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# Watchmen: Comics and Literature Collide

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

WATCHMEN: COMICS AND LITERATURE COLLIDE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH

by

Christina Machado

2011

To: Dean Kenneth Furton  
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Christina Machado, and entitled Watchmen: Comics and Literature Collide, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Kimberly Harrison

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Ana Luszczynska

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Bruce Harvey, Major Professor

Date of Defense: November 10, 2011

The thesis of Christina Machado is approved.

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Dean Kenneth Furton  
College of Arts and Sciences

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Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi  
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2011

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis first to my parents, without their patience, understanding, support and most of all love, the completion of this work would not have been possible. To my fiancé who encouraged me and supported my desire to accomplish a goal I began working toward long before we met. To Dr. Roselyn Smith, who understood everything I said and everything I felt, even when none of it made sense, and always had a kind word and a guiding spirit.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS  
WATCHMEN: COMICS AND LITERATURE COLLIDE

by

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Miami, Florida

Professor Bruce Harvey, Major Professor

This thesis will explore *Watchmen* as an event in postmodern art and literature. When a postmodern event occurs, no language game exists at that moment to make the event comprehensible. Limitations therefore of incommensurable language games are exposed and scholars are left without language, scrabbling to decipher what happened. This is the case with *Watchmen*. Comics and literature collided and there is no language to discuss what has come out of that collision. Through chapter analysis, character study, and inquiry into the postmodern mood this project will demonstrate *Watchmen* as a turning point in the discussion of comics and literature.

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## Chapter I: Superhero Comic Books: From Superman to Rorschach

Instability and disorder can be comfortable, even inspiring states of consciousness. There have been and always will be occasions in history, philosophy, politics, architecture, art and literature that create a breach of order, a disturbance in the aggregate consciousness of a people creating the opportunity for what French philosopher Jean François Lyotard describes as *events*. These are instants in which something happens to which we are called to respond without knowing in advance the genre in which to respond. Events occur in such a way that pre-established genres are incapable of responding adequately to their singular nature. When an event occurs, by its very occurrence *something happens* that alters all that has come before and all that will follow, thereby destabilizing a well established system of thought or procedure. Events challenge the certainties and truths presented by the modern thinker and expose seemingly stable realities as mere illusion.

It may be confounding as to how instability and disorder can offer comfort, how the rug containing order, justice, stability and reality being yanked from under foot can offer opportunity. However, by breaking with traditional modes of operation and conventional wisdoms and promoting experimentation in the arts, discourses can be opened up and freed from the confines ruling them. This is the luxury of postmodernism. It is a philosophy, a theory, a critique or simply another lens through which to see and experience the world and it is through this lens that we can begin to work through *Watchmen*.

In 1986 DC Comics published a 12-issue series comic book (later compiled into a trade paperback) entitled *Watchmen*, affecting an event. The award-winning *Watchmen*



by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons became a benchmark for a new kind of superhero comic book. It attacks the idea of the superhero as he is commonly and classically conceived. It plays with form and structure of visual artwork as well as story telling and how the two mingle to break from traditional comics formulae. *Watchmen* forces into play the notion that no language exists to fully represent its eventhood and that a new language game or an intermingling of language games, in an attempt to explain and understand the event and facilitate language to discuss it must be considered.

Though superhero comics have been a part of American culture since the late 1930s and have even contributed to the national lexicon, they have generally been excluded from academic literary discourse. Cinematic blockbusters have brought attention as well as new audiences to superhero comic books, but the medium has been long ignored and discounted as a worthy form of narrative by literary critics for the majority of its lifespan. American superhero comic books have for decades represented one-dimensional heroes who portray characters that are all good and supremely patriotic. Their sole interest has been to serve and protect the American public. Since their emergence in the late 1930s, comic book superheroes have defended the defenseless, punished the wicked and battled those things that scare us, whether it be slumlords, evil industrialists, Nazis, Japanese agents, communists, aliens and most recently, terrorists. Superhero comics have an interesting history that reflects the mores and customs of place and time but, because of early associations with pop culture and pulp fiction, comics have been undervalued and viewed merely as child and illiterate entertainment. As superhero comics develop they continue to provide a glimpse into the spirit of the age, not only reflecting it, but challenging audience assumptions and beliefs while elevating the art

form by exploring complex issues, characters, language, structures and form. The growing ambiguity of the times reflects a growing ambiguity of subject, content and representation.

Though comic books have grown leaps and bounds, they actually started out very simply as reprints of old newspaper comic strips. It was an inexpensive way for newspaper publishers to profit by repackaging old comic strips and releasing them in a new form. This idea eventually led to comic books with all new original material. In 1938, Superman, the first and arguably the greatest superhero burst onto the scene in DC Comics *Action Comics #1*, ushering in the Golden Age of comics. Superman's popularity prompted DC to look for another costumed character that would grab audience attention the way Superman had. In 1939 they found their next superhero in Bob Kane's Batman. Like Superman, Batman was the first of his breed. Though he was not super powered, Batman possessed superhuman characteristics, having honed his mind and trained his body to the peak of his abilities. The success of these two iconic superheroes created a genre where within a few years they were joined by a slew of costumed characters with varying powers. Their success also prompted other publishers to get into the comic book business. By 1940, costumed superheroes were flooding newsstands. The Flash, Hawkman and Green Lantern among others joined the DC universe while rival companies offered even more superheroes. DC was the biggest comic book publisher, but there were dozens of others, one of those being Timely Comics, which would later become comics giant Marvel Comics.

Marvel Comics embraced less conventional ideas than DC, publishing characters like Sub-Mariner and the Human Torch. In the early years of Marvel (still Timely), a

teenaged Stan Lee working as an assistant tried to convince publisher Martin Goodman that comic book superheroes should appeal to an older audience but Goodman along with other publishers believed their books were read primarily by children. Consequently, instead of getting more mature, superheroes changed to reflect the juvenile market.

Batman was transformed from a weird avenger of evil into a father figure when Robin the boy wonder was introduced, creating comics' first kid sidekick. The assumption was that young readers would identify with young heroes, which proved true when Batman's sales doubled after Robin's introduction to audiences. The success caused an influx of kid sidekicks until finally in 1940, Fawcett Comics introduced a superhero who was a kid. Captain Marvel is a boy named Billy Batson who becomes a big muscled superhero when he says the word *Shazam*.

With the adventures of Superman, Batman and Captain Marvel, superhero fantasies began to function as wish fulfillment. It became a new way for people to deal with the realities of the depression and soon after, superheroes went off to war. In 1939 World War II had begun and though the United States was not yet involved, superheroes were: "We were fighting Hitler before our government was fighting Hitler" (Stan Lee qtd. in *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*). In a special story for *Look Magazine* in February 1940, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's Superman ends the war in two pages by snatching up Hitler and Stalin and dropping them off at the League of Nations, thereby, ending the war and exemplifying the way in which superheroes provided the instant solutions and the instant gratifications that Americans are so accustomed to.

Furthermore, superheroes at war were not just waving the American flag they were wearing it as exemplars of America itself. The greatest of these superheroes was

*Captain America*, who tore onto the scene selling out on newsstands and introducing the legendary Jack Kirby (creator of Captain American, The Fantastic Four, The Hulk, X-Men and more) to the industry. Further still, when the United States finally did declare war, superheroes went with great enthusiasm: “The stories had so much pro-American propaganda that you’d think they were subsidized by the government [...]” (Stan Lee). Comic books also found their way into care packages being sent to soldiers overseas. They became part of the standard reading material for GIs serving in World War II and comic book sales soared marking the peak of the Golden Age of Comics, where in the comics, America always won.

Nevertheless, for one superhero, fascism was just another example of male aggression. DC Comics hired psychologist Charles Moulton as a consultant to think of a way to create a female equivalent to Superman, to try to capture the female audience. In 1941 Moulton wrote the book himself and Wonder Woman came to life. Wonder Woman is an Amazonian princess who falls in love with a naval intelligence officer, Steve Austin, who crashed on the island home of the immortal amazons. Her love makes her realize she must face the same decisions other isolationists and pacifists faced in 1941, try to ignore the Nazis or fight for freedom. Princess Diana chooses to go back with Steve Austin to defend America. Like Superman, Wonder Woman was more powerful than a locomotive, had better gadgets than Batman and proved to be as great a commercial success, not only appealing to female audiences but male audiences as well. Furthermore, Wonder Woman gave easily accessible advice to kids about how they could help with the war effort. She urged them to collect old paper and scrap metal that could

be recycled into war materials. Similarly, other heroes began to promote collecting scrap metal and buying war bonds.

Finally, when artists and writers themselves went off to war feeling they could no longer just write about it, publishers had to give the superhero scripts to other writers and artists. Consequently, superheroes went corporate. Corporate control and long years of depression and war dulled the shine superheroes enjoyed for so long. Thirsting for a sense of calm and stability audiences tired of superheroes and interest grew in other comic book genres: “Superheroes were so closely tied in to [...] the World War II culture that they had trouble surviving” (Bradford Wright). When the war was over, the enemy was beaten and there was no longer a need for superheroes. However, three endured: Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman; and ironically just as superheroes began to lose their appeal, post war politicians attacked them as threats to the very foundation of the country. In the 1950s comic book superheroes faced their greatest battle, against the United States Senate.

Comic books came under attack by psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham who claimed comics were destroying society. The assault culminated in 1954 with the release of his book, *The Seduction of the Innocent*, and continued with Senate Hearings that same year investigating the effects of popular culture on young minds. Fearing government censorship, comic book publishers created the Comics Code Authority, a self-censoring organization that would issue seals of approval indicating that a code approved comic would not upset readers of any age. These new code approved comics instilled the idea that comics are a kids’ medium, a stigma the industry is dealing with to this day and as a result, many artists and writers left the industry. Even publishers closed their doors.

From 1954 to 1956 comic book sales fell more than 50 percent and would never again enjoy the popularity they had just before the senate hearings.

By 1961 a new era had begun, but comic books were still trying to recover from a government crackdown on the industry. Other than Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman most DC superheroes were cancelled by 1951. In an effort to recapture audiences, DC comics introduced new superheroes like the Flash, Green Lantern and Hawkman teaming them with older established heroes to form the Justice League of America. The superhero team concept was so successful that Stan Lee and Jack Kirby created The Fantastic Four for Marvel bringing a psychological component to comics that had not existed before. Characters like Mr. Fantastic and The Torch were shown to have their own human quirks and The Thing had an even greater problem, he hated being The Thing. At that time, superheroes hating being superheroes was a novelty that brought comics into a modern era.

The advancement of scientific technology influenced superheroes and prompted Marvel to reintroduce The Submariner and another atomic age anti-hero, The Incredible Hulk. The Hulk represented an early 1960s fear that atomic weapons would one day get out of control. Characters like the Hulk struck a cord with a new generation of readers that was questioning authority and Marvel started getting fan mail from high school and college students. As a result, Lee thought that audiences would like a superhero who was a teenager. Peter Parker, a shy science major who after being bitten by a radioactive spider, developed spider-like abilities took on the moniker *Spiderman* and became one of Marvel's most successful titles. Peter Parker was forced not only to deal with his newfound superpowers, but problems that any teenage reader could identify with:

school, girlfriend, family and work. The focus was not as much on the blue and red suit as it was on the boy inside the suit. It was about Peter Parker.

Marvel's success with newer more modern characters, illustrated a fundamental difference between DC and Marvel. DC tended to represent the readers' parents, an older generation with a simpler, easy to understand worldview where good and evil was readily recognizable. Marvel on the other hand offered a greater degree of ambiguity in its characters. As Marvel's success grew, Lee and Ditko decided to bring back World War II hero Captain America. The story line was that he had been frozen in ice for twenty years and his kid sidekick Bucky Barnes had been killed in action. The infallible one-dimensional hero of World War II blamed himself for Bucky's death and brooded as he felt he did not belong to the age in which he now found himself, instead he belonged in the 1940s. Captain America's growing discomfort mirrored the nation's as the certainties of yesterday got turned upside down in a new age of rebellion.

