

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

What strikes me most about Jeffrey Wu's wonderful essay "The Greater Good: Analyzing the Morality of *Watchmen*" is its deft handling of sources. This essay—the capstone for our WR 150 course, "Monsters"—originally began as a proposal with a very different topic: Jeffrey wanted to write about Zach Snyder's film adaptation of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' graphic novel. As he researched the critical conversation around *Watchmen*, though, he encountered a problem: there is an almost overwhelming amount of scholarly writing about the novel, and little to none about Snyder's film. At the same time, Jeffrey discovered a pattern in that criticism that he decided to investigate further: critics were writing their essays about only one character in *Watchmen*, or setting them in parallel rather than analyzing them together. If they could not see how the characters form different pieces in a single puzzle, they could not see the puzzle as a whole; their conclusions about the book were partial at best. This observation became the kernel of the final essay.

Throughout the essay, Jeffrey demonstrates a deep familiarity with his exhibit source as well as with the critical conversation around it. Unlike many students who write about graphic fiction, Jeffrey attends to the art of *Watchmen* in addition to its written text; this is especially impressive in his exploration of the book's watch motif. His startling insight that the countdown clock to the next catastrophe has been visually restarted at the end of the novel leads to his brilliant conclusion: by leaving *Watchmen*'s ending unresolved and its moral universe undetermined, Moore and Gibbons want to encourage readers to develop their own moral stances—and perhaps to avoid the next catastrophe in our own world.

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WR 150: Monsters

FROM THE WRITER

At the start of the semester, a friend of mine saw that I had bought a copy of *Watchmen* and immediately pointed it out as the best graphic novel that he had ever read. Now I can say the same. After reading the comic book and discussing it in class, I really wanted to write a paper addressing the idea of morality throughout *Watchmen* and examine the messages that Alan Moore was trying to convey through the graphic novel. “The Greater Good: Analyzing Morality in *Watchmen*” examines various unique views and analyses of *Watchmen* while contributing a different take on the revolutionary comic book.

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THE GREATER GOOD: ANALYZING MORALITY IN WATCHMEN

In 1986, Alan Moore's revolutionary graphic novel, *Watchmen*, redefined the superhero genre and pushed the bounds of what is considered great literature. At the center of its plot sits the classic heroic notion of the greater good, the sacrifice of the few for the many. Set in an alternate version of the 1980s, *Watchmen* follows several heroes as they uncover their comrade Ozymandias's plan to unite the world by sacrificing millions of innocent lives and blaming it on a fake alien invasion. However, when they discover his plot, it has already been carried out and he is able to convince all but one of them, Rorschach, not to reveal the truth to the world. Throughout its story, *Watchmen* presents several takes on the morality of murder, the ultimate judgment of death, and its implications in the grand scheme of the world. However, no verdict is passed on the world's fate. Rorschach's journal, containing an account of events leading up to the mass slaughter, is left in the hands of a young, unkempt newspaper assistant. Most current analyses of the graphic novel disregard the collective ideals represented in *Watchmen*, choosing instead to focus on a single outlook that allies with their own ideologies. While it is important to recognize the different ideas and perspectives represented through the graphic novel, the ramifications of the work as a whole cannot be ignored. By understanding and piecing together the unique positions collected in *Watchmen*, taking into account the recurring motifs and symbols as well, a completely new perspective is born: there is no moral justification for killing, only the justifications that individuals place upon it.

Unlike other classic comic books, *Watchmen* does not have a clear protagonist or antagonist. The characters are eerily human for the genre, struggling through life's various moral and personal obstacles including bullying, child abuse, and adultery. Most do not have any sort of superpowers. What sets them apart is their morality, their minds: each feels a deep need to be a hero and that is what ultimately pushes him or her to become one. S. Evan Kreider takes a look at the moralities of these characters in his article "Who Watches the Watchmen?" In it he explores the characterizations of Rorschach, Manhattan, and Ozymandias, three "superheroes," and how they would handle the fundamental question: "Is it ever morally acceptable to sacrifice the interests of a few for the greater good of the many?" (97) After detailing the various philosophical and moral ideals each character represents, Kreider concludes that *Watchmen* does not offer a "correct" answer to the question of whether millions of lives should be sacrificed to save billions through its characters. However, if he were to choose a "true hero of the piece, it may be Dr. Manhattan" due to the moral middle ground that he represents and his final actions in preserving peace by preventing Rorschach from revealing the truth to the world (Kreider). Yet, this statement raises more questions: If Manhattan is the true hero, why does he allow so much senseless violence to occur and why does he ultimately desert humankind for another universe? Kreider's technique of looking at the story in parts, solely focusing on single characters' journeys throughout the course of the graphic novel, makes it impossible to see *Watchmen's* true themes. Instead, by taking into account all that *Watchmen* has to offer, its unique characters, recurring symbols, and powerful imagery, a new theme within the graphic novel is revealed.

