

Discovering the Literary Relevancy of *Watchmen*
A Review of the Graphic Novel's Philosophical Themes

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Abstract

The American comic book, specifically those of the superhero genre, is a medium that has been associated with stagnant, morally upright characters and formulaic plots. However, author Alan Moore and artist Dave Gibbons changed said stigma with their groundbreaking series *Watchmen*. An analysis of the work's storyline, as well as some of the main characters, will reveal the deep philosophical and psychological underpinnings of the graphic novel, and, more importantly, its literary merit. A Christian interpretation of the work will also be presented.

Discovering the Literary Relevancy of *Watchmen*

A Review of the Graphic Novel's Philosophical Themes

The advent of the superhero is widely agreed to have been initiated by Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster with the creation of Superman in the 1938 publication of *Action Comics* #1 (Goulart 43). Since the inception of the archetype, comic books, and crusading figures in general, have been considered a medium of juvenile fantasy and simplistic storytelling. The word “superhero” itself conjures specific images of the “black-and-white caricature” (Spivey and Knowlton 51) – the spandex-wearing, morally upright individual flying above a city, defending its inhabitants and enjoying a productive relationship with the authorities and public.

However, this model was drastically altered in the 1980s with Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, which featured a gritty and psychologically tortured interpretation of the title character, and Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, a biographical narrative recounting the horrors of the Holocaust. Both compositions challenged the status quo in their portrayal of superheroes and their willingness to deal with adult themes. However, perhaps the most revolutionary of the era's revisionary, mature publications was the 1986 release of the twelve-issue series *Watchmen*. Written by author Alan Moore and artist Dave Gibbons, the narrative, heralded as the first “postmodern comic book” (Thomson 2), posits a dystopian world where superheroes are a part of everyday life. *Watchmen* was eventually published by DC Comics as a single-volume work in 1987, a format known as a “graphic novel,” defined by author Stephen Tabachnick as “an extended comic book that treats nonfictional [and] fictional plots and

themes with the depth and subtlety [expected] of traditional novels and extended nonfictional texts” (*Teaching the Graphic Novel* 1), and “makes use of high-quality paper and production techniques not available to the creators of ... and traditional comic books” (*Age of Transition* 3). The graphic novel format of *Watchmen* will be the source of this analysis and will be referred to as such. Additionally, since the analysis will be textual, Moore will be cited as the primary author of the work.

A review of the themes present in *Watchmen*’s plot, as well as the philosophical backgrounds of several of its protagonists, will demonstrate the comic’s deserved status as literature, defined by *Merriam-Webster* as “writings having excellence of form or expression and expressing ideas of permanent or universal interest” (776). A spiritual analysis of the work will also be conducted.

Background

To understand how *Watchmen* deconstructs the superhero, the origins of the prototype itself must first be examined. The concept of the stalwart hero was developed in the years preceding 1986, during three distinct eras of comic book publication that historians chronologically distinguish as the “Golden Age,” which lasted roughly from 1938 to 1955; the “Silver Age,” 1956 to 1972; and the “Bronze Age,” 1973 to 1985 (Rhoades 6).

In an attempt to produce a definition of the genre, author Richard Reynolds presents the following traits common to these characters:

1. THE MAN-GOD: [Most] superheroes will be like earthbound gods in their levels of powers.

2. JUSTICE: The hero's devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law.
3. THE NORMAL AND THE SUPERPOWERED. The extraordinary nature of the superhero will be contrasted with the ordinariness of his surroundings.
4. THE SECRET IDENTITY. [The] extraordinary nature of the hero will be contrasted with the mundane nature of his alter-ego. Certain taboos will govern the actions of these alter-egos
5. SUPERPOWERS AND POLITICS. [Superheroes] can be capable of considerable patriotism and moral loyalty to the state, though not necessarily to the letter of its laws (16).

Author Jamie A. Hughes best summarizes the term when he says:

The word conjures up a very specific image of ... the [exemplar] "good guy." Many are from faraway galaxies; they fight crime in the name of perfect justice. In short, they are unlike us, and because of this, they are impossibilities (546).