In the late 1960s, the superhero revival of the 1950s began colliding with the counter culture and to hold on to college-aged readers, superheroes had to change with the times. Wonder Woman underwent some unsuccessful changes until returning to her original form. Batman became a fearsome creature of the night that brought a compelling new realism to comics and *Green Lantern* and *Green Arrow* brought social commentary to comics. But, like Vietnam, drugs were an untouched issue of the period until the office of Health Education and Welfare sent Stan Lee a letter asking him to feature the dangers of drug addiction in one of Marvel's top books. In a *Spiderman* subplot, Spiderman saved a kid so stoned he believed he could fly and later his friend suffered a near fatal overdose on pills. They were incidents in a story, not fully devoted books, but

the Comics Code Authority rejected the idea of showing drug use and would not allow the seal of approval to be placed on those issues. Lee and Marvel's publishers decided to release the books anyway, without code approval, and they were very well received by the public. Consequently, the *Spiderman* drug controversy loosened the Authority's guidelines on material.

As new and specific superheroes arose out of time and culture they also faded because they eventually lost relevance. Superman, the original superhero would survive though because he could be re-interpreted to reflect the times and translate his success in comics to success in movies and marketing. He did however, lose his place as the most popular superhero in comics. The X-men, though they did not deal with any particular political issues, were relevant because of the basic theme of bigotry that ran through their history. These figures were hated because they were different, even though they were good. Wolverine as a reflection of the cynicism and irony that came out of the 1960s was a hero for the gen x-ers and a precursor to the darker hero.

Toward the end of the cold war, the potential for global destruction was ever present and the comic book industry was trying to find its place in the world. Out of that humor rose a question about which way the world was headed, a question that was reflected in the superheroes. This is the mood from which *Watchmen* emerged. It was a time when audiences could not accept a conventionally virtuous hero like Superman, on a mission to do good just because it is good, but they could accept someone who had a twisted violent need to fight evil. In this vein, Frank Miller revived Marvel vigilante *Daredevil*, but brought a humanity to the character by presenting him as flawed and



broken. Miller then challenged the traditional superhero notion of non-lethal justice when he revived *The Punisher*, ex-marine vigilante Frank Castle.

Finally, the dénouement came when Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons not only pushed the boundaries farther than ever before, but broke through them altogether. Moore was out to not only destroy the concept of superheroes, but heroes in general, because these are people we trust with our lives and no one should hand over their life, rather we need to trust ourselves. In *Watchmen*'s alternative universe, superheroes are morally ambivalent, impotent and psychotic. *Watchmen* comments on superheroes, talks about superheroes and what they mean and what it felt like to walk the streets in 1985, with Russia versus American, feeling like the nuclear clock was ticking closer and closer to midnight. It is the most complex and intricate superhero story ever produced and has inspired other artists and writers to do more. It pushed even Frank Miller to go further in *The Dark Knight Returns*, which pits an ageing Batman against psychotic foes and a corrupt society in a four-issue fantasy of the future in which Batman believes entropy is a natural state of being. With *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*, the traditional innocence of superheroes was swept away. It became an era where old characters were given new problems, varying from alcoholism to child abuse and anything in between.

Comic books and superheroes had to change with changing culture, history and politics to stay relevant, but none reflected upon their own medium and genre in the way that *Watchmen* did. Moore assumes the traditional comic book premise that superheroes exist and live amongst average citizens, fighting crime and effecting change, but he expands upon it until it eventually falls in upon itself. He questions the people to whom we entrust our way of life and our decision to do that. He pushes the troubled superhero

farther than ever and challenged artists and writers to do the same with books like *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Sandman* and *Spawn*. The medium and the genre have grown in such a way that warrants a study and critique of the art form and its contribution to literary discourse.

This thesis will explore *Watchmen* as an event in postmodern art and literature.

Chapter I: Introduction: From Superman to Rorschach is an introduction to my argument, its landscape, and the theoretical concepts by which I explore *Watchmen*. Additionally, to orient the reader, a brief history of superhero comics is provided, beginning with Superman and tracing the growth and progression of comics and superheroes to Rorschach and *Watchmen*.

Chapter II: Rorschach: The Mask of Sanity is a character study of the novel's protagonist Rorschach and the way in which he exhibits the traits of a postmodern superhero. He has a strict code of ethics recognizing the good and evil binary paradigm that is so common to many if not all Golden Age Superheroes. Rorschach differs from the traditional superhero mentality in that he believes evil must be punished, by death if need be. Golden Age superheroes will not, can not take a life no matter the evil committed, no matter the consequence of the evil doer living and likely escaping police custody to carry out his intended evil. Arkham Asylum, comics universe prison for the criminally insane, is infamous for not being able to hold its inmates for very long.

While analyzing Rorschach and his role within the novel, Chapter II is also a chapter analysis of *Watchmen VI*. In *Watchmen VI* the reader begins to get a more in depth sense of who Rorschach is and what he does. Part of what he does is exhibited in his relationship with Dr. Malcolm Long. As he introduces the doctor to a new way of

seeing, the reader too is made aware of meta-narratives at play and the various perspectives through and by which society and the world operate.

Finally, in Chapter III: *Watchmen: A Postmodern Literary Event*, an inquiry into the postmodern mood, as posited by Jean François Lyotard, will demonstrate *Watchmen* as a turning point in the discussion of comics and literature. The crux of the argument is made manifest. Lyotard's event concept is fully realized and offers a more complete understanding of how indeed revolutionary *Watchmen* is. It forces mainstream critics to talk about a literary medium and genre they do not understand and to talk about it they must find new language. I use various examples to illustrate how this novel has ushered in a postmodern era of American superhero comic books. The chapter presents the characteristics and mood associated with postmodernism as it differs from realism and modernism and shows how *Watchmen* exhibits these characteristics and displays an attitude that can be described as postmodern. *Watchmen* is an extraordinary work. It is not aesthetically pleasing and it is not imminently accessible. *Watchmen* is a complex work that when engaging with it, the reader must be careful not to be lead down the innumerable roads of investigation, inquiry and analysis into an abyss similar to the one Dr. Long finds himself in.

Given the subject matter and the potential for a never-ending project, I chose to narrow my focus. I limited my character analysis to that of Rorschach and how he functions throughout the novel, which lead me to focus on *Watchmen VI* for a chapter analysis that can represent the larger novel. There are so many opportunities to identify postmodernism in this novel, I chose only a few that focus mainly on illuminating

different perspectives, different ways of storytelling and presenting narrative and the use of language and image working together to do so.

## Chapter II: Rorschach: The Mask of Sanity

### *A Watchmen Overview*

*Watchmen*'s narrative frame centers around a group of superheroes or masked adventurers and vigilantes as they have come to be known, who exist in an alternative history United States where the Doomsday clock is set at five minutes to midnight because the threat of nuclear war with Russia has grown increasingly probable. Masked adventurers have lost favor with the American public because of their excessive use of force and thus have been outlawed by the Keane act, save a few who have been recruited by the government. These Government Issue superheroes, the Comedian and Dr. Manhattan have lead to the many differences between real world and *Watchmen* world history: the assassination of John F. Kennedy was averted, the United States was able to win the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal was never uncovered and consequently Richard Nixon was able to change the constitution and serve two more terms as president. Given the imbalance in global power because of masked adventurers' interventions on behalf of the United States, the cold war has never been abated and the threat of nuclear war with Russia is imminent. Radioactive trefoils are littered throughout the novel indicating a sustained terror and unavoidable public apathy. There is despondency among citizens and talk of containment among government officials. This is the reality of the *Watchmen* world.

The story however opens on a much simpler note, murder. In the course of a routine homicide investigation, Rorschach discovers that the victim thrown from his balcony to his death is the masked adventurer the Comedian. As Rorschach continues his investigation and the novel unfolds, he learns that Ozymandias killed the Comedian

because he discovered Ozymandias's plan to "save" the world and usher in Utopia.

Though the Comedian's view of the world and humanity are cynical at best, he is still severely distressed by what he discovers:

[Ozymandias] predicts that the world is moving toward nuclear holocaust, and then creates and successfully executes an elaborate plan to stop this likely annihilation of all life. Using the talents of some of the most creative people on the planet, whom he kills when their work is complete to keep it secret, he sets up a fake alien intrusion into New York City involving an explosion that he knows will kill millions of people. His expectation is that the sudden appearance of an alien foe threatening human life will bring together all the otherwise warring nations in peaceful collaboration against this new common enemy. Before they can ever conclude that there is no more of a threat from beyond forthcoming, new habits of harmonious co-operation will have changed the face of the earth into a peaceful environment that subsequently will support human fulfillment and happiness. (Skoble 36)

When Rorschach's investigation uncovers Ozymandias's plot he informs the other vigilantes who are initially compelled to stop Ozymandias, but when time runs out, Rorschach then plans to reveal Ozymandias's crimes to the world. The vigilantes, initially agree but, are ultimately persuaded by Ozymandias that the greater good will be served by keeping his machinations secret. Three million people die in order for Ozymandias's plan to succeed, but he argues that sacrificing three million lives in order to save the lives of billions is a worthy exchange and revealing his plan to the world

would only undo any positive results to come from the tragedy. The peace and harmony brought about by the attack would be replaced by anger and more violence. Ozymandias does not convince everyone, however. Rorschach rejects the group's utilitarian conclusion and, before Dr. Manhattan kills him, exclaims: "People must be told" (XII 23/5). Throughout the novel Rorschach shows himself to be a strict guardian of justice in an extreme binary sense. Ozymandias killed three million people, thus according to Rorschach's methodology, that evil must be punished and Rorschach goes to his death leaving us to consider the philosophical viewpoint he opened the story with. While investigating the curious circumstances surrounding the Comedian's death, Rorschach ponders: "Why does one death matter against so many? Because there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished. Even in the face of Armageddon I shall not compromise in this" (I 24/5-6). In the beginning, Rorschach declared not to compromise and in the end he did not. He is constant throughout the novel and in the end is silenced by the prevailing philosophical ideology.

Though Ozymandias's narrative wins out, there are many ways of seeing presented in *Watchmen*, from opinions to perceptions to narrative and structure. In an interview with Engine Comics, Alan Moore commented on the importance of varying points of view and presentations in *Watchmen*: "the most important thing in it was its structure. [...] It was about a certain way of viewing reality. It was about a kind of perception [...]" (Moore). With perception as a guiding force, *Watchmen* does not leave us with any conclusions, only more questions and impressions. It is fragmented and ambiguously subjective.

At their most basic, superhero comic books are morality tales where good and evil are easily recognizable and good always triumphs over evil. Though *Watchmen* breaks from much of what would commonly be associated with the superhero tale, it is still a book about morality. It challenges conventional views of literary storytelling and storytelling in comics. Just as the line between literature and comics has blurred, so too has the line between good guys and bad guys. The moral line is not as easy to pinpoint as it once was. The precept that superheroes are morally just and villains are thoroughly wicked is no longer absolute. With the Comedian, Doctor Manhattan, Silk Spectre, Nite Owl, Ozymandias and Rorschach as models, superheroes and villains are difficult to distinguish from one another.

#### Perception Is Reality

As we observe Rorschach throughout *Watchmen*, it is evident that he is guided by a moral code. Though his sense of morality varies from the traditional superhero or what the public perceives as morally acceptable, he believes he is fighting evil. As Dr. Long analyzes Walter Kovacs (Rorschach's alter ego) in *Watchmen VI* he is on a quest to uncover Kovacs's moral code and understand how that guides his actions. The problem is that Dr. Long believes Kovacs is his subject of analysis and not Rorschach. Not only is Rorschach the doctor's subject in *Watchmen VI*, he is the impetus for Dr. Long's eventual change in perception. Walter Kovacs, for all intents and purposes, functions as a secret identity for Rorschach, much like Clark Kent does for Superman. Kovacs like Kent is the personality that allows the superhero to blend in and move among society, whereas, Rorschach functions as a means of revealing and de-legitimizing meta-narratives about identity, justice, good and evil, as illustrated through his relationship with Dr. Long.



