

Who Watches the Watchmen: The Revaluation of the Superhero in the Nihilistic World of

Alan Moore's *Watchmen*

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Alan Moore's comic book series *Watchmen* is unique in comic book history in that it possesses a multi-layered, multi-interpretive structure and complex philosophically driven narrative. One of the novel approaches of *Watchmen* is Moore's treatment of superheroes, revealing in their realistic psychological portrayals the inherent pathologies present in a person who presumes to act on behalf of a society, even if their justification is one of benevolence. In a postmodern world where God is absent and humans are left to construct their own belief systems independent of a creator, the superheroes of *Watchmen* are more often than not just as morally troubling as the villains of the comic. It is Moore's revaluation of the superhero, by placing the superhero archetype in a largely nihilistic alternate universe that brings into relief the problematic existence of such super-powered beings,

and questions their authority and justification to act on behalf of the world. Moore ultimately asks readers to make qualitative distinctions between the moral approaches his superheroes apply, generally reevaluate the morality and ideals superheroes represent, and last, but not least, use their own critical reasoning to take responsibility for their lives and their own moral systems. Moore, in effect, asks readers to apply the kind of heroism his superheroes fail to exemplify: hopefully, a heroism validated by their own authentic search for truth.

Who Watches the Watchmen: The Revaluation of the Superhero in the Nihilistic World of

Alan Moore's *Watchmen*

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: The Rudderless World: Nietzsche's Moral Nihilism in <i>Watchmen</i>	8
Chapter 2: Nietzsche's Übermensch in <i>Watchmen</i>	35
Chapter 3: Twilight of the Superheroes?	61

Introduction

“It’s become a comic-book world.”—Portsmouth Herald, February 29, 2004

Nineteen eighty-six and eighty-seven were red letter years in comic book history. Not only was Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) published but so were Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1987)¹ and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1987), the latter winning a Pulitzer Prize Special Award in 1992. All three works contributed to a redefining period in comic book history not only of what comic books were, but what they were capable of becoming in the hands of writers willing to push the boundaries of the medium. All three works were dark, serious, and in important ways, more anchored to the real world than previous comic book works. Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* shows a middle-aged Batman coming out of retirement to wage war on crime once again (against Gotham’s own police force and the United States government as personified by Superman) in a world that seems hell-bent towards fascism. Spiegelman’s *Maus* is a biography of the author’s father that spans his early life in Poland, his survival of the Holocaust through to his later life in New York City. And then Moore’s *Watchmen* took a realistic look at what a world with superheroes might look like if placed in an alternate universe where Richard Nixon is still President of the United States in the 1980s, and the United States won the

¹ To date *Watchmen* is the only comic book to earn a Hugo Award from the World Science Fiction Society (“Nominations”). In 2005 Lev Grossman and Richard Lacayo placed *Watchmen* on the list of the top 100 English-language novels since 1923, the only comic book to receive the honor (Romanelli “Effect”). In addition, upon publication, *Watchmen* won three Jack Kirby Awards for Best Writer, Best Writer/Artist, and Best New Series and was nominated for many more. It also won every Will Eisner award it was nominated for in 1987 including Best Writer/Artist, Best graphic Album, Best Finite Series, and Best Writer (Hahn).

Vietnam War. Of course, this was not the first time serious issues were dealt with in comics, or the first time a more mature tone was set, but it is the first time that readers enjoyed a brief period so rich with complex and meaningful ideas in works that were both entertaining and formally exquisite. These two years, in fact, have not been equaled in the modern era of comics for their history-changing quality of work and evolutionary approach to producing the comic book. These works set the tone for every comic book that would follow.

Moore's *Watchmen* remains in a category all its own, not only for its popularity and the media exposure it gave to the medium, but also for its startling intellectual depth. It is a difficult work, to be sure, precisely because Moore wrote it in a way that *suggests* interpretations, but does not overtly insist on any particular one. In this way, it is supremely respectful to readers (a trait comic books rarely possessed at the time). *Watchmen* leaves, as do many great works of art, its ultimate meaning ambiguous, allowing readers to come to their own interpretations. Ironically, despite Moore's troubling and realistic examination of the superhero genre, there have been many who would have attempted to adopt its notions and ideas (often having misunderstood *Watchmen's* primary themes of power, nihilism, and authority), and subsequently gave the superhero genre a new lease on life, albeit a much darker one. Comic book characters like the Punisher, Spawn, Wolverine and Deadpool enjoyed immense popularity, even if they did not embody the heightened morals of previous superheroes. These were characters that very often killed (sometimes indiscriminately) and whose morality was as

problematic as the characters of *Watchmen*, except in their case, they did not have the critical and satirical roots that Moore's characters possessed. Dwayne McDuffie in *Secret Origin: the Story of DC Comics* explains, "The only way you could tell the villains from the heroes was by whose logo was on the cover, I mean, their behavior was evil, not morally ambiguous" (Carter). The new kind of superhero played it straight. They were not commenting on the problems of violence, vigilantism, fascism, power and authority; they were simply characters who killed as a means to an end. In cases like the Punisher and Wolverine, their actions are almost indiscernible from those of villains.

Readers have been quick to point out (and rightly so) that Moore propelled the superhero genre into darkness and out of its idealistic moral roots, but I think we would be remiss to see *Watchmen* as a work that simply deconstructed superheroes for the sake of deconstructing them. I don't believe that was Moore's intention. His particular approach to *Watchmen*, although certainly deconstructive, does not leave the superhero without a place to be reconstructed. Moore simply asks readers to reconsider our love of superheroes and think about them critically by examining them through a more philosophical lens. Moore also asks readers what kind of heroism they can implement in the real world, and if the superhero imagined as real is an appropriate model for such heroism.

Watchmen's staying power and popularity largely comes from its philosophical underpinnings that drive the narrative in unexpected ways.

Moore asks perennial questions about the nature of a world without God, the nature of authority, power, and responsibility, and does so within the superhero genre. It is his exploration of these questions within the genre that critiques superheroes and suggests, for perhaps the very first time, that all the qualities readers took for granted about the superheroes they read and admired had very serious moral implications. The world of superheroes is, for Moore, anything but black and white. *Watchmen* shows readers just how horrific a world with superheroes might possibly be if made real. In this depiction of horror, readers must make a choice whether superheroes are worth keeping around, or if perhaps they have outlived their usefulness as cultural icons. Moore asks us to take our superheroes seriously.

In my examination of *Watchmen*, I take Moore's superheroes seriously, too, and look at them through the lens of the philosophical tradition they grow out of, namely Friedrich Nietzsche's conception of moral nihilism and his idea of the Übermensch, which is the philosophical basis for almost every superhero after Superman. I examine Moore's characters as the embodiment of Nietzsche's ideas, or in some cases, the satirical counterpoints of his ideas. In *Watchmen*, the characters move the plot along through their actions, and so, by analyzing the characters themselves, the ideas that inform their actions become more transparent, as does Moore's own ideas of the superhero, the superhero genre, and nihilism. I also briefly compare Moore's superheroes to the superhero genre's most iconic protagonists to show just how radically different his characters are from the superheroes of the past, and to show how

unprecedented *Watchmen* was when it was published. My approach to *Watchmen* is one that attempts to discern the philosophical dimensions that the characters represent, since their actions are rooted in philosophical ideas. But, I also attempt to distinguish between Moore's idea of the superhero and the traditional superhero genre that preceded *Watchmen*. I should also make a note that the scope of my examination will limit itself mostly to the literary text and not the graphic text of the comic book. Because *Watchmen* is so dense in meaning (both in images and the words), I found it much more efficient to examine the literary text and limit my discussion of the art except where appropriate. To examine the images in more detail would overwhelm my examination, which is, of course, largely philosophic in nature.

