

I. Introduction

My argument begins with a quote from the blog of Tony Long, a writer for the magazine *Wired*, a magazine which is immersed in popular culture and technology, and is usually ahead of the times in its cultural evaluations. However, there are still some areas in which the writers are not completely aware of the changes of genre, as Long demonstrates in his argument for why a graphic novel that was recently nominated for the National Book Award should not be eligible.

Long says,

I have not read this particular "novel" but I'm familiar with the genre so I'm going to go out on a limb here. First, I'll bet for what it is, it's pretty good. Probably damned good. But it's a comic book. And comic books should not be nominated for National Book Awards, in any category. That should be reserved for books that are, well, all words. This is not about denigrating the comic book, or graphic novel, or whatever you want to call it. This is not to say that illustrated stories don't constitute an art form or that you can't get tremendous satisfaction from them. This is simply to say that, as literature, the comic book does not deserve equal status with real novels, or short stories. (para 15-16)

Long feels quite strongly that graphic novels are "comic books," and does not know of any distinction between the two. He considers "comic books" and graphic novels to both be "illustrated stories" and so not eligible to be considered "literature." His distinction of literature seems to be that of novels and short stories, and the reason those are literary is because they are "all words." Long is displaying a prejudice towards what he considers "comic books" that is endemic to the mind of the American reader, and most American scholars.

As Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons note in their introduction to The Language of Comics: Word and Image,

Throughout Europe and Latin America, and in Canada and Japan, comic books and comic

strips are regarded as serious artistic and cultural productions. In the United States, however, comics has traditionally been considered a lowbrow medium, or as Scott McCloud says in *Understanding Comics*, as “cheap, disposable kiddie fare” (3). With the notable exception of McCloud himself, few American critics have yet looked at comics as a site where words and images intersect. (x)

Just as film was considered popular entertainment for the masses, and not considered a serious artistic medium, so graphic novels are still considered by most critics. Academia and scholars in the U.S. have been dancing around graphic novels for a couple of decades now, most wary of the possibilities that open up when what they consider “comic books” could be considered literature. Sean Howe offers a sort of explanation in his introduction to *Give My Regards to the Atomsmashers!*, where he muses, “A comic book's inclusion of visual information is probably the major reason for its ghettoization, the idea being that words are harder earned information than pictures” (x). And this is most likely the entire reason why graphic novels are looked upon as a lower form of entertainment than novels; they include images with their text. Recently some critics have started taking graphic novels more seriously, but over all, as Howe points out,

[W]e're still battling the shame that's been heavily indoctrinated over the decades, still striving to be taken seriously. Although I've long accepted its permanence, the very nomenclature “comic book” connotes humor even when there's no comedy to be found....And the superhero comic—the genre of men in tights—simultaneously dominates and embarrasses the rest of the medium. (ix)

Howe notes that the very name of “comic book” implies a form that does not lend itself to the exploration of serious themes and matters, but implies light entertainment. When I speak of literary comic books, I prefer to use the term “graphic novel” for this very reason. A graphic novel also implies a more collated and discrete form of storytelling than the traditional “comic

book” series, and what is implied within the graphic novel is that it is all collected in one volume, not spread across many issues. Therefore, it can be called a novel, as it is one unified story line in one volume. A novel of this form uses graphic narrative to tell the story, which means a combination of words and pictures, but the inclusion of pictures should not lead to this medium of story telling being scorned as not literary. As Varnum and Gibbons explain, “Pictures can belie words. They provide contexts for words. They also provide subtexts, thereby complicating verbal messages. They can suggest what a narrator or a group of characters is not saying.... Words, conversely, can shape the way we look at pictures” (xiv). Varnum and Gibbons are explaining why the inclusion of pictures does not automatically lead to the “dumbing down” of the story, but instead can lend complexity. Words and images work with each other, the images neither illustrating the story, nor the words explaining the images, but they coexist in a fused form of word and image.

Just as there are some novels that we hold above others and claim as literature, there are some graphic novels that can be held above others in the genre, and can also claim that same title of literature. After all, why do we consider some works to be classics, and worthy of the title of literature, and others not worthy of that title? Is it because literature can be analyzed for deeper themes and deeper meaning than the light fare of the normal novel on the *New York Times* Bestseller list? If this analysis is required for the label of literature, then surely any work that can be analyzed to find layers of meaning and complexity can also be considered literature. If a graphic novel can be analyzed just like a literary novel, and can be found to have complexity in its symbolism and themes of deeper meaning to humanity, then surely that graphic novel can be considered literature just like any other literary work.

I will examine and analyze the graphic novel Watchmen to discover if it has the complexity and themes that will allow it to be considered literature, and if it meets the

requirements that classic literary novels meet under analysis, I will consider Watchmen to be literature worthy of a place beside other literary works, whether they contain images or not, and that by extension, that some graphic novels do deserve the discerning label of “literature.”

Preface/Introduction to the Work in Question

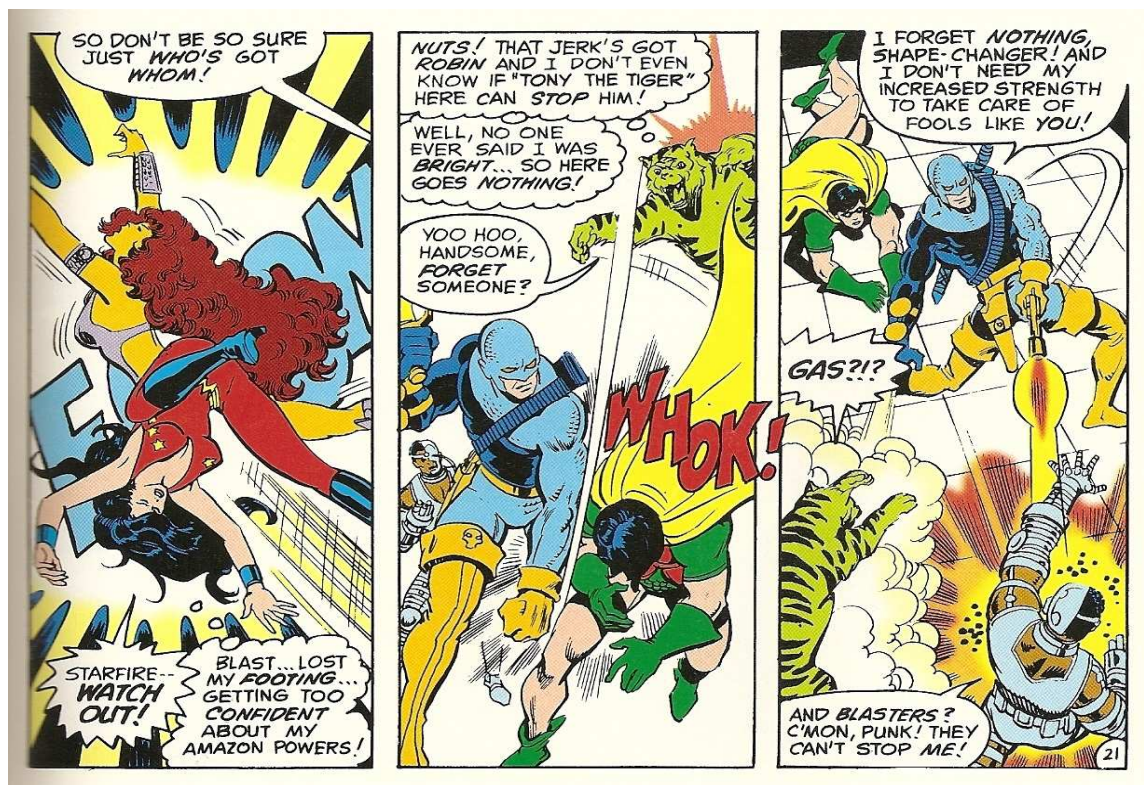
Watchmen is a twelve chapter graphic novel written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons. It was originally released as twelve issues, but was then collected and sold as a trade paperback. The story centers on a group of masked crime fighters on Earth, though a different Earth with different political occurrences, partially because of the efforts of the crime fighters. Out of all the heroes, there is only one with superpowers. The crime fighters of this universe have all been disbanded as a result of an act passed by the U.S. government, though they retain the superhero Dr. Manhattan, and use him as a threat in war. This work takes the known genre of costumed heroes and subverts the expectations carried with that genre, probing into the heroes’ psyches, and examining the depths of their humanity. The story starts out as a murder mystery, as one of the crime fighters, called the Comedian, is killed in his high rise apartment, setting off a series of events in which the remaining crime fighters try not only to unravel the mystery of his death, but also their own relation to the rest of humanity, and the world at large.