The process of creating *Watchmen* began in 1983, when DC purchased the intellectual copyrights, including the characters and continuity, of Charlton Comics, a minor competing publisher. During this period, Moore contemplated creating a radical new vision for these characters, similar to his successful revamp of the DC character *Swamp Thing* earlier that year, and drafted a proposal to DC Managing Editor Dick Giordano (Kaveney 119). However, Giordano opposed Moore's story proposition, as Moore desired to use the Charlton characters within a self-contained murder investigation story, where some of them would have ended up "dead or dysfunctional," while DC was

hoping to reintroduce them to the public at a later time (Khoury, 109). As such, Giordano convinced Moore to begin working on original characters. Inspired by Charlton superheroes such as the Blue Beetle, Captain Atom, Nightshade and the Question, Moore and Gibbons began brainstorming original creations for Moore's narrative. According to Gibbons, their work to reconceive the pitch eventually led to them deciding to tell a critique of the superhero: "The Charlton characters were superhero archetypes. We realized we could create our own ... and tell a story about all superheroes. What were their motivations? How would their very existence change the world?" ("9 Watchmen Facts" 1)

Plot

A synopsis of *Watchmen*'s narrative is essential to understand the inner workings of the piece. Presenting a familiar version of our world, Moore's alternate reality is identical to our own up until the year 1938, when the aforesaid release of *Action Comics* #1 inspires individuals to become real-life vigilantes, with many of them teaming up to form the first superhero group, known as the Minutemen. Having these crime-fighters become public fixtures dramatically alters American history.

The most noteworthy point of deviation is caused by the character of Dr. Manhattan, a being of near-infinite power who was created in a nuclear accident in 1959. His presence halts the inevitable nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the United States, and tips the balance of power to the latter, resulting in the US triumphing during the Vietnam War. Dr. Manhattan also provides vast advancements in the quality of life for the world, including electric cars and non-pollutant air travel. However, his existence conversely exacerbates tensions between the two superpowers, causing an acceleration in

the nuclear arms race, moving both countries closer to the Doomsday clock. Additionally, in 1977, superheroes are outlawed by the Keene Act passed by Congress, and Richard Nixon remains president after four consecutive terms of office, due to the abolition of the 22nd Amendment.

Beginning in 1985, the catalyst for the main plot is the murder of Edward Blake, a.k.a. the Comedian, formerly the last active government-sanctioned superhero. His death is investigated by Rorschach, an unstable and rogue vigilante, who deduces the act is the work of an unknown “mask killer,” and goes to warn his former costumed associates, the second-generation of superheroes following the Minutemen. These main characters include: Dr. Manhattan; Laurie Juspecky, the second Silk Spectre and Dr. Manhattan’s girlfriend; Dan Dreiberg, the second Nite Owl; and Adrian Veidt, a.k.a. Ozymandias, “the smartest man in the world,” the only member of the group who publicly retired in 1975 and revealed his secret identity.

Rorschach learns that the Comedian was investigating the disappearance of several world-renowned artists and writers before he was killed. Furthermore, Rorschach’s prediction of a hidden enemy targeting “masks” soon comes to fruition: Dr. Manhattan exiles himself to Mars after information reveals his presence has unwittingly exposed his loved ones to cancer; Ozymandias is nearly assassinated by a gunman; and Rorschach himself is set-up and captured by the police. The sudden departure of Dr. Manhattan causes the USSR to invade Afghanistan, and Nixon and his cabinet discuss counter strategies, moving the planet closer to World War III.

Silk Spectre and Nite Owl, now believing Rorschach’s costumed killer theory, rescue him from prison after resuming their superhero identities. Dr. Manhattan returns to

Earth and takes Laurie with him to Mars, where she successfully convinces him to once again become involved in human affairs. Meanwhile, Nite Owl and Rorschach prowl the underworld looking for information regarding Ozymandias' assassin, and discover the supposed "mask killer" has been Ozymandias all along.

Traveling to his Antarctic fortress, Ozymandias discloses to Rorschach and Nite Owl that he has masterminded all the events that have affected the heroes – it was he who killed the Comedian after Blake unwittingly discovered his machinations; he afflicted Dr. Manhattan's confidantes with cancer; he gave the police the location of Rorschach's whereabouts; and he set-up his own assassination attempt. In a lengthy monologue, Ozymandias reveals that he determined the world was headed toward an inevitable nuclear holocaust, and has schemed to create a menace that will unite both superpowers – a genetically engineered, unstable alien, designed by the aforementioned missing creative individuals. He plans to teleport the creature to New York, where it will explode and emit a psychic shockwave, killing millions and cause both the USSR and the US to abandon their path of mutually assured destruction and ally against the perceived extraterrestrial threat.