In chapter one, "The Rudderless World: Nietzsche's Moral Nihilism in *Watchmen*," I examine how Moore uses Nietzsche's concept of moral nihilism to inform his superheroes Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan, and the Comedian. Each character represents different aspects of nihilism as it manifests in Moore's universe. In showing the varying degrees in which nihilism is presented, the world of *Watchmen* becomes, for readers, a dark place where existential anxiety and imperfectability become prominent. Moore uses nihilism in this way to justify a world populated with superheroes. In a world with absolute values, where morality is handed down by an all-knowing God, there would be little need to question what the right thing to do would be, so superheroes would, of course, be unquestioned agents for the law. But since God is dead in Moore's world, morality is seriously in question and each character must decide for him

or herself what the right and wrong thing to do is. Moore shows that with characters with superpowers, this lack of moral certainty (or in Rorschach's case, absolute moral certainty) becomes problematic when their actions affect so many lives. Nihilism becomes the existential background where the problematic qualities of Moore's superheroes bring into focus the defeatist nature of such a philosophy, and how it adversely affects superheroes and their world.

In chapter two, "Nietzsche's Übermensch in *Watchmen*," I examine how Moore uses Nietzsche's idea of the Übermensch, to inform his superheroes. Moore understands the implicit use of Nietzsche's ideal in the superhero genre, and how it has informed practically every superhero ever created, beginning with Superman. In an interview with Gary Groth, publisher of Fantagraphics Comics, Moore reflects: "*Watchmen* couldn't have existed without a lot of prior knowledge on the reader's part of what the superhero genre was all about. It was making reference to and playing off of a lot of previously existing stuff. It was trying to do something new with it" (19). However, Moore turns the Übermensch ideal that has informed superheroes since their inception on its head, and shows how such an ideal might not only be undesirable, but that if achieved, might be more problematic than the actions of non-superhuman moral agents. Moore even sometimes makes ironic use of the Übermensch ideal by making characters such as Dr. Manhattan, who outwardly appear to readers from the superhero genre's previous conventions to be Übermenschen, to possess none of the qualities of an Übermensch. At other times Moore shows

just how horrific such a prospect might be if undertaken by a psychologically unhealthy person such as Ozymandias.

In the last chapter, “Twilight of the Superheroes,” I examine *Watchmen*’s lasting effect on the superhero genre. Moore’s deconstruction of the superhero archetype, in some ways, was meant to shed light on the darker aspects of the nature of superheroes, namely, their fascist undercurrents. Superheroes tend to force their morality systems on society without thought to whether or not they are just in their actions. But one thing their deconstruction did was to disclose, by comparison, the idealistic qualities of superheroes that readers cherish. I also examine what kind of hero Moore suggests over the kind of heroes mostly represented by the superhero genre. Moore unconventionally makes some of the more normal characters (those who don’t wear masks or costumes, but who are no less compelling) the most heroic (at least the way Moore defines heroism) in *Watchmen*. In this way, Moore exalts the everyday heroism of average people, and holds them up as ideal moral exemplars. Finally, I examine the response Moore suggests to counter the nihilism he presents in *Watchmen*, namely, anarchy.

The Rudderless World: Nietzsche's Moral Nihilism in *Watchmen*

Alan Moore's *Watchmen* heralded an era of moral complexity previously unknown in the superhero genre. The superheroes before *Watchmen* were largely depicted as figures that, although working outside the purview of the law, were rarely seen as problematic in terms of their moral status and their questionable relationship to authority. Of course, characters such as Batman and Spider-Man were always understood to be criminals on one level, they were never seen as criminals by readers because they were portrayed as protagonists that strove to fulfill a higher moral code than that of the police in their respective worlds. Superheroes were, for the most part, understood as agents, or extensions of the same law, that those with formal authority upheld, and sought to preserve. Stories rarely examined the nature of authority in relation to publically justified forms of authority such as the police and the dubious authority of the superhero. In *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* Richard Reynolds notes that the Comics Code "stipulated that law enforcement officers should never be shown in a disrespectful or unsympathetic light" (8). If superheroes were to have a life at all they would by necessity have to work with law enforcement. For superheroes to stray too far from conventional law would mean law enforcement would have to be critical of their actions, which in turn might mean readers look at police officers in a less than positive light in relation to their larger than life superheroes. So, the relationship between superheroes and law enforcement would have to be congenial. Superheroes and law enforcement were, with few exceptions, seen as valid, even equivalent,

in some ways. Perhaps superheroes sometimes strayed from the strictures of the law, but it was always understood within the moral framework of the narrative that the bending, or sometimes breaking of laws, was for a greater good that served and sustained the moral order of society as a whole.

In *Action Comics #1* by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Superman, the first superhero, makes his appearance and sets the stage for the way most superheroes would be perceived for more than 40 years. In the very first superhero story superheroes are understood to take moral responsibility for their powers to do what is right: “Early Clark decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind” (1). *Actions Comics #1* also sets up superheroes’ relationship with the law when Superman is shown breaking down the door of the governor’s home in order to save an innocent woman from execution. The governor’s butler protests, telling Superman he has broken the law, but Superman barges in anyway, and threatens him until he takes him to the governor’s sleeping chamber. After the innocent woman has been saved and Superman leaves, the governor tells his staff, “Gentlemen, I still can’t believe my senses! He’s not human! –Thank heaven he’s apparently on the side of law and order!” (4). Moore takes what is essentially an understood truce between superheroes and the law and strains it to its breaking point. It is the deconstruction by examining the moral status of superheroes that is one of the important qualities of Moore’s *Watchmen*, and sets it apart from previous explorations of the world of the superhero. It is the superhero as vigilante that Moore examines, but he does so within the context

of a world without absolute values, a world where morality could not be objectively justified or proven. It is this more realistic moral world that makes such a critical examination of superheroes possible.

Watchmen is a postmodern statement on the nature of power, authority, and how one constructs a morality in the absence of God. It is in this *nihilistic* world that all authority comes into question, especially that of superheroes. In this chapter, I examine Nietzsche's conception of moral nihilism and relate it to Moore's most nihilistic characters: Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan, and the Comedian. I show how each character represents various modes of nihilism in Moore's rudderless world—Rorschach forces his own extreme system of morals onto the morally blank world, the Comedian declares the world to be an absurd joke in its existential dimensions, and Dr. Manhattan becomes the personification of scientific materialism.

The kind of nihilism that most informs *Watchmen* and the superhero archetypes Moore explores is that of Friedrich Nietzsche's conception of nihilism. Nietzsche asserted that with the decline of Western Christianity arose the death of God.² Nietzsche thought of nihilism not as the absence of values, morals, meaning, purpose, or knowledge, but rather the absence of *absolute* values and objective knowledge. All values and knowledge come from each individual's own perspective, that is, the subjective experience of their own

² God as God is conventionally defined: an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving anthropomorphic male being in the sky from which humanity receives its moral values.

minds. And so, without an objective world,³ we are left to value our own system of morals and test our knowledge of the world against our experiences. The moral world is not objectively given to us in the form of divine inspiration, but must be created from the human mind. This is a world not where everything is permitted because the mythical God is dead, but where one's actions must be informed by one's own critical intuition and self-actualizing commitment. This is a world where one must take responsibility for one's own life and choices.

In *Watchmen*, characters struggle to find meaning in the world. Characters like Rorschach and the Comedian discover creative ways to assert meaning, but their respective paths to meaning are more pathological than pure. Each responds differently to nihilism, and although they both construct a robust response to nihilism (Rorschach by subscribing to a rigorous system of justice, and the Comedian, by embracing nihilism in a creative act of personal subjugation to meaninglessness) their responses fail because the meanings they construct cause more harm than good for the world. Nihilism demands an answer, but its response must be one that is authentic in that it transcends (and includes) conventional morality, not contravening moral and judicial laws for selfish or self-satisfying reasons.

