

# Men of Steel? Rorschach, Theweleit, and *Watchmen's* Deconstructed Masculinity

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**W***atchmen* (1987), written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons, is a 12-part graphic novel that portrays real-life superheroes in a fictional United States of the 1980s. An alternate universe where ordinary people without superpowers were inspired by superhero comics and took on the crime-fighting in tights in the 1940s, the comic portrays an America vastly different from our reality. Since its publication more than two decades ago, the comic has been the subject of extensive study due to its breathtaking narrative structure as well as its acute deconstruction of the superhero genre itself. Indeed, one of the text's most brutal deconstructions comes from the way it addresses superheroinic masculinity, from the misogynistic vigilante Rorschach to the emasculated ex-hero Nite Owl. Through its cast of male heroes, *Watchmen* deconstructs the superhero genre by rewriting masculine tropes such as vigilantism and patriotism and by exposing the inherent contradictions within these gender-bound tropes from the fascist undercurrents of violent patriotism to the often-hinted sexual dysfunction of the costume-fetish variety.

In terms of masculinity, *Watchmen* is often read through the concept of the *übermensch*, and the focus has been on the seemingly "perfect" characters of Dr. Manhattan and Ozymandias (cf. Keeping 2009; Thomson 2005; Wolf-Meyer 2003). Instead of linking the superhero to the Nietzschean discourse of the superman, this article addresses a different aspect of masculinity within *Watchmen*. Drawing from the German scholar Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* (1977/1978; 1978/1989) and his explorations on the "turbulent emotional world of the fascist man" (Benjamin and Rabinbach 1989, ix) in the German *Freikorps* novels and memoirs of the 1920s, this article uses Theweleit's analysis on the connections between masculinity, nationalism, and violence in post-WWI Germany to produce a new way of analyzing *Watchmen's* deconstruction of superheroinic masculinity. As superheroinic (hyper)masculinity is clearly connected to nationalism, its geopolitical implications are also addressed.

Despite the differences in their contexts, Theweleit's deconstruction of the protofascist "male warrior" shares a number of similarities with the superhero: the main connecting factor arises in the armored "man of steel" (1978/1989, 160), the hard and impenetrable male body, and in the intense rejection of the feminine. A further connection can be found, incidentally, in the way Theweleit chooses to illustrate his own

argument with images of Spider-Man, Captain America, and the Mighty Thor, thus deliberately underlining the similarities between the superhero and the subject of his study. Theweleit visually cites the superhero as an example of the new masculine ideal of the "man-machine" with a hard "steel body" and an armor that contains his "over-wrought body" that yearns to explode and erupt like a bullet in battle (1978/1989, 160–179). In this article, I combine Theweleit's work with a close reading of *Watchmen's* "main character," Rorschach, who represents the violent masculine vigilante ideal in its most extremes, especially through his misogynistic views on the feminine, but also through his intense patriotism. First, I discuss the more general concept of hegemonic masculinity within the superhero genre and its geopolitical relevance, and then I focus on how Theweleit's work presents an alternate way of analyzing modern masculinity in *Watchmen* through the character of Rorschach.

## HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY, POPULAR GEOPOLITICS, AND THE HYPERMASCULINE SUPERHERO

Masculinity, defined as a dynamic concept, is "a set of expectations that society deems appropriate for a male subject to exhibit" (Gates 2006, 28). These expectations vary according to time and place, and are thus part of "hegemonic masculinity," a form of masculinity that is culturally exalted over other forms of masculinity, "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (Connell 1995, 76–77). Overall, "masculinity" can be defined in a variety of ways, ranging from essentialist definitions of what a "man" is to a semiotic distinction that contrasts the symbolic difference between masculine and feminine (Connell 1995, 68–70). Hegemonic masculinity is firmly institutionalized, not just through social and cultural histories, but also through schools and the military, which both take time to include education of "proper masculine behavior" of the hegemonic ideals, often characterized in the Western world by proper morality, a trained body, and self-discipline (Mosse 1996, 134–5). Superhero comics, as a part of western popular culture, can be read as constituting a part of this "metanarrative of masculinity" (Boon 2005, 303) through the way they often espouse and promote a particular type of idealized masculinity through the heroes' looks, action, and ideological stand.