Ozymandias then divulges that his plan has already been set into motion, and the resulting death toll numbers three million. Silk Spectre and Dr. Manhattan teleport first to New York and witness the destruction, and then join the remaining heroes. Nite Owl, Dr. Manhattan and Silk Spectre agree to keep silent about Ozymandias' action to justify the destruction and maintain the supposed "paradise" he has created. Rorschach, however, refuses and attempts to return to civilization before he is killed by Dr. Manhattan, who then leaves Earth forever.

The ambiguous ending of the book has Ozymandias' deception being successful, with the US and the USSR living harmoniously. However, the last page of *Watchmen* leaves open the possibility of the world discovering the ruse, as an employee at *New Frontiersman*, a newspaper Rorschach frequently read, discovers the journal Rorschach left them detailing the affair.

Moore adds to the realism of his world by providing bookends to chapters, which provide greater insight into the mindset of the characters and their reality. Examples include excerpts from the biography of the original Nite Owl; a psychological profile of Rorschach published by the New York Police Department; a scientific paper discussing the implications of Dr. Manhattan's powers, etc. By fashioning a nonlinear narrative, replete with flashbacks and flash-forwards, as well as minute details that are later revealed to have greater significance, Moore keeps the reader highly engaged throughout the work with his self-identified intricate writing style:

The world [*Watchmen*] presented didn't ... hang together in terms of linear cause and effect, but was instead seen as some massively complex simultaneous event, with connections made of coincidence and synchronicity, and I think that it was this [perspective] ... that resonated with an audience that had realized ... their previous view of the world was not adequate for the complexities of this scary and shadowy new [era] ... we were entering into (*Mindscape*).

Plot Themes

The overarching subject that *Watchmen* examines is the question of authority. The title of the work was inspired by the phrase “*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*,” a Latin quote spoken by the Roman poet Juvenal from his work *Satires*:

Or must the torturer rack the truth from your maids?
I know the advice my old friends would give – “Lock her up
And bar the doors.” But who is to keep guard
Over the guards themselves? (140)

Translated idiomatically as “Who watches the watchmen?” Moore himself has stated that the work is “a meditation about power” (*Britannia*). Contrary to previous superhero comics, the question of the appropriateness of the superhero’s crusade against wrongdoing itself is questioned, as abuses of authority are evident, such as Rorschach’s willingness to kill criminals or the Comedian’s excessive crowd-control tactics used during the 1977 Keene Act riots. The query concerning power originates in John Locke’s definition of civil society from his *Second Treatise*, whereby members of such a system are supposed to consent to surrender their right to private vengeance and instead delegate the responsibility to magistrates (105).

The concept of the superhero team is also critiqued in the work. In most Golden, Silver and Bronze Age team-up endeavors, individual superheroes worked cooperatively against an external danger, such as the Avengers uniting against Thor’s evil brother Loki, the Norse god of mischief (*Avengers* #1), or the Justice League of America combating the intergalactic menace of Starro the Conqueror (*The Brave and the Bold* #28). Contrarily, the main threat faced by the protagonists of *Watchmen* is internal, as their adversary is not an otherworldly force, but rather the esoteric concept of moral quandaries. The “us-

versus-them” mindset has been replaced with a new paradigm, defined by Descioli and Kurzban as “between-group conflict,” which is “resolved [by] alliances ... [victory] goes to the combatant backed by the majority” (249).

Prior to *Watchmen*, ethical conformity was generally a non-issue, as most members of a superhero group held similar standards, or were at least willing to put aside personal differences for the greater good. *Watchmen*’s characters are atypical, evidenced by the myriad of personal values they hold regarding the impending doomsday, as well as only being a “team” in name, as their actions indicate the different lengths each are willing to engage to avert the disaster. Thus, for the first time, Moore denied the superhero of his “high moral ground,” making him more relatable, as he faced situations where right and wrong were not clearly delineated (DeScioli and Kurzban 245). Hence, the characters of *Watchmen* represent a “radical departure from the ... trite myth of the superhero” (Masserano 3).

By making the majority of *Watchmen*’s protagonists non-powered and forcing them to deal with everyday problems, Moore criticizes the simplicity of the principles of previous superheroes; his characters, with their multifaceted natures, as well as the acknowledgement of the ethical “grey areas” that exist in the real world, make the template of the black-and-white stance on moral issues an impossibility, a fact echoed by writer Roz Kaveney:

[Superheroes exist in] a world ... [where they] ... are subjected to ... emotional pressures, as well as the stress of dealing with the public and government, not the least of which ... is their need constantly to [make] ethical decisions. Add to this the maintenance of a secret identity ... as

well as the particular problems that go with the individual superhero's condition and situation ... and it is clear that ... superhero comics have considered the rights and wrongs of their fundamental assumption with an obsessiveness that might almost be called neurotic (119).

