

Satirical Sleight of Hand in Warhammer 40K: Space Marines and Hegemonic Masculinity



Jordan Etherington

To a Space Marine the boltgun is far more than a weapon, it is an instrument of Mankind's divinity, the bringer of death to his foes, whose howling blast is a prayer to the gods of battle.

–Warhammer 40,000 5th Ed. Rulebook

Satire (n.): a literary work holding up human vices and follies to ridicule and scorn

–Merriam-Webster

Warhammer 40K has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years. It started in 1987 as a tabletop miniatures game named *Warhammer 40,000: Rogue Trader*, published by Games Workshop. Although it began as a science-fiction version of Games Workshop's already existing Warhammer Fantasy game, it has since eclipsed Warhammer Fantasy in popularity, becoming one of the largest active science-fiction IPs today (Heseltine & Pointon). In the 35 years since it was first released, its brand presence has spread to numerous mediums, including video games (the *Dawn of War* series, *Space Marine*, *Mechanicus*, and *Necromunda*, to name only a few), movies (such as the straight-to-DVD movie *Ultramarine*), numerous stand-alone board games (*Space Hulk*), and a live-action television series under development (as of writing) based on the novel series *Eisenhorn* (Clarke). In this article, I focus on tie-in media that is produced by The Black Library, the book publishing division of Games Workshop.

This article examines how norms of hegemonic masculinity are portrayed and reproduced in the dystopian setting of three novels set in the Warhammer 40K universe. The novels are *Dawn of Fire: Avenging Son*, *Legacy of the Wulfen*, and *Azrael*. These novels were chosen because their content is chiefly concerned with the most iconic and popular part of the Warhammer 40K brand, the Space Marines. I assert that while Games Workshop claims that the setting of Warhammer 40K is meant to satirize and critique authoritarian norms (Warhammer Community), no substantive satirical content is found in these three novels in regard to the Space Marines, the most popular part of the Warhammer 40K brand (Jones & Kelling). This absence is particularly apparent in relation to the tropes associated with hegemonic masculinity. The lack of satirical content significantly weakens Games Workshop's claim about the satirical intent of Warhammer 40K. Instead, it indicates that the label of 'satire' is selectively deployed to resist symbolic association with authoritarian groups, providing a cover for the use of hypermasculine signifiers

in Warhammer 40K content. I provide supplemental context with the concept of the ‘masculine nation’ during the overall analysis (Reeser).

Theoretical Framework

The framework for this article is R.W. Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity as presented in *Masculinities*. In this text, Connell describes gender norms and relations between genders as being socially constructed frameworks rather than inherent to any biological sex. Within each society there exists a form of each gender that is socially dominant, or ‘hegemonic,’ and this category is made up of the ideal attributes associated with each gender. For example, a few of the gender norms that make up hegemonic masculinity in Western society include: an ability and willingness to commit violence to ‘defend’ one’s family, property, and dignity; stoicism; success in sexual relationships with women; physical strength; independence; and a general lack of vulnerability, be it emotional or physical. Concerning Warhammer 40K, Connell’s ideas help us understand that the game is a product sold within a hobby space in the West that is still largely dominated by white males (Pobuda). This incentivizes Games Workshop to ensure that their products engage in tropes that reinforce hegemonic masculinity to appeal to those consumers (Petando Cateli and Rodriguez Pilar, pg. 509).

Novel Content Analysis

The novels covered in this essay focus on the most recognized icon of the Warhammer 40,000 brand, the Space Marines. This analysis considers how these novels use hegemonic masculine ideals to reframe warriors in service to a self-described “monstrous civilization” (Warhammer Community) into heroic characters in which brand consumers can become emotionally invested. These novels are discrete works by different authors, and none of them are in the same series. This selection allows me to provide a wider perspective on the portrayal of the Space Marines and ensure that the entirety of that presentation was not the result of a single author’s voice.

Because Space Marine existence is defined by warfare, the plots of the three books are structurally similar. A planet in the Imperium faces attack from a threat that is too powerful for ordinary humans to defeat, or in the case of *Legacy of the Wulfen*, the home system of the Space Wolves Chapter is threatened (Annandale and Macniven, Ch. 1). The Space Marines battle the threat, making sacrifices and losing members until eventually they can defeat the enemy through the superior application of violence. The main antagonist in all three of these books is Chaos, a supernatural force that is represented by extradimensional demons. More specifically, in *Dawn of Fire: Avenging Son*, the newly revived son of the God-Emperor, Roboute Guilliman, prepares a new military crusade to take back worlds recently lost to the Imperium after an invasion by Chaos. In *Legacy of the Wulfen*, a demonic invasion of the Space Wolves system is accompanied by the return of the Wulfen, werewolf-like Space Wolves whose presence risks the Chapter being declared enemies by the Imperium. Finally, in *Azrael*, the titular character is initiated into becoming the leader of the Dark Angels after the previous leader is killed while fighting a demonic invasion of another planet.