Rorschach's exploits reveal, to the doctor and the reader, many modern narratives that serve to give cultural practices legitimation or authority. Though the private thoughts and opinions that exhibit Rorschach's worldview are present throughout the novel in his journal entries, it is not until *Watchmen VI* that who and what Rorschach is and how he came to be is fully realized.

The reader's journey into morality through Rorschach's eyes begins when the police capture him outside a former villain's (Moloch) apartment building. As they tear the mask from his head asking, "Who is he?" Rorschach roars, "No! My face! Give it back!" (V 7/28). For the police, the mask identifies the citizen known as Walter Kovacs as the infamous vigilante Rorschach. Nonetheless, Rorschach's response indicates his self-identification with the superhero persona Rorschach, raising questions about identity and how it is conventionally and scientifically measured and determined. Rorschach's discussions with Dr. Long come to reveal something unconventional and unexpected, for the doctor as well as the reader, the effects of which slowly unfold throughout *Watchmen VI* changing the doctor by changing his perception of what is real and offering the reader a different way of interpreting the world. Rorschach being stripped of his mask does not strip him of what the mask represents. His mask is the lens through which he sees and experiences the world. It is through this lens, this mask, that Dr. Long comes to see a different way of viewing the world and his profession that has profound effects. He experiences a postmodern event of his own that leaves him uncertain of anything he once believed to be fixed and absolute.

*Watchmen VI* opens on the image of an inkblot card reinforcing the theme of perception. Dr. Long begins his psychological evaluation of Walter Kovacs/Rorschach

by administering the Rorschach Inkblot Test, a test based on perception. It is designed to gain insight into the mind of the subject given how he responds to meaningless ambiguous stimuli. Presumably, objective meaning can be extracted from responses to blots of ink that are supposedly meaningless. *Watchmen VI* functions similarly. It offers insight into the man known as Rorschach as he recounts his journey of self-discovery and as others look into him, he acts as a living Rorschach test offering insight into those around him, namely Dr. Malcolm Long.

Levels of perception and awareness are at play as soon as Dr. Long hands Rorschach an inkblot card and asks him what he sees. Panel seven shows what Rorschach actually sees, a dead dog with its head split in half, but panel eight shows him saying that he sees “a pretty butterfly” (1/8). He knows what the “right” answer is, he knows what the doctor wants to hear or may expect to hear given his reputation and history, and he knows what society deems “healthy.” Given the life he has led, however, and the horrors he has seen, he does not believe in established cultural concepts of right and wrong, healthy and unhealthy. For Rorschach, it is a fabled notion that society’s law, its justice system is equipped to handle every situation. Nevertheless, society must believe and subscribe to the fable in order to feel safe and certain that there is order and reason in the world; a point postmodernism does not concede. Lyotard succinctly defines postmodernism as “incredulity toward meta-narrative” and Rorschach, if he is anything, is incredulous toward meta-narratives. He questions everything the public accepts as True and Real and acts according to his own perceptions about the world.

Dr. Long’s sunny disposition and strict adherence to convention, however, informs his perception and he is encouraged by Rorschach’s “pretty butterfly” response,

noting: “His responses to the Rorschach Ink Blot Tests were surprisingly bright and positive and healthy. I really think he might be getting better” (1/9). And so, Rorschach succeeds in manipulating the doctor. The psychological meta-narrative Dr. Long subscribes to tells him that “[n]o problem is beyond the grasp of a good psychoanalyst, and [he freely admits that his colleagues tell him he’s] very good” (1/6). For Dr. Long, the presumed criminal psychopath acts in accordance with established psychological diagnoses compiled in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), so it is his vanity and his belief in the totality and infallibility of the DSM-IV that leads him to false perceptions about Rorschach.

Again, perception and vanity play a part when Dr. Long shows Rorschach a second inkblot card and Rorschach lies a second time. He tells the doctor he sees “some nice flowers” (5/2). Dr. Long is repeatedly and unknowingly misled by Rorschach simply because of his failure or inability to see a different perspective, to study Rorschach by any means other than what has been established psychological practice. Dr. Long’s first obstacle, then, to understanding Rorschach is his mistaken perception that his patient is Walter Kovacs. The science of psychology has trained him to believe that identity is a fixed concept; that it can be measured and dissected; that there is a structure or a formula to the identity of an individual and anything that deviates from culturally normative variances is not only unhealthy, but harmful.

Further adherence to traditional perception, or misperception, of mental health directs Dr. Long to fit Rorschach into an easily identifiable diagnosis. He believes Rorschach, Walter, to be “withdrawn and depressed” (8/6) and rationalizes his point of view as “a classic case of misdirected aggression” (11/7) refusing to acknowledge the

complexities that make up Rorschach, concluding that “Rorschach is an unhealthy fantasy personality” (8/3). Rorschach may be an unhealthy personality, but the text clearly shows it not to be a fantasy. Walter Kovacs functions more as a fantasy personality. He is Rorschach’s secret identity, allowing him to move among society unnoticed. Rorschach does not identify with the Walter Kovacs identity, but can play the role to mislead and manipulate Dr. Long. Rorschach is not the individual written about and represented in the file Dr. Long believes offers so much insight. Even without his mask, Rorschach is no more Walter Kovacs than Superman is Clark Kent.

Dr. Long realizes he cannot merely ignore Walter’s “fantasy personality” and asks Walter to tell him about Rorschach. He, Rorschach, complies. He begins to tell his story and in doing so lays out a philosophy denying the traditionally held belief in a civilized and just society. As mentioned earlier, postmodernism identifies these traditionally accepted beliefs as fables society fosters to feel safe, but Rorschach’s eyes are opened to a truth, a reality that he cannot reason away, or ignore. Instead, he adapts. Rorschach begins his story at age 16 when he left the children’s home and went to work in the garment industry where he came across a Dr. Manhattan spinoff fabric made of “viscous fluid between two layers latex, heat and pressure sensitive” (10/2). It was used to make a special order dress that was subsequently never collected. The young girl who ordered the dress thought it was ugly, but Walter saw the beauty in it: “Black and white moving changing shape... but not mixing. No gray. Very, very beautiful” (10/3). The fabric’s binary representation exemplified morality for Walter: black and white, moving and changing, but never mixing. Just as the viscous fluids remain separate, never mixing, never turning gray, so too are good and evil clearly defined concepts where there is no

compromised grey area. Consequently, Rorschach's sense of a good and evil was put to the test two years later when the young woman who ordered the dress appeared on the front page of the newspaper:

Raped. Tortured. Killed. Here. In New York. Outside her own apartment building. Almost forty neighbors heard screams. Nobody did anything. Nobody called cops. Some of them even watched. Do you understand? Some of them even watched. I knew what people were, then, behind all the evasions, all the self-deception. Ashamed for humanity, I went home. I took the remains of her unwanted dress... ..and made a face that I could bear to look at in the mirror. (10/7-9)

Walter put on a mask to stand apart from humanity whom he believes wears a mask of its own feigning civility while actually barbarous and apathetic. Moore, by including an actual event that took place in Kew Gardens, New York on March 14, 1964 brings the real world into the text and the text into the real world. He draws the reader into the conversation of morality because this is not only a comics universe event that the reader can distance himself from, it is a real incident that readers are forced to consider.

On March 27, the New York Times published an article entitled, "Thirty-Eight Who Saw Murder Didn't Call Police," wherein Martin Gansberg quotes assistant Chief Inspector Frederick M. Lussen, a homicide investigation veteran of 25 years, who stated that he was baffled by the slaying "not because it is murder, but because the 'good people' failed to call the police." Rorschach is angered and just as baffled as Chief Inspector Lussen that the "good people" did nothing, but Dr. Long reacts differently to the murder and apathy of the "good people." He views this infamous incident, dubbed

the Genovese syndrome by social scientists, as an anomaly. He asks: “Walter, is what happened to Kitty Genovese really proof that the whole of mankind is rotten? I think you’ve been conditioned with a negative worldview. There are good people too, like...” (11/2). Given the opportunity, Rorschach challenges Dr. Long, asking him if he considers himself “good people.” The doctor is evasive and Rorschach presses the point: “Why are you spending so much time with me, Doctor? [...] Other people down in cells. Behavior more extreme than mine. You don’t spend any time with them... But then, they’re not famous. Won’t get your name in the journals. You don’t want to make me well. Just want to know what makes me sick” (11/3-5). Dr. Long speaks of helping Rorschach, guiding him out of depression, and trying to make him well; on some level he may believe that to be true, but Rorschach’s assessment of the doctor proves accurate.

Dr. Long does believe himself to be “good people,” though his motives are less than altruistic and suggests that “good” has become just another mask of civility worn by a more self-interested people. Rorschach sees “good” as a mask that the “well” or “well-intentioned” citizens display while underneath there lie more selfish motives. As postmodern meta-narratives, “sick” and “well” are merely manufactured constructs held together by a social contract by which people deceive themselves into believing they are “good” and “others” are bad. Amongst the New York Police reports, psychiatric hospital reports, and Charlton Home documents included at the end of *Watchmen VI*, there is a note from the desk of Dr. Malcolm Long that reads, “...keep notes with an eye to possible future publication. First interview with Kovacs is Friday afternoon.” Based on

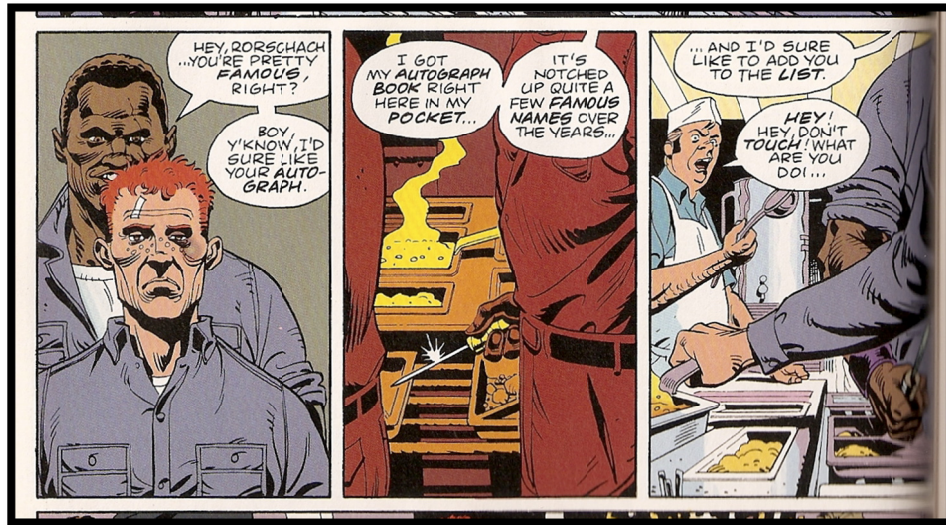
Dr. Long's own notes and private thoughts, Rorschach is correct in his assessment. Dr. Long is not quite as "good" as he claims to be.

Even after Rorschach tells Dr. Long why he put the mask on, how Kitty Genovese impacted him and that it opened his eyes to "what people were," Dr. Long still tries to reconcile Walter's behavior. He refuses to acknowledge Rorschach (the mask) and dismisses valuable information into the identity of the man he sits across the table from. He has an expectation of reality and will not bend until he is made to: "[t]he flimsy story about Kitty Genovese is obviously there to justify [Walter's/Rorschach's] behavior to himself. It's perfectly simple. Case solved" (11/8). The case is far from simple and far from solved. It is not Rorschach who is trying to justify his behavior, quite the contrary. Rorschach knows exactly what he is doing and why he is doing it. He makes no excuses or apologies. Dr. Long tries to simplify and explain away Rorschach's behavior and his own once rigidly held beliefs and perceptions of reality and justice even identity come into question as he begins to see things from another perspective.

