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Texts Tell Truths

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Writing Process

The assignment for this essay was to provide a close reading analysis of a writing or visual strategy in the novel *Watchmen* by Dave Gibbons and Alan Moore, while making connections to how this strategy relates (or doesn't) to the Catholic Intellectual Tradition (CIT). To get started on this essay, I looked through various in-class writings we had done regarding rhetorical strategies in this novel. I also reviewed information about the CIT and typed a two-page-long brainstorm of all the rhetorical strategies I found that interested me, and the connections I could find between those and CIT. After deciding on my topic, first-hand accounts and the use of stories to understand humans, I began a draft. Before my final essay was complete, I had two rough drafts. The first went through in-class peer reviews, and the second received comments from my professor (via email). Revisions were made as a result of both.

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Texts Tell Truths*

From newspapers to novels, textbooks to tabloids, and everything in-between, written texts within our society provide an important medium through which we understand and interpret the world around us. Through texts we learn values and understand the lives of others. Writers can send messages to a wide audience through their words. The graphic novel, *Watchmen*, by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons is an example of how content creators can use their work to send a deeper message about society. In this novel, a handful of costumed vigilantes, some retired, some working illegally, are faced with a world that seems to be crumbling down around them. From their own personal troubles and insecurities, to backlash from the community, to the death of many of their former colleagues, to the threat of a global war, the characters have a lot to deal with. Rorschach, one of the main characters, is attempting to solve the mystery of a specific death, Edward Blake, and believes that someone is out to kill all of the costumed vigilantes. After being imprisoned and being broken out of prison, Rorschach, along with three other former vigilantes, finds out the truth of Blake's death as well as many other mysteries throughout the novel. Yet before anything is done to stop the person behind Blake's death, and that of millions of civilians, Rorschach is killed because he refuses to give up his values and keep quiet about what he has discovered. Throughout the novel, readers are given pieces of Rorschach's journal, as well as some notes of Dr. Malcolm Long, Rorschach's psychoanalyst. Through the various first-hand accounts that Moore and Gibbons include within *Watchmen*, they show the importance

of using stories to understand humans, which ultimately leads to an understanding of the character Rorschach, which sends a strong message about the Catholic Intellectual Tradition (CIT).

Both Rorschach's journal and Dr. Long's notes contain events, thoughts, and emotions that readers could not get anywhere else, and that allow us to better understand the context of these characters' lives. Without considering his journal, Rorschach seems like a violent, cruel person. We see him bending back the fingers of men who don't have the information he wants, breaking into Moloch's house and beating up the weak man before even speaking to him, and lighting police officers on fire when they come into a house to get him (Moore and Gibbons 24, 63, 170). Yet, through his journal, we get a contradictory view of this character. While twisted, Rorschach seems to have pure values. Various lines in his journal, such as, "I leave the human cockroaches to discuss their heroin and child pornography" show his dislike towards things like pornography, and abuse of children and women (Moore and Gibbons 24). In addition, he tries to warn fellow costumed heroes of a potential threat to their lives. For example, before visiting Dr. Manhattan, a fellow superhero, Rorschach writes, "I shall go and tell the indestructible man that someone plans to murder him" (Moore and Gibbons 27). Through Dr. Long's notes, we learn a bit more about Rorschach's past. Dr. Long interprets Rorschach's stories of his childhood, and explains that his built up anger towards his mother may be motivating his current actions (Moore and Gibbons 186, 189). This information of Rorschach's tragic past is meant to have an effect on readers, and it does. Despite his actions, we sympathize with the broken man. The journals and notes of both Rorschach and Dr. Long provide us with a better understanding of who exactly Rorschach is, much better than simply looking at his actions could.