A. Narrative devices

Watchmen contains a variety of narrative techniques that sets it above the standard superhero comic, and into the realm of great literature. These techniques include first-person narration, voice-over narration, flashbacks, strategic manipulation of chronology, frame narrative, and secondary sources.

The first deviation from the narrative path of the comic book is Moore’s approach to the

thoughts of the characters. In comic books featuring superheroes before Watchmen, the thoughts of characters are displayed in thought bubbles that float up from the character's head.



Teen Titans Archives Vol. 1 (p. 27.4-6)

As demonstrated in the above Teen Titans comic, the thoughts of the heroes are displayed along side their speech, so the reader knows both what the heroes think and what they say. The tendency to explain every action taken by the heroes is what made superhero comics appear juvenile, and as nothing more than light entertainment without any real depth. When the reader can see what everyone is thinking, and all actions are over-explained, there is no depth to the story, and no thought required on the part of the reader to analyze the characters, because it is all immediately presented. The clear depiction of thoughts provides more humor than characterization for the reader, because as long as the reader can see the actions and speech of the character, the thoughts during the action explaining the action become redundant and obvious. Also, the thoughts shown are not shown the way that people normally think, as shown

in the panel above as Wonder Girl is thrown into Starfire, and she thinks, “Blast...lost my footing...getting too confident about my Amazon powers!” This is unrealistic because she knows why she lost her footing, and so she wouldn’t have to explain it to herself inside her head, she would just feel annoyed at herself without needing to explain both that she lost her footing, and then why she lost her footing. This display of her thought process is obviously aimed at the reader, because it provides information about the actions occurring, explication that would not normally go on in people’s heads unless they were narrating a story about themselves to themselves. The same amount of over-explanation occurs in the following panel, as Beast Boy turns himself into a tiger and attacks, he thinks, “Nuts! That jerk’s got Robin and I don’t even know if “Tony the Tiger” here can stop him!” Beast Boy knows that Robin has been hit, but using the exclamation “Nuts!” and explaining that Robin is having trouble with the villain is not something he would tell himself, but something he would communicate to someone else to clarify the situation, such as the reader. Calling his form “Tony the Tiger” is also less likely to be something he would call himself in his own mind, and more an attempt to communicate to the reader that he is the witty character who pulls in pop culture references even while battling evil. In Watchmen, the thoughts of characters are not communicated to the reader unless the character is narrating part of a chapter. Character’s thoughts and motivations are shown in a more cinematic way, through their actions and their speech, which makes the reader responsible for deciphering the thoughts and emotions of the characters. This decision on the part of the author, Alan Moore, shows that he respects his readers’ intelligence, and believes them capable of understanding events and personalities without the Greek chorus effect of the thought bubbles.



Ch. 16 p. 16.7

Above, Ozymandias strikes Rorschach, but there are no lines emphasizing the point of impact on Rorschach's face or showing the force of the blow, which are known as "force lines." The lack of force lines, which can be seen radiating out from blows and explosions in the previous Teen Titans panels, is a huge step away from the conventions of the average superhero comic. By not illustrating the energy of a blow, the story appears more realistic and less "comic book," more like a scene from a movie the reader is watching, without all the lines distracting away from the story. The reader understands how hard a character has been hit, or affected, by watching the character's reaction, as in real life, and again, the reader becomes more engaged. The lack of onomatopoeic words for sound effects, such as the "foom" and "whok!" of the above Teen Titans, also adds to the realism while distancing the art and the action from the typical comic book. Since explosions and gunshots are shown by bursts of white light, the reader must again extrapolate what action has occurred from the visual clues provided, which again involves the reader's mind more than the typical comic book form.

Sometimes thoughts are communicated by using one of the characters as a first person narrator. Rorschach continually performs this function, and is the first voice "heard," meaning

seen by the reader, in the story. His words are presented in a hardboiled detective style, shown at the top of the panel in yellowish boxes with ragged edges, like torn out scraps of paper. The reader learns that these words in the boxes are his recordings in a journal, though he often speaks in a similar style in the action below. The advantage of Rorschach's writing having its own visual style is that the reader always knows when Rorschach is writing, as opposed to speaking, and knows that the writing presented is the product of Rorschach's thoughts. So the reader is always privy to the filter of Rorschach's thoughts on an event, except for the time he is taken away from his journal. Rorschach never serves as a narrator for the action, presenting more of an internal monologue than an expository narrator voice.

Rorschach's last journal entry occurs in Chapter 10, and so when his journal surfaces again in the last panel, the reader knows more than Rorschach at the time of his writing. When it appears that Rorschach's journal will be published by the *New Frontiersman* in the end, dramatic irony occurs as the reader knows that the contents of the journal may unravel the new world peace, or the journal may be seen as the ravings of a lunatic when it contains the real truth of the situation. The question left at the end is whether or not the journal will be published, and whether or not Rorschach gets to have the last word, ending the lie that has ended the Cold War. This narrative ambiguity is a definite change from the clear-cut superhero comic ending, where the reader knows definitively who is evil and who is good, and which side has won. At the end of Watchmen, the reader is left feeling unsure of the morality of the superheroes, and whether good has prevailed.