In terms of geopolitics, the superhero belongs to the popular geopolitical discourses of nationality, and the superhero's

role as America's national icon and its visual and cultural embodiment has been frequently stated in scholarship (cf. Costello 2009; Dittmer 2010; Duncan and Smith 2009; Edwardson 2003; Murray 2011). Popular geopolitics in general combines the study of popular culture with that of geopolitics, the study of the relationships between geography, statehood, and politics, and it is particularly interested in questions of power, space, and identity (Dodds 2000, 73). While geopolitics as a whole contains a wide area of studies focused on the formal and practical aspects of foreign policies, state leadership, and geographical states, the stress on *popular* geopolitics emphasizes the way popular culture can create, sustain, and challenge specific national identities and scripts. Popular geopolitics then, is interested in the way societies and states attempt to represent the world and their position in it in certain, consistent, and regular ways, and how these attempts manifest through popular culture and the popular cultural myths of a particular nation (Dalby and Ó Tuathail 1998, 3; Dijkink 1996, 1–2). From this perspective, studying the way the superhero is deliberately deconstructed can be analyzed as a deconstruction of some of the popular geopolitical myths it carries.

As a representative of a particular brand of twentieth century American hegemonic masculinity, the superhero usually embodies the tough, uncompromising masculine virtues of the American nation, virtues that originate from the Frontier myth and which can be located in other popular fictions of America, such as westerns and detective fiction, which tend to embrace the idea of a masculine essence instead of a plurality of masculinities (Miettinen 2012, 76). Looking at the superhero, the essential masculine attributes attached to him stress the ideal as white, heterosexual, muscular, and violent (Miettinen 2012, 55). Crucially, superheroic hypermasculinity is often partially achieved through a highly misogynistic representation of female characters, from the hypersexualized representation of the female superhero to the clichéd demonization of the powerful female character going “berserk” (Emad 2006, 982). Deemed “secondary in importance” already in the 1950s by a notorious DC Editorial Policy (Madrid 2009, 77) and often serving as “motivation for the [male] hero’s journey, rather than as characters of substance in and of themselves” (Stuller 2012, 237–38), female characters in superhero comics still are faced with a tradition of years of explicit misogyny. Although Moore and Gibbons do not completely succeed in escaping these influences in *Watchmen* (the male-female binary remains intact throughout the comics), they do expose the inherent misogyny of the genre through their focus on masculinity.

#### THE MASCULINE VIRTUES OF THE MAN OF STEEL

Critically aiming to expose the inherent assumptions and contradictions within the superhero genre, *Watchmen* relies on a form of “hypertrophic deconstruction” where deconstruction is achieved by developing the heroic characters beyond their limits and thus exposing the realities behind such fantasies as they turn into nightmares (Thomson 2005, 106). In terms of superheroic masculinity, this hypertrophic deconstruction is clearly present in the character of Rorschach. Rorschach’s diary monologue begins and ends the narrative, casting him in the implicit role of a main narrator. Rorschach’s diary with its

economic use of language in itself echoes what Jopi Nyman has called the “linguistic strategies” of hard-boiled detectives, which usually convey a detached form of masculinity through their narratives (1997, 36), further stressing the hero’s detached and controlled state. As a hypertrophic deconstruction of the American vigilante ideal, Rorschach arises as the comic’s archetypal superhero, but, as Richard Reynolds has noted, “with every semblance of glamour apparently taken away” (1992, 107). Of course, Rorschach is by far not the only character used to question superheroic masculinity. For example, the masculinist discourse of the “hard body” has been a subject of parody and satire within the superhero genre since its origins, from the tongue-in-cheek “Plastic Man” (Cole 1941) to the casting of scrawny teenager Peter Parker as the brooding “anti-hero” Spider-Man in the 1960s. Nonetheless, it can be argued that *Watchmen* uses Rorschach to expose the connection between masculinity, misogyny, and nationalism on a level not previously witnessed in the genre.

Rorschach’s masculinity is closely tied to his nationalism. Idolizing President Truman and the lost America of the past where men “believed in a day’s work for a day’s pay,” Rorschach views himself as the true patriot, the one who has seen the “true face” of New York (and, by association, all of America) (Moore and Gibbons 1987, I; 1). Rorschach embodies a political ideology that has been labeled “radical conservative” as his actions aim to restore the dystopian present of *Watchmen* in the name of a “pro-state ideology” (Wolf-Meyer 2003, 508–09). From a popular geopolitical perspective, Rorschach can be read in terms similar to Captain America: a character where the political nature of American nationalism connects with the individual body (Dittmer 2005, 627). Although he lacks the obvious flag-motif costume (given here to the Captain America-inspired military hero, the Comedian), Rorschach nevertheless demonstrates the hypermasculine “virtue” of patriotism, becoming a hypertrophic representative of a national ideal. That this is done through attributes that are perceived as masculine is hardly coincidental: as Mosse notes, masculinity holds a “determining role” in defining nationhood and nationality as the male body comes to symbolize the state’s need for such virtues as order, progress, self-control, and moderation (1996, 4–5). Theweleit, too, suggests that the strict order and control required of the male body consolidates the “nation” as a totality formation, thus connecting hypermasculine ideals with statist ideals about control (1978/1989, 155).

