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Watchmen: The Superhero Destroyer

It is often believed that superheroes are “kid-stuff” creatures of light that don’t face the reality of the world. Superheroes are beings of imaginary realms, each with differing levels of adversity each character must overcome or certain villains a character must face. Superheroes are often characterized as unearthly beings, unable to relate to the hardships that humanity faces on a daily basis, however in Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* that perception is twisted. The message of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon’s *Watchmen* reveals the true nature of the superhero narrative as one that is dark and self-destructive through situations that affect each superhero’s psyche and the way the characters interact with each other because of it.

In an alternate 1985 America during the heart of the Cold War, masked superheroes have come out of the shadows after a law is passed banning masked superheroes. When one of the former Crimebusters is found murdered, Rorschach, one of the few masked vigilantes still active, uncovers a plot to kill and discredit all past and present superheroes. Through investigating and reconnecting with his former kin, Rorschach reveals a far-reaching conspiracy involving the masked vigilantes and the catastrophic sequences for the world’s survival.

The graphic novel *Watchmen* embodies a realm of secrecy and savagery that plagued the United States during the Vietnam and Cold War. Superheroes were a lost cause, as the country pushes these superheroes out from behind their masks. These heroes experience different lives after coming out to become government workers, undercover vigilante, and entrepreneurs. Throughout the graphic novel, the novel flashes back to the past and show each “superhero” in

their past life. The novel follows the life of Rorschach, an undercover superhero that is mocked by his peers as a schizophrenic manic worried about a killer murdering all the former masked superheroes.

Each superhero faces some sort of different obstacle throughout their time within the story and it plays a role in each person's psyche and interaction with the outside world because of it. In a world where superheroes are not only shunned, but almost hated for their past lives, each character must find a way to forget the past and try and escape the life that they were (Moore).

To the everyday person, *Watchmen* look like another superhero graphic novel. People see the violence, the masked beings, and the conflict as the stereotypical mind set of "superheroes". With *Watchmen*, however, that is certainly not the case. The characters throughout the novel are not referred to as "superheroes," but are referred to as "masked vigilantes" or "anti-hero," questioning many of the stigmas that come from a cliché superhero novel. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons create a realm of darkness that mirrors these novels, but with dark realism that surrounds the everyday world. Humans are seen as beings of light and darkness that seen superheroes as the bane of their existence. Superheroes are not seen as their past predecessors, but in fact, are seen as the scum of the Earth trying to make fame from the ashes of a dissolving society.

Watchmen is a dark parallel to the stereotypical superhero narrative. Alan Moore creates a realm where these "masked vigilantes" are the bottom feeders of society, fighting to protect what they see as just and unjust. These characters struggle with differences of metaphysical philosophy on life, which causes angst throughout the story between the characters.

Watchmen questions the very nature of the superhero stigma through the evolution of the

Crimebusters and their members. Alan Moore creates a realm where these “masked vigilantes” are the hated, not worthy to work in society. Each character has a storied past full of moments that shape the way they interact with the others around them. Throughout the novel, it can be seen that each character embodies an overall aspect of the human psychological spectrum, such as narcissism or manic behavior. With these “psychological disorders,” each character within the Crimebusters and Crimebusters 2 experience different sides of the story as it folds out in front of them. Some are moral absolutists, only seeing what is right and what is wrong, while others may question ethics as a whole and try to understand human kind.

Rorschach experiences the abuse and murder of his mother, leading the audience to see his evolution into a deranged psychopath, on the search for a killer targeting masked vigilantes. Through his first murder during a kidnapping investigation, Kovacs (Rorschach) explains how before he was just a “man in a costume,” but after killing the dogs that were gnawing on a piece of bone of the child that was abducted, he closed his eyes as Walter Kovacs, and “it was Rorschach who opened them again” (Moore 193, 199). Rorschach is “reborn,” free from the gray that surrounded many of the choices in life and had become a vigilante born on the foundation of only right versus wrong, black versus white. The gray matter that was curled through the decisions of men had vanished from his existence. He was a man that saw evil as evil and good as good, with no deeper meaning or context behind it.

