

IBDP

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RQ: “How does the author, Alan Moore, twist the ideas of a
“hero” through his graphic novel series *Watchmen* ?”

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1. Introduction

“Watchmen” is one of the most popular and influential graphic novel series ever written by Alan Moore: “The English Wizard”. Alan Moore has also written other critically acclaimed graphic novels: “V for Vendetta” and “Swamp Thing” (1985-1996), which are also very unique amongst the general genre of graphic novels. Watchmen is a series which show the dark and more realistic side of heroes contrary to their depiction as “perfect”. It is a complex story about power, moral ambiguity, human fantasy and conflict. Alan Moore has always been very opposed to the idea of the general idea of a “superhero” which is a perfect human or a godlike being who always does the right thing and is never on the morally “wrong” side of conflicts. The plot of Watchmen questions the idea of a “hero” and whether they would be a beneficial for humans or not. The “smiley face with the bloodstain” symbolises the heroes of “Watchmen” in their simplest form. The smiling face suggests optimism and general positivity, which is how heroes, idols or superheroes are generally depicted and viewed as. However, The World of Watchmen adds a bloodstain on the smiley face which represents the addition of human flaws, political corruption, opposite ideals and darkness to the heroes that are generally looked up to and seen as “the perfect being” and “role models”. Moore’s criticisms against ideal heroes can especially be seen in “Watchmen”. I will analyse “Watchmen” through the research question “How does the author, Alan Moore, twist the ideas of a “hero” through his graphic novel series *Watchmen* ?”

2. The World of Watchmen

The story is set in alternate 80’s United States where superheroes exist and when the tension rises between USA and Russia in the Cold War. These super heroes do not possess actual powers (except for Dr. Manhattan) and are more like masked vigilantes. In this alternate

timeline, The United States wins the Vietnam war with the help of Dr. Manhattan and heroes like “The Comedian” who do undercover work for the government. This shows that the heroes of “Watchmen” altered historic events but their effect can also be seen in the everyday life and culture in the series. Due to the existence of heroes in the series, people lost interest in the superhero comics which caused the popularity of comics about pirates to increase such as the story “Tales of the Black Freighter”. One of the main characters, *Ozymandias*, built his own corporate empire by selling his superhero mantle’s toys or figures. With the help of *Dr. Manhattan*, technology took a giant leap and became a lot more advanced at a very early time. 80’s New York now had electric cars, genetically modified food and a lot more like airships. The story’s most important event takes place in the 1970’s, where heroes and vigilantes are outlawed by the United States government which forces many heroes to retire. Only *Dr. Manhattan* and *The Comedian* are left because they actually worked with the government. This leads to the eventual downfall of heroes in which the characters get corrupted both morally and mentally

3. Ozymandias

The character that is the living representation of “grey morality” in Watchmen is Ozymandias, who is shown as a part of the vigilante team of Watchmen. But as the story unravels, his real ideals start to show themselves and he becomes the main antagonistic force in our story. His real name is Adrian Veidt and is known as the “smartest person on the planet” within the novel’s story. He is an overly ambitious, extremely rich and arrogant character who idolises Alexander The Great. He believed that the heroes in the story were not enough to prevent the catastrophic threat of war so instead he put his faith into science and genetically engineered an artificial alien which eventually becomes the main focus in his elaborate master plan. He assassinated the aforementioned character in the introduction “The Comedian” when he finds out about his plan, creates a hoax about Doctor Manhattan for major cases of cancer which

eventually ends with his exile from the Earth, frames Rorschach to put him in jail and hires an assassin on himself to throw off any type of suspicion against himself and ends his master plan by teleporting the artificial alien into the center of New York City, causing the tragic deaths of 3 million people. The main plot thread that differentiates Watchmen from other stories is that the plan of the antagonist actually succeeds without any major setbacks.

Governments from around the world are spooked from the fake alien encounter and sign peace treaties. As for the heroes of the story, they fail to prevent Ozymandias from going through with his morally questionable plan, which shows us that the writer believes that heroes are not and can never be perfect in anything so they are bound to fail, and the deaths of the 3 million people are the consequence of their failure.

Ozymandias successfully goes through with his plan not by using brute force or superhuman powers, but by using science, determination and his psychopathically evil elaborate plan and his willingness to sacrifice 3 million people for the sake of the world. At a terrible cost, he saves the world and whether or not he is a hero or a villain does not have a clear cut answer because he has saved and murdered people simultaneously, which shows his willingness to go through with his plan no matter what.

