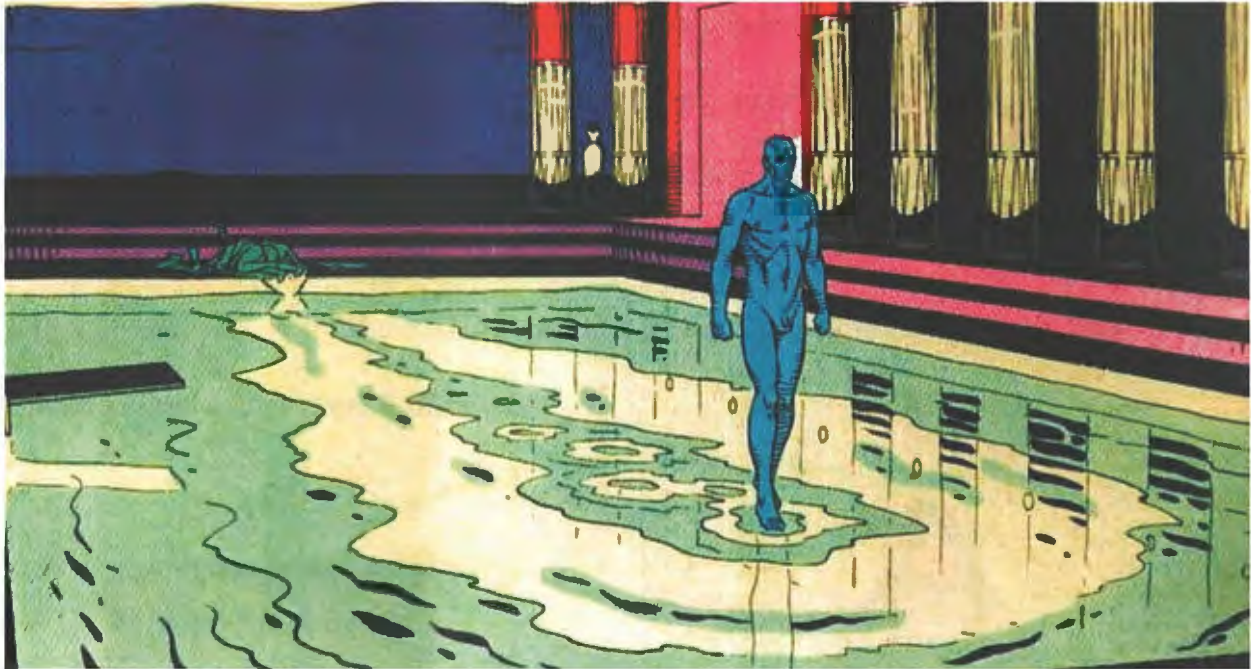
Manhattan has greatly increased tensions between the US and the Soviet Union. The Keene Act has officially banned all vigilante activity, yet the threat of nuclear war ultimately provokes a series of action that force the semi-retired superheroes to investigate a string of murders connected to a potential threat against America.

Though each comic contains a story all its own, Moore's characters are people, even if their abilities or situations are not plausible. These people may dress up in interesting costumes in order to combat crime, but their motivations and desires are apparent to the reader. The exact set of circumstances the characters face is arguably impossible to replicate, yet the various responses in the course of events are plausible, providing reasonable cause-and-effect scenarios. However, the actions (and reactions) we read can do little to edify a character or the faction that character represents but rather further advance a stereotype. With Moore, this is especially interesting, as his stories contain imitations of archetypes that mock or warp that traditional mold. Rorschach, for instance, is a vigilante from *Watchmen* who is molded as a conservative extremist with an absolute morality. He is based off of similar superheroes – Mr. A, Question, and Batman – who maintain a black-and-white morality, yet Moore presents this archetype as it might be viewed in reality. How would a vicious vigilante, bordering on sadistic, who abides strictly by his own moral code be viewed by society? To quote Moore, Rorschach is a “nutcase”. Moore does not always break stereotypes with his female characters, however. Though I am able to connect with the women in Moore's comics, I struggle with the way they are portrayed, at points wondering if women are done justice through these stories as the men are.

Moore first gives us Sally Jupiter and Laurie Juspezyk in *Watchmen*, a mother and her daughter. Laurie is sometimes termed the “glue” of the major arc because of her many connections to other characters and plot points. Sally Jupiter is the first of this mother – daughter

duo to take the mantle of the Silk Spectre to work as a vigilante in a group of crime fighters known as the Minutemen. She is a victim of sexual assault and functions mainly as a pinup superheroine among the Minutemen. Laurie Juspezyk, taking the role as Silk Spectre II from her mother, is a member of the updated group her mother had served in – the Crimebusters. She replaces Dr. Manhattan's lover when Laurie herself is but a teenager before attaching herself to another relationship shortly after that one ended. Of course, there are other women present or at least Moore mentions them in the various flashbacks or the pages of text interspersed between issues. Janey Slater, whom Laurie replaces, is in a relationship with Dr. Manhattan. Ursula Zandt, or the Silhouette of the Minutemen, is ousted from the group for being openly homosexual. Two lesbians are present toward the end of the series fighting over ending their relationship. The common thread connecting all these women is they are presented sexually.