The idea of disregarding old conventions about morality and uprightness of heroes is echoed in Moore's intentional recurring motif of the Comedian's badge, a bloody smiley face pin which affirms the idea that "the age of innocence is over" (Khoury 117).

Therefore, the main question asked by *Watchmen* is whether anyone could be trusted to occupy a position of guardian over the world. A poignant symbolic device Moore utilizes to present this query is the work-within-a-work "Tales of the Black Freighter," a fictional EC Comic which is read by one of the supporting characters. The narrative involves a sailor who is marooned by a demonic pirate ship and attempts to make his way back to his home to warn the townspeople of the ship's imminent attack. However, his unrelenting dedication to his righteous cause leads him to commit atrocities, slowly corrupting his nature, eventually motivating him to join the pirate ship himself. This story and the actions of the character evoke the statement spoken by in Friedrich Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "Anyone who fights with monsters should take care that he does not become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes back into you" (68). We can observe the devolution of the moral ground of the characters, such as Rorschach and Ozymandias, in the actions they take to ensure the safety of innocent, albeit via very different means.

Characters

Adrian Veidt, a.k.a. Ozymandias, the most audacious of the protagonists, is perhaps also the most complex of Moore's characters. The son of wealthy German immigrants, Ozymandias inherited a large inheritance at the age of 17, but chose to donate it to charity in an attempt to prove to himself that he could be successful starting penniless. Inspired by the achievements of Alexander the Great, Ozymandias embarks on a vision quest through the Middle East, following in the steps of his idol. He eventually returns to America and uses his intelligence to establish a successful crime-fighting career, and later, after he retires, a marketing empire.

Despite being a true "Renaissance man," Ozymandias is commonly classified as the villain of *Watchmen*, based on the outcome of the narrative. By having him detail his master plan to Rorschach and Nite Owl, and by extension the audience, Moore cleverly elicits a sense of complacency from the audience. Ozymandias' monologue evokes the comic book cliché of having the pompous and self-assured antagonist reveal his evil scheme to the heroes, fully confident that he will succeed, only to be thwarted at the last moment by a contrived plot device. However, once again Moore defies superhero tropes by allowing Ozymandias his speech, and then pulling the rug out from under the reader, resulting in the most haunting line in the piece:

NITE OWL: [When] was this hopeless black fantasy supposed to happen?

When were you planning to do it?

OZYMANDIAS: Do it? Dan, I'm not a republic serial villain. Do you seriously think I'd explain my master-stroke if there remained the slightest chance of you affecting its outcome? I did it thirty-five minutes ago
(Moore and Gibbons 27; ch. 9).

Also, uncharacteristic of a so-called “supervillain,” Ozymandias’ ultimate goal is not global domination, but pacification. Despite his willingness to commit mass murder, it remains unclear whether Ozymandias can truly be classified as the antagonist of the work – although he does leave a trail of collateral damage, the end result of his conspiracy is one of stability and prosperity for the world. Thus, his actions could classify him as an anti-hero, “a person ... who does bad things for the right reasons” (Spivey and Knowlton 51), which result in the quelling of the inevitable conflict between the world superpowers and the assured continuance of the human race. The principle of “the ends justifying the means” invokes the philosophical ideals of Jeremy Bentham, the father of utilitarianism, which he discussed in the first chapter of his work *Principles of Morals and Legislation*:

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do.... The principle of utility recognizes this subjection.... Systems which attempt to question it, deal in sounds instead of sense, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light (17).

Ozymandias is thus merely fulfilling Bentham’s “greatest happiness principle,” whereby the end result of his actions provides the greatest benefit for the largest group of people – the preservation of billions of people at the cost of a few million. Therefore, in

his mindset, having to choose between several evils, he has selected the more worthy outcome (Spivey and Knowlton 51).

However, in doing so, he makes himself unsympathetic to the reader, as it is difficult to accept his justifications:

The hero rises above normal human beings by saving them, and, through this secular salvation, he or she lives on in their memory. Ozymandias, the hero who most lucidly realizes all this, unapologetically seeks to put himself in the place previously thought to be occupied by God. His ability to shoulder ... superhuman responsibility – by choosing to sacrifice millions of innocent lives in a bid to save the world from nuclear annihilation – not only makes [him a] hero with which most of us cannot identify, it also puts him above, and so alienates him from, humanity in general (Thomson 12).