The true sense of morality in *Watchmen* lies in its lack of a "true hero," of a "right and wrong," of a "correct" answer. The world the Watchmen inhabit is dark, gloomy, and above all, vicious.

Around every corner, behind every door, violence lurks. The art throughout the comics is graphic, and the colors are dreary, with menacing black and blood red used wherever possible. In a single word, *Watchmen* is gothic. In his article, “‘Nothing ever ends’: facing the apocalypse in *Watchmen*,” Christian W. Schneider looks at how Moore uses gothic elements and traits to enhance the story telling in *Watchmen*. Schneider argues that the extensive use of dark and blood red colors, vivid crimes, and violent scenes provides a gothic atmosphere, showing that *Watchmen*’s world is “bleak, with its glaringly negative sides exposed... ultimately, it is not worth saving” (Schneider 89). With a world so gloomy and the air so ominous, lines become blurred. Criminals are not the only ones killing; the murders committed by the heroes, who are supposed to prevent crime, may be even crueler.

Rorschach, a main character in the comic book, embraces this surrounding cruelty in every moment of every day. He sees all the evil around him and has made it his life’s purpose to extinguish it from the world at any cost. The progeny of an abusive prostitute, his psychopathic personality is the focus of an entire chapter. Thus, when it is revealed that he witnessed his mother at work, readers may understand why he sees the world as “stand[ing] on the brink, staring down into bloody hell” (Moore 1). Schneider expands on Rorschach’s views, deciding that the world drives “Rorschach over the brink, into insanity and extreme nihilism” (89). However, Rorschach is not without morals. He has an idea of right and wrong; it is just not the same idea of right and wrong as everybody else. After fighting crime while abiding by the law for some time, he decides that he was “soft on scum. Too young to know any better. Molly-coddled them. Let them live” (Moore 192). After this revelation, Rorschach attacks without restraint those he perceives as evil, going as far as chaining a man to a water pipe, handing him a hacksaw, lighting his house on fire, and harshly telling him, “Shouldn’t bother trying to saw through handcuffs ... Never make it in time” (Moore 203). He takes an uncompromising approach to fighting crime, punishing all no matter the severity of the offense. However, what makes him truly terrifying is that he is the judge, jury, and executioner of his own morality. He wholly relies on his own judgment to determine who lives and who dies.

Although this seems like a rather unique point of view, ultimately demonstrated when he is the only one who rebels against Ozymandias’s plan, the source of his ideology is not uncommon. In the numerous glimpses into Rorschach’s mind and judgment, one thing is clear: Life is inherently meaningless and there is no greater purpose beyond the principles individuals impart to it. In his own words, “Existence is random, Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it too long. No meaning save what we choose to impose” (Moore 201). Rorschach sees the world as a blank slate, without an inherent set of moral standards, just the set of morals each individual places upon themselves. This theme is common throughout the narrative: each character has their own view on their role in the “picture of empty meaningless blackness,” one that serves their own interests (Moore 206). In Rorschach’s case, he fills his slate with the anguish of his past, the bullying and torment of his childhood. His existence is for the sole purpose of punishing the guilty in ways he sees fit, discarding the laws that society has already put in place in favor of his own distinct moral code.

Still, it’s possible to read even further into Rorschach’s mind, the reasons behind his intense need to serve his brand of justice to any criminal he comes across. The narration in the comic book switches between several characters. It begins with Rorschach’s consciousness, expressed through his personal journal, as he documents his investigation into the death of a fellow hero, the Comedian, who was killed after he discovered Ozymandias’s plan. Rorschach’s short, concise train of thought, hardly legible and without pronouns, provides deep insight into the true motives behind his actions. As the comic moves through the Comedian’s brutal thrashing, he writes: “The future is bearing down like an express train” (Moore 68). Yet, what’s most striking about the scene is not the text, but the scene unfolding in the background. Along with the foreboding words is a map of the United

States burning up in flames, as if to say that even greatest country in the world cannot escape its eventual destruction. So as the world is saved from impending doom, Rorschach sticks to his ideals, to “never compromise” and deliver justice to Ozymandias even if doing so would return the world to chaos. He chooses to die before giving up what he believes. Rorschach has turned the meaningless blackness that he was given, his blank moral slate, into the only thing that means anything.