Representation of body is the first way in which the women have their sexuality displayed. In modern comics, peculiar costumes for women who frequently engage in battle have become something of a trope. The revealing costumes have been frequently criticized and redrawn by comic readers who argue the outfits serve only to exploit a character's sexuality rather than as a functional wardrobe. "The Hawkeye Initiative" has recently gained fame on the internet for redrawing a male superhero in women's positions/costumes that have appeared in comics. The unusual garments are prominent in *Watchmen*, the panels displaying of the female form markedly different from the male even though Dr. Manhattan is nude for most of the comic.



F.7



Figure 8

Although naked, the presentation of Manhattan in Figures 7 and 8 is akin to that of an art book which teaches anatomy rather than pornographic material. The genitals are not detailed, and the character is only shown in one sexual encounter throughout the entire comic. Although Dr. Manhattan is a being with sexual impulses, this is never made a cornerstone of his character, as he is detached from the world. He has perfected his detachment so that he nearly refuses to **save**

it from destruction. Contrast this with Laurie and Sally whose costumes do more to accentuate their bodies than cover them. Laurie's costume draws attention to the "high points" of a woman's body and creates a V-shape that pulls the eye from the breasts to the hips, forming an arrow that highlights and directs attention to all sexual regions. Sally's costume functions as a reversal, pulling the eyes up with fishnet stockings that bare her legs before ending at her breasts. Her top, as with Laurie's, once more forms the V.



Figure 9



Figure 10

These sexualized portrayals are not limited only to when the women appear in costume. When we encounter Sally at her home, she is wearing naught but a robe which opens in the front to expose cleavage for the panel. (Again, the slit in the front of the robe makes a V and not one wearing a Guy Fawkes mask) Later, Laurie, dining out, is shown only from the back while wearing a dress that drapes on her upper thighs. The dress is barely seen in the panel that focuses on her legs, leaving an impression of partial nudity. However, Laurie's costume, out of all other examples, is what remains firmly tied to sexuality. Laurie and Dan Dreiberg – the hero, Nite Owl

II, with whom she starts a relationship – attempt to have intercourse but are unable because of his impotency. This problem is only resolved when they are both in costume. After rescuing people from a burning building (one of whom actually comments on Laurie's choice of dress), they are finally successful in their sexual endeavors because Dan is attracted to Laurie while she is dressed in this manner. While Laurie clearly is attractive in her costume, it was interesting that Moore chose to bind her sexuality to it so closely.

There is another sexual act attempted between Laurie and another man that fails, but this occurs for different reasons. While still in a relationship with Dr. Manhattan, Laurie and he engage in foreplay. The panels only show her face and his hands initially before another set of hands join in. Dr. Manhattan has duplicated himself in order to perform multiple tasks, so that Laurie is with two of his copies instead of the man himself. The act is a clear violation of her trust, but even though this scene has a grand total of four characters in the buff (the original Dr. Manhattan is currently not in Figure 11), only the woman appears shamed, quickly covering herself with the bed sheets. The one panel shown below is a strong representation of the gender stereotype of the emotional female. The stereotype is only strengthened by Dr. Manhattan's logical explanation for the situation, even as Laurie continues berating him.



Figure 11

The conventional roles of the male and female continue to play out with Laurie and Dr. Manhattan. Manhattan is a being driven entirely by logic, so when he discovers he may have been the cause of cancer in various people, he opts for the more efficient action of leaving the planet. Laurie, on the other hand, is propelled by her feelings to yet another relationship. Even when in the company of her mother, she is talking about men. At the crux of the decision in determining the world's fate, Manhattan's logic is placed in stark contrast to Laurie's emotional pleas. However, only Laurie's mother is able to outstrip all of the competition presented here.

The reader's first encounter with Sally Jupiter includes a moment where Laurie, visiting her mother, is offered by Sally a Tijuana Bible, a short, pornographic comic popular in the 1930s and 40s, that features Ms. Jupiter as a character. Whereas Laurie is revolted by her mother's portrayal, her mother is flattered by the attention. Given her track record, sexual attention appears to be something Ms. Jupiter highly enjoys. She initially joins the Minutemen **at the age** of 18 to not necessarily perform as an effective crime fighter but uses her fame to **finance her**