There are two other narrators who break in for one chapter each. Jon Osterman, aka Dr. Manhattan, gives a narration in which the order is broken up, giving current and future observations with past memories while using a present tense for each, as if they are all occurring at the same time, showing how time occurs to him. This narrative is presented in blue boxes

surrounded by a white frame, setting Dr. Manhattan's speech and thoughts aside from that of any other characters, and rendering it immediately recognizable. No other character has colored speech bubbles or boxes, and no other character is a superhero. The blue surrounded by white also shows that his words are removed from the rest of the panel, implying that Dr. Manhattan himself is equally removed from the world and normal human relations. As Dr. Manhattan is not writing or speaking in his chapter of narration, the reader is given direct access to his current thoughts, mixed with his memories. As he is the only true superhero, his is the only true superhero narrative of the whole work, and it provides insight into his own life more than it advances the action. This cannot be compared to the superhero narratives of the traditional comic books, where, as stated before, the thoughts float up from the superhero's head, and usually applies as exposition for some moment of action that the superhero is taking or is about to take. This narrative provides a different perspective for the reader, especially about the history of the seemingly transcended Dr. Manhattan. Certain images appear over and over again, such as the moment in which Janey Slater buys Jon Osterman a beer, and their hands touch as she hands him the glass, beginning Osterman's, and Dr. Manhattan's, first sexual relationship. Another image that continually appears is the moment when Osterman's father declares that his career as a watchmaker is dead because of the atomic bomb, and dumps the cogs of the watch Osterman was fixing off the fire escape. The image repeated here is that of the cogs falling. The repetition of each of these moments in Dr. Manhattan's thoughts shows how he connects to his identity before the accident, as Jon Osterman, and the impact those moments had on his own life as it is now. His memories also give the reader a way in to the different political events of this world, and provide exposition without being too obvious or dry, demonstrating his own connection to the politics of this world.

Another narrator who breaks in for only one chapter is Rorschach's prison psychologist,

Dr. Malcolm Long. In a way, he has taken over the narration for this portion from Rorschach, because Rorschach still reveals information to him, and thus to the reader. Also, the reader can still see into Rorschach's mind, which is shown when Dr. Long hands Rorschach an inkblot card, and when he asks Rorschach what he sees, an image of a dog with its head split open flashes. The strategic placement implies that this image is what Rorschach sees, but Rorschach replies, "A pretty butterfly" (Ch. 5 p. 1.4-9). Since Rorschach is lying to Dr. Long and the reader can see what he really sees, the reader is closer to Rorschach than the narrator, creating dramatic irony. At the end of the chapter, the reader can see that Dr. Long's mind has been changed by Rorschach, as the tone of his narration has changed; it has started to adopt a similar theme to Rorschach's narrations, and the effect is seen in his relationship with his wife and friends.

As Holman notes, "Another cinematic convention, the use of recurring flashbacks taken from different characters' points of view, is shared by *Watchmen* and numerous other films, the most famous of which is Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*" (41). This technique is a staple of *Watchmen*'s narrative technique, which provides most of the exposition for the characters, especially the Comedian, who is only shown in flashbacks. Many of these flashbacks also provide psychological insight into the characters, such as Rorschach's interaction with his mother, and Dr. Manhattan's relationship with Janey Slater, both of which inform their later decisions and behavior.

The use of time as a device is also played with, as Holman notes: "One technique favored by Moore is to take different events separated by time and/or space and juxtapose them, using the different visual and verbal elements to let the events comment on each other" (39-40). This technique can be seen both through these flashbacks, and also in Moore's alternation between the scenes with the main characters and the minor characters in New York. The juxtaposition of these events comes into play later as the reader is fooled into thinking that the scenes in New

York that are alternated with the scenes of Veidt with Rorschach and Nite Owl are happening at the same time. The effect of this is felt when Veidt announces that he killed half of New York thirty-five minutes ago, as the reader feels the same jolt of disbelief as the characters, and a sudden awareness that the perception of time is completely controlled by the author.

One of the most interesting narrative devices in Watchmen is the frame narrative within the story, where a minor character is reading a pirate horror comic book that provides a parallel symbolism for the actions of several of the characters, such as Rorschach and Ozymandias. The story of “The Black Freighter” is juxtaposed against the current action, including the images from the comic book, creating a dialogue between the two texts. The text of the comic is usually combined with the monologues of the newsvendor, and they both comment on and reply to each other. For example, the comic text “The waves about me were scarlet, foaming, horribly warm, yet still the freighter’s hideous crew called out, ‘More blood! More blood!’” is placed with the newsvendor’s rant, “I’m a newsvendor, goddamnit! I’m informed on the situation! We oughtta nuke ‘em till they glow!” (Ch. 3 p. 1.3), which creates a connection between the newsvendor and



Ch. 3 p. 1.1

the Black Freighter’s bloodthirsty crew through their desire for violence. Both texts exist separately, that of the pirate comic and the newsvendor’s rant, but together they form a new dialogue that provides commentary on the events of the Watchmen world. This frame story adds to the tone of despair and horror that accompany the dread of nuclear war the minor characters in New York discuss. The opening of “Tales of the Black Freighter” plays appropriately against the image of the nuclear sign on a fallout shelter, as the narrator speaks of war, and describes the Black Freighter’s “black sails against the yellow Indies sky” (Ch. 3 p. 1.1), connecting the

Black Freighter to the atomic bomb. The story is read by a young black man named Bernard, who sits next to the man selling newspapers, and the text that he reads is shown in boxes that look like parchment, curling at the ends. The comments of the newspaper man is projected in speech bubbles, floating around the story the young man reads, so we read both the comments and the story, just as the young man reads the story and hears the comments. One example of the interaction between the story of “Tales of the Black Freighter” and the commentary of the newsvendor is in Chapter 5, page 12.7. The narrator of “Tales of the Black Freighter” says, “This sudden confrontation with mortality induced an odd clarity within me,” and directly next to his statement is the newsvendor saying, “I mean, all this, it could all be gone: people, cars, T.V. shows, magazines...even the word ‘gone’ would be gone.” The “clarity” that the narrator of the comic discusses when facing death is also echoed by the newsman, and seems to be an extension of the narrator’s thought, even though both men are in very different situations, as one is alone floating on a raft made of dead men trying to prevent the destruction of his home, and the other is worrying about World War III.

In the last few frames of “Tales of the Black Freighter,” the audience is put in the position of the narrator, now actually seeing through his eyes, implying that they are now completely in his head, whereas before they were more objective observers. The narrator says, “The world I'd tried to save was lost beyond recall. I was a horror: amongst horrors must I dwell.” This explanation of why he joins the crew of the Black Freighter reflects the Nietzsche quote from Chapter 6, “Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster.” The narrator of “Tales of the Black Freighter” has become a murderer just like the crew of the Black Freighter in his own deluded efforts to save his town from being destroyed by them. The ending of this story is a commentary and an indictment of Adrian Veidt, and his actions in what he saw as saving the world. It also follows Rorschach's story, as he hurts people to help people, saying how when

making an omelette, one must break a few eggs. However, this comes full circle for him, as he refuses to condone and live with Veidt's mass-murdering lie, proving that he cares more about individual humanity than Veidt, and he escapes from his role as a monster.

There are secondary texts after each article, which purport to be from the media of the Watchmen world. These texts provide context for the crime fighters, and often provide psychological insight. For example, the first narrative voice, Rorschach, tells the reader nothing about himself, leaving the reader to gather insight from flashbacks. Full insight into Rorschach's actions is not provided even fully by the flashbacks, but by a series of documents following the chapter in which Rorschach is captured and imprisoned. These documents include a psychological evaluation, the police report of Rorschach's arrest, a story about his family that Rorschach, who also has the name of Walter Kovacs, wrote as a child in the Charlton Home for Problem Children, as well as a written description and illustration of one of Kovacs' dreams. Other important documents include an interview with the original Silk Spectre, in which she gives more details about her feelings surrounding her attempted rape by the Comedian, as well as an interview with Adrian Veidt that details his own personal philosophy and background, both of which foreshadow important events in the Watchmen plotline.

