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## Superheroes Unmasked

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## Superheroes Unmasked

### Writing Process

In this assignment, I was asked to analyze one rhetorical strategy in the graphic novel *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons. I was also asked to consider the Catholic Intellectual Tradition as a rhetorical context. As the class read the book, we had in-class writing assignments that helped us trace our strategy throughout the text and develop our analysis that would eventually become the backbone of our papers. I used these in-class assignments along with my notes on the book to create a comprehensive list of every flashback in the novel. I used this list to develop my thesis and decide which characters I would use to support my analysis. After writing and editing my rough draft, two of my peers reviewed my paper during class. After another round of editing, I brought my paper to a conference with my professor, Dr. Mackay, and she gave me ideas to improve the paper. Next, I edited the paper again and submitted it for a grade. Upon deciding to submit this paper to *Line by Line* I edited it again and had another conference with my professor.

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### Superheroes Unmasked

Who is really behind the superhero mask? When they take off their costumes, superheroes are simply average people with above average jobs. In their action-packed graphic novel, *Watchmen*, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons explore the personal lives of a group of superheroes in Cold War-era New York City. Through flashbacks, Moore and Gibbons paint the full picture of these heroes – their childhoods, their relationships, and their thinking – without interrupting the excitement of a murder mystery story of their own. Flashbacks serve to humanize the superheroes and explore what is truly behind the superhero façade.

Flashbacks serve as a tool to unravel Rorschach's motivations and understand his persistence in his pursuit of proving his "mask killer" theory. Rorschach is introduced through his first journal entry when he is investigating the murder of Edward Blake (The Comedian) (1.5-9). Throughout the story he is fixated on solving the mystery of Blake's death. After he is arrested and put through psychological tests, specifically the Rorschach inkblot test, the flashbacks in response to the images explain his development into a superhero. Readers are able to see the childhood traumas, like discovering his mother was a prostitute and being bullied, that motivated Rorschach to become a superhero (6.3-6). This knowledge of Rorschach's past also makes clear why Rorschach deals with people so violently. He dealt with childhood bullies that way, so now he is dealing with real villains using the same methods. To him, the fight against criminals is deeply personal. The lingering emotions from his childhood motivate every act of

violence and drive his obsessive need to find answers. Although his speech is very detached, often lacking subjects and full sentences, hints of his emotion can be found in Rorschach's dialogue. In prefacing his flashback to a kidnapping investigation, Rorschach explains his motives. "Thought of little child, abused, frightened. Didn't like it. Personal reasons" (6.18). Rorschach sees himself in the victims of crimes he stops and that is why he so insatiably pursues criminals. Flashbacks give the reader a snapshot of background information so they can understand that Rorschach is not just a superhero, but that he is motivated by human emotion just like anybody else.

Similarly, flashbacks are used to show Dr. Manhattan's (Jon's) development as a superhero. However, they are also used to put the reader inside his head to understand how his brain thinks. The entirety of Chapter Four describes Jon's history from his childhood to his time as a human to the accident that gave him his powers to his life as a superhero working for the government. The story is told non-linearly, abruptly jumping from past to present to future, leaving it up to the reader to put together the chronology of the events. At the same instant Jon describes the past, present, and future. "Two hours into my future, I observe meteorites from a glass balcony, thinking about my father. Twelve seconds into my past, I open my fingers. The photograph is falling" (4.2). Although confusing, this mix of flashback and flash-forward is effective. This is the way Jon's mind thinks and it is important for readers to experience his thinking in order to understand his character. Because the readers have an experience sorting out the confusing chronology of Jon's mind, they can more fully appreciate the conflicts it brings to Jon's relationship with Laurie, particularly in their conversation on Mars about their relationship and the fate of humanity. Although Jon already knows that Laurie is having an affair with Dan, he still reacts as if he was learning that for the first time, becoming angry and emotional, when

Laurie tells him because his responses are predetermined. This frustrates Laurie because she struggles to understand how Jon thinks (9.8). In traditional superhero stories, superheroes are typically viewed strictly as superheroes. There is little consideration for their personal lives or how their powers may be challenging in relationships with other humans. The flashbacks and flash-forwards describing Jon's life humanize his character and give a deeper perspective on superheroes. Like "role-model" celebrities who make unhealthy choices or beloved politicians who suddenly find themselves wrapped up in scandal or even teachers and coaches who disappoint the children they are mentoring, superheroes are human. However super they appear, they still have human flaws.