career as a model afterwards. When confronted by her daughter on both using her sexual attraction to succeed and also enjoying the interest generated by such actions, she replies that “Being reminded that people used to slobber over me? Sure. Flattering. Why not? Laurie, I’m 65. Every day the future looks a little bit darker. But the past, even the grimy parts of...well, it just keeps getting brighter all the time” (*Watchmen* 4). The flashback triggered by this comment is the moment in time where Eddie Blake – The Comedian – attempts to rape Sally Jupiter.⁶ Given the context of the situation combined with her flippant remarks about the event, the implication remains that Sally is now flattered by the attack, viewing it as attraction to her person. However, Moore later reveals that Jupiter and Blake have a consensual relationship wherein Laurie is conceived. The question concerning the character of Sally Jupiter is not “Is it misogynistic to portray a woman obsessed with sexual attention, even fostering this attitude in her daughter?” but “Is it misogynistic to feature a victim falling in love with her abuser - known as the Conversion or Corrective Rape trope – *and then* have the salvation of the world depend upon the conception of their child?”.

The answer is a complicated “yes”. When Laurie first meets Blake, Sally appears in a whirlwind to snatch her daughter away, and, even knowing Blake is the father, she accuses him of having amorous attentions on Laurie. Blake insists the matter between himself and Sally was handled a long time ago, yet Sally replies “No. Things like that don’t ever get settled. Not completely...and they’re not going to happen to my daughter” (16). Laurie’s next encounter with Blake is more of a confrontation, as she demands to know how he felt knowing he forced a

⁶ An argument exists that an actual rape took place in the form of sodomy. The reasoning is as follows: 1) The “camera” cuts away from the scene as Blake is lowering his trousers; 2) Angles in the next panel, combined with comments from Hooded Justice, imply that Jupiter is in a state of undress necessary for such an act to occur; 3) There is audible confirmation - “Ghuuchh” - of violence taking place as the panel focuses elsewhere, ironically on a gorilla head, symbolizing animalistic nature.

woman to have sex with him. He responds “Only once” (21). So, was the encounter between Jupiter and Blake – for it was only one episode when he came to her house one afternoon – consensual, or has it been romanticized along with the porno comics? Sally’s final panel in the comic displays her weeping while kissing Blake’s image in the photo of the group that was taken shortly before the assault. But I believe this is another broken character in this comic who has made a choice that cannot be readily defined as “black” or “white” as one main character – Rorschach – so fiercely believes. Yet this is also a display of woman romanticizing her past to the extent that she is affectionate towards a man who assaulted her once, possibly taking advantage of her another time. Forgiveness has been equivocated to reconciliation.

Conclusion

Moore’s stories are layered and complex. It would be a mistake to oversimplify a problem, even if that problem persists throughout his work. Based on his writing and the presentation of all women, there has been both improvement and failure from Evey to Mina Murray. While I do believe there are sexist elements scattered throughout the comics, I also believe the characters have some form of justice served to them, even if it is not to the degree that I wish it to be. Yet if they are uplifted and given autonomy, then at some point the women are also degraded. Mina leads a contingent of men, but Moore breaks her spirit by the end of the comic. He paralyzes Barbara Gordon in every sense of the word. Moore simply never bothered to repair Sally Jupiter or give the subject of her abuse a definitive answer. I must acknowledge the issues present, yet I do believe future generations will acknowledge them (and to an extent have already acknowledged them) and are steadily improving the female representation in the comic world.

At the time Moore was publishing his first comics in the 1980s, the comic book industry was undergoing yet another change as it shifted out of what is known as the Bronze Age into the Modern or Dark Age, which Moore helped usher in with his grim storylines and antiheroes. Comparing his female characters with those of the writers surrounding his publications, however, does not provide us with much difference. The women grapple issues in an empowering manner while simultaneously being objectified. They are deprived of roles of leadership and independence, much like Laurie and Sally. By the late 90s with the beginning of the publication of *League*, Moore had begun losing his chance to make an impact with any sort of feminist sentiment.

Though the industry was led into much darker territory by Moore, writers ventured into feminism without him. Chris Claremont is one such writer, who co-created several female characters with layers of power and complexities that endure to this day. Perhaps the most famous comic book with a female protagonist is *Persepolis*, the autobiography of an Iranian woman, Marjane Satrapi, published in 2006, shortly after *League*, which does far more to advance the subject than Moore does. Of course, I have yet to mention the artists who have flocked to the internet to display their artwork and stories through web comics with no restrictions or boundaries, achieving far more success in this matter than anyone else. Among these include *Girl Genius* by Kaja Foglio, *The Dreamer* by Lora Innes, *Hark! A Vagrant* by Kate Beaton, and *Lackadaisy* by Tracy Butler. While Moore has contributed to this fanciful world of caped crusaders and knights in dusty armor, his works retain their complexity. The fact remains that I must grapple with disturbing elements throughout Moore's comics. His themes do degrade his female characters. Even if he raises his character to new heights, abandoning them at the end undoes all his work. I cannot paint Alan Moore in shades of black and white, but I can turn to the

pages of other comics that do not leave me questioning my status as a woman in a mad Moore world.

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