B. Literary references

Important evidence of Watchmen's literary nature is found in Moore's use of literary references and allusions to various works of literature. Moore draws from previous literature, and these references to other fairly well-known works adds a whole new dimension to the analysis of the characters and the themes of the work for educated readers. These references also show that Moore is a highly educated author, and has a certain expectation of education for his readership. Even if a reader is not well-read, the cited quotes at the end of each passage provide an

opportunity for the reader to self-educate.

One of the first literary references is the title of Chapter 5, which is called “Fearful Symmetry” from William Blake’s poem “The Tyger.” The poem itself is cited at the end of the chapter, though not in its entirety, so in order for the reader to understand the importance of the reference, they need to know more of the poem, and understand the interpretation behind it. The last part of the poem is most important to the main interpretation, so the last two verses are included to assist in analysis:

When the stars threw down their spears,
 And watered heaven with their tears,
 Did he smile his work to see?
 Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
 In the forests of the night,
 What immortal hand or eye
 Dare frame thy fearful symmetry? (Songs of Innocence and Experience)

The main part of the poem offered here is all about the creation of the tiger, and asks the question, essentially, if God created the peaceful, gentle lamb, which is also symbolic for Jesus in Blake’s poetry, then can God be a God of duality, of both good and evil, and also create evil, as symbolized in the ferocity of the tiger. As Nicholas Marsh observes, “The tyger [sic] appears frightening: it is strong and potentially destructive...In a different vision, however, its creation is a triumph of a disarming and refreshing nature, an event to bring a smile. The suggestion here is

that the tyger [sic] and the lamb, apparent opposites, belong together” (Marsh 89). The “fearful symmetry” is the juxtaposition of the lamb with the tiger, a binary of good and evil. This relation of the “fearful symmetry” of good and evil to Rorschach also complicates his character, implying that while he has evil in him, he also has good. Moore makes it apparent that the poem tiger refers to Rorschach, as his violent attempt to escape capture is one of the last events in the chapter, followed by the verse from “The Tyger,” and the Rorschach blot he wears as his face is symmetrical. Tying Rorschach to this poem adds another dimension to Rorschach if the reader catches the reference.

For example, Rorschach wears a fabric that creates a Rorschach inkblot as his face, which is symbolic because an inkblot is chaotic, and yet people read meaning into it, making an image out of the blot, creating order out of chaos. Also, Rorschach is a man of inner duality and contradiction. He expresses a nihilistic worldview, part of which is a disbelief in God and the goodness of humanity. However, when he is not disguised as Rorschach, he carries around a sign that says, “The End is Nigh,” which is usually done by a religious person who believes in the Last Days of the Christian religion. Since Rorschach is not a believer, this juxtaposition of atheism and pretend belief creates irony in his character. Rorschach also expresses disgust with humanity, and claims that life has “no meaning save what we choose to impose” (Ch. 6 p. 26.4), and yet he chooses to fight crime to protect the innocent, continuing to protect humanity. Rorschach is creating order out of the chaos he sees. He is the only hero of the story who does not bend to moral relativism in the end, as is evidenced by his refusal to stay silent about Ozymandias’ act of mass murder in the name of world peace, and his feeling that such destruction of human life is an act of evil. This final act shows his moral absolutism, and his ultimate belief in protecting innocence, despite his own brutal actions while fighting crime. His own brutality juxtaposed against his goodness creates a good/evil binary in his person, showing

that Rorschach is the “fearful symmetry” of Blake’s poem, contradictions and paradoxes in one person. The connection of “The Tyger” to his character gives Rorschach a complex psychological layer beyond that seen in the narrative, and the complexity of his role in Watchmen.

The next major literary reference is Friedrich Nietzsche’s quote in Chapter 6, which is also in the title of the chapter, “The Abyss Gazes Also.” Any reader familiar with the full Nietzsche quote comes to the chapter with a different expectation than the uninformed reader, but the uninformed reader gets the full quote at the end, so both readers can fully appreciate the aptness of the quote. Chapter 6 is about the transformation of Walter Kovacs into Rorschach, as well as Rorschach’s transformation of his psychologist, Dr. Malcolm Long, into a nihilist just like himself. In Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche says, “Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster, and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you,” and this quote is the applicable aphorism for both transformations. Walter Kovacs finds a truly monstrous human being, and in the process of fighting him, he himself becomes the monstrous Rorschach. Rorschach says about himself, “Being Rorschach takes certain kind of insight. Back then, just thought I was Rorschach. Very naïve. Very young. Very soft...Soft on scum...Mollycoddled them. Let them live” (Ch. 6 p.14.4-6). Before Rorschach’s discovery of the kidnapper who killed a little girl and fed her to his dogs, he let criminals live, and after, he killed them, which shows how he became a monster while fighting the monsters he found. Dr. Malcolm Long doesn’t become a monster in the same way that Rorschach does, but in attempting to understand Rorschach’s reasons for his nihilistic and absolute worldview, Long himself also adopts that worldview. After Rorschach kills his first human monster, he thinks, “The cold, suffocating dark goes on forever, and we are alone...There is nothing else” (p. 26.2-3), which shows his complete nihilism. After Long hears this story from Rorschach, he tells his thoughts at the end of the

chapter, saying, “The horror is this: In the end, it is simply a picture of empty, meaningless blackness. We are alone. There is nothing else” (p. 28.5-6). Long’s worldview now completely echoes that of Rorschach’s, mirroring the imagery of dark and “blackness,” as well as repeating the assertions that “we are alone” and “There is nothing else.” Even as Long gazed into the abyss that is Rorschach, the abyss of Rorschach gazed into Long, and changed him more than Long changed Rorschach.

The warning of Nietzsche’s quote also comes back later, echoed in the ending of “Tales of the Black Freighter” in Chapter 11. At that point, the reader understands that the comic book story is a sort of allegory for the actions of Adrian Veidt, or Ozymandias, who has gone farther than Rorschach in his attempt to solve the world’s problems. Since Ozymandias has killed the Comedian and half of New York as a by-product of his plan to scare the U.S. and Russia into making peace, he has become like the evil of nuclear war that he fights, becoming a monster while fighting monstrosity. Even Rorschach balks at Ozymandias’ methods, saying “Evil must be punished” (Ch. 12 p. 23.5), which shows that he still values life, and has not become the monster that he sees Veidt has become. The application of Nietzsche’s quote no longer fits Rorschach so well, and in the end fits Veidt entirely. When the reader reads “Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster” back in Chapter 6, the quote also foreshadows the end of the heroes, and the climax of the entire work. Moore does not do it on his own, but pulls in the tradition of nihilism by evoking Nietzsche, and adds another layer to his story.