His name itself is derived from Ramesses II, the thirteenth century BC pharaoh, who was well-renowned for his conquests. Ozymandias' true nature is fittingly demonstrated in the epigraph by Percy Bysshe Shelley that closes Chapter XI: "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings.... Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" (Moore and Gibbons 28)

Moore does not allow Ozymandias to escape his endeavors unscathed. Although Ozymandias is willing to shoulder the burden of the destruction of millions of innocent lives, even his façade of absolute certainty about his plan's effectiveness breaks down near the conclusion of the book:

OZYMANDIAS: I know I've struggled across the back of murdered innocents to save humanity ... but someone had to take the weight of that awful, necessary crime.... I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end.

DR. MANHATTAN: "In the end?" Nothing ever ends Adrian. Nothing ever ends (Moore and Gibbons 27; ch. 12).

Ozymandias' actions also recall the principles advocated by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, specifically the *Übermensch*. The concept of the *Übermensch*, translated as "superman" or "overman," was what Nietzsche believed man could become through dedication to perfection – the epitome of being:

Man is something that shall be overcome.... What is the ape to man? A laughingstock-stock or a painful embarrassment. And just the same shall man be to the *Übermensch*.... The *Übermensch* is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: The *Übermensch* shall be the meaning of the earth (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 9).

Ozymandias fully embodies the *Übermensch* ideal, as he has "transcended the bounds yoked upon him by culture and achieved his genetic potential" (Wolf-Meyer 498). The character's superiority is achieved through his advanced intellect and his athletic prowess, a feat which serves as inspiration to everyone, proving that the *Übermensch* is attainable. In keeping with the concept, Ozymandias is attempting to uplift his genetic precursors, imparting his enlightened, metaphysical knowledge, in this case, world peace, to institute change (Wolf-Meyer 501).

Walter Kovacs, a.k.a. Rorschach is the polar opposite of Ozymandias in terms of political ideology. The son of a prostitute, Rorschach's childhood was plagued by abuse and neglect, which lead him to become a pariah – an antisocial, deranged vigilante, who exercises brutal methods of retaliation against criminals. Moore has stated that Rorschach is intended to be a realistic representation of Batman's vengeance-fueled crusade against crime: "Superheroes in the real world ... are scary [because] a person dressing in a mask and going around beating up criminals is a ... psychopath" (*Britannia*).

Rorschach holds to the views of Immanuel Kant, who advocated a retributive theory of punishment – the idea that evil must be punished, simply because it is deserving of punishment (Held 20). As such, the character expresses a clear delineation between right and wrong, and has appointed himself as the judge of criminals:

RORSCHACH: [There] is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished. But there are so many deserving of retribution and there is so little time (Moore and Gibbons 24; ch. 1).

Rorschach exemplifies the notion of the categorical imperative, whereby Kant affirmed the idea that human beings, specifically because of their capacity for free will, should never be devalued, but should rather be respected as autonomous individuals, capable of making decisions and their corresponding consequences: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end" (Kant 21).

It is for this reason that Rorschach refuses to accept the utopia offered by Ozymandias at the story's conclusion, as if he does, justice has been bought, and the injustice committed by Ozymandias would go unpunished.

NITE OWL: Rorschach, wait! Where are you going? This is too big ... we have to compromise....

RORSCHACH: No. Not even in the face of Armageddon. Never compromise (Moore and Gibbons 20; ch.12).

Rorschach's self-imposed position as an arbiter of justice also causes him to recognize his own mortality, prophetic of the character's end:

RORSCHACH: Violent lives, ending violently.... We never die in bed. [We're] not allowed. [Is it] something in our personalities, perhaps? [It's unimportant]. We do what we have to do (Moore and Gibbons 26; ch. 2).

Rorschach's character also fully embodies the Nietzschean concept of nihilism, the belief that "[Our] existence (action, suffering, willing, feeling) has no meaning: the pathos of 'in vain' is the nihilists' pathos" (*The Will to Power* 318).

The two major characteristics that form the crux of the character – his unique mask and the fact that Rorschach, rather than Kovacs, is his primary personality – both stem from instances of violence.

The first event, the motivation for Rorschach's costumed identity, was initiated by a real-life felony. Kitty Genovese, a New York City woman, was raped and murdered outside her apartment building in 1964. In Moore's account, forty neighbors witness the incident, but do nothing to intercede. During this period, Kovacs is employed as a garment worker and comes into the possession of fabric from a rejected special-ordered dress. The unique material contains two pressure and heat-sensitive fluids between layers of latex, which create a morphing, non-mixing black-on-white color effect. Rorschach,

disillusioned with the apathy of his fellow man after hearing of the Genovese case, decides to use the cloth to craft his “face.”