### Sliding Into The Abyss

As Dr. Long is more and more influenced by Rorschach's viewpoint, again perception is pushed to the forefront. Dr. Long is made aware of an incident that happened in the canteen and inaccurately concludes that Rorschach is the problem and that his "delusions" are causing him to act out in violence. Dr. Long's notes are as follows: "The guards intervened dragging Kovacs away to solitary and the other man to the prison hospital. According to the Deputy Warden, his burns were horrific. Hot cooking fat... I don't like to think about it" (13/1). Dr. Long's final statement is very characteristic of his perception, "[He doesn't] like to think about it." He generally

doesn't like to look at the darker side of life, of human nature, but without doing so, he misses what is actually occurring. He makes evaluations and judgments and bases his beliefs and practices on inaccurate and incomplete information. What was not reported, but what actually occurred, during the altercation, as the panels bare out, is that Rorschach acted in self-defense.



(12/2-4)

The guards and Dr. Long make inaccurate assumptions about Rorschach's behavior that lead to faulty conclusions. The altercation in the canteen is yet another incident where perception plays a role and as they all look at Rorschach they see what they want to see, what they expect to see, and not necessarily what is there. Furthermore, Dr. Long notes: "As they dragged him away, Rorschach spoke to the other inmates. He said 'None of you understand. *I'm* not locked up in here with *you*. *You're* locked up in here with *me*'" (13/1-2). Given this report from the prison, Dr. Long concludes that his earlier optimism about Walter's mental state is baseless and that he is getting worse (13/3). Again though, his original conclusion was founded on a faulty premise of who Rorschach is, a fact Dr. Long does not understand, never tried to understand, and likely



could not understand, given his pre-conceived notions about criminality, identity, justice, social norms and Rorschach himself.

However, Dr. Long's sense of reality is beginning to break down. He notes that Kovacs is getting worse, but also admits: "So am I. Just read back what I've written above. The sixth line down should read 'Kovacs spoke to the other inmates'" (13/3). Dr. Long's outlook begins to shift as he stares more and more into the abyss. He is drawn into Rorschach's reality, his so-called delusion. Consequently, his interactions with his wife begin to deteriorate. Where he could once leave the work at work, Gloria now sees him becoming consumed by it, engulfed by the abyss. She once told him, "On the news [Rorschach] sounded frightening. Don't get too wrapped up in this one Mal. It might ruin your cheerful disposition." At the time he could honestly and confidently assuage her fears by telling her, "Gloria, I'm too fat and contented for anything to ruin my disposition..." To which she replied, "You're the nicest person I know that's why you gotta look after yourself [...]" (8/4,7). Now her prompts to leave his work and come to bed are met with agitation and umbrage. He is clearly engrossed in Rorschach's case, sitting at his desk pouring over his notes and files contemplating Rorschach's words, "'You're locked up in here with me,' he said. He's right. Absolutely right" (13/9). Dr. Long's perspective is broadening and curiosity demands he gaze deeper.

The doctor is obsessed with Rorschach and now not only wants to hear Rorschach's story and learn what made him "sick," he is increasingly desperate to know who Rorschach is and understand a point of view that is so foreign and, subsequently, destabilizing to him. Although Dr. Long hungers for knowledge and awareness, he resists it by holding on to traditionally established and accepted modes of representation by

keeping himself again from acknowledging Rorschach: “Alright, Ror... Alright Walter...” (14/1). Even though Dr. Long’s aspect is changing, he continues to exhibit a lack of understanding and a naiveté regarding Rorschach’s identity and motivations: “After the murder of Kitty Genovese you decided to vent your hostility upon the underworld... making a mask for yourself, you decided to become Rorschach and...” (14/1). Dr. Long is still viewing the murder of Kitty Genovese and the creation of Rorschach’s mask in a way that conforms to a clinically acceptable explanation for Rorschach’s behavior, but Rorschach quickly corrects him and perspective is again thrust to the fore. He explains: “Being Rorschach takes certain kind of insight” (14/4). He believed himself and the other masked adventurers to be “soft” because, upon capture, they let criminals live. He laments that he had not yet realized what was at stake.

In *Watchmen I*, Rorschach makes the stakes very clear: “...There is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished...” (24/6). His code is simple, but until he understood what was at stake, he tells Dr. Long: “all Kovacs ever was [was a] man in a costume. Not Rorschach. Not Rorschach at all” (15/1). Rorschach was born out of the Roche kidnapping. He was no longer just a masked adventurer, though misperceived by society perhaps because of those who were actually playing dress up, superheroes and villains alike. Once he saw clearly the evil living in the world he could not quit fighting when the Keene act outlawed masked adventurers: “We do not do this because it is permitted. We do it because we have to. We do it because we are compelled” (15/6).

With respect to Superhero lore, “one of the defining features of a superhero is an over-riding mission to serve the larger world and to defend it” (Peterson 8). Though serving the larger world and vowing to defend it is not necessarily Rorschach’s mission,

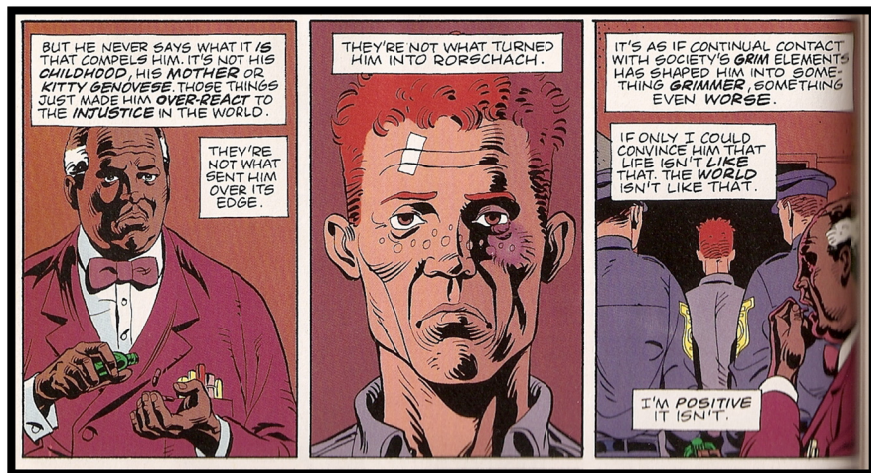
he is compelled to fight evil. Ozymandias wants to serve the larger world, but his own ego is what truly drives him. His life is defined by challenging himself. He wants to do what Alexander the Great could not (create a utopia), so he uses utilitarianism to justify his abhorrent behavior. Rorschach on the other hand came to understand what the Comedian knew all along, “[...] man’s capacity for horrors [...] the world’s black underbelly [...] Once a man has seen, he can never turn his back on it. Never pretend it doesn’t exist. No matter who orders him to look the other way” (15/5-6). By the end of Rorschach’s history Dr. Malcolm Long too will understand and will be unable to turn away. He will not be able to un-know what he has learned and he will be unable to un-see the reality that Rorschach has shown him. He will never again be “cheerful” and “contented,” “nice and “positive.” He will be changed because the abyss gazes also.

Nevertheless, Dr. Long does not yet understand what drives Rorschach. He is desperate to know and still holds out hope that he can convince Walter that the world is not how he sees it:

[...] he never says what it is that compels him. It’s not his childhood, his mother or Kitty Genovese. [...] They’re not what turned him into Rorschach. It’s as if continual contact with society’s grim elements has shaped him into something grimmer, something even worse. If only I could convince him that life isn’t like that. The world isn’t like that. I’m positive it isn’t” (16/2-4).

Again, Dr. Long is trying to rationalize away the Rorschach identity. He still believes in a Walter Kovacs who has been shaped by his criminal associations rather than a Rorschach whose knowledge of “man’s capacity for horrors” necessitated his

associations with criminals in order to fight evil. His hold on that belief, however, is continuing to waiver. The expression on his face and the repeated consumption of aspirin illustrates that Dr. Malcolm Long is not as sure of his science or his reality as he once was. It appears as though he is trying to convince himself, rather than Walter, that “the world isn’t like that.” The certainty in his final statement seems less a statement of certainty than a pondering of whether he believes his own words.



(16/2-4)

The chapter quote by Nietzsche warns “Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster...” but it can be argued that Rorschach’s choice or compulsion to battle monsters did not make him something worse, it made him something different, something necessary, something willing to do what is necessary in the face of so much apathy, cruelty and injustice. He said that he cannot look away from the horrors that he now knows exist, so instead, he chooses to engage with them. His actions demonstrate a refusal to fool himself or allow others to fool him into believing in a narrative that says people are “good,” that there is justice in the world, and that the Doomsday Clock is not ticking closer and closer to Armageddon because of man’s base nature. His creed is made plain in *Watchmen I* as he questions his own purpose:

Are they right? Is it futile? Soon there will be war. Millions will burn. Millions will perish in sickness and misery. Why does one death matter against so many? Because there is Good and there is Evil, and Evil must be punished. Even in the face of Armageddon I shall not compromise in this. (I 24/4-6)

### Becoming Rorschach

On October 28, 1985 Rorschach tells the doctor everything, revealing himself and his commitment to fighting evil. Dr. Long begins their session by handing Rorschach the very same inkblot card he handed him to open the chapter, but now he is more aware and this time he says, “Tell me what you *really* see” (VI 17/4). Rorschach stares intensely at the card. He sees what he saw before, but this time he tells the truth: “Dog. Dog with head split in half.” Dr. Long responds with a look of horror and Rorschach confesses that he did it. (17/5-9). He then explains why he did it and what compels him to fight evil:

1975. Kidnap case. Perhaps you remember. Blaire Roche six years old.

Kidnappers believed she was connected to Roche chemical fortune.

Stupid mistake. Father was bus driver. No money at all” (18/1-2).

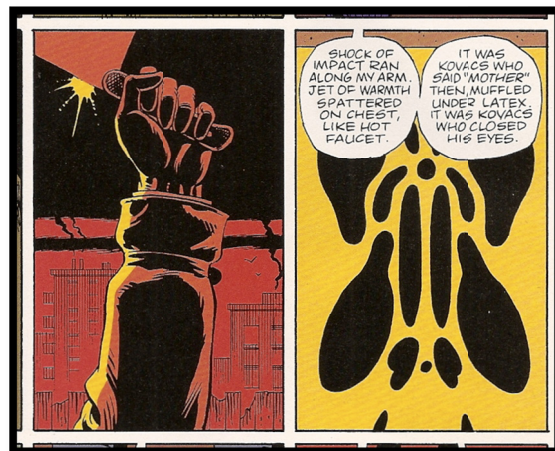
Rorschach’s staccato narration continues for a few panels as the illustrations show us what he is describing. In panel eight, the text stops and the story continues through illustrations alone. Allowing only images to tell this part of the story draws the reader in and allows him to discover what happened as Rorschach discovers what happened. It creates a dark and ruminative mood. Rorschach explores the deserted shop and finds evidence that Blaire Roche had been there and what happened to her. As he looks out the window at the dogs fighting over a bone of page 20, panel nine clearly illustrates his

recognition of the horror that has occurred. His recognition is clear, as is his mental state. Rorschach is staring out at the reader through the window and the panel is colored red.

The pace quickens and the following panels show him exiting the back door and approaching the two dogs with a butcher knife in his hand. Panel number five on page 21 is a close up of Rorschach's raised arm, butcher knife in hand and is immediately followed by a close up of the inkblot card, representing what happened next, "Dog with head split in half." As the text is reintroduced to the narrative, the reader is once again a spectator, whereas the illustrations alone drew the reader into the action.