Flashbacks to Laurie's childhood illuminate her struggle for identity. As a small child she finds out that her mother's husband is not her real father (9.6-8). She does not find out that her real father is the Comedian until after she has several unfriendly encounters with him after the Crimebusters meeting and at a banquet in his honor (9.14-16, 9.19-21). She also questions her identity because she never really chose the superhero life for herself. Her mother, once Silk Spectre I, pushed her into the superhero lifestyle, forcing her to train in preparation for her career (9.10). Laurie became Silk Spectre II when she was only sixteen years old. Does she really want to be a superhero? Did she only become a superhero because that was what her mother wanted? Her conflict of identity is a very human concern that is not typically addressed in superhero stories. Superheroes are supposed to be confident and decisive; Laurie is neither. After fighting with Jon, Laurie visits fellow superhero Dan Dreiberg because she cannot cope with her emotions on her own (3.7-16). She also reveals her insecurities by smoking a cigarette whenever she is nervous. Laurie's flashbacks come during a difficult conversation with Jon when they are on Mars debating the fate of humanity (Chapter 9). Laurie holds immense power,

but she is unsure if she even wants it. Laurie's flashbacks to her personal life show the reader that superheroes are human too. Laurie is an example of someone who has power thrust upon her but did not really ask for it. Like athletes who are expected to be role models for kids, she did not expect all of the extra responsibility that comes with her job. Should people like this be expected to use their power responsibly even if they did not want it? Is it their duty or can they simply brush it off? Laurie's character forces the reader to look at some of the unexpected struggles that come with power.

Flashbacks in *Watchmen* gain significance from their relation to the Catholic Intellectual Tradition (CIT). This tradition values knowledge of the past and builds on it to create new ideas (Hellwig). It is in this conversation with past knowledge that people question and discover. *Watchmen* uses this philosophy in its characterizations of the superheroes. The story could not be told without drawing on the characters' pasts. Readers would not understand Rorschach's motivations or Laurie's identity struggle if there were no flashbacks to explain the origins. The characters in *Watchmen* exemplify that nobody is unaffected by their past and that the past shapes who people are in the present. This is an important principle of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. Ideas are dynamic and developing. It is important to search into the past to understand the present and future. *Watchmen* uses flashbacks to incorporate this philosophy. Because *Watchmen* is a popular book and not a religious text, it connects the Catholic Intellectual Tradition to the average reader. *Watchmen* helps readers better understand the CIT and, conversely, the CIT helps readers better understand *Watchmen*. The CIT brings to life the gravity of the conflicts the characters face. It adds depth and meaning to questions about the fate of society and the meaning of justice in the world. Flashbacks incorporate the Catholic Intellectual Tradition effectively in *Watchmen* to give the text broader significance.

Learning about the characters' pasts gives the reader a look into their motivations, thinking, and relationships. Flashbacks make the characters relatable in a way that is not common in traditional superhero stories. Instead of being portrayed as invincible and untouchable by human problems, the Watchmen are troubled by conflicts and haunted by their pasts. Moore and Gibbons not only write about the characters' lives in their masks, but also their lives as average people with everyday problems. Flashbacks give readers a glimpse at what is behind the hero and humanize them in a way that makes them real. Although superheroes are fictional, this reality can be applied to the real world. On a broad scale, this perspective explains why some celebrities are not perfect despite their seemingly flawless image. On a more personal level, this perspective can help people in their own relationships. Sometimes best friends will let you down. It happens; they are only human. When people understand that, like the superheroes in *Watchmen*, everybody is flawed, they can more easily forgive. When superheroes are unmasked, they are simply human. When people are unmasked, they are simply individuals with their own imperfections and their own story.

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