As the story of Watchmen unfolds, we also see a glimpse of another comic book, within the comic book called "Tales of the Black Freighter" that can be interpreted as a story that reflects Ozymandias' character. It tells the story of a sailor who tries to save his town and people from the wrath of pirates but in the process, ends up killing innocent people and becomes just as evil and prone to violence as the pirates. In this side story the quote "Noble intentions led him to atrocity" represents the character of Ozymandias, who becomes a force "necessary" evil while trying to prevent evil from being necessary whatsoever. His ideals became corrupt and eventually led him to believe that someone had to commit an act with a severe impact to the world such as he did to save humankind from destroying itself.

The main philosophical idea that Ozymandias' ideas boil down to is utilitarianism. The idea of utilitarianism is that the morally right action is the one that has the outcome with the most benefit towards the people. Utilitarianism tries to maximize the good that comes from important decisions. Although this kind of thinking is similar to egoism, they do differ in the goal that they try to reach. While egoism is for the benefit of yourself, utilitarianism's goal is to "maximize overall good". Ozymandias' actions could be considered evil, but his intentions and the overall conclusion of his actions were extremely beneficial, the thousands of lives that were sacrificed to deceive the entire world into a union were only a small price to pay for the benefit of humankind.

The author seems to be criticising rich people who possess too much power with the character of Ozymandias. In the eyes of a normal person leading an ordinary and simple life, a rich person may become idealised due to their appealing lifestyle in which they can simply own anything they want; however, the one thing that we cannot see in that rich person lifestyle is how much it deteriorates one's ethical compass and motives. Even though the novel itself makes it seem like Ozymandias committed this genocidal act for the better of mankind, in the end all he did was reach his own personal goal and kill 3 million people to reach it, therefore committing a "selfless" act to reach selfish and personal goals.

Even though he is widely appreciated by people in the story and hailed as a hero, us readers get the real picture, the flaws and moral corruptions of an idol that Alan Moore is trying to show us through the help of characters like Ozymandias, who is a written representation of the idea that heroes are not "good" people and even if they seem like they care for us and help us, in the end goal they are only trying to help themselves.

4. Rorschach

The character that showcases the mental toll that the role of a hero has on a human best is known as *Rorschach*. His name and design are a reference to the infamous “Rorschach Test” which is said to open the mind of a mentally broken person to a psychiatrist and the character Rorschach himself, is a broken human that is behind the mask.

The start of the story depicts everyone in fear due to a possible all out nuclear war and annihilation. And the vigilante “The Comedian” is mysteriously murdered. This leads to the investigator of the murder, who is one of our main characters. Rorschach is a hero who did not obey the regulations in the 70s and refused to retire from being a hero. When he is not wearing a mask and catching criminals, he is Walter Kovacs (Rorschach), a lonely man who roams the streets with a “The End is Near” sign. He is not a normal and functional person, he is asocial and suffers severe mental problems like psychopathy. His methods against criminals are very violent and tend to cross the ethical line. This shows us that his views against crime and humans is not gray but merely black and white. He believes all the society to be “sinful” and “filthy”, and that the society does not deserve any amount of sympathy or mercy.

His black and white life views say that “everything is either good or evil, and evil must perish”. This morality is reflected on the black and white mask of his costume. In the story, he says “Evil must be punished” and that he “shall not compromise in this” but he commits contradictory actions to these words by sparing judgement on people due to personal reasons and not caring that The Comedian, one of the vigilantes connected to the United States Government, sexually assaulted *Silk Spectre*, a female hero from the 40s, because he defined himself as a “Patriot”.

He decided to become a detective hero when he heard about the murder of Kitty Genovese, which was a real life murder that took place in the 60s. At the start of his career as a masked

hero, he was not as violent or harsh against criminals as he is in the current time of the story. The event that completely broke him and shifted his views about society was when he discovered the brutal murder of an innocent child. That was when he bore witness to the real dark side of the world and humanity. This broke him mentally and showed him the randomness of the world, the lack of the existence of God and the meaningless of life. His distraction from the cruelty of life became his hero life and to escape from trauma, he imposed his inhumane ideology towards people by stopping crime at any cost whatsoever. He breaks random peoples' fingers to get information, he assaults an old and defenseless man, who used to be a villain and forcefully enters peoples' houses just so he can "punish evil". It can be said that his methods cause more damage in the long run to the people he is trying to protect from evil.