Rorschach, formerly Walter Kovacs, is the most philosophically rigid character in *Watchmen*. He is as extreme in his attitudes as he is extreme in

³ Of course there is an external objective world that exists apart from human experience, but we can never know it because we experience the world in a subjective way via our specific senses.

his behavior. What makes Rorschach slightly different from the other superheroes in *Watchmen* is that he centers the comic book. His journal frames the narrative, both opening the comic and closing it. By framing the comic in this way, Moore suggests:

Comic book heroes are projections of the fantasies of their readers—as well as their authors. *Watchmen*'s development of Rorschach as a character makes clear Moore's contention that these wishful superheroic fantasies of power stem not just from a deep fear we are powerless to live up to our own ideals, but also from an even deeper fear that these ideals themselves are mere *projections* with which to cover over and conceal from ourselves 'the real horror' that 'in the end' reality 'is simply an empty meaningless blackness.' (Thomson 107)

Rorschach's journal entries provide a narrative effect like that of detective novels and detective movies with voice-over dialogue and first-person narration, which is a nod to his character's literary roots and his moral compass. He is from the world of noir and pulp fiction, where the world is brutal, dark, and filled with human imperfectability. But Moore also superficially patterned Rorschach after Steve Ditko's Mr. A and The Question, characters who hold extreme right-wing political beliefs. In the character of Rorschach these right-wing beliefs are intensified until he becomes as Moore describes him, a character of "ferocious moral integrity" (*In Search of Steve Ditko*), which has ironically enough been the reason for Rorschach's

overwhelming popularity. This was, however, far from Moore's intention for the character. "I originally intended Rorschach to be a warning about the possible outcome of vigilante thinking. But an awful lot of comics readers felt his remorseless, frightening, psychotic toughness was his most appealing characteristic—not quite what I was going for" (Jensen). Moore even goes out of his way to make Rorschach dirty, smelly, and offensive to nearly everyone in the comic to drive home how reprehensible he (and his brand of vigilantism) are. And yet, as Moore explains, "I think people were getting off on him because he was a tough, scary, frightening character that they identified with" (Reynolds 118).

Rorschach's words introduce us into the dark nihilistic world of *Watchmen* and also his own personal dark world:

Rorschach's Journal. October 12th, 1985. Dog carcass in alley this morning, tire tread on burst stomach. This city is afraid of me. I have seen its true face. The streets are extended gutters and the gutters are full of blood and when the drains finally scab over, all the vermin will drown. The accumulated filth of all their sex and murder will foam up about their waists and all the whores and politicians will look up and shout 'Save us!'...and I'll look down and whisper 'no.' (1.1)

We learn from Rorschach's very first journal entry his relationship to the world, and, in part, his moral outlook. He sees the world as essentially fallen, and those he deems "vermin" and "filth," he will refuse to save. But Rorschach

did not always think of the world in nihilistic terms. It took a series of traumatic events, most transpiring in his childhood, for him to understand that things happened for no reason, and there is no meaning to any event other than what one ascribes to it. But it is an event in his adulthood while he is investigating the kidnapping of a six year old girl named Blaire Roche that finally makes him understand the world's dark nihilistic nature. Before the Blaire Roche case, he may have worn the mask of Rorschach, but he was not Rorschach yet. Rorschach discovers that the girl has been murdered and her body fed to the murderer's pet dogs. His discovery shakes him to his core. When he realizes what has been done to the girl, he slaughters the dogs immediately. When the owner returns home, he chains the man to a chair and sets the house on fire. He then stands in the yard and watches the house burn for an hour. Once Rorschach is captured by police he tells Dr. Long, his appointed psychiatrist, who Rorschach is at his core:

Looked at sky through smoke heavy with human fat and God was not there... 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. This rudderless world is not shaped by vague metaphysical forces. It is not God who kills the children. Not fate that butchers them or destiny that feeds them to the dogs. It's us. Only us...The void breathed hard on

my heart, turning its illusions to ice, shattering them. Was reborn then, free to scrawl own design on this morally blank world. (6.21-26)⁴

Rorschach's epiphany is one born of violence so great, so horrific, that it shatters his very conception of reality. It destroys what was left of Walter Kovacs, and out of that death, Rorschach is born. What he realizes is that the world is not governed by an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God. It is nihilism that is born of the violence he witnesses, but it is not a nihilism that is defeatist in nature. Rorschach's nihilism extends only so far as his metaphysical conception of the world. In practice, despite the world being essentially meaningless, Rorschach forces the world to make sense by interjecting his extreme deontological conception of justice on the world. As Iain Thomson says in the essay "Deconstructing the Hero:" "It is as if, rebounding from an inevitable collision with moral ambiguity, such a hero precipitously concludes that, since our values are not absolute, they must be relative—their absolutism having led them falsely to assume these alternatives must be exhaustive" (108). Rorschach is wrong in his conception of justice because in his extreme actions he does not take into account the negative effect his actions have on others; for him, it is more moral to do the right thing, even if it means much more harm will be done to others in the long run. But Rorschach's moral code, despite being problematic, is chosen through his own

⁴ Compare Rorschach's speech with Moore's own musings of the world in the documentary *The Mindscape of Alan Moore*, "The truth of the world is that it is chaotic. The truth is, that it is not the Jewish banking conspiracy or the grey aliens or the 12 foot reptiloids from another dimension that is in control. The truth is far more frightening, nobody is in control, the world is rudderless." (Vylenz).

experience. Rorschach, for all his extremism, is not acting out of bad faith. His “moral ferocity” is as fierce as it is precisely because it is so sharply defined.

Moore goes to such lengths as providing readers with a relatively in-depth history of Rorschach to show just how such a vigilante character is produced. Rorschach was not born as he is, rather he was *made* that way. Moore takes extreme care to describe his troubled background and shows how a child who is as abused as Kovacs might become Rorschach. Knowing Rorschach’s past does not justify his actions as an adult, but it does qualify his actions for readers, which gives them a singular look into the psyche of Rorschach that is rare in *Watchmen*. As Moore explains in *Absolute Watchmen*, “Depending on which way you look at him, he is either the one incorruptible force at large in a world of eroded morals and values or he is a dangerous and near-psychotic sociopath who kills without compassion or regard for legal niceties” (“Rorschach”). As is often the case in *Watchmen*, Rorschach is a bit of both.

In some ways, it is through Rorschach’s relationship with God that Moore suggests other ways the title *Watchmen* may be interpreted. Juvenal’s now famous line, “*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*” (Who watches the watchmen?) is not simply talking about who is watching the watchmen, a phrase concerned with whether power and authority is ever justified by a single person or select group of people, but is also meant to shed light on the moral landscape of the comic: namely, if there is no God watching, who is it that

ensures justice unfolds properly? Who sustains the moral order? This timeless question does not rest alone with Rorschach, but is posed differently in Dr. Manhattan's character, an omnipotent being who even though he can predict the future with uncanny accuracy and experience time in a way no human can, fails to understand what created him and the universe if it was not God. Before Dr. Manhattan leaves Earth, he thinks of when he was human and he and Janey Slater, his girlfriend, are at a fair. Her watch falls from her wrist where it is then stepped on by a fat man. Dr. Manhattan thinks of how the world is changed by such small events as that, and how, even such an event as meaningless as that cannot be accounted for. Who or what authored that moment? He wonders who is responsible:

If that fat man hadn't crushed the watch, if I hadn't left it in the test chamber...Am I to blame, then? Or the fat man? Or my father, for choosing my career? Which of us is responsible? Who makes the world? Perhaps the world is not made. Perhaps nothing is made. Perhaps it simply is, has been, will always be there...a clock without a craftsman.
(4.27-28)

Moore invites readers to use their own critical intuition to answer the question themselves. What are we to do with a world without a God? In an interview in *Arthur Magazine*, Moore discusses how the postmodern world without God came about:

Up until 1960, people kind of understood where everything fitted. It was an entirely wrongheaded kind of understanding ...God was running the universe. Everything was in its place, and everything was alright. But, by the '60s, perhaps, after the second world war, after Auschwitz, after Hiroshima, it must have been difficult. God had taken a bit of a beating. It must have been a bit harder to believe in a supreme benign merciful creator after some of the things that happened in the '40s... there's no God there. (Babcock)

Moore takes care that the horrors that contribute to nihilism in the real world are present in the world of *Watchmen* as well. Rorschach and Dr. Manhattan's musings on the absence of God act as an anchor to their world, securing it ever more to nihilism. For Rorschach, God's absence simply propels him to fill in for God with his own moral order, while for Dr. Manhattan, the question of God is merely an equation to be solved, a mathematical remainder of which he cannot make sense.