The second event that defines Rorschach is his investigation of the kidnapping of Blair Roche, a six-year-old girl taken from her parents. During his inquiries, Rorschach discovers the kidnapper, realizing he had targeted the wrong victim, butchered the girl and fed her remains to his German shepherds. In retaliation, Rorschach kills the dogs, chains the man to his fireplace and sets the house on fire, an act which cements Rorschach’s adoption of his vigilante persona as his dominant “self” – he becomes completely devoted to his perverted form of justice after concluding the world has no moral order:

RORSCHACH: Existence is random.... No meaning save what we choose to impose. This rudderless world is not shaped by vague metaphysical forces. It is not God who kills the children. Not fate that butchers them or destiny that feeds them to the dogs. It’s us. Only us (Moore and Gibbons 26; ch. 6).

Author Ian Thomson asserts that Rorschach’s bleak worldview is a realistic outlook for his character, and superheroes in general:

[Given] the ... all-or-nothing mentality of the kind of person who would become a hero (a person who wants to believe in absolute values but encounters only darkness and ambiguity), nihilism is a natural [fallback] position (11).

Interestingly, Rorschach derives his name from the patterns on his mask, which reference the famous psychological test where participants look at inkblot images and

describe their interpretations. The fact that the black and white colors never intermingle serves as a reflection of his well-established moral code. Furthermore, the character serves as a metaphorical blank slate, an invitation for the audience to read into the blots of his “face” to determine what they feel about him (Kaveney 130).

The final character who demonstrates philosophical depth is Jon Osterman, a.k.a. Dr. Manhattan. Formerly an unassuming watchmaker, Osterman’s career path was altered in 1945 at the behest of his father after the US dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima; his father, not wanting Osterman to engage in an “obsolete trade” (Moore and Gibbons 3; ch. 4), encourages him to pursue a career as a nuclear physicist. In 1959, Osterman accidentally locks himself inside an experimental test chamber, and his body is vaporized, but his consciousness later reconstructs his physical form as a blue-skinned, unearthly being. Now possessing god-like capabilities, including teleportation, control over matter at the subatomic level, clairvoyance, etc., Osterman, is publicly bestowed with the identity of Dr. Manhattan by the US government.

Dr. Manhattan’s newfound perception of reality is the primary influence for the character’s worldview. Following the nuclear accident that resulted in his “rebirth,” he no longer experiences time in a linear manner, but rather receives input from the past, present and future simultaneously. As such, he holds to the ideal of fatalism, the belief that every action in life is moving incontrovertibly and unchangeably towards preset outcomes (*Merriam-Webster*):

DR. MANHATTAN: Everything is preordained. Even my responses.

LAURIE: And you just go through the motions, acting them out? Is that what you are? The most powerful thing in the universe and you're just a puppet following a script?

DR. MANHATTAN: We're all puppets, Laurie. I'm just a puppet who can see the strings (Moore and Gibbons 5; ch. 9).

According to his own beliefs, the turning point of his own life is when his father set him on the path to becoming a nuclear physicist, a fact made more poignant by the Albert Einstein quote that ends Chapter IV: "The release of atom power has changed everything except our way of thinking. The solution to this problem lies in the heart of mankind. If only I had known, I should have become a watchmaker" (Moore and Gibbons 28).

His certainty in predetermined events also motivates him to adhere to the idea of Stoicism, a worldview which emphasizes that negative emotions, such as anger or jealousy, are the result of lapses in judgment, and a truly logical individual – who has achieved intellectual perfection – will not suffer such feelings (*Stanford Encyclopedia*). The end goal of said philosophy is to achieve a state of *apatheia*, a Greek word which translates as being "without passions" (Laertius 117).

The philosopher Chrysippus best summarized the viewpoint in the work *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato*: "We say that such people are irrationally moved, not as though they make a bad calculation, which would be the sense opposite to 'reasonably,' but rather in the sense of a rejection of reason" (IV: 18).

Dr. Manhattan extrapolates the concept by applying a modern interpretation to Stoicism, in that he seeks to excise all emotions, both negative and positive, as it impedes

him from maintaining an objective view of the world; instead, he chooses to focus on the one constant in reality – nature (Terjesen 140). Dr. Manhattan's indifference to emotion is evident when his live-in girlfriend Janey Slater, presents him with a ring as a Christmas gift:

JANEY SLATER: Do you like it? I mean, is that the sort of thing that you like, not that you're....