(20/9)



(21/6-7)

When Gerald Grice, the suspected murderer, returned to the dress shop, he called out for his dogs, neither of which responded until one crashed through a window landing on the floor in front of him and the second crashed through another window hitting him in the back and knocking him to the ground. He squealed for somebody to "get it off" him and Rorschach, not Walter Kovacs, stepped into the room, blood splattered across his

jacket. He was different now. He would no longer be “soft.” He would dispose of evil himself, in silence and with brutality.



(24/4)

Rorschach pulled Grice to his feet by the collar. Without a word from Rorschach Grice began to panic:

Oough. Oh, no please... I haven't done anything... ooouh. Oh, wait!

Wait please, please, what are you going to do...? Look... look, I know what you think... You think I'm something to do with that little girl.

Well, well I'm not. Okay? Okay? (24/1-7)

Rorschach took out a set of handcuffs and handcuffed Grice to a pipe. “Oh, God, please... What do you want? Y-you can't prove anything. I mean, wh-where's the evidence? You can't do anything to... ..me...” (24/8-9). Grice first tries to deny anything to do with the crime though he knows exactly why Rorschach is there and when his lies go unattended he raises the question of evidence, which draws into discussion the

question of justice, of law and order, right and wrong in the name of the law versus a moral right. Grice tries to plead his case, not realizing that it has already been adjudicated. Rorschach is investigator, judge, jury and executioner. No amount of pleading, no argument about rules of evidence, no question of guilt or no guilt will be entertained. His sentence is death. Rorschach places a handsaw beside Grice, picks up a can of kerosene and pours it around the room. Grice says, "Hey, hey, are you crazy? That's Kerosene!" Rorschach looks back at him with a match in his hand, "Yes. Wouldn't bother trying to saw through handcuffs. Never make it in time." Rorschach strikes the match. Grice's eyes widen, "What do you mean? What am I supposed to... oh God. Oh Jesus. No. You're kidding you have to be kidding" (24/3-5).

Astonishingly enough, Grice is surprised by what is happening to him, by the form of justice he has brought upon himself. He is surprised because though he is a criminal, he takes comfort in the narrative of the American justice system, where evidence, a trial, a "civilized" performance takes place to mete out justice. Upon capture, relying on the law to save him from any punishment akin to the crime he committed, he argues evidence. Any evidence found by the police, the evidence found by Rorschach, is merely circumstantial. Grice's freedom would depend on evidence so, as the panels show, his crime was thought out and planned, accounting only for normative legal practices. He did not account for moral retribution. He did not account for Rorschach.

Grice calls out for God and Jesus in the end, but commits a crime against an innocent, against God himself, an irony the text points out. Grice showed no mercy, but expects mercy for him, proving the point Rorschach has been trying to make to Dr. Long. In a world where human nature rules and the laws of man rule, sometimes the laws made



to civilize man and tame nature are what make it possible for Grice and those like him to exist and visit pain and terror upon others. From Rorschach's perspective, a general and continued sense of apathy among the public and a fostering of meta-narratives makes crimes like this possible and, therefore, it is not only Grice who is responsible, it is all of humanity. Rorschach sees a world filled with violence and apathy, on the brink of nuclear war and he is one man trying to make a difference. He is compelled and describes his compulsion, his transformation, to Dr. Long:

Stood in firelight, sweltering. Bloodstain on chest like map of violent new continent. Felt cleansed. Felt dark planet turn under my feet and knew what cats know that makes them scream like babies in night. Looked at sky through smoke heavy with human fat and God was not there. The cold, suffocating dark goes on forever, and we are alone. Live our lives, lacking anything better to do. Devise reason later. Born from oblivion; bear children, hell-bound as ourselves; There is nothing else. Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long. 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. Streets stank of fire. The void breathed hard on my heart, turning its illusions to ice, shattering them. Was reborn then, free to scrawl own design on this morally blank world. Was Rorschach.

(26/1-7)

Rorschach was freed by the knowledge he now had, set adrift to make his own meaning, tethered no longer to a false belief in an inherent meaning. He was free to make his own purpose, to live in awareness, free from the constructs and constrictions placed upon him by meta-narratives imposed and created by a hegemony that has its own agenda. He chose not to be led or misled any longer. He decided to take responsibility for himself and his actions.

#### Malcolm Transformed

As Rorschach describes his experience Dr. Long is transformed too, as evidenced by the expression on his face. He sits with his eyes wide open, literally and figuratively. He rubs them, but he cannot un-see what Rorschach has shown him, try as he might. As Dr. Malcolm Long walks home, at once, he begins experiencing life differently and despondently makes note of the ugliness he is no longer blind to: “Walked home along 40<sup>th</sup> street. A black man tried to sell me a Rolex watch. When I kept walking he started shouting ‘Nigger! Hey Nigger! [...] Bought paper. [...] Inside article on nuclear alert procedure. It says that any dead family members should be wrapped in plastic garbage sacks and placed outside for collection. On 7<sup>th</sup> avenue, the Hiroshima Lovers were still trying inadequately to console one another” (27/1-3). Previously, Dr. Long was unsettled by front-page news of Russian tanks entering Pakistan, but had little else to say. He commented on the silhouetted figures spray painted on the wall: “It reminded me of the people disintegrated at Hiroshima, leaving only their indelible shadows” (16/6). Where he once saw the figures as lovers consoling one another romantically, purposefully leaving an indelible impression for all to remember, he now sees them as “inadequately” consoling one another. He gives the impression that it was futile for them to even try. In

*Watchmen I*, Rorschach too questioned the futility of his actions but concluded that he must not compromise his fight against evil. Once he realized existence is random, he chose to impose his own meaning on the world. Dr. Long must now do the same. His understanding of the world and its operations is shattered. He must, therefore, impose his own meaning or suffer losing all meaning.

When Dr. Long arrives home, his wife reminds him that friends are coming for dinner and we see how truly changed Malcolm is. Randy asks, “So, Mal, how are things going with this famous masked maniac of yours? Oh, yes, tell us,” joins Diana, “Has he told you anything weird or kinky yet?” (27/5). Dr. Long responds, obviously angered: “Yes. Yes, he has. Today he told me about a girl who was kidnapped” (27/6). He looked at the couple with contempt. “Oh, boy!” Randy says with wide eyes and a smile, “Was she tied up and gagged and helpless?” Randy and Diana are examples of the apathy and farce of decency that permeates society and now sickens Malcolm like it sickens Rorschach. The reality of the horrors that exist in the world escapes them and rather than join the farce with casual conversation Malcolm throws his guests’ callous ignorance back at them: “No. She was six. Her abductor killed her, butchered her and fed her to his German Shepherds” (27/7). His perspective has changed and he can no longer engage in pleasantries or provide entertainment for a blind audience.

Gloria immediately left the table, Diana was nauseated and Randy contrived an excuse for them to leave. “Gloria went into the bedroom. [Malcolm] followed her. She walked out again, into the hall. [Malcolm] sat on the bed.” He is clearly changed as he sits on the bed holding the yellow case file. He is a dazed shell of who he once was. “[Gloria] came in, wearing her coat, subjected [him] to a lot of crude sexual insults, went

out. The front door slammed” (28/1-2). Gloria leaves Malcolm and he is now truly left alone to contemplate his newfound awareness:

Why do we argue? Life’s so fragile, a successful virus clinging to a speck of mud, suspended in endless nothing. Next week I could be putting her into a garbage sack, placing her outside for collection. I sat on the bed. I looked at the Rorschach blot. I tried to pretend it looked like a spreading tree, shadows pooled beneath it, but it didn’t. It looked more like a dead cat I once found, the fat, glistening grubs writhing blindly, squirming over each other, frantically tunneling away from the light. But even that is avoiding the real horror. The horror is this: In the end, it is simply a picture of empty meaningless blackness. We are alone. There is nothing else. (28/3-7)

Obviously, Malcolm has experienced a transformation similar to Rorschach’s. He is unsettled and de-stabilized. Rorschach came out of his experience with a purpose, with meaning. He was cleansed, free to make his life make a difference. Malcolm has not yet reached a point where he can see beyond the nothingness. He is lost, trying to make sense of what he has learned, his new way of seeing. He sees only the bad, the darkness, and the meaninglessness of life. He does not yet feel empowered as Rorschach does. And he did not get the answers he was looking for. He did not discover what made Rorschach sick; he discovered instead that society is sick, so sick in fact that it is headed for Armageddon, so sick it has created an unhealthy and harmful delusion of a polite, civilized society that does not actually exist. It is a pretense that allows people to feel “good.” There is no Justice, no Truth to which Malcolm can cling any longer. His

science, his justice is illusion. Society has created a grand lie to comfort people with the notion that the world makes sense and reality is certain. That constructed reality, that façade, has been smashed and Malcolm's once positive, contented demeanor and outlook has been stripped away. Sitting on the bed, defeated, looking at the Rorschach blot in his hand, he can no longer see a pretty tree; instead he sees death and decay. But the most horrifying part of all this for Malcolm is the emptiness, the meaninglessness of life. Man has made the rules; man has set the narrative; man has set the course for destruction and there is nothing and no one to save them. As Malcolm stares at the card his focus narrows, including only blackness. The final panel of *Watchmen VI* reveals succinctly his state of mind: blackness. To further emphasize the hopelessness that Malcolm feels, even the page number is set in the seventh panel so that in panel number eight there is only blackness.

#### Never Compromise

Nevertheless, given the world and all its ills, Rorschach believes the answer is not to kill three million New Yorkers, as Ozymandias's plan calls for. He tears down meta-narratives, exposes them, to free people from their authority, not to create another false and elaborate narrative that leads the world further into darkness. At first, the masked adventurers agree with him, but once they realize that they have failed to stop Ozymandias's, they agree to stay silent. They are swayed by Ozymandias's argument that "all the countries are unified and pacified." He asks, "Will you expose me, undoing the peace millions died for? Risking subsequent investigation? Morally, you're in checkmate [...]." Dr. Manhattan addresses the group: "Logically, I'm afraid he's right. Exposing his plot, we destroy any chance of peace, dooming earth to worse destruction.

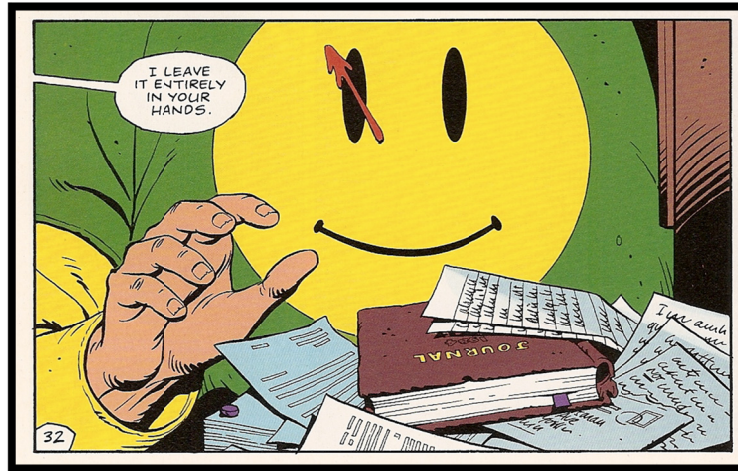
On Mars,” he says to Laurie (Silk Spectre), “you demonstrated life’s value. If we would preserve life here, we must remain silent.” She answers, “Never tell anyone? W-we really have to buy this?” Dan (Night Owl) joins the discussion, “How... how can humans make decisions like this? We’re damned if we stay quiet earth’s damned if we don’t. We... Okay. Okay, count me in. We say nothing.” Rorschach is disgusted by their decision and walks toward the door. Dan tries to convince him to join them, “Rorschach, wait! Where are you going? This is too big to be hard-assed about! We have to compromise...” and of course he answers, “No. Not even in the face of Armageddon. Never compromise” (XII 20/3-9).