The functions of these first-hand accounts represent an important characteristic of CIT—narrative rationality. Narrative rationality is the concept that texts can be used “to inspire the imagination, to deepen the emotions, and to provide ways of understanding human meaning and value” (“Catholic” 5). The texts of Rorschach’s journal and Dr. Long’s notes do just that. They “deepen the emotions” by providing us the tragic past of Rorschach, explaining his situation, and showing Dr. Long’s emotional downfall. For example, Dr. Long’s notes start with an optimistic view, as he states, “I’m convinced I can help him.” Yet after a few visits with Rorschach, the mood quickly changes. By the end, he is saying, “We are alone. There is nothing else.” (Moore and Gibbons 179, 206). The first person account allows us to not only sympathize, put potentially empathize, with what these characters are experiencing. In addition, these journals and notes “provide ways of understanding human meaning and value,” which in turn helps “to inspire the imagination.” Showing a side of Rorschach outside of the action of the narrative develops him into a more complex and dynamic character, with whom it is difficult to decide if he is truly bad or good. This is where imagination comes in. The journals give us more pieces of the puzzle as to the truth about the character of Rorschach, but there are still gaps that we must fill in with our own imagination. It is up to readers to imagine what other horrific things Rorschach has encountered, and if he has ever loved, felt guilt, or felt powerless. The text provides the match that sparks our interest, and our imagination must fuel the fire. In a way, Rorschach and Dr. Long’s journals are to *Watchmen* what the gospels are to CIT. They are a first person account of a story, which give readers a unique perspective, perhaps as if a friend is talking directly to them, and help them to better understand the overall message and meaning.

Although the first-hand accounts of both characters are critical to the novel, Rorschach’s journal provides another significant role in understanding CIT. Through his journal, we learn

how he embodies the idea of practical wisdom and the search for the common good. The CIT explains that in practicing this concept, one will “define and diagnose problems and issues, thoughtfully discern both more human visions for the future and strategies of change to realize in these visions; organize people and resources to implement the strategies of change; and reflectively learn from the consequences of change” (“Catholic” 5, 6). This is a perfect description of how Rorschach leads his life, which is seen clearly through his journal. Early on, he is “defining and diagnosing problems and issues” within his society. He explains that the people in New York City have “accumulated filth of all their sex and murder” (Moore and Gibbons 9). Rorschach has considered the visions of the humans around him, and has decided that they have no desirable visions. He explains that “nobody cares. Nobody cares but me” (Moore and Gibbons 32). Rorschach also, attempts to “organize people and resources to implement the strategies of change.” He is trying to change the fact that nobody cares by organizing other costumed vigilantes and trying to convince them that someone did something awful to Blake, and is coming after them too. Meanwhile, he is trying to connect dots and solve the mystery of Blake’s death. Unfortunately, this fails, and lands him in prison, where he must face the “consequences of change.” That being said, it is doubtful that he reflectively learns from these changes, as he tries the same strategies once he is busted out of jail. Yet up until this point, Rorschach’s thoughts and actions, no matter their merit, are following, almost step by step, the way in which CIT states that one “cultivates practical wisdom and the search for the common good” (“Catholic” 5).

Moore and Gibbons’ close comparison of Rorschach to this ideal Catholic inquirer seems to send an interesting message about the CIT. While Rorschach follows all the steps of this ideal Catholic process, he is also a violent, merciless, and often cruel person, which strongly

contradicts the values found in CIT. Rorschach does not have hope, he does not have faith, and he does not seem to have respect for human life. So why would he be compared so strongly with the Catholic Tradition? Perhaps Moore and Gibbons were trying to make a point, trying to suggest a fault in the CIT. One can follow their faith closely, and still cause destruction instead of good. Even though Rorschach claimed to be working for the good of humanity, this claim is questionable. It seems that his actions were motivated from feelings of anger, pride and vengeance. In the end, Rorschach dies without freeing the world from its evils. Despite his loyalty to his own values, he is killed, and he leaves little to no impact on the state of the world. Moore and Gibbons seem to be sending a message, through Rorschach, that the idea that because you are faithful to your values you and your cause will be saved, is incorrect.

Through the use of both Rorschach's journal and Dr. Long's notes, Moore and Gibbons paint Rorschach as a character with good intentions acting in violent and cruel ways. Despite his actions, reading Rorschach's journal invites readers to sympathize, and perhaps empathize, with this broken man. This understanding of the character and his place in the world is an example of the CIT trait of narrative rationality. Perhaps by allowing readers to understand Rorschach, Moore and Gibbons hope that readers will see themselves in him. They hope that they will see that just as Rorschach is faulty, so is the idea that faithfulness causes goodness, though this is something that many people practice and believe. Moore and Gibbons are sending a strong message that in order to make this world a better place, one with peace and love, people must not only claim to be good, they must fully and completely do, act, and spread good.

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