Flawed Heroes, Flawless Villain

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Heroes are good; villains are bad. This simple fact is common knowledge engrained in the very definitions of the words. The classic superhero story supports this, as in the distinguished journeys of Superman and Wonder Woman. However, this does not necessarily mean that heroes are perfect creatures and that villains lack all qualities thought to be admirable. In fact, it is not uncommon for villains to possess the same qualities as heroes, or even better qualities, including mastery of one’s rationality. Accordingly, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition suggests that human rationality has an analytic side and a narrative side. Analytic rationality relies on factual evidence, logic, and reason to make arguments, whereas narrative rationality focuses more on a symbolic nature, using imagination, emotion, and human value to reach conclusions (“Catholic” 4). The only way to reach the full potential of one’s rationality is to utilize both aspects in the search for truth. In the graphic novel, Watchmen, the many superheroes all have something in common—they are only able to grasp one facet of human rationality. However, the super villain, Ozymandias, exhibits both aspects. Watchmen and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition disconnect in regards to the capabilities of human rationality, which is shown by the inability of the superheroes Dr. Manhattan, Rorschach, and Silk Spectre II to exemplify both factors of rationality. However, the two texts seem to connect when analyzing the villain Ozymandias’ ironic supreme embodiment of both aspects of human rationality.

Dr. Manhattan, also known as Jon Osterman, is constantly referred to as a “superman,” an
“omnipotent God-King” (Moore 141). He can easily complete any physical task imaginable, even if it seems impossible. For example, Dr. Manhattan teleports to Mars and can defy gravity (Moore 282, 289). Furthermore, he is known to be able to complete any mental task as well. While Dr. Manhattan can control matter with his mind and comprehend gluinos and tachyons, he cannot seem to understand human desires and emotion (Moore 31, 393). For example, creating multiple bodies of himself to multitask, he fails to see why his longtime lover Laurie would be upset with this insensitive behavior while she was trying to spend personal time with him. He puts his focus on his work and studies, rather than on the feelings of his loved ones (Moore 81). This erudite lifestyle pushes away his only attachment to the human world—Laurie—which influences him to isolate himself on Mars (Moore 104). Furthermore, he is practically emotionless when it comes to the value of life. Preferring the canyons and lifeless rocks on Mars to the humanity of Earth, Dr. Manhattan contends, “[Laurie] argued before that human life was more significant to this excellent desolation, and I was not convinced” (Moore 298). He fails to see the beauty in life and death, and in human growth and struggles, which causes the reader to question his validity and ambitions as a superhero, and as a “man” in general. Even though this man-god can manipulate matter in any way that he pleases, his tragic flaw is his inability to see past the logic and reason of the world and into the emotion and value of human life, disconnecting with humanity and with the theme of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

Silk Spectre II, better known as Laurie Juspeczyk, tends to have the opposite problem as Dr. Manhattan. She becomes engrossed in her emotions, rather than opting to think through...
situations logically and coherently. For example, when Rorschach visits her and Dr. Manhattan at the Rockefeller Center, she becomes distraught when the masked adventurer talks about her mother’s sexual abuse by the Comedian (Moore 29). While this is an understandable reaction, she is not able to control her emotions and freaks out, requiring Dr. Manhattan to teleport Rorschach away when she demands, “Jon, get this creep out of here” (Moore 29-30). She will not reason with either man, which shows her lack of analytic rationality. Furthermore, when Laurie is with Dr. Manhattan on Mars, she relives memories in her mind from her childhood that deal with her parents and the Comedian, but, as seen in Figure 2, her thoughts become jumbled up and she cannot think straightly (Moore 303). Words race around her mind as she concludes that the Comedian is actually her father. Flustered and frantic, Laurie dramatically hurls a Nostalgia perfume bottle at a wall of Jon’s glass castle and the magnificent structure shatters to the Martian ground (Gibbons 304). She repeatedly acts and speaks before she thinks, rarely using logic to think through situations; her impulsivity often buries her in situations that would not have been as bad had she rationally thought through them beforehand. This heedlessness is an undesirable and potentially destructive quality in a superhero and a human being. Even so, her tendency to focus on the empathetic views of life allows her to understand the value of humanity. She defends her mother’s honor.
when looking at an old smut comic, believing that her mother deserves more than being belittled to that level, even though her mother does not believe it herself: “I just don’t know how you can stand being degraded like this…don’t you care how people see you?” (Moore 50). Laurie clearly believes in and promotes the dignity of human life, which contrasts with most other characters in *Watchmen*. Similarly, Laurie constantly stands by her beliefs that each human life matters, even when facing the arguments of Dr. Manhattan. She sees the value in every human life—the suffering and the fear, no matter how ordinary. Disputing Dr. Manhattan’s claims that the “chaotic terrain” of Mars has more meaning than human life, Laurie describes memories of her mother, urging that each person’s life tells a unique story of significance: “Her pain, her fears, her whole life…I mean, ordinary people…all the things that happen to them…doesn’t that move you more than a bunch of rubble? (Moore 294, 296). She understands that all life matters, and her empathy contrasts her with the other characters. However, despite her connection with her emotions, Laurie disconnects with the Catholic Intellectual Tradition because she lacks the important attachment with logic and reason, which hinders her overall performance as a superhero.