It would seem Rorschach’s friends have gone soft once again. An unimaginable crime has been committed against humanity and Rorschach cannot compromise accepting mass murder. Veidt (Ozymandias) contemplates Rorschach’s statements: “Hmm. Now what would you call that, I wonder? ‘Blotting out reality’ perhaps?” (21/1). Veidt criticizes Rorschach’s reaction, questioning his sense of reality, which once again raises the question: what is reality? Veidt has merely created a new narrative. His narrative is simply replacing the old one, which does not, as Veidt may think, create Truth and absolute reality. Because Rorschach, like traditional superheroes, is guided by a belief that there is obvious good and there is obvious evil, he must go “Back to America. [Because] Evil must be punished. People must be told” (23/5). Dr. Manhattan, for the reasons he argued earlier, will not allow Rorschach to reveal what has happened and so Rorschach dies fighting evil.

Veidt later confesses to Jon (Dr. Manhattan) that he realizes what he has done: “I know I’ve struggled across the backs of murdered innocents to save humanity... But

someone had to take the weight of that awful, necessary crime (27/2). Considering now what he has done, seeing the destruction, the death, he is trying to justify his crime. He wants Dr. Manhattan to tell him it is okay. “I did the right thing, didn’t I? It all worked out in the end” (27/4). But, the problem as Dr. Manhattan points out: ““In the end”? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends.” Veidt answers, “Jon? Wait! What do you mean by...” but he is gone (27/5). Life goes on. It evolves. There is no constant, no fixed reference on which to base such extraordinary decisions. Veidt did not plan beyond his alien attack. He does not know what will happen later. The flaws in humanity that he felt necessitated his extreme action live on. Once the perceived threat abates, man’s nature will return.

The final page of *Watchmen* offers only more uncertainty. Seymour (the young newspaper apprentice) is told to fill two pages of print: “Well, which piece should I run?” he asks his editor. “Seymour, for God’s sake! I’m asking you to take responsibility for once in your miserable life [...] Go on. Just run whichever you want...” (32/5-6). The final panel depicts a close up on Seymour’s t-shirt that has the same happy face image on it as the Comedian’s button and a ketchup stain that resembles the blood spatter on the button. His hand is reaching toward a pile of papers and letters in front of him, on top of which sits Rorschach’s journal. The speech bubble reads, “I leave it entirely in your hands” (32/7).



(32/7)

Clearly Veidt did not account for Rorschach's tenacity. He fought to his death against evil and he took measures to make sure his fight continued even after his death. The torch has now passed to Seymour. He is charged with taking "responsibility" for what to print, for deciding the moral right. Does he, should he, reveal Rorschach's truths to the world? It is up to the reader to make his own decisions about good and evil, what is right, what is just, what is real and what is each individual's responsibility.



### Chapter III: Watchmen: A Postmodern Literary Event

For Jean François Lyotard the event concept is vital to postmodern thinking. It is a moment when a feeling occurs, “a sense that something has happened” (Malpas, *Jean François Lyotard* 101). That sense does not determine *what* has happened, only that something different, unexpected, out of the ordinary has happened. Though the something that has happened demands reaction and response from its audience, no language game can claim to understand it or represent it fully. No language game exists at that moment to make the event comprehensible. Limitations therefore of incommensurable language games are exposed and scholars are left without language, scrabbling to decipher *what* happened. This is the case with *Watchmen*. Comics and literature collided and there is no language to discuss the result of that encounter. Crucial to the philosophical event is what lay between *something* happening and *what* happens:

To be able to say “what happens” is already to have understood the meaning of an event, to have drawn it into consciousness and fitted it into a genre or genres of discourse. On the other hand, the “something happens” calls for a receptivity to the event itself, a reaction to it that is not guided by pre-given guidelines and a questioning of those genres of discourse that appear unable adequately to fit it into their schemes of thought. In this form of response, the event resists representation (it is, in itself unrepresentable), and yet it challenges those established modes of representation as they attempt to suppress its strangeness. (101)

As mentioned earlier, *Watchmen* and novels like it are to some extent being suppressed because of its unconventional representation of a medium, genre and subject that can be

perceived as strange. Critics and scholars are directed, whether knowingly or not, by preconceived guidelines that do not include a work like *Watchmen* that resists representation and therefore they ignore it or debase it.

The “established modes of representation” of which Malpas speaks include firstly realism because it “is the mainstream art of any culture” (44). Realist art’s purpose then is to simply reflect a culture’s beliefs and ideals, to mirror back to those various consciousnesses the world they see before them so that they may easily recognize it and accept it as true and real. Lyotard argues that its purpose is to “preserve various consciousnesses from doubt” (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* 74). Doubting reality is unsettling to say the least and if it occurs in numbers that reflect entire cultures or peoples, it can have devastating affects, so those consciousnesses struggle to preserve the fantasies of reality. The value in art then lies in its ability to raise questions about ways of thinking and language games that attempt to unify experience and provide absolute explanation of an overall structure that tries to represent the unrepresentable. Art can evoke feelings that disorient and jar consciousness from the slumber of the meta-narrative. It is therefore a prime location for the occurrence of events.

*Watchmen*’s appearance on the literary scene in 1986 changed the function and format of American superhero comics and forced into play a new language game or an intermingling of language games in the field of literary discourse to understand the event and facilitate language to discuss it. As mentioned earlier, though superhero comics have been a part of American culture since the late 1930s and have even contributed to the national lexicon, they have generally been excluded from academic literary discourse. As a postmodern text, *Watchmen* offers a literary experience that is not unifying or absolute

and drastically departs from how Lyotard defines the unifying absolutism of realist literature:

[...] the objective [of realist literature] is to stabilize the referent, to arrange it according to a point of view which endows it with a recognizable meaning, to reproduce the syntax and vocabulary which enable the addressee to decipher images and sequences quickly, and so to arrive easily at the consciousness of his own identity as well as the approval which he thereby receives from others—since such structures of images and sequences constitute a communication code among all of them. This is the way the effects of reality, or if one prefers, the fantasies of realism, multiply. (74)

*Watchmen* does anything but stabilize the referent. It does not arrange the world, reality, in a way that is recognizable or that provides meaning. Rather it causes confusion and forces the audience to question reality or the way in which they perceive reality.

*Watchmen* is not easily decipherable nor reconcilable with any established sense of realism.

Consequently, destabilizing the referent and fracturing the consciousness of the addressee gives rise to modernism because without “a shattering of belief and without a discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality” modernism cannot exist (77). The structure and order guiding pre-twentieth century art experienced an earthquake that tore down the fantasies of realism. Disrupting realism and making evident a lack of reality however are characteristics found in both modernism and postmodernism. Each mode of representation accomplishes disruption by “questioning the rules that govern images and

narrative” (Lyotard *The Postmodern Explained* 12). Questioning leads to rejection, which leads to experimentation. For modernism, experimentation in literature comes in the form of rejecting traditional characteristics of realist novels. Modern writers did away with “chronological plots, continuous narratives relayed by omniscient narrators, ‘closed endings,’ etc.” (Barry 82). The fracturing of consciousness and the fantasies of realism, the shattering of belief in reality is expressed through modernist art. It is a purging of the destabilized state in which people find themselves. Barry enumerates several symptoms that arise in literary modernism:

1. A new emphasis on impressionism and subjectivity, that is, on how we see rather than what we see [...].
2. A movement (in novels) away from the apparent objectivity provided by such features as: Omniscient external narration, fixed narrative points of view and clear-cut moral positions.
3. A blurring of the distinction between genres, so that novels tend to become more lyrical and poetic, for instance, and poems more documentary and prose-like.
4. A new liking for fragmented forms, discontinuous narrative, and random-seeming collages of disparate materials.
5. A tendency towards “reflexivity,” so that poems, plays and novels raise issues concerning their own nature, status and role. (Barry 82)

Since postmodernism shares many of the characteristics set forth in modernism, the difference between them is then nuanced. Fragmentation being a central element to the twentieth century zeitgeist of both modernism and postmodernism, their difference can be

described as that of different moods or attitudes. The modernist mood would present “as a way to register a deep nostalgia for an earlier age when faith was full and authority intact” (83). There is a longing for certainty and stability. Modernist art is filled with “a tone of lament, pessimism, and despair about the world which finds its appropriate representation in these ‘fractured’ art forms” (84). What makes postmodernism different is its attitude that “fragmentation is an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief” (ibid.).

It is exactly this attitude that *Watchmen* embraces, allowing for the limitless possibilities Scott McCloud argues comics are capable of. Further separating itself from modernism, postmodernism “rejects the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ art which was important in modernism” (ibid.). Obviously superhero comics are not and have never been considered high art, rather they have been called escapist fare that contributes to the delinquency of American children. In 1954 psychiatrist and consultant to the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency Fredric Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocent*, a book claiming that comics cause juvenile delinquency. Subsequently that same year Senator Estes Kefauver, advised by Wertham, lead a three day hearing by the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency with the aim of proving a correlation between comic books and an unsubstantiated claim of a rise in juvenile crime. Though the Supreme Court had already deemed comic books protected under the First Amendment in the 1948 case *Winters v. New York*, comic books were swept up in McCarthy era hysteria (McWilliams). It is with *Watchmen* however that the line between high and low art is obfuscated since postmodernism does not recognize a difference. It does not recognize a hierarchal classification of art imposed upon it by

systems that propagate the illusion of a unifying reality that dictates what art or literature is or is permitted to be.

Furthermore, *Watchmen* unfolds with a “narrative style more akin to fiction than to comic books to explore what superheroes might be like if they really existed in the contemporary world” (Wright 271). Wright describes it as “unlike anything the comic book industry had ever seen” exhibiting many of the symptoms Barry enumerates as symptoms of modern literature, but with a postmodern sensibility. Set in

an alternate reality much like our own 1980s world, except that in this fictional “real” world, there are superheroes. Moore’s superheroes immediately appeared different from other comic book superheroes. They talk and behave like real people—or more appropriately, like real people who were strangely motivated to don colorful costumes and fight crime. Their intervention leads to such alternative historical developments as a U.S. victory in Vietnam and a multiple-term Nixon administration that continues into the 1980s. (Wright 271)

By considering a world in which superheroes exist, Moore raises issues about comics’ own nature, status, and role in art and literature. *Watchmen* is self referential, examining its own medium and commenting on it. *Under the Hood* (a fictional novel with the novel) talks about comics, their rise and popularity and their place in culture, considering the impact they might have on an individual based on a confluence of environment and individual psychological makeup. It gives a first person account of Hollis Mason’s journey to becoming a masked adventurer (the first Night Owl) and gives insight and commentary on his colleagues. This aspect of *Watchmen* analyzes the

yearning for such figures when they remain safely in the pages of DC or Marvel where they are blindly accepted and admired, questioning the reality of that childhood or even adult musing about how our community or the world would be better off with superheroes who drop into our lives without notice to save us from any number of undesirable experiences by alluding to the police strike and subsequent outlawing of masked adventurers. Furthermore, because superheroes came off the page and into the real world, a different comic book genre became the dominant form, namely pirate comics. So, “Tales of the Black Freighter” is introduced into *Watchmen* as a comic within a comic, read issue by issue along with a young boy who sits at the newsstand week after week reading about the ill fated mariner. Referring back to his genre foundationally, Moore’s characters are based on defunct Charlton Comic Books characters (Cook 34). He references comic book artist Joe Orlando, who incidentally drew one of the panels for “Tales of the Black Freighter” and is mentioned at the end of *Watchmen V* in the fictional Treasure Island Treasury of Comics. Moore questions the economy of structure by including the end of chapter supplemental materials creating a more complex work wherein he constructs a reality and presents it in the same fractured way that we experience our own reality, through book and newspaper clippings, television, advertising, marketing, brand recognition etc.