DR. MANHATTAN: I like it very much. Its atomic structure is a perfect grid, like a checker-board (Moore and Gibbons 11; ch. 4).

An identically passionless response is provided when Rorschach informs Dr. Manhattan of the Comedian's death:

RORSCHACH: [I] take it you're not too concerned about Blake's death.

DR. MANHATTAN: A live body and a dead body contain the same number of particles. Structurally, there's no discernible difference. Life and death are unquantifiable abstracts. Why should I be concerned?

(Moore and Gibbons 21; ch. 1)

Dissimilar from Ozymandias and Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan's character also represents a critique on the scientific method. Prior to *Watchmen*, superheroes in comic books obtaining their powers via uncontrollable accidents was not uncommon: the members of the Fantastic Four were bombarded by cosmic rays during a space mission (*The Fantastic Four* #1); Matt Murdock gained heightened senses after being blinded by toxic waste (*Daredevil* #1); and Barry Allen's super speed was the result of a freak lightning strike (*Showcase* #4). In all of these circumstances, the titular character gains new abilities and immediately dedicates their life to fighting evil (Thomson 21). Science

during this era was viewed as the means by which humanity was to achieve utopia. As explained by author Danny Fingeroth, “Science fiction ... was about a man’s potential becoming realized ... the world [was] full of evil, but science [was meant to] show us the way to good” (123).

Moore counters the idea that the future scientific developments will be the savior of mankind, as evidenced through the actions of Dr. Manhattan. As a being of limitless power and one who views the world through a distinct paradigm, Dr. Manhattan becomes increasingly withdrawn from humanity as the book progresses, disinterested in human affairs and unable to connect with his loved ones.

Additionally, Dr. Manhattan continuously questions his necessity to fight evildoers, as his perception of ethics slowly fades away:

DR. MANHATTAN: The newspapers call me a [crime-fighter], so the Pentagon says I must fight crime.... The morality of my activities escapes me (Moore and Gibbons 14; ch. 4).

Additionally, by specifically naming his character after the infamous Manhattan project, Moore proposes that science is not a tool for the utopian ideal, but is just as corruptible and destructive as man:

[By using the bomb] America, formerly righteous ... had abdicated its position of moral leadership by employing the tactics of its enemies, namely the mass obliteration ... of civilian populations. It had lowered itself to the level of the worst enemies of mankind as revealed by the bloody page of history.... American scientists had developed the most

horrible weapon ... ever seen, and ... the United States had used it, not once but twice (Savage 14).

Spiritual Analysis

Moore generously refuses to make judgments about the actions of the *Watchmen* protagonists – his ambivalence signifies his desire for the audience to engage the issues:

Ultimately it's the reader who has to make the choice. It's the reader's decision; it's the reader's world.... [It's] up to [them] to formulate their own response ... and not be told what to do by a superhero or a political leader or a comic book writer for that matter (Khoury 114).

In the words of the perennial final line of dialogue in *Watchmen*, “I leave it entirely in your hands” (Moore and Gibbons 32; ch. 12). Based on Moore's offer, a Biblical analysis can also be undertaken to comprehend the relatable spiritual elements of the work.

Moore, using his non-powered “heroes” as representations of everyday people, recognizes the imperfection of humanity, coinciding with the concept of the Fall from Scripture (*New International Version*, Rom. 3.23). Interestingly, Rorschach's opening monologue bears strong similarities to Paul's lamentation about society's depravity, although it is devoid of hope from a higher deity:

There is no one righteous, not even one;
there is no one who understands;
there is no one who seeks God.
All have turned away,

They have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,
Not even one. (Rom. 3.10-12)

RORSCHACH: 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 1; ch. 1)

Coinciding with his recognition of humans' flawed nature is Moore's realization
that individuals also require redemption – someone or something to elevate them above
the increasing corrupt and bleak world they have created for themselves:

CAPTAIN METROPOLIS: Somebody has to do it, don't you see?
Somebody has to save the world.... (Moore and Gibbons 11; ch. 2)

Based on this perception, Ozymandias' final solution to the Doomsday clock
countdown could be viewed as an imperfect attempt to recreate heaven on earth, to
"restore a little bit of Eden to the world" (Oropeza 4).

However, Moore never provides a singular answer to his own redemption
question – we are stuck between the obvious ineffectiveness of watchmen, i.e. us,
governing ourselves, and numerous bleak outlooks that provide very little hope for a
positive moral framework or a hopeful future.