Rorschach, or Walter Kovacs, sees the world in a matter of black or white. His views are extreme and take many shapes, but there is never grey area in between, which is reflected in the mask he wears (Gibbons 32). Rorschach’s limits of rationality make him believe a man is either virtuous or corrupt—with no in-between. His extremist views along with his dedication to the search for Blake’s murderer are shown in his journal: “there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished” (Moore 32). In this search, he uses the tools of logic and patterns to
unearth clues, which is characteristic of analytic rationality. For example, he reasons with Daniel Dreiberg about the possibility of a mask killer, a political killer, and a revengeful killer (Moore 20). Similarly, he finds patterns in the many incidents regarding Blake’s murder, which seems to be more difficult for others such as the Nite Owl to comprehend (Moore 324). For example, he constantly references a “mask killer,” and attempts to connect the dots between the murders and attempted murders with the clues from the men at the bars and the evidence in Veidt’s office (Moore 324, 328, 334). Despite Rorschach’s ability to use reason and analytic thinking to find answers, he has a lack of respect and empathy for humanity. He describes humans as dogs, thinks the worst of people even when he does not know them, and overall believes society is corrupt and poisonous (Moore 9, 22). His lack of empathy is obvious when torturing the men at the bar by breaking fingers and digging shattered glass into skin (Moore 24, 329). Furthermore, Rorschach consistently uses brute tactics against humans to mercilessly hurt them when he could have taken less violent approaches. For example, he shoots a policeman with a grappling hook in order to escape Moloch’s house, practically blinds an older boy with a cigarette, and dumps a pot of hot cooking fat on a fellow inmate (Gibbons 171, 185, 190). He even goes as far as to call “ruthlessness” his signature; he must be uncompromising, cruel, and forceful to get anything done, and unfortunately it seems to work (Moore 204). Rorschach’s one-sided character, which relies wholly on facts and evidence and ignores human sensibility, is not ideal for a superhero and an individual in society since he is apathetic to humanity. He, like Dr. Manhattan, cannot seem to feel or relate
to human emotions nor see value in humanity. Because of this, he disconnects with the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

While these heroes only seem to display one facet of human rationality as described by the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, Ozymandias, or Adrian Veidt, utilizes both analytic and narrative rationality. Evidently, Ozymandias, a retired superhero turned business tycoon, is known as the smartest man on the planet, having complete mental and physical control (Moore 351). For example, he can perform incredible acrobatics to perfection, has genetically engineered a pet lynx, and can even catch a bullet (Moore 226, 131, 398). In his Antarctic fortress, Ozymandias watches a multitude of television screens all with different channels so that he can absorb as much information as possible (Moore 322). This allows him to use logic and “patterns of cause and effect” to view the world and justify his decisions, which proves his ability to think analytically and judiciously, unlike Laurie (“Catholic” 4). Nevertheless, he also understands the symbolic, imaginative side of rationality. As seen in his Veidt Enterprises memos, Adrian Veidt pictures the advertisement for his Nostalgia perfume as including “soft focus imagery and romantic atmosphere…[conjuring] an idyllic picture of times past” (Moore 345). Furthermore, he describes his penchant for relating to people’s emotions: “I’ve made myself feel every death…I imagine endless faces…I dream” (Moore 409). He proves his ability to both feel emotion and use imagination, unlike Dr. Manhattan and Rorschach. Veidt’s combination of an analytic and
allegorical mind is an important factor of what makes him so successful in business and marketing, alongside his success as a masked adventurer. Similarly, his capabilities of rationality also help him to formulate a strategic and comprehensive plan that he thinks will save humanity. However, while his plan may be ingenious, it is by no means perfect or ideal.

Even though Ozymandias seems to possess flawless rationality, he is the super villain of the story, while the flawed characters are supposed to be the heroes. Ozymandias is a characteristic antagonist, blowing up a cruise ship, poisoning his innocent servants, giving cancer to multiple people, and annihilating half of New York City by exploding a horrifying monster, all for his selfish plan (Moore 332, 359, 372, 374). Accordingly, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, while appreciating the capabilities of human rationality, also accepts that rationality has limits. It states: “Human rationality can…be diverted from the truth through sin” (“Catholic” 4). Pride, disdain, and greed can distract a good person from fulfilling their potential. Since Ozymandias embraces the ideal rationality, it can be concluded that he must have a tragic flaw or sin that deters him from reaching this positive potential. This major flaw is that he looks down on humanity. Since people refer to him as the smartest man on the planet, he condescendingly believes he knows what is best for society. He narcissistically plans the future for the entire world in order to fulfill his lifelong dream of following in Alexander of Macedonia’s footsteps to unite humanity (Moore 369). This dream is harmless—even beneficial—on the surface, yet the steps he takes to achieve this goal are severely flawed and maniacal. Ozymandias has every quality to be the world’s best superhero—
mental control, physical control, analytical rationality, and allegorical rationality—yet he chooses to use his abilities to further the violence and death in society. Sin infiltrates his thinking, putting his desires above the wants and needs of humanity.

As shown in Watchmen, heroes and villains can express the same characteristics; villains may even exhibit stronger, more desired traits. However, classification of hero or villain depends on how one uses his or her capabilities. Using abilities to search for truth like Rorschach, to improve science like Dr. Manhattan, and to care for others like Laurie, can make one a hero, even if it is on a small scale. However, using abilities to reach a personal goal that has detriment to society like Ozymandias is never acceptable. Even still, humans are not perfect. Failing to completely understand the meaning of one’s quest is easy, but living and learning in a positive manner can always improve results. Sin is inevitable—the Catholic Intellectual Tradition accepts this—but allowing it to define your character may be the worst sin of all. You may not be the smartest or strongest man on the planet, but if you work to overcome sin and better yourself and society, you can still be a hero.

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Works Cited