*Watchmen* emerges more and more as a postmodern text when we examine how Lyotard expounds on his postmodern philosophy by citing Irish novelist James Joyce. He argues that

novels such as *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939) [...] ‘make us discern the unrepresentable in the writing itself... A whole range of

accepted narrative and even stylistic operators is brought into play with no concern for the unity of the whole, and experiments are conducted with new operators.’ In other words, the sublime in Joyce is not just a question of missing contents such as the identity of the narrator, but rather occurs in the writing itself. Joyce’s use of puns, obscure allusions, quotations and his disruptions of the established ideas of linear development and narrative sense, challenge the reader’s presuppositions about what a novel should be and continually undermine the desire to make the work make sense. One might constantly be at a loss about what the novel is about, but that loss is itself enjoyable and stimulating, and might just lead one to raise questions about one’s everyday sense-making processes. (Malpas *Jean-François Lyotard* 49)

Adopting Lyotard’s analysis of Joyce’s work as a guide, that same logic can be applied to an inquiry into similar characteristics and devices present in *Watchmen*. The title itself—*Watchmen*—is an obscure reference to a quotation from the Greek philosopher Juvenal’s *Satires* about marriage. Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?—Who watches the watchmen?—from Satire VI 347 argues the inevitable corruption of those entrusted with the sole power of safeguarding men’s wives. Incidentally, the same Latin quote was used as epigraph to the Tower Commission Report in 1987. Though Juvenal was asking a philosophical question and it seems Moore is too, it is one that seems to have had a more literal relevance to the Iran-Contra affair, calling into question the unauthorized power taken by a select few. It is a motif that plays a part in *Watchmen* and is kept present in the reader’s mind even if only subliminally by the repeated visual of the



quote “Who Watches the Watchmen?” spray painted on building walls throughout the novel though never in it’s entirety, alluding to the quote and it’s concepts, allowing the mind to recognize it, but blending into the background art so as not to be blatant or explicit.



(I 9/7)



(VIII 26/7)

Watchmen opens on a series of panels illustrating blood running from the sidewalk into the gutter with a smiley face button wedged against the curb and a stream of consciousness narration laid over them:

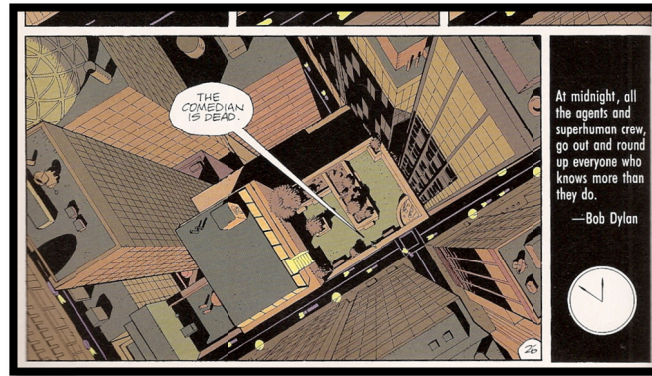
Rorschach’s Journal. October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1985.: Dog carcass in alley this morning, tire tread on burst stomach. This city is afraid of me. I have seen its true face. The streets are extended gutters and the gutters are full of blood and when the drains finally scab over, all the vermin will drown. 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!”... They had a choice, all of them. They could have followed in the footsteps of good men like my father, or president Truman. Decent men who believed in a day’s work for a day’s pay. Instead they followed the droppings of lechers and communists and didn’t realize that the trail led

over a precipice until it was too late. Don't tell me they didn't have a choice. Now the whole world stands on the brink, staring out into bloody hell, all those liberals and intellectuals and smooth-talkers... ..and all of a sudden, nobody can think of anything to say. (I 1/1-6)

Rorschach's opening comments express a specific discontent with the world and a darker view of the world reflected in image and text throughout the novel. He is one of many narrators and narrative structures and represents only one point of view or moral stance. As he enters Edward Blake's apartment and begins investigating, we see further evidence of non-linear narrative or interrupted narrative in *Watchmen* with the interjection of phrases in large bold block text on a page somewhere in each chapter that sits between and is separate from the panels and basic narrative of the novel. It is visually and narratively disruptive. The phrase is put into context at the end of the chapter where it is presented in an entire quote that fits into the format of the page but is not part of the page itself as a narrative panel. The quote is actually somewhat of a postscript positioned after the final page numbered narrative panel. They are theme related quotes commenting on the action taking place in that chapter, adding another narrator or point of view that exists somewhere outside the action and really only refers to that one chapter, functioning as mini-narrative.



(I 6)



(I 26)

Along with references to song lyrics and lyricists, the Bible, authors, poets, philosophers, and scientists strewn about the novel, there is a seemingly random and disparate operatic component that runs through *Watchmen*, beginning with “Ride of the Valkyries,” and continuing with “Pagliacci” and “Three Penny Opera.” The Italian composer, Jacopo Peri, credited with having invented opera with the very first documented opera *Dafne* and the second still surviving opera *Euridice*, was inspired by the Greek tragedies. Opera may be figured into *Watchmen* because it fits the schema of Greek tragedy; an art form based on human suffering. *Watchmen*, it can be argued, among other things is a story about human suffering. Hollis Mason’s recounting of the Moe Vernon story in *Under The Hood* illustrates not only the idea of human suffering but offers another point of view through excerpts from *Under the Hood*. It is another disruption in narrative as a piece separate from the main *Watchmen* narrative. It offers another more conventional type of narrative style, though still functioning as disrupted narrative because it is presented in excerpts.

Not knowing how to begin his autobiography, Mason was advised by a neighborhood grocery clerk to “[s]tart off with the saddest thing you can think of and get

the audience's sympathies on your side" (I Under the Hood 1). The saddest thing Mason could think of was "Ride of the Valkyries." Mason says, "Every time I hear it I get depressed and start wondering about the lot of humanity and the unfairness of life and all those other things that you think about at three in the morning when your digestion won't let you sleep" (ibid.). Moe Vernon was the owner of Vernon's Auto Repairs, approximately age 55, a jocular man with an affinity for novelty items, toys, and gadgets. Moe Vernon was also an opera buff; "he had one of the new gramophones over in the corner of his office and all day he used to play scratchy old seventy-eight recordings of his favorites just as loud as he could manage" (2). When the mail arrived one morning with a letter from his wife Beatrice, Moe was listening to Wagner. As he read her letter, he learned

that for the past two years she'd been sleeping with Fred Motz, the senior and most trusted mechanic employed at Vernon's Auto Repairs, who, unusually, hadn't shown up for work on that particular morning. This, according to the concluding paragraphs of the letter, was because Beatrice had taken all the money out of the joint account she shared with her husband and had departed with Fred for Tijuana. The first anyone in the workshop knew about this was when the door of Moe's office slammed open and the startlingly loud and crackling rendition of "Ride of the Valkyries" blasted out from within. Framed in the doorway with tears in his eyes and the crumpled letter in his hand, Moe stood dramatically with all eyes turned towards him. [...] Almost inaudible with so much hurt and outrage and offended dignity fighting for possession of his voice [...]. (3)

Presumably, because of Moe's notorious reputation for practical jokes and gags, everyone in the auto shop began to laugh at the news of Beatrice's betrayal.

[...] That night, [Moe] sent everybody home early. Then, running a tube from the exhaust of one of the shop's more operational vehicles in through the car's window, he started up the engine and drifted off into a final, bitter sleep amongst the carbon monoxide fumes. His brother took over the business and even eventually reemployed Fred Motz as chief mechanic. And that's why "The Ride of the Valkyries" is the saddest thing I can think of. (ibid.)

The "Ride of the Valkyries" introduces the idea of human suffering to *Watchmen* as it figures into the Moe Vernon story. It is the first instance where we see the effects that shattering the reality of a teenage boy unaware of this kind of betrayal and hopelessness can have. Be that as it may, chapter two advances the operatic motif of human suffering by alluding to another tragic opera, "Pagliacci" by Ruggero Leoncavallo and maintains it with "Three Penny Opera" by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill.

The one literal reference to "Pagliacci" exemplifies the multi-layered storytelling taking place in *Watchmen*, layered not only through text and image but pun and allusion. Edward Blake is the Comedian; he is the clown, the Harlequin, il Pagliaccio. During the late 1930s when many masked adventurers emerged, the Comedian's costume was similar to that of a Harlequin. Hollis Mason describes him as "a particularly vicious and brutal young man in a gaudy yellow boiler suit [who] started cleaning up the city's waterfronts under the name of The Comedian" (II *Under the Hood* 7-8). As a play within a play, "Pagliacci" anecdotally relates the dilemma posed by the inescapable fact that

superhero or no, costume or no, player or no, “we are human beings too, flesh and blood we breathe the air of this lonely world just like you” (Pagliacci).

When Rorschach goes to the cemetery to pay his respects to Edward Blake (the Comedian), the reader is confronted with this multi-layered narrative. Journal entries revealing Rorschach’s reflections on the life and death of a masked adventurer overlaying panels illustrating the life and death of the comedian, played out as a mind might while remembering a friend through flashes of memories:

In the cemetery, all the white crosses stood in rows, neat chalk marks on a giant scorecard. Paid last respects quietly, without fuss. Edward Morgan Blake. Born 1924. Forty-five years a comedian, died 1985, buried in the rain. Is that what happens to us? A life of conflict with no time for friends... ..so that when it’s done, only our enemies leave roses. Violent lives, ending violently. Dollar Bill, The Silhouette, Captain Metropolis... we never die in bed. Something in our personalities, perhaps some animal urge to fight and struggle, making us what we are? Unimportant. We do what we have to do. Others bury their heads between the swollen teats of indulgence and gratification, piglets squirming beneath a sow for shelter... ..But there is no shelter... ..and the future is bearing down like an express train. Blake understood. Treated it like a joke, but he understood. He saw the cracks in society, saw the little men in masks trying to hold it together... He saw the true face of the twentieth century and chose to become a reflection, a parody of it. No one else saw the joke that’s why he was lonely. Heard Joke once: man goes to doctor. Says he’s depressed says life seems harsh and cruel. Says he feels all alone in a threatening world where what lies ahead is vague and



uncertain. Doctor says “treatment is simple. Great clown Pagliacci is in town tonight. Go and see him. That should pick you up.” Man bursts into tears. Says “but, doctor... [and as the final panel shows Edward Blake being shoved out a window to his death with the smiley face button displayed vividly in yellow against muted colors falling along with him, we see the words,] “...I am Pagliacci.” (II 26-27)



(II 27/7)

Powerfully rendered, visually, structurally and narratively, the play on the word Pagliacci, used in reference to the Comedian draws into *Watchmen* another layer of meaning. It fills the word and the image with much more than the casual reader is likely to recognize. The prologue to “Pagliacci” relates a theme being played out in *Watchmen*, in particularly with the Comedian and Rorschach who have, more than the others, come to understand the world and their bit parts in it (the joke) until they discover

Ozymandias's plot, the knowledge of which end in both their deaths. The comedian goes mad when he finds out what Ozymandias has been doing and is planning to do because the way in which he understood the world, his reality, his perspective is shattered:

I mean, lemme tell ya, when I started out, when I was a kid, cleanin' up the water-fronts, it was like, real easy. The world was tough, you just hadda be tougher, right? Not anymore. I mean, I thought I knew how it was, how the world was. But then I found out about this gag, this joke... [...] I mean, this Joke, I mean, I thought I was the comedian, y'know? Oh, God, I can't believe it. I can't believe anybody would do that... I can't... I can't believe... [...] Oh, Jesus look at me. I'm cryin'. You don't know. You don't know what's happening. On that island they got writers, scientists, artists, and what they're doing... I mean, I done some bad things. I did bad things to women. I shot kids! In 'Nam I shot kids... But I never did anything like, like... [...] Somebody explain it to me. (II 22-23)





(II 23/8)

Edward Blake knew the world was bad, that horrible things happen everyday, but in the grand scheme he believed there was little any one person or even any few people (Minutemen) could do to change it. That is the joke he thought he understood that so many did not. But as his view of the horrors that do occur is shifted to include a much larger evil, a joke that he was not privy to, he is de-centered and forced to question everything he knew to be real and all the things he has done based on that perception of reality.