Throughout the story, it can be seen that Rorschach takes actions that heavily contradict with his morality. He sees everyone as "parasitic", when he survives by living off other peoples' stock. He says he shall never compromise but he usually does when it becomes personal and his psychotic obsession against evil causes more damage than evil itself and leaves bloody footprints behind him.

Watchmen does not find a perfect role model to portray as a "hero", instead, they give the mask to a mentally broken, traumatised and hypocritical man named Walter Kovacs, who actually becomes one of the key members of the heroes who go on to uncover a great conspiracy. This is a message from the author Alan Moore, who believes that heroes are not the perfect human beings that people make them up to be.

5. Dr. Manhattan

Alan Moore explores the idea of an individual with “superhuman” powers with the character Jon Osterman who is also called “Dr. Manhattan”. He has the ability to shape any object or alive being in an atomic scale with no effort required, he can transport himself anywhere at any time within mere seconds and sees the past, the future and the present as one. With these powers, also comes the loss of connection to humans. Manhattan’s relationship with his girlfriend ended because it became hard for him to understand and relate to the concept of love and affection. He does not have human needs like food, he does not feel emotions like fear, anger or even happiness, which results in him becoming cold and distancing himself from humans.

Manhattan can observe anything in the universe and everything that has happened, happening and will happen within it which includes the movement of atoms and ancient extraterrestrial technology. He is a human who has obtained “godlike” powers, which makes humans look like mere ants to him, small and meaningless to *Manhattan*. People around him change, get older with time and eventually pass away while he remains the same. He can see the end of a relationship before he even meets that person. So, this disconnection completely serves as a factor to perceive humans as machines and irrelevant.

An interesting thing that can be perceived in this graphic novel is that we see the story from Dr. Manhattan’s perspective. We see that the timeline as the past, the future and the present is all visible within the pages, with its eventual end. This strengthens Manhattan’s ideals against free will ¹“We are all puppets Laurie. I’m just a puppet who can see the strings.”. Even

¹ Moore, Alan. *Watchmen, Deluxe Edition*. Deluxe, DC Comics, 2013

though he is the most powerful being within the story, he knows that even he is powerless, he cannot intervene and shape the future to his liking since the events that will occur in the future has already happened to him.

Manhattan's exposure to superpowers has made him a being that is no longer human. He no longer has human desires or even feelings, and due to the absence of humanity in him, he does not want to become a hero, a person that people look up to and depend on. He is a deconstruction of the terms "superhero" and "idol". This deconstruction in Alan Moore's writing suggests that superheroes would not be the protector of humankind.

The idea of a superhero can also have some horrifying implications regarding the relevancy of mankind. A being with this much power makes us regular humans who study, work and struggle from day to day fall into irrelevancy. Our lives become obsolete due to this power, machinery that needs years to be built can be created by Dr Manhattan within seconds.

²"We've been replaced... while masked vigilantes had certainly been made obsolete, so in a sense had every other living organism upon the planet."

At one point in the story, Manhattan is exiled from the planet after being falsely accused of giving people cancer and some time after his girlfriend Laurie ends their relationship, he immigrates to Mars so that he can live without any connection to the Earth and its inhabitants. Though while he was on Mars, after having debates with his ex-girlfriend, she manages to convince Manhattan that humankind has its own value due to the miraculous chances of even one person existing.³"Thermo-dynamic miracles... Events with odds against so astronomical they're effectively impossible, like oxygen spontaneously becoming gold. I long to observe

² Moore, Alan. *Watchmen, Deluxe Edition*. Deluxe, DC Comics, 2013

³ Moore, Alan. *Watchmen, Deluxe Edition*. Deluxe, DC Comics, 2013

such a thing. And yet, in each human coupling a thousand million people for a single egg. Multiply those odds by countless generations, against the odds of your ancestors being alive, siring this precise son, that exact daughter.....". Even though Manhattan has a change of heart and decides to go back to Earth and save the people from an upcoming World War, he still sees human lives as events that come and go even if it's nearly impossible for it to happen. Dr. Manhattan is not going back to save the people, he is going back to save the "Thermodynamic miracle" that he just accepted the existence of.

Through the lens of the character "Dr. Manhattan", Moore shows us that heroes are not as relatable as people think them to be, since they deal with problems that are far above the daily lives of regular humans, they tend to become isolated from society and lose touch with what it means to be an individual and instead of using their power for humans, they start using it for themselves to seek personal pleasure or goals.