Rorschach is a moral absolutist, bounded by the black and white chains that he sees the world. Although many of his intentions are good, it creates the eventual disintegration of subsequent world peace. Through Alan Moore’s dark parallel to the superhero narrative as this “masked vigilante” tears down the very walls he set out to build up. Through his preconceived notions on philosophy, many of the actions that were regarded the means justifying the end

outcome. Ozymandias set out to save the world through a “masked vigilante” kill-list, riding the world of the very thing many thought would be the saving grace before their fall from grace. In a quote from Freya Stark, the author of *The Damnation Game*, used that was used by the authors to describe how the idea for their graphic novel came about, she describes two different viewpoints on society that Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons tried to replicate through their dark superhero novel. She explains how a “society that knows fear is not [a] society that’s faced with extinction. It is the society that has forgotten fear that is faced with extinction,” shown through Ozymandias plans to save the Earth through fear tactics (“A Portal to Another Dimension”). Ozymandias brought peace by doing the “morally unjust” seen through the eyes of Rorschach. Through these vile acts, these “masked vigilantes” are not praised by in fact shunned from their existence.

Doctor Manhattan is seen by the untrained eye as a superhero comparable to the greats, Batman, Superman, etc., however Doctor Manhattan is some of these things, but more dark and disturbing. Doctor Manhattan began as Doctor Johnathan Osterman, a nuclear physicist who became trapped in an Intrinsic Field Subtractor and was disintegrated from the radiation. Once he re-animated himself, he became the US government’s key “weapon” to fight against the Russians. Doctor Manhattan is seen as a man of grace and glory until he is mocked and wrongly accused on live television leading him to escape to Mars to build his own kingdom away from earthly beings. From his kingdom in Mars, Laurie Juspecky, Silk Spectre II, to come back and see the Earth from an ensuing war, begs him. Doctor Manhattan tells Laurie that “We are all puppets...I am just a puppet who can see the strings,” playing on the belief that humans are just pawns in a massive game by a universal being (Moore 285). Doctor Manhattan shows the implications of super intelligence. He can see into the future and predict how events will happen, causing him to be apathetic to the world around him. He questions the very nature of ethics due

to his elongated perception of time. Doctor Manhattan isn't just a superhero born to save humanity, but a being of super intelligence struggling to understand his own metaphysical philosophy with the realm of humankind at the tipping point.

Adrian Veidt, better known as Ozymandias, could be looked at as the savior of the world, but in a deeper analysis can be seen as a narcissist, hungry for glory and fame that comes from saving the world. Through his genius-level intellect, Veidt was seen to the public as the great humanitarian, capable of finally bringing peace to Cold War America. Veidt, however, was planning a catastrophic event that would bring "peace" between the United States and Russia through a combined coalition of countries to combat the nuclear war, catapulting him to further fame and stardom. Through his project, he would inevitably kill all of his former colleagues and set up the self-exile of Doctor Manhattan. Veidt was trying to rid the world of his former accomplices in an attempt to stop the world from hanging on the balance as it had with these "masked vigilantes". Veidt concludes that the very reason that the Earth is near the brink of nuclear war is the comfort that is felt in their home countries. Veidt wanted to kill millions through his genetically engineered creature to unite the world against a nuclear war, questioning the very philosophy of the superhero narrative. Veidt believes that saving the world "could certainly be on his own terms," allowing him to do whatever he feels must be done to achieve his desired outcome (Moore 367). Morals on right and wrong go out the window, as Veidt only takes in what he sees as best for the globe. Through the paradigm of conflicting philosophies of Veidt and the other masked vigilantes, Alan Moore challenges the very basis of a superhero story and places real-world problems and challenges that darken the view of these super beings.

Watchmen is a dark parallel to the stereotypical superhero narrative. Alan Moore creates a realm where these "masked vigilantes" are the bottom feeders of society, fighting to protect

what they see as just and unjust. These characters struggle with differences of metaphysical philosophy on life, which causes angst throughout the story between the characters. The dark realism in *Watchmen's* reality is that of American identity. Moore shows the true danger of American society and the sense of security that is felt within its country. Many of the conflicts fluttered around throughout the novel strictly parallel events such as the Vietnam War, the Watergate Scandal, and the fear of nuclear warfare. *Watchmen* plays on the different moral codes that each character acts upon, although, "...*Watchmen* has characters with great power who are intensely flawed people," (Schaefer). If each and every character found with this novel were a superman, imposing their will upon the people with a very strict moral code, there would be no problems, however it is the downfall of these "masked vigilantes" due to the flaws found within them. Moore plays upon the realism that is society, giving each character different circumstances they must combat within their lives.