Here, a brief explanation of Space Marines will be helpful for understanding the rest of my analysis. The Space Marines are genetically and cybernetically enhanced super-warriors that are taken from different parts of the Imperium's population in childhood and put through intentionally deadly trials. The surviving members are then put through the series of implants and treatments that change them into roughly eight-foot-tall superhuman warriors. Afterwards, their entire lives are dedicated to fighting the enemies of the Imperium. Different groups of Space Marines are called Chapters. Most significantly, they are exclusively male. Women cannot become Space Marines, and there have never been any examples of or references to Space Marines that do not present as cisgender males.

The Space Marines exist to defend the Imperium of Man, a massive, highly fractured state that can be best described as a brutally authoritarian fascist theocracy. The Imperium violently enforces a social order defined by unthinking devotion to the God-Emperor of Mankind and his representatives, hatred of anything that is not defined by the authorities as sufficiently human, and a constant state of war with everything in the galaxy that is not the Imperium of Man. Anyone who is not directly involved in brutal and dehumanizing combat must support it through brutal and dehumanizing labor. Every Black Library novel set in the Warhammer 40K universe illustrates this premise with an opening statement about the setting, describing the Imperium as “the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable” (Thorpe, “Warhammer 40,000”), or in an updated version in *Avenging Son*, as a society “where an existence of grinding servitude is the best that can be hoped for, and a quick death is seen as the kindest mercy” (Haley, “Warhammer 40,000”).

Games Workshop directly states that the Imperium is meant to be understood as satirical in a blog post entitled “The Imperium is Driven by Hate, Warhammer is Not” (Warhammer Community), stating: “The Imperium of Man stands as a cautionary tale of what could happen should the very worst of Humanity’s lust for power and extreme, unyielding xenophobia set in. **Like so many aspects of Warhammer 40,000, the Imperium of Man is satirical**” (Warhammer Community, emphasis in original). However, it should be noted that Games Workshop created this blog post in response to fans appearing at a Warhammer 40K tabletop army game tournament wearing clothing associated with hate groups, and therefore clearly intended to disassociate the Warhammer brand from toxic elements of the fandom. According to this blog post, the satirical elements are to be found in the exaggeration of humanity’s worst tendencies, such as authoritarianism, fanaticism, and xenophobia, to a self-destructive degree. However, taking a closer look at the novels I chose for analysis—*Dawn of Fire: Avenging Son* by Guy Haley, *Legacy of the Wulfen* by David Annandale and Robbie Macniven and *Azrael* by Gav Thorpe—will provide examples of how Games Workshop fails to commit to satirical commentary by neglecting to satirize hypermasculine norms as embodied by the Space Marines.

Dawn of Fire: Avenging Son

Dawn of Fire: Avenging Son provides the most nuanced perspective on Space Marine characters because multiple characters, only a few of whom are Space Marines, tell the story

through their own viewpoint. Space Marine characters very rarely externally display uncontrolled emotion, in keeping with Western norms around stoicism. This emotional withdrawal is framed as a benefit of training that allows them to face evil enemies (including literal demons) that ordinary humans (referred to as “mortals” by Space Marines) would not be able to fight without being overcome by fear. This is shown with the passage: “Thousands of red-skinned monsters born of fear and sin scaled the outer ramparts, fury and murder incarnate. The mortals they faced quailed. It took the heart of a Space Marine to stand against them without fear” (Haley, Ch. 1). Such emotional detachment could have been used to satirize toxic masculinity by pushing stoicism to such an extreme that its adherents have a difficult time relating to the humans they are supposed to defend; however, the reader is simply presented with the situation without further comment. In other words, *Avenging Son’s* portrayal of Space Marine emotional expression is generally restricted to expressions of tactical professionalism, comradely affection, and cold anger, all of which serve to make them better able to commit violence against their enemies. However, even though the book gestures at how their stoicism makes social interaction with others difficult, it fails to engage in satirical exploration of these toxic masculine norms, implying that these traits are meant to be engaged with uncritically.