The actions of Ozymandias do uphold some aspects of Biblical teachings,
specifically in that he attempts to prevent the world power's self-destructive habits (Matt.
26.52) and institute peace (Matt. 5.9). However, the utilitarian notion that his deeds
should be judged by their end results, rather than the nature of the acts themselves,

opposes the clear Scriptural precepts against murder and deceit (Ex. 20.13). The casualness with which he is willing to murder for the “greater good” also demeans life, as God has made it evident that every person is crafted in His image (Gen. 1.26-27) and that “the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 2.16). Ozymandias’ actions fail to recognize God’s sovereignty regarding the outcome of world events (Prov. 19.21).

Rorschach’s character also demonstrates theological inconsistencies. His positive actions include his attempt to expose Ozymandias’ ploy, which reveals his dedication to truth (John 8.32). He also proactively fights against sin, an aspect of creation that opposes God: “And I will punish the world for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; and I will cause the arrogance of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible” (Is. 13.11).

Conversely, Rorschach’s method of combating evil involves the destruction of God’s creation by usurping His designated role of judge: “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Rom. 12.19).

He also fails to recognize that the law originates not within ourselves based on our reactions to the atrocities of the world, but rather from God: “Until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matt. 5.18).

Dr. Manhattan is also a paradox of Scripture. Perhaps the most poignant moment in the work is when, during a discussion with Silk Spectre, his naturalistic worldview causes him to realize the beauty of life:

Thermodynamic miracles.... Events with odds against so astronomical they're effectively impossible ... I long to observe such a thing. And yet, in each human coupling, a thousand million sperm vie for a single egg. And of that union ... it was ... you that emerged. To distill so specific a form from that chaos of improbability.... That is the crowning unlikelihood. The thermodynamic miracle (Moore and Gibbons, 26-27; ch. 9).

This revelation coincides with King David's adulation for the blessedness of life: "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb" (Ps. 139.13).

Furthermore, as the only character with superpowers, Dr. Manhattan constitutes the work's "Messianic" figure, in the sense that he has the greatest potential to influence events and inspire virtue in the human race (1 John 4.9). An appropriate parallel figure who demonstrates Dr. Manhattan's intended role comes in the form of another comic book "savior" – Superman. In the film *Superman Returns*, Jor-El's monologue to his son from best explains the character's purpose: "They can be a great people, Kal-El, they wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you" (Singer).

Dr. Manhattan's overall worldview of fatalism, however, violates Scripture. His analogy regarding the universe as being without supernatural design, "a clock without a craftsman" (Moore and Gibbons 28; ch. 4), is a direct refutation of the teleological argument developed by William Paley in his work *Natural Theology*:

Suppose I had found a watch upon the ground and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place.... When we come to inspect the watch, we perceive ... that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose.... This mechanism being observed ... the inference is inevitable ... that the watch must have had a maker ... who comprehended its construction ... and designed its use (1).

The dangers of such a philosophy are revealed through Dr. Manhattan's general apathy and moral relativism, specifically through his abandonment of the human race in their hour of need. This outcome, motivated by his worldview, was lamented by philosopher William James in his essay "The Dilemma of Determinism:"

[With determinism], is there not something rather absurd in our ordinary notion of external things being good or bad in themselves? Outward goods and evils seem practically indistinguishable except in so far as they result in getting moral judgments made about them. But then the moral judgments seem the main thing, and the outward facts mere perishing instruments for their production. This is subjectivism.

Finally, the title of the work has theological implications. As followers of Christ we are also called to be watchmen, in the sense that we are commanded to remain to be vigilant in guarding our hearts against worldly thinking (Prov. 4.23) and to educate non-believers about the message of salvation:

Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked person, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn them or speak out to

dissuade them from their evil ways in order to save their life, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood (Ez. 33. 7-8).

Conclusion

The themes presented by Moore in *Watchmen* push the envelope of what the comic book medium is able to accomplish: “*Watchmen* represents a criticism of traditional superhero literature, uttered through the technique of deconstruction” (Masserano 6).

Through his reevaluation of the genre, Moore is able to question what the exact nature of the term “superhero” means, and, if such an occupation were to exist, whether it would be beneficial to the world. Through philosophical examination, *Watchmen* is able to transcend its artistic pages and moves from being a case study about vigilantes to a commentary on mankind. As Iain Thomson states, it is by examining the characters that we hold up as “heroes” that we truly see a reflection of the human condition (1).

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