No character showcases this idea of meaninglessness more than Dr. Manhattan, the only hero in *Watchmen* with superpowers. Born of a nuclear accident, Manhattan exhibits a variety of abilities, from replication to telekinesis to disintegration. He is essentially a god, save a single debilitating flaw, his indeterminate moral compass. Despite having the capability of changing the world for the better with a single thought, he works mindlessly for the U.S. government as its plaything, doing its bidding without purpose. His reasoning? “We’re all puppets ... I’m just a puppet who can see the strings” (Moore 285). Manhattan pushes the idea of fate being set in stone. Since he experiences the past, present, and future all at the same time, he cannot see the world as anything except immutable, unyielding to any outside forces. In an essay describing the characters’ relationships to the political sphere and the various political messages in *Watchmen*, Michael J. Prince concludes that Manhattan’s “knowledge and perspective disqualify the possibility of individual agency categorically” (Prince 821). Similarly, Schneider calls Manhattan *Watchmen*’s “most ineffectual character” (90). Manhattan is given godlike power but, at the same time, sees himself as powerless against the flow of time. As a result, Manhattan, much like Rorschach, sees life as a morally blank slate.

However, where they differ is their views of this blank ethical slate. Comic book analyst Bryan D. Dietrich examines the many motifs throughout *Watchmen* and their roles in how readers interpret the graphic novel and its characters. In his essay, “The Human Stain: Chaos and the Rage for Order in *Watchmen*,” he notes that Manhattan “cannot see a self, because he is all selves and all truths, all possibility and all reason, he too acts on what must be... a singular (if infinite) vision of right and wrong” (Dietrich 122). That is to say, Manhattan does not make moral decisions based simply on an uncompromising set of guidelines like Rorschach. There is no one rule in his mind that dictates when killing is justified and when it is not. This is shown throughout the story when he does not stop countless murders, something he is very capable of doing, yet he kills off a fellow hero, Rorschach, in order to stop exactly that, the countless murders that would ensue if the world returned to its former tumultuous state. While Rorschach is single-minded in pursuing his form of justice, Manhattan sees a more complicated world, without a fixed right and wrong, where a single decision can ripple far beyond current circumstances.

Nevertheless, even though he does not have a singular idea of morality, he is not, as Schneider puts, a nihilist who views life as meaningless; rather, he just does not conceive of a fixed right or wrong. He knows what the future holds, so there is no moral deterrent from killing. Since all possible choices are ultimately trivial, Manhattan’s “views rest on a deontological principle concerning the value of human life” (Kreider 107). More plainly, Manhattan acts upon an obligation to preserve human life. Instead of making moral decisions based on a right or wrong, he weighs his options according to whether the outcome of the event is important or trivial, ignoring simple homicides while keeping the world from nuclear apocalypse. He takes into account all the information he has, all the potential outcomes, “all selves and all truths, all possibility and all reason” (Dietrich 122), and makes a decision based on the gravity of the situation. The numerous instances where he does not prevent what society would deem a crime can be justified by these crimes having no overall effect on the survival of humanity. They will not change the course of the human race, so Manhattan does not care about them.

Again, as with Rorschach, Manhattan's morality is informed by a distinct view of the world that only he can see. His unique perspective that bears the burden of countless deaths is based on the fundamental premise that the future is circular and unchangeable. However, this is not just Manhattan's view. Moore also displays the concept of time as an inflexible construct. When the story begins, the art opens to a peculiar image of a blood splattered smiley face lying on the sidewalk. Although it may not hold any significance at the moment, as with all reappearing imagery in the revolutionary comic book, it is there for a reason. The blood splatter on the face bears a striking resemblance to an arrow, one that appears on the cover page of Chapter 1 pointing to 12 minutes before midnight. As representing the 12 chapters of the book before Ozymandias's plan comes to fruition. However, as the clock strikes midnight and humanity is seemingly saved from the nuclear apocalypse, the smiley face reappears in the last panels of the comic, once again stained with an arrow pointing to 12 until midnight, counting down to the next catastrophic disaster. Moore displays the future as relentless and recursive. What is destined to happen will happen: the only variable is when.