6. Daniel Dreiberg "Nite Owl"

Even though the story does not have a main "protagonist", Daniel Dreiberg, also known as "Nite Owl" seems to fit that role the most in the story of Watchmen. He is a retired hero who used to dress up in a costume inspired by an owl and used gadgets to fight crime, but in the present time of the story, he believes that lifestyle to be "childish" and "immature". When he looks back to what he used to do, he realises that dressing up in a costume to beat up criminals had little effect on lowering crime rates and thinks that everything the caped heroes did were only a part of a childish fantasy which can be seen as the author criticising the idolization of the hero lifestyle.

In the story's continuity, he has just become "Dan Dreiberg", leaving his heroic identity behind, gaining weight and becoming a generally normal person. This also has a negative

effect on his happiness, which deteriorates after retiring. In a way, this could be seen as a way of the author telling us to leave behind our “hero” fantasies behind and “get real”, which means that the author believes heroes to be old-fashioned and useless, even if this makes people generally unhappy. The author Alan Moore tells us that this is the right thing to do.

His retirement days do not last forever though, when he is warned about heroes being forced to disappear or murdered. Daniel feels powerless to do anything against this conspiracy, his self isolation makes him think that he is useless and impotent. His love life is also affected by the mental toll his old life has on his present self. He wants to be together with Laurie, the only female amongst the main characters, but he becomes awkward and unconfident, he believes something to be missing in his life and tries filling that by re-entering his unhealthy life as a hero.

The author tries to show us the addiction our society has on heroes and how difficult it has become to move on from the idea that there are people who are perfect and should be idolized because it gives us comfort, but the comfort that we get from these heroes give us is merely an illusion. Moore created the character Daniel to show and warn us about our attachment to heroes or hero-like figures.

7. Laurie Juspezyk

Laurie Juspezyk is the only female lead character in the cast of Watchmen. She carries the hero title “Silk Spectre”, which was passed down to her by her mother, who also was a hero in her glory days. She is the character who is the closest to being a regular human within the main characters, which is probably because she never really wanted to be one in the first place, but this does not mean that she is a person without any issues.

The main problem that rises from Laurie's life as a hero is her problems with finding herself as an individual. She despises the character that was murdered in the start of the story, "The Comedian" because he tried to assault her mother back when he worked with her. But she soon comes to discover that her mother loved The Comedian anyway and that they had a child together, so she discovers that the most despicable character within the story is her biological father. This causes her whole idea of who she is which causes her to be smashed into bits and pieces, which is represented in the story with the breaking of her childhood snowglobe when she learns the truth. Her loss of identity then transforms into a darker and messier thought when at the end of story, she plans to change her costume to something similar to what his biological father's costume used to look like. This is a way of the story telling us that Laurie has embraced *The Comedian's* legacy whether she likes it or not.

This revelation is the embodiment of the loss of purity and innocence in Laurie and in turn, heroes, which is what the aforementioned smiley face in title 2 represents. This can be seen as a criticism from the author in which he aims to tell us that our ideal heroes as a whole have become corrupted because in the story, even though The Comedian has committed unforgivable acts, Laurie still decides to honor him and embraces him, which is a direct parallel to our society's treatment of heroes, in which they accept a hero no matter how messed up or despicable they tend to be due to their egos and selfishness.

Overall, Laurie is not a character that is explored as deeply as the other main heroes of the story. Laurie and her mother's defining traits are shown mostly to be their sexuality and their relationships with men. The depiction of a female hero is not changed much in the story, which shows us that the writer believes that female heroes are objectified. He wrote the story to show the issues that are caused by heroes and he is telling us that the depiction and sexualization of women heroes is shown as the main problem that rises in the stereotypical description of a woman hero.

8. Conclusion

In the end, the writer Alan Moore is criticising both the depiction of a hero and how we, the society define what a hero to be. The fantasy of a superhero is shown as a negative aspect of our culture, showing us how events would truly unravel in the real world, which is a much darker and mind boggling truth than we would want to believe.

The story ends with a journalist saying “I leave it entirely in your hands.”. This can be seen as a message from the writer to us. He has warned us about heroes, but in Daniel and Laurie’s relationship, he has also shown us that the fantasy and illusion of heroes can fill a void in our lives and make us happier, even if it is merely a fantasy. Or we can accept the dark and gruel truth of heroes, like Rorschach, who tried everything within his power to go against the conspiracy created by the character Ozymandias but lost his life in the conclusion. His actions were not futile however, showing us that he kept a journal about the conspiracy and sent it to the journalist who Rorschach sent his journal to and left it “entirely in our hands”. So in the finishing point of the story, it is us who will choose what to do with the idea of a hero whether we accept it or deny and go against it, it is up to us to decide.

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