A rebuttal to Nietzsche comes in Chapter 9, titled “The Darkness of Mere Being.” The quote that applies to the philosophy shown in this chapter is of course at the end of the chapter, providing a sort of summary of Laurie Juspezyk’s humanist views in C. G. Jung’s words from Memories, Dreams, Reflections, “As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light of meaning in the darkness of mere being.” The “darkness of mere being” is

the darkness of nothingness and emptiness of the universe, into which the nihilists of Chapter 6 look and see nothing. Dr. Manhattan, no longer the human man with human concerns when he was Jon Osterman, is also alienated from humanity, and expresses his own nihilistic view to Laurie, saying, “All those generations of struggle, what purpose did they ever achieve? All that effort, and what did it lead to?” (Ch. 9 p. 10.6-7). Laurie is the lawyer for humanity in this episode, and has to argue the importance of the human psyche and emotion with Dr. Manhattan, the embodiment of logic and science. This interplay of science against the emotion of the human psyche is a Jungian dialogue. Since Jung argued the theory of the interconnected nature of human beings in his concept of the collective unconscious, and was a founder of analytical psychology, it is fitting that Laurie examines her own memories of life as the argument for why life should be preserved. One of her arguments to Dr. Manhattan before reaching her epiphany about her own life is, “Okay, I’ll admit lots of people have messed-up lives that don’t accomplish anything visible, but...but don’t we have some importance to the universe beyond that? I mean, just the existence of life, isn’t that significant?” (Ch. 9, p. 13.1). Laurie’s argument encompasses Jung’s point, as she says that the importance of life to the universe, the “darkness of mere being,” is its existence, and he says life exists “to kindle a light of meaning” or provide meaning for the universe. Ultimately, Laurie’s realization that the Comedian is her father is the argument that convinces Dr. Manhattan that life has meaning. He says, “To distill so specific a form from that chaos of improbability, like turning air to gold...that is the crowning unlikelihood. The thermodynamic miracle” (Ch. 9, p. 27.1), which still couches his understanding of the importance of human existence in scientific and logical terms, but it shows that he agrees with Laurie and with Jung that human existence is special, and provides meaning for the universe. The Jungian concepts that Moore throws in show his own level of education, and the sort of philosophy that he continually tosses at his readers, but it provides more thought for the reader

who knows Jung's philosophy. The reader can also access the world of thought behind this chapter, and understand that this work is not all about the lack of meaning in the universe, but also about the creation of meaning, and the meaning of being human. By bringing in Jungian psychology, Moore draws on a whole philosophy and realm of thought outside the world of his story, adding depth to his work, and reinforcing his primary themes, such as the meaning of life and human experience.

One of the most appropriate and intricate uses of a literary reference occurs in the character of Ozymandias, or more specifically, in the character of Ozymandias and Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem of the same name in Chapter 11. The poem itself is a sonnet, and therefore is fourteen lines long, but Moore only pulls the small, most relevant passage from the poem: "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:/Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" Alone, the quote seems very appropriate, and makes Ozymandias into more of a frightening figure. If the reader doesn't know the entire context of the poem, then the reader misses out on a lot of irony, and the possibilities of the application of the irony of the poem to the works of this Ozymandias. The entire poem is:

I met a Traveler from an antique land,
Who said, "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings.
 Look on my works ye Mighty, and despair!
 No thing beside remains. Round the decay
 Of that Colossal Wreck, boundless and bare,
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

The assertion “My name is Ozymandias” etc. is twice removed from the poet through the teller of the tale, as it is removed from the teller of the tale by being written on a pedestal, and so is three times removed from the reader of the poem. The distance creates irony in the presentation of the statement, as one would expect the king himself to be issuing the statement, not that the statement is being read by a traveler on the ruins of a statue, and then repeated to another person, who is writing the poem, which will be read. The statue is obviously ruined, as the face of the king is “shattered” and “half sunk,” lying in the sand next to “trunkless legs,” and around the “decay” of the statue, called a “Colossal Wreck” is nothing, “the lone and level sands” are “boundless and bare,” containing no other works left of this “King of Kings.” The message from the dead king is ironic, because he has no works to show to the mighty he addresses, though he obviously expected that his works would last forever, and that he would be forever remembered and feared through his statue. Another way that the message is interpreted is not how Ozymandias meant it, but it becomes relevant, that the mighty should despair not because Ozymandias is great, but because his great works have faded into nothing. The mighty should despair because, no matter what they do, their works will not last. This interpretation also applies to the Ozymandias of Watchmen, Adrian Veidt. It becomes apparent in Chapter 12 that Moore meant this quote not only as a demonstration of Veidt’s mindset, but also as a dig at Veidt’s megalomaniacal self-assurance in his ability to transform the world. Veidt asks Dr. Manhattan, “I did the right thing, didn’t I? It all worked out in the end,” and Dr. Manhattan replies, “In the

end'? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends" (Ch. 12 p. 27.3-4). Veidt believes, as did the old Ozymandias, that his great utopia will last forever, and that the world will stay peaceful, but the immortal Dr. Manhattan serves the role of the traveler, looking at his work in the future, and puts him back in his mortal place, telling him it cannot last. However, all of these layers of meaning and irony behind the quote is lost if the reader has not read all of Shelley's poem, which shows how much education Moore demands from his readers in order for them to understand his work fully.

There are also three passages from the Bible. In Chapter 2, the pastor reads a passage from Job at the funeral for Edward Blake, aka the Comedian. It could just be an appropriately poetical passage about death for the funeral, but it provides irony when compared with later events. For example, the verse "In the midst of life, we are in death. Of whom may we seek succor but of thee, o Lord, who for our sins art justly displeased," plays across the face of Adrian Veidt, who could be said to commit the worst sin of the entire work. There is also irony at work in the fact that the Comedian did not believe in the existence of God, nor do the rest of the heroes, yet Moore continually throws Biblical references around them. Since this passage is from Job, as is one later passage, Moore's choice could be seen as appropriate, since Job is the book of the Bible that involves the most questioning of God, and the most undeserved suffering of a man. If the reader understands the suffering that occurs in the Book of Job, and sees that Moore references Job a few times, the reader understands that there is a layer of human suffering added beyond that of the characters. Moore is reaching back to Biblical suffering to make statements about humanity and human relation to God. Moore uses the passage "I am a brother to dragons, and a companion to owls. My skin is black upon me, and my bones are burned with heat" (Job 30:29-30) because it fit with his ending Chapter 7 on Nite Owl's activities, but also because it displays the alienation and suffering of Job, and connects it to the character of Nite Owl and the

other heroes.

As the quote from Genesis, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (18:25), in Chapter 3 is stretched out long under a picture of Dr. Manhattan sitting by himself on Mars, Moore draws a connection between God, whom the quote originally refers to, and Dr. Manhattan. The connection shows how powerful Dr. Manhattan is, and how close he is to being a god, since none of the heroes actually believe in God. This quote also foreshadows the later chapter where Laurie acts as a lawyer for humanity, and Dr. Manhattan does act as the judge of the meaning of human life.