One thing is obvious: Moore meant for us to pay close attention to Rorschach's character. Rorschach has, as Nietzsche said, stared into the abyss—the world stripped of its philosophical and moral assumptions. By killing Blaire Roche's murderer, he becomes the very thing he is supposedly punishing: a monster. Peter Coogan, in *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, explains Rorschach in similar terms: "Rorschach's fight against evil has made him more brutal than the criminals he sees himself as superior to" (226).

Perhaps it is indeed a kind of justice Rorschach is meting out, but in doing so, he commits the very crime he is avenging. Rorschach is Kovacs' answer to nihilism, his answer to the abyss. Vigilantism, in the form of Manichean values, is Rorschach's answer to the rudderless world.

In the character Dr. Manhattan, nihilism is seen in the form of the personification of scientific materialism. He represents the only character in the *Watchmen* universe to truly possess superpowers. It is through his character's experiences that readers get the most profound metaphysical questions posed. Jon Osterman,⁵ scientist, son of a Brooklyn watchmaker, is disintegrated in a horrific lab accident. Osterman's consciousness, which apparently is not connected to his physical body, begins to learn how to reassemble his physical body. In a panel showing young Osterman putting together the components of a watch, Dr. Manhattan explains, "Really it's just a question of reassembling the components in the correct sequence" (4.9). But as he fully pieces himself together, his new body is different: it is a bodybuilder's body, muscular, hairless, and blue from head to toe reminiscent of Hinduism's depictions of Krishna . He has become like a god, a secular deity who can control all matter at an atomic level. And as Rorschach suggests, he may even be indestructible.

⁵ In Iain Thomson's endnotes for his article "Deconstructing the Hero" in the anthology *Comics as Philosophy* he states, "...Moreover, Dr. Manhattan's human name, Osterman, connotes Easter (Oster), and thus divine rebirth..." However, very little seems divine about Dr. Manhattan apart from his god-like powers.

Unlike all the other superheroes in *Watchmen*, Osterman did not choose to become Dr. Manhattan; he was *made* into a superhero (or at least a super-powerful being). But who made him? Because human events are inextricably interconnected to all other events, it is impossible to untangle each thread of the metaphysical puzzle. Even someone with Dr. Manhattan's powers cannot trace each event back to its source, hence his remark when he leaves Earth for Mars: "I am tired of this world; these people. I am tired of being caught in the tangle of their lives" (4.25). For Dr. Manhattan, human beings are far too complicated; he is more comfortable with the simplicity of objects and matter. Dr. Manhattan's super-natural existence begs the very question of *all* existence. Why is there something instead of nothing? Not only is humanity without an apparent creator, but apparent gods like Dr. Manhattan lack a creator, also: "I am watching the stars, admiring their complex trajectories, through space, through time. I am trying to give a name to the force that set them in motion" (4.2). Dr. Manhattan never finds an answer. The world simply is. For a character who values precision and predictability, this "answer" is not very satisfying, which is why at the end of the comic book, he departs Earth for good to create his own humans, who will probably resemble soulless automatons more than real human beings. Moore comments through Dr. Manhattan that absolute power housed in one person is a frightening prospect no matter if that person is God or not, but wholly terrifying when that power belongs to a being who has no connection to humanity. Power, for Moore, is a troubling thing, no matter who possesses it. In his depiction of Dr. Manhattan,

Moore proves that no one has the authority or the ability to wield so much power.

For all his power, Dr. Manhattan finds it difficult to use it while under the control of his own will. He, like a cog in a mechanical wheel, is driven along by the will of others. His actions are just as scientific materialists view the world—purely mechanical. They lack human substance and connection because they are simply a collection of deterministic probabilities that unfold like clockwork from other prior deterministic probabilities. He simply cannot process human will apart from its objective counterpart of physical expression.

Because Dr. Manhattan can control matter at the atomic level, his ability also allows him to experience the universe in a very unique but limited way. He sees all things, including humans, in terms of their material make-up (neutrinos, electrons, protons, neutrons, atoms, molecules, etc.). Humans are equated with objects, or rather, seen only in objective external terms—their simple location. According to Alfred North Whitehead in *Science and the Modern World*:

To say that a bit of matter has *simple location* means that, in expressing its spatio-temporal relations, it is adequate to state that it is where it is, in a definite finite region of space, and throughout a definite finite duration of time, apart from any essential references to the relations of that bit of matter to other regions of space and to other durations of time. (58)

Dr. Manhattan cannot see beyond the purely physical dimension in which objects inhabit space. He sees the world in terms of their location but fail to attribute meaning to them beyond their physicality. All human agency is reduced to objectively determined patterns of atomic and sub-atomic events. Dr. Manhattan is the idea of scientific materialism taken to its logical end: a being that sees and experiences the world only in terms of its physical dimensions, lacking the spiritual, emotional—the purely *human* dimension of life.

Scientific materialism is a form of nihilism because it robs the human experience of its essential nature: subjective emotions. The scientific materialist cannot account for something so human as love, compassion, or concern. And if they do, they reduce it to biochemical processes or declare it epiphenomenal, leaving out the most vital part of the human experience: experience. In *The Mindscape of Alan Moore*, Moore says:

Science cannot talk about consciousness because science is a thing that deals entirely with empirical evidence, with things that can be replicated in a laboratory and thoughts do not come in this category. Therefore science generally tends to try to disprove the existence of consciousness. They will say consciousness is some accident of biology, which is itself based upon chemistry which is itself based upon physics and wholly explicable within a normal rational scientific framework. (Vylenz)

It is as Laurie Juspecky also known as Silk Spectre II (and Dr. Manhattan's former girlfriend) explains to Dan Dreiberg, "The way he looks at things, like he can't remember what they are and doesn't particularly care...This world, the real world, to him it's like walking through mist, and all the people are like shadows" (3.9). It is Dr. Manhattan's divorce from his humanity that Ozymandias ultimately uses to carry off his plot to save the world by faking an alien attack and murdering over 3 million people.⁶ This is Moore's assertion that science and technology have overreached humanity's morals and has caused an invention such as the atomic bomb to be invented, an invention that morally should have no place in the world. In the shadow of a science without an equally evolved morality to govern it, human beings suffer. In Dr. Manhattan's case, his apathy allows millions to die. If human beings are not engaged with the world in deep reflective ways, then it becomes much harder to find reason to do anything, let alone feel a moral urgency to act on behalf of another. This becomes nearly impossible if we experience or choose to interact with the world only in terms of its physical processes. Moore shows what such a world might look like if a being experienced the world only in terms of its physical attributes, while ignoring the intrinsically human features that make life meaningful. An atom by itself can never attribute meaning in the world, nor can a molecule or a cell. But if life complexifies enough to evolve into a human

⁶This however was not always the case. The longer Dr. Manhattan has his superpowers the more he gradually begins to feel alienated from human beings. Early in the comic book, while having a conversation with Ozymandias, he thanks Dr. Manhattan for his help saying that his scientists were only limited by their imaginations. Dr. Manhattan adds, "And by their consciences surely?" (9.21) At this point in time Dr. Manhattan is still has human concerns.

being with consciousness, then meaning becomes second nature. In a world without such human attributes as love, concern, and empathy, little remains but meaningless physical processes. Moore critiques scientific material for exactly its life-denying qualities. He makes Dr. Manhattan impotent to drive home the fact that science, without deep human values, is a science that does not serve humanity, and ultimately harms it.