Positing himself as the true masculine hero, Rorschach condemns his former partner, Nite Owl, as “a flabby failure who sits whimpering in his basement” (Moore and Gibbons 1987, I; 19) who obviously fails to meet the masculine ideal of the hard “steel body” by becoming “soft” and quitting (Moore and Gibbons 1987, VI; 15). Rorschach is primarily characterized by his adamant refusal to quit or compromise, “even in the face of Armageddon” (Moore and Gibbons 1987, I; 24), which is how he separates himself from the “failures” others have become. He describes himself as “free from fear or weakness or lust” as he puts on his mask, his true face (Moore and Gibbons 1987, V; 18), in essence stating that he is in complete control of himself and his desires, as the “true” masculine hero should be. As Theweleit writes:

[T]he most urgent task of the man of steel is to pursue, to dam in and to subdue any force that threatens to transform him back into the horribly disorganized jumble of flesh, hair, skin, bones, intestines, and feelings that calls itself human (Theweleit 1978/1989, 160).

The steel body is then not only about the physical fitness, but also about mental control. The man of steel must not only have a perfect body, but he must also contain and control any urges or emotions that may threaten to deluge him.

In his need for this ultimate control, the comic shows how Rorschach's ego is derived from the mask, which becomes his true self, his armor against the world and its temptations. The narrative delicately challenges this depiction as the reader begins to see the contrast between Rorschach's self-image and the perceivable reality: Rorschach's apartment is filthy, filled with dirty dishes, cracked windows, and torn wallpaper (Moore and Gibbons 1987, V; 11). There are visible stains in the gloves he refers to as "spotless" (Moore and Gibbons 1987, V; 18), leading the reader to doubt whether the rest of his narrative holds similar dissonances. When he is captured, one of the police officers mockingly notes how he is wearing "elevator shoes" to look taller (and thus more masculine), and he is on several occasions described by others as remarkably ugly (Moore and Gibbons 1987, V; 28, VI; 2). The masculine ideal of control, self-discipline, and physical perfection that characterizes Rorschach is contrasted with features that do not fit this ideal, beginning to deconstruct the masculine myth of the superhero, and by association, the wider popular geopolitical constructs of masculinity.

### REJECTING THE FEMININE

In his "immaculate" state as Rorschach, he is free from all corruption and temptation. Rorschach's bitter monologues clearly evoke Theweleit's "metaphor of the flood": the inevitable upheaval which simultaneously threatens and excites, as it will ultimately "cleanse" the world from all its corruption (1977/1987, 230):

The streets are extended gutters and the gutters are full of blood and when the drains finally scab over, all the vermin will drown. The accumulated filth of all their sex and murder will foam up about their waists and all the whores and politicians will look up and shout "Save us!" ... and I'll look down and whisper "No." (Moore and Gibbons 1987, I; 1)

The "vermin" drowning in its own filth is identified as either prostitutes or politicians. In other words, both women and the government are seen as responsible for the corrupted state of the nation, and it is this explicit rejection of the feminine that further connects Rorschach to Theweleit's fascist males.

Theweleit discusses at length how the *Freikorps* men see women as a clear threat to the male ego and its boundaries through a "fear of dissolution" and how women in their writing become uncanny "agents of destruction" who must be rejected to protect the self (1977/1987, 45; 63). Accordingly, there is a significant absence of pure and virtuous mother figures (Theweleit's "white nurses," 1977/1987, 90–91) in Rorschach's life, where only whores seem to exist. Rorschach

views the corrupting female sex as a particular source of potential emasculation, a clear threat to his sense of identity. Rorschach's curt reaction to the news of his mother's death ("Good." Moore and Gibbons 1987, VI; 8) testifies to the notion that the threatening element of the corrupting female must be annihilated (Theweleit 1977/1987, 183). Indeed, Rorschach's misogyny is underlined throughout the comic: he refers to the first Silk Spectre, Sally Jupiter, as "a bloated, aging whore" (Moore and Gibbons 1987, I; 19), and later criticizes the way "women's breasts [are] draped across every billboard, every display, littering the sidewalk" (Moore and Gibbons 1987, II; 25). He cites his work in the garment industry as "unpleasant" due to the requirement to handle women's clothing (Moore and Gibbons 1987, VI; 10). His dislike of the feminine is apparent in the way he cuts up a dress until "it didn't look like a woman anymore" (Moore and Gibbons 1987, VI; 10) and in his disapproval of the second Silk Spectre's (very figure-revealing) costume (Moore and Gibbons 1987, VIII; 21).