The last, most relevant literary reference is not actually found in any of the chapters, but at the end of the entire work. The ending quote is from Juvenal’s Satires, VI, 347, “Quis custodiet ipsos custodies” which is then translated below it as “Who watches the watchmen?” This quote is where the title of the graphic novel came from, so it obviously applies to the entire work, and the idea of individual responsibility that comes from this work. Holman explains his conception of the term “Watchmen,” saying,

the most obvious application for the term is to the costumed vigilantes who constitute the story’s protagonists. The term function [sic] in two different ways: it gives the vigilantes an unofficial designation as society’s self-appointed guardians, and it implies that the costumed characters have a perspective that ordinary characters lack. The Watchmen all have particular philosophical attitudes that tie in with their reasons for being costumed vigilantes, and as such, give them greater perspective on the rest of the world than the rest of the characters (the “innocent bystanders”). (57)

Holman believes that the term “Watchmen” applies to the characters with the greater knowledge of world events, besides simply the self-appointed guardians. Even though there are women involved in the “watching” of the world as well, the term “watchmen” is applied to make use of

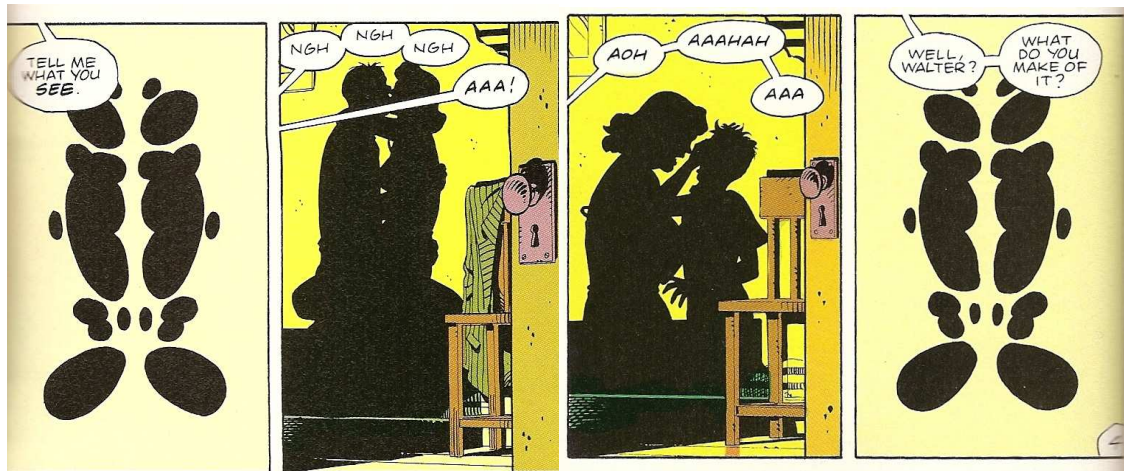
the historical connotation of “watchman,” which comes from the night watchmen of England during the Elizabethan period. The night watchmen would walk around the city with tall lights, keeping watch for possible crime, and also shouting out the hour. The watchmen of this book are most likely the crime fighters, but the term could also be applied to the media of the Watchmen world, as they have a strong presence throughout, especially influencing Ozymandias’ views about the necessity of saving the world. The term “watchmen” can also apply to government officials, who are supposed to act in the best interest of the people, but sometimes abuse their greater knowledge and higher position of power in their “watching.” The term “watchmen” applies to all of these figures. However, the question of “Who watches the watchmen” can also be taken further than just this work. Moore ends with this quotation as an example of his narrative will: he, the author, chooses to end with this quotation, and because he created these watchmen, he watches them. The next answer to the question is the next logical step, as the reader could think, I watch the watchmen. I watch Alan Moore’s creation, and so I watch his will and these watchmen. The next step beyond this one is the thought that the reader can apply this watching to the watchmen of the real world, the government officials and the elite decision makers, making this work a call to action on the part of Moore.

Such a call to action is not standard fare among comic books, and moves this graphic novel, along with all of its references and philosophical ideas culled from previous literature, to the level where it can join that literature.

C. Motifs and themes

There are several visual leit motifs scattered throughout Watchmen, which take the forms of images and words. The most common images are silhouettes, which also include symmetrical ink blots, Nostalgia brand perfume, clocks, faces with eyes obscured, and the unfinished phrase “Who watches the watchmen.”

Silhouettes are a constantly repeated image, showing up in painted form on walls, and also in symmetrical images of copulation, as well the dissolving image of humans in nuclear blasts. Oftentimes the silhouettes are a man and a woman, about which Rorschach comments, “Silhouette picture in doorway, man and woman, possibly indulging in sexual foreplay. Didn’t like it. Makes doorway look haunted” (Ch. 5 p. 11.5).



Ch. 6 p. 3.1-2

Ch. 6 p. 4.9-9

Silhouettes remind Rorschach of his mother’s sexual activities, the memories of which haunt him, and explain his distaste for women. The silhouettes also make the doorway look “haunted” to him because the silhouettes of his memory are shadows of people, and so the painted



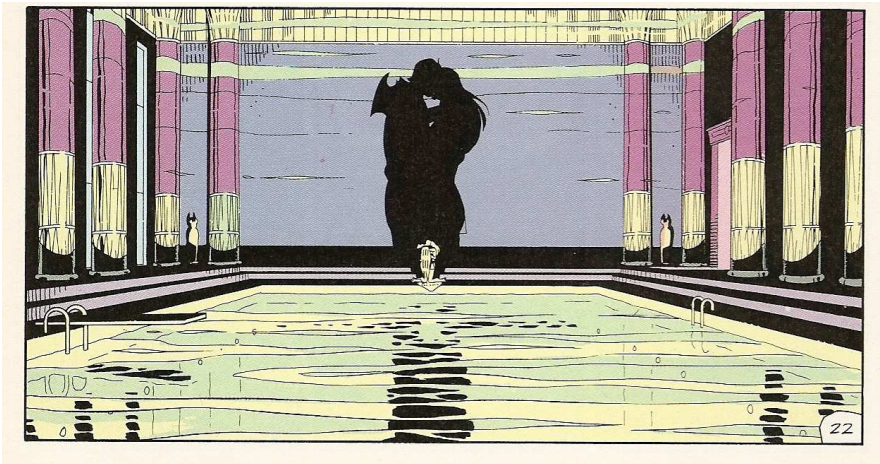
silhouettes in the doorways are the shadows of people who are not there, or are no longer there. This significance of the silhouette as an afterimage relates to Dr. Malcolm Long’s reaction to a similar silhouette of a man and a woman, as he says, “It reminded me of the people disintegrated at Hiroshima, leaving only their indelible shadows” (Ch. 6, p. 16.6). The silhouettes are a

Ch. 7 p. 17.5-6

Ch. 6 p. 16.6

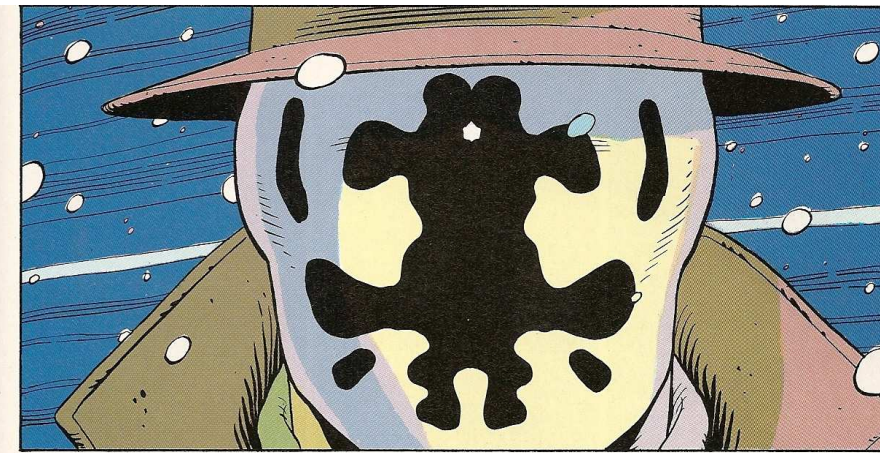


reminder of nuclear war and the obliteration of humanity to Dr. Malcolm, reinforcing the threat of nuclear war as a main theme of Watchmen. Rorschach's silhouettes from his memory are related to the symmetrical ink blots that Dr. Long shows him, and so silhouettes are tied to symmetry in his mind.