Avenging Son implies that while the existence of Space Marines is in many ways inhuman, it is also necessary because the universe of Warhammer 40K is so hostile that the conversion of human beings into weapons of violence is required for humanity’s continuing existence. In fact, the creation of a massive army of Primaris Space Marines is treated as a vital part of heroic character Roboute Guilliman’s plan to save and reform the Imperium. This novel is the most critical of the experience of being a Space Marine, which is illustrated by the description of the new Primaris Space Marines—upgraded Space Marines that have spent millennia in cryogenic hibernation—as alienated from reality due to most of their experiences resulting from mentally implanted knowledge and tactics, and, in the case of one character, literally entering an unpleasant depersonalized state during a battle. However, at no point is the ethics of the use of Space Marines questioned or criticized outside of concerns that the leader of such an army would become morally corrupted by power. Furthermore, while this book does have the most actual satirical content, such as when an administrator named Fabian is accused of heresy for saying that the Imperium had not existed for eternity (Thorpe, Ch. 9), these elements are never used to satirize the Space Marines themselves. Their existence is strange, violent, and often unpleasant but never actually an impediment to their goals. If satire exists to “hold up vice and folly to ridicule and scorn” (Merriam-Webster), then a satirical portrayal of Space Marines would show how their inhuman existence works against them. The failure of *Avenging Son* to do so therefore indicates that Space Marines are not intended to be satirical.

Legacy of the Wulfen

Descriptions of emotional expressions are more varied in *Legacy of the Wulfen*, with the Space Wolves Chapter characterized as more given to express emotion than the Space Marines in *Avenging Son*. It should be noted that these characters’ emotional expressions are still within

hegemonically masculine norms; they are merely less stoic. The aesthetics of the Space Wolves are derived from popular depictions of Viking-era Norse culture, and thus they are characterized as more open to joyful expressions like laughter or grinning, all of which are still placed within the context of battle (Annandale and Macniven, Ch. 1; Ch. 4). This expressiveness does not extend to emotional vulnerability with some form of masculine compensation. For example, all three times Space Wolves are described as experiencing grief, that grief serves to motivate them to enact violent retribution against their enemies (Ch. 1; Ch. 3). In other words, not performing masculinity through stoicism is allowed because it makes them better at performing masculinity through violence. The fact that Space Wolves consistently experience grief as a motivator for violence is never brought up in a critical way. To be fair, this all occurs during combat, but it is still remarkable that it occurs three times and the authors never comment on it.

Azrael

Finally, the emotional expressions of the Space Marine characters in *Azrael* contrast much less with that of *Avenging Son* than that of *Legacy of the Wulfen*. The one notable subversion from the norm is an open expression of sorrow coupled with “a moment of very human frailty...” (Thorpe, Ch. 21) during a scene in which the psychic Space Marine Ezekiel explains that his great power required him to face greater tests of loyalty than anyone else in the Dark Angels Chapter. However, Ezekiel compensates for this expression of emotional vulnerability by framing it as resulting from how powerful he is. If he did not have to constantly resist the temptation to exercise his supernatural powers for his own benefit, he would not experience a lapse in stoicism. Otherwise, the masculine norms of stoicism, with emotional expressions of affection being restricted within a framework of fraternal warrior bonding, remain the default. A dogged commitment to remaining as masculine as possible prevents Space Marine characters from being targets of critical/satirical commentary, with subversions of masculinity quickly compensated for and then never brought up again.

Common Elements

All three of these novels depict Space Marines as violently hypermasculine. Whether part of the Space Wolves, Ultramarines, or Dark Angels Chapters, they are all superhumanly large, powerful, and exclusively male characters that are defined chiefly by their capacity for inflicting violence on their opponents, and their relative physical and emotional invulnerability (particularly with regards to fear) when compared to regular humans. This is consistent with many of the idealized traits of hegemonic masculinity in Western society (Connell), albeit exaggerated beyond human capacity.

In a satire, the Space Marines embodiment of superhuman hegemonic masculinity could result in toxic hegemonically masculine traits being amplified to a superhuman degree as well, allowing for commentary on how unhealthy expressions of masculinity traits, such as the urge to dominate one’s surroundings to compensate for feelings of insecurity, can lead to self-destruction. Instead, these books view the hypermasculine existence of the Space Marine as a vaguely

disturbing (Haley, Ch. 21) but ultimately necessary sacrifice for the greater good of humanity which does not come with any negative consequences that keep them from carrying out their duty. Those hypermasculine traits are instead portrayed as necessary for the Space Marine's duty to defend those who cannot defend themselves. For example, the violent nature of Space Marines is justified by the existence of foes described as overwhelming existential threats to the population of the Imperium, such as the Chaos Space Marines or daemons.

A satire could also discuss how a Space Marine's duty to defend the citizens of the Imperium is incompatible with their duty to preserve the Imperium itself, as the Imperium represents the greatest source of harm to its citizens. However, while Roboute Guilliman expresses disdain for how the Imperium has fallen from its idealistic origins, it only extends to a desire to reform the Imperium rather than outright reject it (Thorpe, Ch. 9). That the Space Marines themselves are portrayed as unambiguously heroic characters despite their complicity in the preservation of the explicitly tyrannical Imperium indicates that their mutually incompatible duties are not intended to be a source of satirical commentary, but instead ignored or absorbed uncritically by the audience.

