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A Better Question Would Be: Are We the Watchmen?

Alexander Lawriw
University of Dayton

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A Better Question Would Be: Are We the Watchmen?

Writing Process

This assignment was meant to be a literary analysis of the famous graphic novel, *Watchmen*, written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons. In this analysis, we were supposed to look at some of the various writing/visual strategies of the novel and note how these strategies either related to or did not connect with various Catholic Intellectual Traditions. I, personally, decided to look at two of the main characters of the book, Rorschach and The Comedian, and examine how they related to the deeper Catholic and Philosophical understanding of what it means to be human. In particular, I looked at various points in the book in which Moore and Gibbons, through their characters, appeared to give their own insights into the deeper parts of human nature. In terms of the overall writing process, I started off carefully reading through the novel, which took a couple of weeks. After that, I took a few extra days to go back through the novel in order to come up with an idea of what I wanted to write about, gathering examples/evidence along the way. After a couple of rough drafts, including one that one was peer reviewed and another that was reviewed by my professor, I finally managed to come up with the final draft which you'll see here.

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Alex Lawriw

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A Better Question Would Be: Are We the Watchmen?

Watchmen, the graphic novel written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons, is a story that goes against the norms of what many might consider to be a traditional super hero tale. However, in doing so, Moore and Gibbons are able to create a story which, if all of its deep hidden symbolism is taken into account, becomes more relatable to the reader than any rendition of the famous *Dark Knight* could ever be. It might not seem quite the case at first, but as the reader follows the group of masked heroes on their quest for truth about the murder of fellow superhero, Edward Blake, and uncovers the rather wicked aspects of the individuals deemed the “good guys,” a personal connection is formed between the reader and these disguised vigilantes. And it is through this connection with these characters, who are far from heroic in any sense, that Moore and Gibbons are able to delve deeper into the basics of our human nature.

The story of *Watchmen* opens up with what could be considered the main plot of a large majority of the novel: the murder of Edward Blake, aptly also known as The Comedian. Blake, as it is revealed early on, was one of the few superheroes unaffected by the Keene Act, a fictitious act that outlawed superheroes, as he worked with the U.S. government against the Vietcong in the Vietnam War (won by the U.S. in this timeline). The war took its toll on Blake, though, both physically, as he sustained a deep cut from a broken beer bottle on his cheek after an altercation between himself and a Vietnamese prostitute (56), and mentally, as revealed in a

late-night conversation with his old enemy, Moloch, in which he bursts into insane ramblings (64-65). Of course, one might argue that through this descent into madness, Blake had finally gotten his just deserts, so to speak, especially after his lack of remorse for the attempted rape of one of his fellow heroines that he had tried to commit early on in his crime-fighting life. But in all actuality, his fellow mono-tone superhero, Rorschach, puts it the best, “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” (69). This short quote uttered by Rorschach at the end of chapter two helps illustrate the absolute genius behind Moore and his writings. Moore purposely uses this imagery of a face, one that is cracked and falling apart, to directly connect back to Edward Blake symbolically. Blake is one of the few characters in the novel who sees the true face of the twisted society around him and, instead of trying to hold it together like his fellow superheroes do, becomes a direct reflection of it, embracing the flaws. He is a reflection in both a metaphorical sense in his overall demeanor and character and a literal sense in his appearance (recall the deep scar, mentioned earlier, that streaks across the right side of his face). The only problem lies in the fact that no one else sees the sick “joke” the Comedian is trying to tell (69). This flawed side of society, or the reflection that Blake gives off, serves as the punchline that no one else gets. They simply do not see the world the same way Blake does, and because of this, he becomes isolated from society. The society that he is a direct parody of.