Ch. 12 p. 22.7

The upper and lower images appear consecutively, clearly connecting the silhouetted couple to the Rorschach inkblot below of Rorschach's face, tying together silhouettes and symmetry, and tying them specifically to Rorschach and his outlook by reflecting the silhouette in his face.

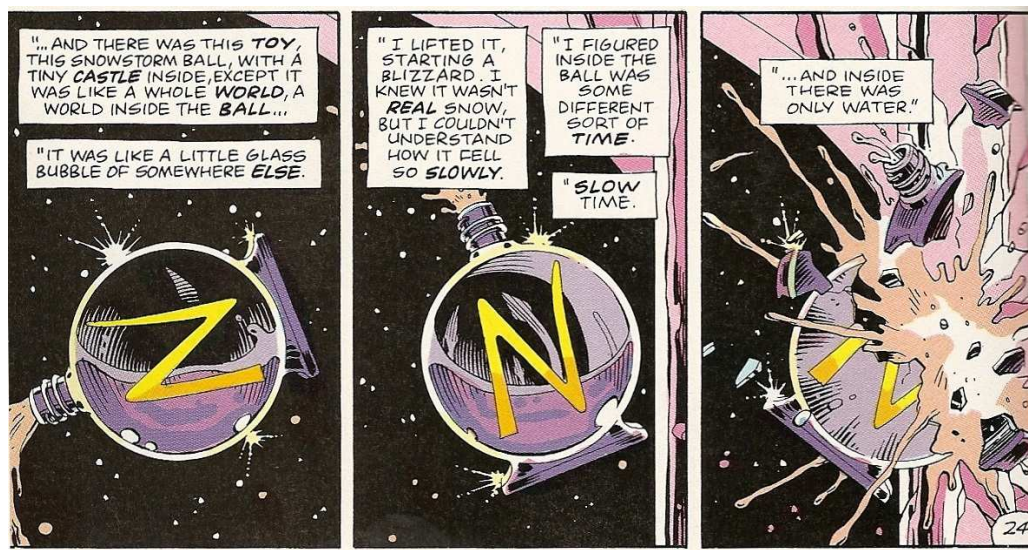


Ch. 12 p. 23.1

The symmetry of his Rorschach ink blot of a face, as well as the symmetrical way in which he leaves back-to-back Rs as his signature, show that symmetry is an important part of Rorschach's mental outlook, and that the Rorschach ink blot is a symbol for his own outlook and personality. The ink blot is a black and white figure, with no gray area, only filled space and

negative space. Because Rorschach sees the world in black and white terms, he appreciates the purity of the ink blot, since it represents his absolutist moral outlook. Rorschach also uses the Rorschach ink blot to describe his philosophical view of the world. He compares existence to the chaos of the ink blot, saying, “Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long. No meaning save what we choose to impose” (Ch. 6 p. 26.4). Just as the symmetrical ink blot has no objective meaning, just the subjective meaning seen by an individual, so Rorschach believes human existence has only subjective meaning. The argument between the meaning of life and the meaningless of life is another central theme to Watchmen. Curtis Lehner Holman says, “the very presence of the graphic novel’s narrative will suggest and [sic] order-imposing force in the Watchmen universe. The symmetrical repetitions in the storyline contradict the characters’ nihilistic views, and even if the meaning of life is only subjective, Moore’s implication is that it does have meaning indeed” (76). For Holman, not only the images of symmetry, but the symmetrical design of the work by the author show that Moore wants to make the idea that human existence has meaning a main theme of this body of literature.

The word *nostalgia* shows up in ads for the perfume Nostalgia marketed by Adrian Veidt in billboards and magazine ads, as well as in the shape of the Nostalgia perfume bottle, labeled by a large N, which both Laurie and Sally Jupiter use.



Ch. 9 p. 24.5-7

The use of nostalgia as a motif is interesting, because it is a word connected with complex human emotion, such the feeling of longing for the past, which is an emotion strongly tied to human existence. The chapter where both the perfume Nostalgia and normal nostalgia are featured prominently is the chapter where Dr. Manhattan is deciding whether or not human existence matters. He makes his decision as a result of Laurie's nostalgia, and the important memories that lead her to figure out the identity of her father. Since Dr. Manhattan decides that life matters because of the uniqueness and coincidence of life, nostalgia also relates to the relevance of human existence. This idea that nostalgia is important to human existence is also reinforced in the end, when Dan Dreiberg and Laurie Juspezczyk connect through their nostalgia. Laurie says, "Oh, it's sweet. Being alive is so damn sweet," and before they acknowledge their gratefulness to be alive by having intercourse, Laurie asks Dan, "What's that you smell of?" and he replies, "Nostalgia," verifying their existence as humans. As they are the only two characters to survive the events of the story and become unalienated human beings, their interpretation of the importance of human life is the final word in the existential argument of Watchmen.

Another motif is the face with one eye obscured, which sometimes takes the form of two

eyes with one eye obscured, usually a smear or streak obscuring the eye. This image is the

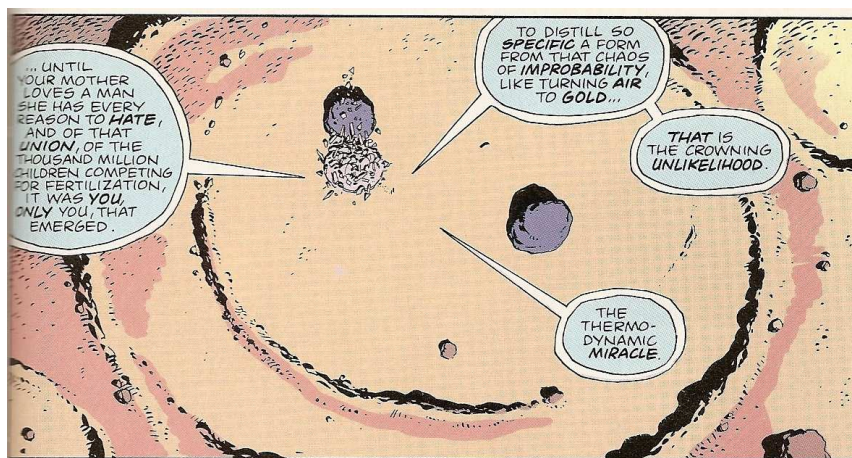


opening and closing image of Watchmen, bringing the work full circle.