Like Edward Blake goes mad from the accidental discovery of Ozymandias's plot, Canio (Pagliacci) goes mad when he discovers on stage that Nedda is having an affair with Beppe. Surely a less globally destructive realization, nevertheless it does destroy Canio's world and all he believed he knew and trusted. By referencing "Pagliacci," we need only look to the prologue for a deeper understanding of what is happening in *Watchmen*. Tonio, acting as prologue explains to the audience:

Because the author is putting the old maskers on stage, he wants to revive some of the old customs and so he's sent me to you. But not to tell you, as in the past that the tears we shed are false! Not to be alarmed by what we suffer! No! No: instead the author wants to portray a slice of life. His only principle is that artists are human and it is for humanity that he has to write. And he is inspired by a real event. [...] So you'll see love like it is in real life; you'll see the bitter fruits of hatred. You'll hear pangs of grief, screams of anger, and cynical laughter. Rather than thinking of our poor actors' costumes, think of our souls, because we are human beings, flesh and blood we breathe the air of this lonely world just like you. I've shown you the idea, now hear how it works out. Let the show begin! (Pagliacci)

The prologue to Leoncavallo's opera can just as easily be a prologue to *Watchmen*. The author challenges his audience to see differently, to watch and experience his work from a different perspective. These are not mere actors on a stage. These are not flat characters telling a story, masked adventurers playing a role. *Watchmen* is an exploration of the human experience in every aspect. Most basically, it supposes what the world would be like if superheroes existed in the real world. They would not be as we have traditionally known them in comic books. Morality is not clearly defined. Good and evil is not as easily defined. And as varied and flawed as people are, superheroes, masked adventurers, vigilantes are just as varied and flawed:

Yes, we were crazy, we were kinky, we were Nazis, all those things that people say. We were also doing something because we believed in it. We were attempting, through our personal efforts, to make our country a safer

and better place to live in. Individually, working on our separate patches of turf, we did too much good in our respective communities to be written off as a mere aberration, whether social or sexual or psychological. It was only when we got together that the problems really started. I sometimes think without the Minutemen we might all have given up and called it quits pretty soon. The costumed adventurer might have become quietly and simply extinct. And the world might not be in the mess that it's in today. (II Under the Hood 8-9)

Lyotard's discussion of Joyce leads to his clearest definition of postmodern aesthetics:

The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations—not to take pleasure in them, but to better produce the feeling that there is something unrepresentable. (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained* 15)

*Watchmen* inquires into new presentations that in turn create a new era of comics that subsequent creators attempt to follow with grittier, more violent and mature content. Many however miss Eisner's point advising practitioners to examine their own genre in order to effectively convey meaningful art. *Watchmen* became a new literary benchmark, introducing superhero comics to literary criticism sometimes to the disdain or the confusion of mainstream audiences that include literary critics and scholars. It attacks the

entire notion of the hero as he is commonly and classically conceived. It plays with form and structure, text and image as well as story telling and how they mingle to break from traditional literary and comics formulae. Ironically, *Watchmen* begins as a detective story. This is merely a parody of the realist form however, because it is a misdirection. Moore lulls his audience into a false sense of nostalgia, where we can take comfort in a recognizable representation of narrative form where the detective gathers facts throughout the novel, fits them all together by the end to figure out whodunit. Life is more complicated than that and we learn that there is more to this story than who killed Edward Blake. Rorschach says that he responded to a “routine homicide,” but even beyond the discovery that Blake is the Comedian this murder is anything but routine and the characters and narratives surrounding it, anything but ordinary.

Yes, *Watchmen* played a critical role in the advancement of comic books in both art and commerce. As Versaci stated, “Suddenly, there was grittier superhero fare! Suddenly, there was a comic book taking on a ‘serious subject’!” (10). Suddenly it must be legitimized or silenced. Suddenly we must bring it into a recognizable representation of the real, but as a representation of the unrepresentable this is impossible. As Lyotard calls event “the founding moment of any postmodernism” (Malpas, *Jean-François Lyotard* 101), similarly, Douglas Wolk uses the term “finite crisis” (11). He says comics have come “to a moment of crisis. It is a distinctly finite crisis, but a dilemma nonetheless” (ibid.). It is indeed finite because it is just as he says, “a moment.” A postmodern view takes Wolk’s moment further by saying this moment holds “a sense that something has happened” (Malpas, *Jean François Lyotard* 101) which for Wolk means that “the big, awkward question hanging in the air is how to read and discuss comics now

that they're very different from what they used to be" (11). He begins the discussion by considering what indeed is occurring when we read comics:

When you look at a comic book, you're not seeing either the world or a direct representation of the world; what you're seeing is an interpretation or transformation of the world, with aspects that are exaggerated, adapted or invented. It's not just unreal, it's deliberately constructed by a specific person or people. But because comics are a narrative and visual form, when you're reading them, you do believe that they're real on some level... So the meaning of the comics story within the world we see on the page is different from its meaning within the reader's world" (Wolk 20-21).

*Watchmen* shatters that divide. It brings comics into the real world by setting its action in a world similar to the audience's experience and how the audience experiences it. He is drawing on real places and real history (e.g. New York, Kitty Genovese, Nixon, Watergate, Vietnam, the Cold War, nuclear proliferation, etc.) engaging readers with the text and asking them to consider questions about how we read and how we see concepts of reality, justice, power, morality etc.

Art's role then as Lyotard relates it,

shatter[s] people's common-sense understandings of the way the world works. He argues that realist art serves to reassure this common sense, but that modern and postmodern art employ the sublime to demonstrate understanding's limits and point to new possibilities. For Lyotard, the postmodern is a radicalization of the modern. In the modern, the sublime

appears through the missing contents of a work, whereas the postmodern sublime enacts a disruption not only of the contents but also of the formal mode of presentation itself. (Malpas, *Jean François Lyotard* 50)

In “An Answer to the Question: What is the Postmodern?” Lyotard compares the postmodern artist to a philosopher, arguing:

The Postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: The text he writes or the work he creates is not in principle governed by pre-established rules... Such rules and categories are what the work or text is investigating. The artist and the writer therefore work without rules and in order to establish the rules for what will have been made. This is why the work and the text can take on the properties of an event. (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained* 15)

Moore creates something different, a multi-layered tapestry, investigating new ways of storytelling and experiencing narrative. *Watchmen* is more than a novel or a comic book it is a reading experience that explores how we read. Using text and image, Moore presents a fragmented story in a way that creates an experience for the reader, much the way life and the world functions. We read symbols as well as text and as we do, we recall other images, texts and ideas that we inevitably incorporate into our experience. Life is not linear; the way in which the world functions is not linear. It is fragmented and presented and represented through visual and textual communication. *Watchmen* challenges readers on many levels, filling the work with so much that it overloads any initial sense making abilities. *Watchmen* may not be indecipherable, but it is immediately indecipherable and in most cases discourages the reader from wanting to

make sense of it. *Watchmen* is jarring to audience assumptions about literature and comics. It is jarring to the reader's sense making process, not only about narrative and storytelling, but about the way in which we view identity, power, justice, reality, humanity, perspective, philosophy, morality, ideology and whatever other mode the reader is forced to question.

Upon first, second, third or 30<sup>th</sup> read, *Watchmen* still may very likely make no sense. Even upon further inquiry it is unclear if all the pieces will ever fit together. One may be able to find a thread and follow it for a while, but there are so many threads that pulling all of them is unlikely and they are so interwoven that it is difficult to separate them all out to get a clear and total picture. The threads are not only interwoven and many times seemingly unconnected or disconnected. They are certainly fragmented, layered on top of one another offering pieces to the puzzle that never fully materialize into one total and comprehensive representation. There are so many ideologies and points of view being presented that in one moment meaning may be claimed and in the next it slips away. Any kind of total comprehension one may presume to hold is at best momentary and fleeting. The entirety of the work can not be seen for any significant amount of time, yet it seems to be revealed more and more when delving into the layers and coming to a disjointed understanding or a sublimely fragmented experience.

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## Appendix

What are, what is comics? Many have attempted to define comics however, none have been able to capture the art form fully. Thus, the debate continues. No definition is as yet sufficient. Legendary comics master Will Eisner in his highly acclaimed *Comics and Sequential Art* was the first to offer the definition *sequential art* as a way “to consider and examine the unique aesthetics [of comics] as a means of creative expression, a distinct discipline, an art and literary form that deals with the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea” (xi). Cartoonist and comics theorist Scott McCloud who, in *Understand Comics: The Invisible Art* comprehensively and adeptly illustrates how Eisner’s term sequential art is a good place to start the discussion about comics but is an inadequate definition. He goes on to say, “The world of comics is a huge and varied one. A proper definition must include all models, while also being specific enough not to include anything which is clearly not comics” (4). McCloud begins his journey to define comics by first considering the word itself:

“Comics” is the word worth defining as it refers to the medium itself, not a specific object as “comic book” or “comic strip” do. We can visualize a comic. But what is comics? Master comics artist Will Eisner uses the term sequential art when describing comics. Taken individually, [...] pictures [...] are merely that—pictures. However, when part of a sequence, even a sequence of only two. The art of the image is transformed into something more: The Art of Comics. Notice that this definition is strictly neutral on matters of style, quality or subject matter.

[...] The art form—the medium—known as comics is a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images. The “content” of those images and ideas is, of course, up to creators, and we all have different tastes. The trick is to never mistake the message for the messenger. (4-6)

Because it comes in the form of comics, the message is not disqualified from being worthy of study. “At one time or another virtually all the great media have received critical examination, in and of themselves. But for comics, this attention has been rare”

(6). So, McCloud begins with Eisner and attempts to form a proper dictionary-style definition: “Comics (kom’iks) n. plural in form, used with a singular verb. 1.

Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). The comics community as well as the mainstream literary community have defined comics too narrowly to perform any substantial scrutiny.

For much of this century the word ‘comics’ has had such negative connotations that many of comics’ most devoted practitioners have preferred to be known as ‘illustrators,’ ‘commercial artists’; or, at best ‘cartoonists’! And so, comics’ low-esteem is self-perpetuating! The historical perspective necessary to counteract comics’ negative image is obscured by that negativity. (18)

A proper definition then may put to rest some of the debilitating stereotypes comics has had to contend with and showcase the exciting and limitless potential of comics.

Even having provided a working definition of comics, McCloud continues his discussion by illustrating how his own definition is still inadequate. His definition

says nothing about superheroes or funny animals, nothing about fantasy/science fiction or reader age. No genres are listed in [the] definition, no types of subject matter, no styles or prose or poetry. Nothing is said about paper and ink. No printing process is mentioned. Printing itself isn't even specified! Nothing is said about technical pens or Bristol board or Windsor & Newton finest sable series 7 number two brushes! No materials are ruled out by [this] definition no tools are prohibited. There is no mention of black lines and flat colored ink. No calls for exaggerated anatomy or for representational art of any kind. No schools or art are banished by [this] definition, no philosophies no movements, no ways of seeing are out of bounds! (22)

So, anything is possible in comics and irrespective of the historical journey McCloud takes his reader on, beginning with pre-Columbian picture manuscripts or the Bayeux Tapestry, detailing the Norman conquest over England in the middle ages, up to the more traditionally recognized comics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Archie, Little Lulu, Donald Duck etc.), it is obvious that comics include a wide array of subjects, styles, tools, and characters. Additionally, as the medium grows, a definition becomes more difficult to create and with the introduction of the term graphic novel into the conversation, a satisfactory definition seems even more unlikely. It is this ever-present confusion about what comics is that contributes to its neglect by literary scholars and critics.