One question Dr. Manhattan's character seems to beg is: What's the difference between someone with *no* power who does nothing, and someone who has *absolute* power and does nothing? The answer is *nothing*. The results are exactly the same. Evil triumphs if people do nothing. Because Dr. Manhattan feels no impulse to move on behalf of humanity, over three million New Yorkers are killed by Ozymandias' "alien" monster as he teleports it in the middle of, ironically, Manhattan. But Dr. Manhattan not only could have stopped Ozymandias from attempting his plot to sacrifice millions to save the world, but also could have stopped the nations of the world from engaging in a cold war to begin with, which would have made the threat of nuclear holocaust non-existent. He could have saved the world by himself, without the help of anyone else.⁷ Dr. Manhattan, although omnipotent, is largely impotent.⁸ He

⁷This is, of course, debatable. In Milton Glass's "Dr. Manhattan: Super-powers and the Superpowers" he states that, "Dr. Manhattan could at any time destroy large areas of Soviet territory instantly. It has been similarly theoretically demonstrated that, were a full scale nuclear assault to be launched upon America from Soviet bases in the U.S.S.R. and Europe, Dr. Manhattan would be able to deflect or disarm at least sixty percent of all incoming missiles before they had reached their targets" (6. supplementary material). But owing to Dr. Manhattan's near omnipotence it doesn't seem implausible to think he might be able to do just about anything he sets his will to do, if he had a will.

cannot act. His superpowers have paradoxically made him feel powerless. As Dr. Manhattan says, “A live body and a dead body contain the same number of particles. Structurally, there is no discernable difference. Life and death are unquantifiable abstracts. Why should I be concerned?” (1.21). Seeing the world in purely mechanical objective terms, what is there to do? Nihilism is affirmed. Humanity is nothing more than a collection of atoms without intrinsic value. Dr. Manhattan’s attitude is a far cry from such superheroes as Stan Lee’s Spider-Man who in *Amazing Fantasy #15* (August 1961) uttered the now famous line to which nearly all superheroes live up to: “With great power comes great responsibility.” For Dr. Manhattan, his powers mean nothing. They are simply a reaction to his physical death by the intrinsic field extractor. His behavior in no way reflects his archetypal predecessor, Superman, who in *Action Comics #1* learns that he “must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind” or his more recent archetype, the noble Charlton Comics’ Captain Atom, who as scientist Allen Adam is atomized in an experiment and then learns he can rematerialize his body. Like Dr. Manhattan, the body Adam constructs is no longer the one he had prior to his accident but one that is super-strong, can fly, and even emits energy beams. Captain Atom immediately uses his powers for the greater good. Superman and Captain Atom both value human concerns and have even served on the Justice League. Dr.

⁸ In Zack Snyder’s movie adaptation, *Watchmen*, the point of impotence is driven home by endowing Dr. Manhattan with a larger penis than that of the comic book, thus emphasizing his impotence.

Manhattan, on the other hand, values nothing but the infinitesimal intricacies of atoms. There is nothing heroic about him.

At the end of the chapter, “The Darkness of Mere Being,” Moore quotes Carl Jung: “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” (9.28). Dr. Manhattan, throughout the comic book, has simply existed without providing meaning to his life. And this is the tragedy of Dr. Manhattan and also the tragedy of nihilism. By becoming an all-powerful being, he has lost his essential humanity. He may be able to see time from multiple perspectives and control life at an atomic level, but what does it matter if his powers cannot be used to interject more meaning into human life? Dr. Manhattan exists, but he exists meaninglessly. At the end of *Watchmen*, he has found an abstract way to value human beings (simply because their existence is miraculous by his definition, *not* because they are valuable in any intrinsic sense); but it is a poor sort of humanity he has recovered since he still cannot relate to them on a level other than the statistical miracles of which their existence is evidence. Dr. Manhattan’s nihilism persists.

Moore exemplifies nihilism depicted as scientific materialism with the character of Dr. Manhattan. The world is robbed of its essential spirit of feeling, emotion, love, compassion, and concern when viewed from merely a materialist’s point of view. To take such a monological view is to ignore the very qualities in humanity that make life the most meaningful. Dr. Manhattan, the

character who possesses almost limitless power and in any other comic book would be Superman or Captain Atom using their powers to help humanity, in Moore's world, is a living aberration to those characters, a character whose powers obligate him not at all to do good. In fact, Dr. Manhattan's powers do the exact opposite—they divorce him from humanity and his moral responsibilities.

Rorschach's response to nihilism is vigorous in its application and Dr. Manhattan's response is really no response at all, thus on one level asserting nihilism via his association with scientific materialism. By contrast, the one character whose response is the most disturbing in its denial of meaning is the Comedian. Instead of denying nihilism or constructing meaning in the face of it, he decides to become its living embodiment.

Along with Dr. Manhattan, Edward Blake, also known as the Comedian,⁹ is the only government-sanctioned superhero. The Comedian's Charleton Comics predecessor, the Peacemaker, who was also a government agent for a time, values peace so much he is willing to kill for it; the Comedian kills almost indiscriminately at times, and takes a far more extreme political and philosophical position. The Peacemaker later understands that his propensity to kill for peace was brought on by mental illness, but the Comedian makes no such excuse.

⁹ Nicholas Michael Grant in "Watchmen Character Profiles: The Comedian: The Nihilist Hero of the Watchmen Universe" described him as "the only character in the Watchmen universe who is almost totally unlikeable. He is unrepentingly [sic] evil and for the most part he gets away with it."

Despite the Comedian's ruthless violence he is perhaps the most perceptive character in *Watchmen*. He sees the world as nihilistic, with no absolute value (as opposed to relative value), no absolute morals, and no absolute anything, except absolute meaninglessness, but it is his response to this nihilism that is most interesting. Where Rorschach responds to nihilism by undertaking a Manichean perspective of justice, the Comedian treats the world as his playground to act and play with according to his whim. The Comedian becomes a trickster, becoming the personification of nihilism through mockery and absurdity. Even Dr. Manhattan, in his apathetic stance towards humanity, understands the Comedian in these terms:

Blake is interesting. I have never met anyone so deliberately amoral. He suits the climate here: the madness, the pointless butchery...As I come to understand Vietnam and what it implies about the human condition, I also realize that few humans will ever permit themselves such an understanding. Blake's different. He understands perfectly...and he doesn't care. (4.19)

Despite Rorschach and Dr. Manhattan's obvious differences, they both come to the same conclusion about the Comedian:

No staying power. None of them. Except Comedian. Met him in 1966. Forceful personality. Didn't care if people liked him. Uncompromising. Admired that. Of all of us, he understood most. About world. About people. About society and what's happening to it. Things everyone knows

in gut. Things everyone too scared to face, too polite to talk about. He understood. Understood man's capacity for horrors and never quit. Saw the world's black underbelly and never surrendered. (6.15)

The Comedian knows, perhaps better than most, the nature of the world, but he is not paralyzed by nihilism as is Dr. Manhattan, or unhealthily empowered by it as Rorschach is; nihilism, for the Comedian, represents freedom. The Comedian, much like the Joker from Batman comics, sets himself upon the world as if it is a consequence-free environment. He acts only out of his own amusement. It doesn't matter one way or the other what he does, only that he does something that is enjoyable to him, and that is usually violence.

What is the Comedian's response to horror, to tragedy, and to murder? *Laughter*. It is his perspective, or rather an almost aperspectival perspective, of treating the world as one big joke that sets him apart from his fellow superheroes. He is, in some significant ways, not attached to the world in the way everyone else is; in fact, he is, in his trickster-like nature, as detached from the world as Dr. Manhattan is at the beginning of *Watchmen*. He has no stake in the world, apart from satisfying his own amusement, blood thirst, and desire for spectacle.¹⁰ The world is a stage, an elaborate game of poses, masks,

¹⁰ The Comedian is similar to the Joker in Batman comics. In Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke*, the Joker delivers a soliloquy that could just as well be the Comedian speaking. "You have to keep pretending that life makes sense, that there's some point to all this struggling! God, you make me want to puke. I mean, what is it with you? What made you what you are? Girlfriend killed by the mob, maybe? Brother carved up by some mugger? Something like that, I bet. Something like that... Something like that happened to me, you know. I... I'm not exactly sure what it was. Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another... If I'm going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice! Ha ha ha! But my point is... My point is, I went crazy. When I saw what a black, awful joke the world was, I went crazy as a coot! I admit it! Why can't you? I mean,

and near infinite points of view of which all may be sampled: there is no truth but the play, and the play always goes on absent of absolute meaning; only relative perspectives and identities exist. For the Comedian, the world is what we make it, and he likes it bloody.