Whoever possesses a face with an eye that is obscured cannot see clearly what is going on around him, which is what occurs with the crime fighters all throughout the work. The obscured eye symbolizes their inability to see the whole picture, and the obscured eye reveals itself most often around Nite Owl, though it also shows up around the mostly omnipotent Dr.

Ch. 1 p.1.1

Manhattan. Besides implying that the “Watchmen” of the work cannot truly watch well, the obscured eye also relates on a symbolic level to the existentialism of the work. Part of the existential dilemma is that no person can see the whole picture of the universe, that no person can see the future. Also, no person can see the people around them clearly,

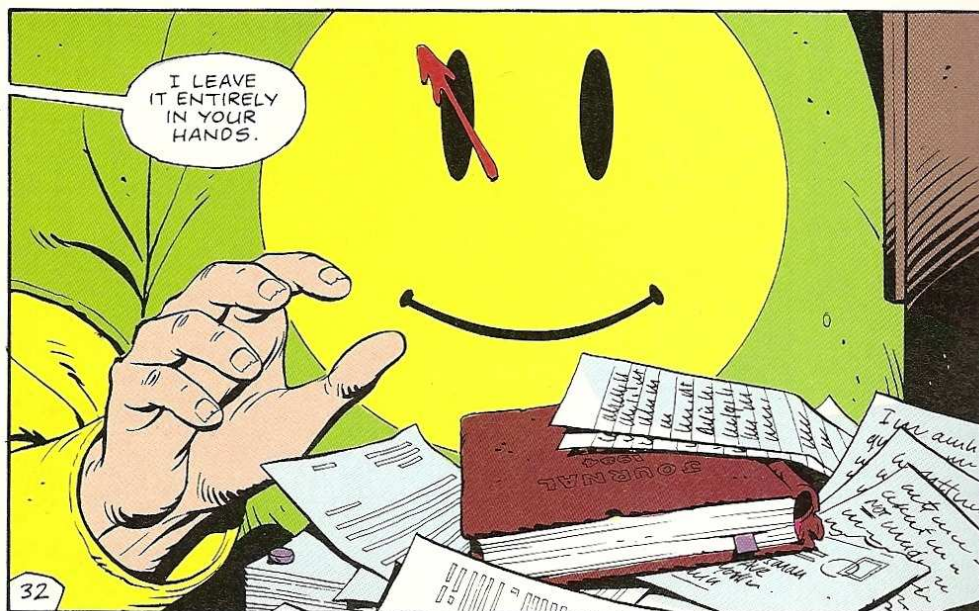


Ch. 9 p. 27.1

because no one can know another person fully. This damaged eye manifests the existential theme of Watchmen, which is that none of them can fully control events around them,

not even Ozymandias, and

though the alienation that accompanies existentialism disappears for several of the characters by the end of the story, the final image applies the alienation and inability to see clearly to the rest of the world. The last obscured eye is almost symbolic for what the public and minor characters don't know, for what the unprivileged, normal humans don't know.



Ch. 12 p. 32.7

Clock faces and watches are another set of images that continually appear throughout the work,

as well as on the inside covers of the issues, where the clock is gradually covered with blood, and gradually works its way to midnight. The clock countdown foreshadows the climactic bombing of New York City which occurs at 11:25, though the heroes don't know that it's happened until 12:00. The use of clocks also connects, like the silhouettes, to the bombing of Hiroshima, where clocks were found stopped at the moment of the nuclear explosion (Ch. 4 p. 24.7). The use of clocks, watches, and gears make the presence of time, and the progression of time despite the events of the world, evident.



Ch. 4 p. 24.7

The inexorable progression of time is a source of despair for

existentialists, as the passage of time is unstoppable and uncontrollable, which ties back into the irony of the poem "Ozymandias," as well as Ozymandias' conceit in believing that the world

peace he has tricked the world into will last. Time ties into the existential theme of Watchmen because it acknowledges, as Dr. Manhattan says to Ozymandias, nothing lasts forever, including governments and humanity. Also, the idea of the watch is connected to the word *watching*, which then relates to the “Watchmen,” who are not only the costumed heroes, but the government officials and the media. This connection is more of a stretch, but Moore adds a man selling watches on the corner in New York, making him a “watch man,” so he is aware of the word play and possible interpretations of “watch.”

The graffiti of “Who watches the watchmen” is scrawled across numerous walls, though the artist, Dave Gibbons, never shows the complete phrase, as if the ones writing it were always interrupted by a “watchman” of some kind. In one panel, Nite Owl and the Comedian interrupt a woman who is spraying the phrase on a wall. Holman explains the use of the phrase on the walls, saying, “In the context of the graphic novel, it’s an expression of American citizen’s [sic] mistrust of costumed superheroes, and by extension, of the government that allows individuals such as the Comedian to act without control” (89). The underlying message from Moore to his readers is that as citizens, they should also be watching the watchmen of their world. Again, this theme of personal responsibility accompanies the existential nature of the work, as it asserts numerous times that there is no God and no master plan, so the nature of existence is up to the individual, just as each individual hero of Watchmen must respond to the events of their world, either by attempting to change it in some way, or by accepting what they cannot change.

III. Conclusion

The final themes of Watchmen include existentialism, the meaninglessness of life in the face of nuclear warfare, the meaning of human existence, moral ambiguity, and individual responsibility. Holman concludes his interpretation of Watchmen’s themes by explaining,

The mantle of savior is taken up by Ozymandias, however: in the book's conclusion, the world is saved and guided by not a nuclear demigod but by a man (albeit a perfect one). The implication here is that, in an age of nuclear weaponry [sic] and instantaneous communication, man's fate is in his own hands, whether he likes it or not. In the graphic novel's conclusion, Ozymandias' guilt suggests that playing God is almost as dangerous as believing in one, whether that God be a nuclear superman, or the benign, protecting forces of the media, or a charismatic political leader...Readers should not let their fate be controlled by political figures, the mass media or belief in gods. Instead, they should take responsibility for their own lives, and make sure the elite do not abuse their powers. (100)

Holman believes that Watchmen boils down to a call to action, that Moore is calling the reader to participate in politics and watch the watchman. For Holman, Watchmen is all about existential personal responsibility. Indeed, the ambiguity of the ending, and the closing statement, "I leave it entirely in your hands," demands the readers' participation in deciding the message of Watchmen, as well as extending this personal responsibility to the rest of their lives. The fact that Watchmen contains a call to individual responsibility removes it from the realm of mere entertainment, and to the realm of texts with themes and complexity, known as literature.

Literature is used as a term for bodies of work that have complex layers that can be examined over and over again, including themes, three-dimensional characters, literary references, and multiple narrative techniques. Watchmen has all these trademarks of literature, and contains even more complexity in the interaction between text and images. Therefore, Watchmen should be considered a literary work, fit to join the canon of literature. By extension, if the graphic novel Watchmen is considered literature, it follows that other graphic novels could be literary as well. The concept that graphic novels are literature is a concept that is long overdue, especially considering that Watchmen is over twenty years old at this time. The

inclusion of graphic novels in the literary canon opens up a whole new field for academics and scholars, and should be seriously considered as an officially accepted course of study.

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