The story quickly proceeds to give the backstory of some of the current superheroes, one of which being the ink-blot wearing hero Walter Kovacs, or as he is better known, Rorschach. Debatably the most interesting character in the novel, Rorschach, is a no-nonsense sort of superhero unafraid to use violence to accomplish his goals. However, he does so in a subtle

enough manner in order to avoid getting caught by the authorities, and only to those that seem deserving of his retributive form of justice. Unfortunately, even Rorschach's cunning is not enough to avoid getting caught by the police in an elaborate setup. This inadvertently allows the reader to learn more about his past as he is psychoanalyzed while behind bars. As readers learn in chapter seven, Kovacs came from a troubled family life, one in which he never knew his father and his mother had to become a prostitute to make ends meet. The mask he wears, resembling the famous Rorschach ink-blot test, came from a woman's dress when he worked in a tailor shop after his mother's death. The woman who had ordered the dress, Kitty Genovese, thought that it was horribly ugly, but Kovacs liked the way that it always changed (188). After reading that Kitty was brutally raped and killed while her neighbors did nothing to intervene, the character of Rorschach was born. He says, "I knew what people were then, behind all of 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" (188).

Rorschach, like the Comedian, also saw this negative side of humanity and wanted to do something about it. However, instead of being a direct reflection of it, Rorschach found it easier to hide behind a mask, or a sort of alter ego, that like he says, would be easier to look at in the mirror. Interestingly enough, this face, as Rorschach points out, is "constantly changing", yet the "black and white never mix to create grey." (Which is exactly the way he sees the world around him, there are no morally-grey areas to Rorschach, just good and evil) (188). This would actually end up playing a key role in his death, as an isolated Rorschach is so caught up in doing what he believes is morally right by revealing Veidt's grand scheme that he is easily disposed of by Dr. Manhattan (406). Interestingly enough, the last cell of Rorschach before his death is a close up of his face without his mask on as tears stream violently down his face (406). It is entirely possible

that this moment could be symbolic of Rorschach “facing” the truth, or the ugly side of society, rather than doing what he had been doing most of his life: hiding from it. He had completed his transition from being one of the “tiny men in masks” trying to hold society together into the reflection that the Comedian had been all along (69). Rorschach’s quest for truth had finally come to an end with the realization that there was nothing that he could do, as a mere human, to combat human ignorance. Ignorance that had prevented society from realizing its own flawed nature.

So how exactly does all of this tie together? Through two essential characters of the novel in the Comedian and Rorschach, Moore and Gibbons are not only able to give their own insight into the human psyche, but also offer their own view of human nature. The truth that all of the characters in the novel were looking for was right in front of them the entire time. Not only in a literal sense, that Veidt was the villain all along, but also in a metaphorical sense, that they were mere reflections of the flawed society around them. Rorschach and the Comedian happened to be the only characters who realized this sad fact and wanted to cause some sort of a change. The Comedian choose to become a literal and metaphorical reflection of this twisted side of humanity, while Rorschach chose to hide from it. Either way, the more they learned about the harsh reality of the flawed world around them, the farther each of them became from it, eventually becoming completely isolated and alone. With both characters eventually dying rejected and misunderstood, they had come to the miserable conclusion that human nature is inherently flawed, and that there was nothing that they could do to change it. This is certainly not what you would typically expect out of a book about superheroes. But I think that this just reiterates the point made earlier: Moore and Gibbons wanted to break away from the traditional mold by presenting broken and flawed characters in order to make a deeper connection with their

audience. Superman and Batman are great because they allow us to envision a better version of ourselves, one that is stronger, braver, smarter, etc. However, they just are not realistic interpretations of what we as humans are, due to their over exemplification of positive traits. The Comedian and Rorschach represent society because they *are* who we are. We, as humans, are indeed flawed in a lot of ways, even though it might be hard to admit it. It is how we react and adapt to these flaws that truly defines who we are. So I guess a more fitting question than the famous who watches the watchmen would be, are we the watchmen?

Works Cited

Moore, Alan, writer. *Watchmen*. Illustrated by Dave Gibbons. Colored by John Higgins. New York: DC Comics,, 2014. Print.