What gives nihilistic trickster characters like the Comedian their gravitas and what has made them so significant over the years is that they are essentially *correct*. They hold a piece of a larger existential puzzle. On one level, the world *is* meaningless, random, and even humorous in its absurd dimensions. After all, humans are born against their will, live relatively short lives, and then finally die against their will—an absurd circumstance, to be sure. Trickster characters like the Comedian provide an existential point of view that, for readers, is on some level cathartic because it speaks to the chaotic aspect of their lives. We are, as one philosopher put it, “condemned to meaning.”¹¹ We all fulfill various roles in our lives, many ultimately arbitrary, whether biologically random or culturally selected; we play these roles within society, but these roles are not fundamentally who we are. The Comedian understands this, and takes the arbitrariness of life to a mythic level where he represents chaos and the instability of life itself. He mocks the world while joyfully participating in its absurdity.

you're not unintelligent! You must see the reality of the situation. Do you know how many times we've come close to world war three over a flock of geese on a computer screen? Do you know what triggered the last world war? An argument over how many telegraph poles Germany owed its war dept creditors! Telegraph poles! Ha ha ha ha HA! It's all a joke! Everything anybody ever valued or struggled for... it's all a monstrous, demented gag! So why can't you see the funny side? Why aren't you laughing?" (38-39).

¹¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* (xxii), alluding to Jean-Paul Satre's quote about being “condemned to freedom.”

But is Blake's Comedian identity his true identity or just an elaborate pose? Is his affirmation of nihilism complete? Usually, levity is a quality of enlightenment, evidence of a certain healthy detachment from the world. In Taneli Kukkonen's essay, "What's So Goddamned Funny" in *Watchmen and Philosophy*, he reminds us that "Laughter signals transcendence; it indicates that a person has realized the limits of a particular viewpoint, even as some attachment to that same viewpoint still remains" (199). But is this the transcendent humor of the Comedian? Or is it mere posturing, assuming a comedic point of view to escape dealing with the real madness at the heart of the world of *Watchmen*?

As the Comedian and Nite Owl II are dealing with riots in the streets, the Comedian tells Night Owl II, "Rorschach's nuts. He's been nuts ever since that kidnapping he handled three years back. Him, Byron Lewis, Jon goddamn walking H-bomb Osterman...all nuts...Not me. I keep things in proportion an' try ta see the funny side" (2.18). But if this is so, why does he end up drunk in the bedroom of his archenemy, Moloch, uncontrollably weeping in the middle of the night? While in Moloch's bedroom, the Comedian finally reveals himself:

I thought I knew how it was, how the world was. But then I found out about this gag, this joke...I mean, this joke, I mean I thought I was the Comedian, y' know? Oh God, I can't believe it. I can't believe anybody would do that...I mean, I done some bad things. I did bad things to women. I shot kids! In Nam' I shot kids...But I never did anything like,

like...Oh mother. Oh forgive me. Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me...I mean, what's funny? What's so goddamned funny? I don't get it. Somebody explain. (2. 22-23)

The Comedian, for all his bravado and nihilistic energy, in the end, cannot sustain his identity. His mask of comedic detachment breaks when confronted with Ozymandias' horrific plot to save the world by sacrificing millions of people (by transporting an artificially produced "alien" in New York City and thus uniting the world against a further alien "attack"). For all the evil the Comedian has done, the murders, assassinations, the senseless violence and abuse, he cannot reconcile Ozymandias' actions, and for the first time, fails to find the world funny. The joke is so big it collapses beneath its own existential weight. The Comedian cannot laugh, so he weeps. His mask of nihilism, like Rorschach's mask when he is getting ready to be killed by Dr. Manhattan, falls away in the end.

After Blake's funeral, Rorschach thinks of the Comedian again. In remembering him, he is reminded of a joke, a joke which relates rather tellingly to the Comedian's own life:

Man goes to doctor. Says he's depressed. Says life seems harsh and cruel. Says he feels all alone in a threatening world where what lies ahead is vague and uncertain. Doctor says 'Treatment is simple. Great clown Pagliacci is in town tonight. Go and see him. That should pick you

up.' Man bursts into tears. Says 'But, doctor...I am Pagliacci.' Good joke. Everybody laugh. Roll on snare drum. Curtains. Fade to black. (2.27)

The Comedian's response to nihilism by viewing the world as a joke unravels against the monstrosity of Ozymandias' plan. The Comedian represents, on one level, chaos, and yet, his chaotic actions help bring about stabilization to the *Watchmen* world via Dr. Manhattan's influence on Ozymandias' plot. In the Comedian, we find an unbalanced value ultimately balanced, if not, at least partially redeemed through the relationship of his actions with other characters' actions. In the end, he is found to be the very character that inadvertently and indirectly saves the world. As much as the Comedian vehemently denies meaning in the world, his life is the catalyst for persuading Dr. Manhattan of humanity's specialness, providing some kind of meaning for him to attempt to save the planet. As much as the Comedian denies that life has meaning, his life becomes significant to the fate of Earth, and in playing a role in saving it, his life becomes meaningful. In making the Comedian one of the means of Earth's temporary salvation, Moore affirms life's meaning in the face of nihilism. The Comedian, the one character in *Watchmen* who affirms nihilism wholly, cannot escape meaning no matter how hard he tries. In giving the Comedian so large a role in Earth's salvation, Moore reminds readers that although life may not have any absolute value, its relative value is just as important, and in fact, more important because it is a value *earned*, not given or handed down by God. The Comedian is Moore's argument that there is meaning in life no matter if we deny it or not. Paradoxically, even

if we assert nihilism, nihilism is still a meaningful judgment about the world and carries with it a great amount of philosophical weight. Nihilism for all its life-denying force, is still a judgment about the world that is, from a moral developmental level, a more sophisticated perspective than say, the theistic moral fundamentalism of a Christian.

Nihilism is the moral landscape in which Moore situates his characters. All the superheroes of *Watchmen* subscribe to nihilism in one way or another; some characters, like Rorschach, choose to find extreme ways beyond it, while characters like Dr. Manhattan and the Comedian affirm it. Nihilism becomes the philosophical background which makes Moore's deconstruction of the superhero archetype possible in the first place. Before *Watchmen*, superheroes' moral status was assumed to be greater or equal to that of their authorized police counterparts, but in *Watchmen* Moore discloses through his characters' relationship to nihilism just what moral weight a superhero inhabiting a more realistic moral world might carry. Moore also reveals how problematic such a figure would be if the crutch of continuity and the dependence on previous idealistic superhero conventions were abandoned for a more realistic philosophical and psychological approach to creating superhero characters. But does Moore suggest any alternatives to nihilism? Is there a meaningful way to be a part of a world that lacks any absolute value? Again, we turn to Nietzsche and to the ideal that informs many of the superheroes in the superhero genre: the Übermensch.

Nietzsche's Übermensch in *Watchmen*

Nietzsche was concerned that if humans did not replace nihilism and the death of God with their own values, there was a significant chance at *real* nihilism, the absence of *any* meaning in the world. What he sought to disclose was a higher meaning of human life where human beings took responsibility for their own lives and lived out of their own enlightened awareness and not follow the "slave-morality," which coerces humans out of their own personal creative strength and innate agentic power. For Nietzsche, human beings have to throw off the yoke of conventional morality that inhibits them from living to the fullest expression of their humanity, reevaluate all the values given to them, and discover what values are valid to their own personal lives. To accomplish this, they must become more than their fellow citizens. Each must become a superman or superwoman, an Übermensch.

Brian Leiter's *Nietzsche on Morality* identifies a few characteristics of what Nietzsche considered to be an Übermensch: a person who achieves a higher state of solitariness, pursues some unifying project, and affirms life in a healthy self-reverential manner. Nietzsche believes humanity has to achieve this super-human flourishing if it is to overcome the very real nihilism that may result from the death of God. As J. Keeping reminds us in *Superheroes and Supermen: Finding Nietzsche's Übermensch in Watchmen*, "To overcome nihilism, we must create values without foundations, values that are *freely* chosen within, rather than putatively imposed from the outside...not simply

posit values *arbitrarily*...the values must somehow be compelling.” (51).¹² The Übermensch project demands nothing less than the dismantling of the value system of the external world and replacing it with the values achieved through the intimate examination of one’s identity and self-making. It requires authenticity.