By displaying the future as immutable, along with the endlessly violent and gloomy backdrop in which the story takes place, Moore emphasizes the single variable: the distinct morals of the unique characters. In particular, for Rorschach and Manhattan, Moore displays that "for [Rorschach] law is definable, for [Manhattan], infinitely recursive and indeterminate" (Dietrich 122). Rorschach and Manhattan essentially see the world in similar ways, even though they seem diametrically opposed: for Rorschach, a "meaningless blackness", and for Manhattan, "the darkness of mere being" (Moore 281). Despite this, Manhattan decides to base his morals on preserving human life, which always seems to find a way to reset itself after great tragedy or a period of peace. Since he also sees that time is fixed and enduring, he determines that the laws society enacts to protect life are both necessary in the short term and useless in the long term.

Similarly, Adrian Veidt, or Ozymandias, holds a consequentialist view of morality, basing his actions solely on their final results, choosing to ignore short-term harm in service of long-term benefit. Albeit he has taken it to the extreme in his decision to kill millions of New Yorkers and blame it on aliens in order to bring about world peace. Ozymandias provides the epitome of the idea that "right and wrong are determined by the consequences of our actions" (Kreider 102). Moore thus seems to provide three distinct views of morality to show the extremes of all variations. Ozymandias represents the epitome of long-term, consequentialist thought, Rorschach, the simple self-righteous mentality, while Manhattan displays deontological ethics, basing his judgment on what is better, worse, or insignificant for humanity. Of all these characters, Ozymandias displays the most desire to make a difference, acknowledging his horrific actions: "I know I've struggled across the back of murdered innocents to save humanity... but someone had to take the weight of that awful, necessary crime" (Moore 409).

However, despite how it may seem like his morality is based on the good of others, it is ultimately derived from a selfish need for fulfillment, a need to feel like he is making a difference. As Prince puts it, Ozymandias is "tainted by a lack of compassion, and an ends-justify-the-means mentality" (826). In her essay "Radical Coterie and the Idea of Sole Survival in *St. Leon*, *Frankenstein* and *Watchmen*," Claire Sheridan compares how the need to survive factors into the motivations of the main characters in the aforementioned books. Her exploration provides an interesting insight into the mind of Ozymandias. According to Sheridan, in order to feel like he is making a difference, "Veidt interprets those who might challenge his belief system in a productive way as threats to his sovereignty" (Sheridan 189). As the "smartest man in the world," Ozymandias cannot see himself doing any wrong. This is appropriate when considering his namesakes: Ramses II, whose Greek name was Ozymandias, and Alexander the Great. Though they built great kingdoms, their

impressive empires were no exception to the ravages of time. By naming his main protagonist as he does, Moore hints that Ozymandias's utopia will be no different.

Additionally, Moore seems to use Ozymandias as a foil for Rorschach, a point of comparison to highlight the distinguishing features of both characters. While Ozymandias is wealthy, powerful, and handsome, Rorschach is filthy, despised, and unattractive. Ozymandias focuses only on the consequences of his actions, an ideal displayed in his monologue describing his ultimate goal of building a "unity that would survive him" (Moore 358). His ideology obviously contradicts Rorschach's self-focused, shortsighted moral absolutism of extinguishing evil. Still, in the end, even Ozymandias, with the purest of intentions, is only doing "good" for himself, for his own self-importance, deciding that he will do whatever it takes to feel like he is making a difference, even at the cost of millions of lives. Ozymandias struggles to justify his actions, even to himself, and is left wondering how long his newly created peace will last, with Dr. Manhattan cryptically telling him "Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends" (Moore 409).

Yet, somehow, that is the beauty of the story: that nothing is certain, that each individual's morality is of his or her own making. No matter what the circumstances are, they can always change, hopefully for the better. More importantly, *Watchmen* exhibits the best part of being human: our ability to choose our own ideas for right and wrong and act upon them. Despite being deemed superheroes, the characters in *Watchmen*, including Dr. Manhattan, are all fundamentally human. As Schneider puts, in their capacity to change the world "they are in no better position than the rest of humanity, neither on a moral nor on an authoritative level" (90). Perhaps the point is not that superheroes can be human, but that humans can be superheroes. Moore suggests that because of our ability to choose our own ethics, our own limitations and the fate of the world are ultimately in our hands, which aligns perfectly with *Watchmen's* enigmatic ending.

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