Because Rorschach can be read as the hypertrophic extension of the popular superhero myth, his violent rejection of women exposes the inherent potential for misogyny within the popular (super)hero myths of America. Love and family must be rejected to maintain the autonomy of masculine identity and authority (Mosse 1996, 166–167; Nyman 1997, 7), and in Rorschach, this part of the popular hero myth is taken to its most extreme and highly misogynist limits: he becomes the extreme masculine (super)hero who must resist and reject women to survive. This rejection of women within fiction has also been read as a larger symptom of a western "crisis of masculinity" that Lawrence and Jewett (2002, 151–55) identify as rising in America in the early 1980s. As Susan Faludi recounts, by the 1990s, everyone from newspaper editors to preachers was publicly bemoaning the crisis in American masculinity that manifested in the much-publicized "angry white male" demographic, which was linked to the rising levels of unemployment, depression, and suicides found among the average male population in America (1999, 6). Linked to this, the nation saw the emergence of a new men's movement that suggested that men needed to distance themselves from the domesticating effect of women and the Women's Rights movement and reconnect with other men, thus becoming "warriors" of a near-mythical proportion (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 152–153).

It is revealing that Rorschach (whose uncompromising yet contradictory morality leads him to kill rapists and despise whores) idolizes the Comedian, whose attempt to rape the original Silk Spectre is viewed by Rorschach as a "moral lapse" (Moore and Gibbons 1987, I; 21) of a great man, "a hypermasculine display of power and violence" (Loftis 2009, 72) that is to be admired rather than condemned. The Comedian represents a "real" man to Rorschach, whereas all the other heroes of his cohort are seen as either failures or otherwise corrupt; the Comedian fights US wars in both the South Pacific and in Vietnam, and handles the Iranian hostage situation in 1980 (Moore and Gibbons 1987, IV; 23). As Rorschach describes him, it is clear that he views the Comedian as standing for the same uncompromising attitude he holds for himself: "He [the Comedian] stood up for his country [...] He never let anybody retire him"

(Moore and Gibbons 1987, I; 17). While Rorschach idolizes the Comedian as an example of a “proper” and idealized masculinity, he clearly labels homosexuality as an unwanted and negative form of masculinity. This is revealed in his evaluation of the hero Ozymandias: “He is pampered and decadent, betraying even his own shallow, liberal affectations. Possibly homosexual? Must remember to investigate further” (Moore and Gibbons 1987, I; 19). In Rorschach’s world, homosexuality implies moral corruption and the inability to control one’s sexual urges, the very opposite of the controlled and impenetrable masculine ideal. Homosexual desire destabilizes the dominant binary categories of gender (Nyman, 1997, 135), and accordingly, Rorschach, too, expresses distrust toward anyone he sees as challenging this binary.

It is interesting to note that writer Alan Moore was reportedly dissatisfied with the way the majority of readers positively identified with Rorschach as the comic’s hero despite that Moore aimed to portray the “worthlessness of the vigilante ideal” through him (*Comics Journal* 138, 1990, 73; quoted in Reynolds 1992, 117–18). Pondering on the popularity of this clearly paranoid, violent, and right-wing hero who “represents the most unsavory part of American culture,” Michael J. Prince concludes that it is Rorschach’s “resilience in the face of everything that would undermine his identity” that is the cause of his popularity among readers, his refusal to compromise “even in the face of a collective problem” (such as a potential Armageddon) (2011, 823). Through his resistance to moral compromises and his desire to go on fighting when all hope is lost, Rorschach displays the superheroic “extra effort” identified by Reynolds as a key element of superhero comics (1992, 40–41).

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I aimed at reading *Watchmen*’s Rorschach as an attempt to deconstruct some of the masculine myths associated with the superhero, linking them to the wider discourse of popular geopolitics. Rorschach is in many ways the western masculine hegemonic ideal taken to the extremes, his explicit misogyny linking him with Theweleit’s fascist men and their rejection of women as an intrusion on their ego. Furthermore, through his misogyny, Rorschach can be read in connection with the wider “crisis in masculinity” that was widely reported in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s. Although Rorschach becomes a deconstruction of a particular masculine ideal strongly associated with superheroes, the way he embodies these ideals even in the most extreme can also act as reaffirming those ideals among readers, as his popularity among readers clearly suggests. ■

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