The Übermensch is the embodiment of human overcoming by becoming more than the average human. In this striving for super-human excellence, Übermenschen overcome nihilism by creating higher values that are anchored and tested in their own experience, more morally sophisticated, and achieved through their own heroic effort. Moore is as equally concerned as Nietzsche that nihilism be overcome, but Moore is uneasy with the idea of Übermensch as a possible remedy. He examines the Übermensch ideal in *Watchmen* and satirizes it as it manifests as superheroes in the superhero genre. In this chapter, I examine how Nietzsche’s Übermensch informs Rorschach, Nite Owl II, and Ozymandias, and how Moore critiques the ideal in order to shed light on the troubling prospect of human beings attempting such a goal as becoming superhumans.

¹² One aspect of Nietzsche’s philosophy that often gets left out is his understanding of evolution. It is important to note evolution in terms of Nietzsche’s moral philosophy because it is the idea of transcendence that he is talking about when he says that humans must “revaluate all values” and “overcome man.” This overcoming, or transcending, is not simply abandoning the values of the past (although on one level it does), but rather in its reevaluating project actually uses the previous moral values as a foundation in an evolutionary process of transcendence (which by necessity, includes the previous moral stages). So, although objective moral values are abandoned, they are at the same time included in the process of evolutionary unfolding of higher, more holistic (in terms of wholeness) ways of being.

The idea of the *Übermensch* has informed superheroes from their earliest origins beginning with Superman (his very name a translation of the German *Übermensch*). Superman is the physical expression of a higher way of being; his sense of morality and justice are unerring in their acuity. In *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice, and the Socratic Way*, Dennis O’Neil quotes Jerry Siegel as saying, “All of a sudden it hits me. I conceive of a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I had ever heard of rolled into one—*only more so*” (24). It is the “*only more so*” part that is interesting because Siegel and Shuster created Superman with mythological archetypes in mind in terms of super strength and durability, but they took their character a step further, and imbued him with an unerring sense of morality and justice aided with almost god-like powers and near invulnerability. They created Superman with the evolved ethical and moral codes that the best of humanity prized and exemplified. Superman would later internalize humanity’s greatest values so deeply that he became humanity’s living conscience, our ideal. He remains the brightest star in comics today *because* he represents the highest human moral potential. He is the idealized human being, absent of any moral or spiritual failings, perfection incarnate, and represents the evolutionary impulse in human beings to become more complex, more ethical, and more *whole*.

The superhero genre is one of the few places where Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* ideal is consistently actualized. Superheroes are, by definition, *Übermenschen*. They create a new identity (or it is thrust upon them), transform their entire moral and physical being into something higher than

normal human beings, and then they live out their lives in service of that higher ideal. Coogan notes that the “*Übermensch* is a revolutionary figure, operating beyond the traditional notions of good and evil, following his will to power, and embodying the master morality while abandoning the slave morality.” (130). Superheroes transcend conventional morality, but what kind of morality do they assert in Moore’s world? Do they replace conventional morality with something higher?

In *Watchmen*, the *Übermensch* is largely a nightmare come true, and those who fail at achieving it are nearly as nightmarish as the one character who does manage to achieve it. Because Moore understands how the *Übermensch* ideal has been used by comic book writers in the past to inform their superheroes, he uses the *Übermensch* as an implicit ideal that he plays his characters against to emphasize the stark difference between his superheroes and those superheroes of the past. In doing so, many of the traditional conventions of the superhero genre are overturned. Superheroes and villains, although becoming more psychologically and morally complex during the 1970s and early 1980s, possess in *Watchmen*, almost the same moral and psychological complexity that real people possess. They are both depicted as having complex, sometimes even paradoxical psychological motives. The idealized moral exemplar images of superheroes of the past were shattered. Moore states the following in an interview on the *Salon* website:

When the comic book industry started you had characters who were, let us say, one-dimensional in that they only had one quality. They were good or they were bad. By the 1960s Stan Lee with Marvel Comics had the brilliant idea of two-dimensional characterization where they are still good or bad but now they have some kind of, perhaps a medical complaint or some sort of emotional suffering. What we were trying to do with "Watchmen" was to make it at least three-dimensional. So that the characters that we were talking about were complex human beings that weren't defined by one simple set of behavior patterns. (Firestone)

Along with more psychologically realistic characters came a more accurate depiction of the world where morality was not always certain, but had to be *achieved* rather than inherited. For the first time, comics sought to mirror the full existential dimension of the real world. In this morality-maturing project, superhero comics shift from fantasy to gritty realism, from simple Manichean morals to ideas as complex as nihilism, from superhuman to all-too-human. No longer was the heightened moral status of superheroes assumed, but rather their motivations were questioned and their authority as administrators of justice came under scrutiny.

In short, the superheroes of *Watchmen* are not depicted as the pure Übermensch archetypes they were in previous decades (and the one superhero that most resembles the Übermensch, Ozymandias, is morally ambiguous to say the least). The new kind of superhero is a superhuman who

struggles with morality in the face of nihilism and does not always behave in the most ethical manner. In cases like the Comedian, Rorschach, and Ozymandias, one could just as well call each a superhero *or* a villain. For characters like Dr. Manhattan, the true Superman of the comic (at least in terms of power), the Übermensch ideal is not even sought after. In fact, Moore deliberately makes Dr. Manhattan the least heroic character in the book to highlight his counterpointing the Superman archetype. He is a character who, in any other comic, would be the most heroic because of the super-powers he possesses; in *Watchmen*, however, Moore has made him impotent because of his powers. And while characters like Ozymandias achieve an Übermensch-like status, his method of achieving it is problematic and casts doubt on the efficacy of his entire Übermensch-project.

Those who do not attempt to be an Übermensch or fail in attempting it in *Watchmen* are interesting to Moore because it is their failures as true superheroes (Übermenschen) that brings into relief the unstable aspects inherent in superheroes, emphasizing their ambiguous moral statuses as vigilantes who work under their own authority. But their failures also illustrate the dangers of pathological people who undertake such a lofty transformative goal of becoming an Übermensch.

Rorschach attempts to overcome nihilism in an Übermensch-building project, but the values he creates are simply extreme versions of a deontological moral system—all that is important is right and wrong, the

consequences of one's actions mean nothing. There is only the act, the consequences are literally *inconsequential*. Rorschach's character grows out of such vigilante characters as Bob Kane and Bill Finger's Batman and Steve Ditko's The Question and Mr. A.¹³ Moore highlights Rorschach's hyper-extremism by rooting his character to what many consider extreme vigilantes in their own right. For example, Rorschach makes Batman look like a Boy Scout in comparison to his actions. It is precisely that comparison that informs Rorschach and defines his troubling code of ethics. Unlike Rorschach, Batman's powers are governed by a keen sense of morality. At his core, Batman is a supremely moral agent, and this is why he will never kill even to save lives. He will never cross that line, because if he does, he will be no better than the criminals he fights and punishes. It is his deep humanity that keeps him from ever departing from his code. Batman has developed himself in many of the developmental lines (for example Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development, Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, and Jane Loevinger's stages of ego development, to name but a few) and his actions are always governed by his highly developed moral system, which although extrajudicial, is in many ways more rigorous than the laws he

¹³ Moore says in an interview on www.Blather.net, "...Steve Ditko's Question/Mister A, Rorschach is a kind of logical extension of that character but I'm sure it's not one that Steve Ditko himself ever imagined, in fact I did hear that someone was interviewing Steve Ditko and asked him whether he'd seen *Watchmen* and this character in it called Rorschach and he said 'Oh yes, I know that, he's the one who's like Mister A, except Rorschach is insane.' [Laughs] I thought, well yeah, that's about what I'd expect! Well, Mister A *wasn't*, presumably. Yeah so it was just taking these ordinary characters and just taking them a step to the left or right, just twisting them a little bit" (Kavanagh).

fighters to protect. Batman's code of conduct transcends conventional laws. He breaks only the laws that must be broken in order to serve a higher good, but it is his contravention of laws that allows him to serve justice on a higher level than the police ever can because they are restricted by sometimes limiting and arbitrary laws. Aeon J. Skoble's essay "Superhero Revisionism" reminds us that "for Batman, the presence of a badge or a flag is neither necessary nor sufficient for justice. Laws may be unjust, politicians may be corrupt, and the legal system may actually protect the wicked, but none of this will deter Batman from his mission" (32). Batman is an *Übermensch*. But Rorschach will cross the line that Batman will not. Rorschach may be ferocious in his morality, but he has no compunction when it comes to killing to punish criminals, an act that Batman would find morally repugnant.