To the average reader, *Watchmen* is just another superhero graphic novel, full of unrealistic events that the characters must conquer and save the city. They point out the insecurities within each character as a sign that they must "overcome themselves" before they can save the fate of the world. These readers also like to point out the fact that these are indeed superheroes due to the costumes and challenges that arise just like every other superhero novel. Where these readers are wrong, are not in the fact that they are not reading, it is that they are not reading deep enough.

Moore and Gibbons challenge the stigma of the stereotypical superhero with their own creation, a much deeper and darker parallel. Throughout the novel, these characters question the very basis of life on earth, as they try to figure out a moral code. With the introduction of the free mind these characters are given, conflict arises as each character discovers that their view of

moral ethics is not the same is not the same as others. Rorschach is a moral absolutist, bound by a moral code thrust upon him, only seeing the world on two layers, right and wrong. Rorschach feels that he must rid the Earth of all things wrong and save those that are “right.” However, Doctor Manhattan sees the world in a different light. As an all-powerful being, capable of seeing time in multiple dimensions, he weighs decisions on the outcomes that could affect civilization. These two characters constantly battle between of the fate of the world as they decide on what is morally and ethically right. Each of the characters throughout the novel has the tacky superhero get up that sets them apart from the average everyday Joes on the street; however, it’s what they embody through their conflicts and their experiences that take the story deeper.

Critics, such as Grant Morrison, question the very nature of these “superheroes” in *Watchmen*. He argues that superheroes “never let you down” and that they are like the “sci-fi Jesus,” (Morrison 419). Morrison sees superheroes as righteous beings, praised for their work to save people of the Earth. He claims that superheroes are seen in good light at all times and never are pressured under the turmoil, that is, real-life. Through criticizing Alan Moore’s work as being indecent to the comic book readers of today, Morrison claims that *Watchmen* is, in fact nothing more than a washed up graphic novel of “masked vigilantes.”

Where Morrison is wrong, is not in his assessment of Moore’s *Watchmen*, it is in the complexity in which he reads the novel. Moore creates a different realm where superheroes are persecuted and punished aside, developing a dark parallel to the stereotypical superhero stigma. Each character throughout the novel embodies a different character trait flaw that allows each character to seem human. Morrison likes to point out that these characters should be like gods walking the Earth as they please and being the savior of the world, however Morrison misses out on one key trait developed within the tangles of a superhero story. Morrison misses the fact that

these beings are indeed humans. Most of these characters come from troubled backgrounds each with varying degrees of psychiatric torture that each has had to face and overcome. Morrison attempts to clash against the deeper meanings that surround the graphic novel as a way to comprehend the metaphysical philosophy within the cells.

Although many see *Watchmen* as a kid-related fantasy where superheroes are actually “super,” the dark parallel that intertwines within each cell creates a story that questions the modern day stigma of the super hero. Many of these characters can be seen as the very opposite of the term “super,” however it is the way in which the story is played out that allows them to challenge the term. A superhero is defined as a person whose actions or achievements are far greater than what people expect. People expected nothing from these “masked vigilantes,” shunned from the public eye and forced to come out from behind the mask. These characters were the laughing stock of society, forced to combat their past failures and memories while be ridiculed for what they love. To save the world, these characters had to go against the social order of society and become something that they once were. Nobody expected anything from the rapists, adulterers, wash-ups, or oddballs, but these superheroes saved the world for humanity.

Watchmen is an epic saga that compels the reader to question society and the stereotypes thrust upon a country. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons create a realm where supers are not only scorned, but the very bane of society. Although they do not associate with the average superhero, the masked vigilante of *Watchmen* creates a parallel to the superhero story as a dark and destructive narrative, where Super fights against Super in a battle of ideologies and philosophies.

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