The most interesting way that that Space Marines manage to avoid satirical scrutiny is through the portrayal of their quasi-autonomous relationship with the rest of the Imperium. This is particularly the case in *Legacy of the Wulfen*, wherein the Space Wolves are described as holding control over their "sovereign territory" (Annandale and Macniven, Ch. 13) of the Fenris System. This is a star system over which the Imperium has granted them "full rights" (Ch. 13). Leaders of the Dark Angels and Space Wolves are both depicted as being able to defy the Inquisition, a secret, police-like force with unlimited jurisdiction, powerful enough to command the destruction of entire planets (Ch. 11). Thus, the Space Marines essentially exist as sovereign states within a state—literally in the case of the Ultramarines—allowing the authors frame them in a non-dystopian manner. This indicates a symbolic separation between the satirized self-sabotaging tyranny of the Imperium and the non-satirized violent hypermasculinity of the Space Marines.

Space Marines and the Warhammer Brand as Masculine Nation

This de facto separation between Imperium and Space Marine governance is more interesting when one considers the concept of the 'masculine nation.' As described by Reeser, this refers to how "connections are often made between the nation and gender as human traits are ascribed to the nation to put forth a certain image of what it is or should be" (171). While the Imperium is certainly a gendered nation, as it is called "the Imperium of Man," and its ideology is based around such masculine traits such as aggression, competitiveness, violence, and stoicism in the face of pain and death, the Imperium itself is egalitarian with regards to gender. For example, one of the most important space admirals in *Avenging Son* is a woman. However, the Space Marine 'nations' in the books are literally gendered, the nature of the Space Marine transformation precluding anyone who is not male from being able to take a leadership role. While there are non-Space Marines present, baseline humans are restricted to being "Chapter serfs," assistants, and servants

to those Space Marines. This allows the Space Marines to exist without any possibility of feminine ‘interference,’ which then allows the Space Marine to indirectly fulfill the hegemonic masculine ideal of being able to dominate the feminine.

The relevance is in the fact that while the Imperium and Space Marines keep their distance, this separation allows the Warhammer 40K setting to remain firmly masculinized if one looks at the Warhammer 40K brand as a nation. As Reeser explains, “When key elements, (such as the military), are considered as unwaveringly masculine, the nation by extension may be seen to assume that gender coding as well” (174). The Space Marines are *the* key element of the Warhammer 40K brand, and they are literally unwaveringly masculine. The separation from the Imperium is necessary to provide an even more purely masculine ‘place’ within the setting, because the Imperium itself is too large to function without any female characters without stretching credulity.

By making the ‘face’ of the brand be a faction composed wholly of hypermasculine bodies, the Warhammer 40K setting can be discursively constructed as a ‘masculine nation’ while still being marketed as inclusive of consumers of all genders. This may also account for the lack of satire directed at the Space Marines. They are meant to signal that the Warhammer universe is still a hegemonically masculine space. Attempting to criticize them may be interpreted as a criticism of masculinity itself by male consumers, risking pushback from the consumers who rigidly identify with hegemonic masculine ideals.

Conclusion

Warhammer 40K is a setting that is explicitly described as a dystopian satire of humanity’s worst impulses. One would expect the Space Marines to symbolize hypermasculine norms of violence, stoicism, and emotional alienation taken to a self-destructive extreme. Disappointingly, my examination of Black Library novels finds that the authors ignore this potential. While the Imperium itself is described as cruel and tyrannical, the Space Marines are allowed to keep the most toxic elements at an arm’s length while still engaging with the preservation of a tyrannical regime that is simultaneously described as an indefensibly monstrous state yet also treated in the narrative as necessary for the survival of the human species, enacting what I refer to as the satirical sleight of hand. Games Workshop benefits from the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity, particularly with the Space Marines. However, Games Workshop also claims their product to be satirical when it benefits them to deny their role in reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. My analysis casts doubt on that claim, as there is very little substantive satire to be found here regarding hegemonic masculinity. If Games Workshop truly intends for Warhammer 40K to be taken seriously as satire, then it will need to show willingness to express “ridicule and scorn” (Merriam-Webster) at the same tropes of hegemonic masculinity used to market Warhammer 40K products so profitably (Heseltine and Pointon).

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Jordan Etherington is a current doctoral candidate in the cultural arts Ph.D. program at Trent University, specializing in the study of performative masculinity and white supremacist rhetoric within online spaces from an affect theory perspective. He holds an M.A. in criminology from OntarioTech and a B.A. in sociology, also from Trent University. His favourite Space Marine Chapter is the Salamanders, but his favourite 40K faction is the Drukhari.