Moore extends the Batman vigilante archetype in Rorschach to its breaking point by examining how such a character would have come about in the first place, and what dark psychological underpinnings might drive a character like him to take the law in his own hands to become a vigilante. It might not take a pathological person to become a vigilante, or even an *Übermensch*, but in *Watchmen* this is usually the case.

Different from other superheroes, Rorschach seems less concerned with saving people as he is with punishing evil. Rorschach is the one character in the comic book who knows, without any uncertainty, that what he does is the right thing to do. This makes him very dangerous. As I mentioned in chapter

one, his extremism grows out of his traumatic experiences, but many of those experiences happened during his childhood. He was abused by his prostitute mother and bullied at school. When he was finally taken out of his home, he finds out that his mother was brutally murdered. Kovacs grew up significantly disadvantaged and there is little doubt his traumatic experiences helped shape his view of the world, particularly his solitariness. As Dr. Malcolm Long writes in his journal about him, “The cops don’t like him; the underworld doesn’t like him; nobody likes him. I’ve never met anyone quite so alienated” (6.2). Even his fellow superheroes don’t like him. Kovacs’ being alone as a child has made him unused to supportive social interaction with others. He had no father, not even a surrogate father, and no one to help guide him and instruct him in how to relate to others in a healthy way. All Kovacs received from the world was pain, loss, and an arguably disproportionate measure of injustice.

One significant event in Kovacs’ boyhood that propels him toward becoming Rorschach the vigilante is his severely beating a boy and partially blinding him with a cigarette after the boy and his friends pick on him about his mother being a prostitute. This is the first taste of power and justice Kovacs receives and it is his violent outburst that establishes his relationship with the world: justice is begotten through violence, through the raw acquisition of power.

When he is older and working at a garment factory, a young woman named Kitty Genovese orders a special dress that contains viscous fluid

between the fabrics causing the patterns on the dress to randomly change shape, but she never picks it up citing its ugliness. The material from the dress becomes what Kovacs calls his real face: Rorschach. Days later, as Kovacs is reading the newspaper, he finds the woman's name on the front page. She was raped, tortured, and then murdered.¹⁴ Rorschach later tells Dr. Long:

Almost forty neighbors heard screams. Nobody did anything. Nobody called cops. Some of them even watched. Do you understand? Some of them even watched. I knew what people were then, behind all the evasions, all the self-deception, ashamed for humanity, I went home. I took the remains of her unwanted dress and made a face that could bear to look in the mirror. (6.10)¹⁵

Rorschach feels that in a world where citizens are afraid to act or are so apathetic to their fellow humans' suffering they will not help, someone must act. Evil cannot be allowed to run rampant. Justice must be served. But his compulsion to punish evil does not come solely from a desire to help others or to save them as his journal entry at the beginning of *Watchmen* demonstrates, it comes from his desire for power, to punish a world that has committed injustice against him and isolated him from humanity. The world punished him, and now he will stop at nothing to punish it back. Of course, he has a conception of what is good and evil, and morality is important to him, but his

¹⁴ Moore actually took these details from a real news story. Martin Gansburg, "Thirty-Eight Who Saw Murder Didn't Call Police." *New York Times* (March 27th, 1964).

¹⁵ Again Moore draws attention to another interpretative layer of the title *Watchmen*, in this case, watching evil and yet doing nothing.

passion for justice vies with his need to punish the world. Unfortunately, all too often it is a psychology like that of Rorschach that informs most vigilantes' behavior. It is Rorschach's kind of absolutist moral fundamentalism that is the static moral force in *Watchmen*, but it is also what is most troubling because although he is firm in his conviction, it is a conviction that is fundamentally flawed.

Rorschach, in his attempt at making sense of a nihilistic world by asserting his own rigid value system, ultimately fails at achieving anything like the *Übermensch* ideal. He has not transcended conventional morality, but has simply regressed further into its darkest dimensions: vigilantism without a higher moral guiding principle that attempts to bring about harmony between him and the world. He does not represent a higher way of being, but becomes a boogey man of justice of whom everyone is afraid, even the superheroes he sometimes works alongside. He is judge, jury, and executioner. His motives are selfish in that he is acting out of a pathological need to assert power and punish evil in order to ward off the helplessness and impotency he felt as a child.

But is there any nobility in Rorschach's uncompromising commitment to vigilante justice? Perhaps there is nobility in certain situations, but it is a poor sort of justice he deals out that damns himself in the act of administering his brand of justice. At the end of the comic book, after Ozymandias has revealed his now already-executed plot to save the world, Nite Owl II asks Rorschach to

compromise, to refrain from telling the world what Ozymandias has done. The world peace Ozymandias bought was purchased at an incalculable human price, and if Rorschach tells the world, it will all have been for nothing. Rorschach replies, “No. Not even in the face of Armageddon. Never compromise” (12.20). Rorschach cannot veer from his rigid code of ethics even a little. For him, no matter if it costs the lives of more people, the truth must always be told, evil must be punished. So, Dr. Manhattan atomizes him to keep Ozymandias’ plan secret.

Just as Rorschach’s face invites us to interpret what we see in it, it is up to us to interpret what his last action meant and ultimately who he was. In the dialectic between Rorschach and Walter Kovacs, he becomes the rhetorical signifier of *Watchmen* asking us what we ultimately see in *Watchmen*’s design. His face, a constant shifting Rorschach test, never remains static, but changes randomly. His face mirrors that of the world of *Watchmen*; a cipher that resists an ultimate meaning. It invites readers to interpret Rorschach’s facial expressions, and in the interpretative dance of possible meanings, interpret his world as well. Although it cannot always be certain what Rorschach is feeling, one thing is certain—he fails to become an *Übermensch* and becomes a monstrous vigilante instead.



Figure 1. 1.24

Nite Owl II is one of the few characters in *Watchmen* that readers can identify with. His *Übermensch* qualities grow out of feelings of inferiority. He is, in some ways, the most heroic of his fellow superheroes. Dan Dreiberger did not suffer from an abusive childhood, he was not destroyed in a lab experiment gone awry, and he certainly did not have ambitions to be the next Alexander the Great and unite the world. He was, by *Watchmen* standards, normal. His father was a banker who left him a small fortune when he died. He later went on to get a Masters degree in Aeronautics and Zoology at Harvard University. As an adult, he is a respected academic who writes journal articles on rare birds. Dan Dreiberger did not begin “adventuring” bent on administering justice to criminals or to avenge some great wrong. He became a superhero simply to belong to something higher than himself and to become more confident. His life was dull and lonely; he felt that joining the growing fraternity of superheroes

would fulfill the need for belonging in his life: “Well, I was rich, bored, and there were enough other guys doing it so I didn’t feel ridiculous...It would have been like joining the Knights of the Round Table; being part of a fellowship of legendary beings...” (7.8). For Dreiberg, the kind of fraternity superheroes represented was one of power and nobility, a higher calling.

Dreiberg’s superhero identity is also tied to his feelings about his own competence as a man. In part, he adopts his Nite Owl persona to honor the original Nite Owl, his friend Hollis Mason, but he also adopts it because he respects the powerful image of the owl, an image that lends him power. As Nicholas Michael Grant remarks in "Watchmen Character Profiles: Nite Owl: The Most Human Hero of Alan Moore's Watchmen Universe," “The thing that [Dreiberg] praised in the owl was its perfection as a hunter, and its magnificence as a predator. This shows a respect for power. This isn’t the same quest for power that Ozymandias undertakes, nor is it the reflection on power that Dr. Manhattan enacts, but it is respect for power at a distance.” Dreiberg uses the owl as his totem from which he draws strength, confidence, and personal power. Without the owl, he is largely ineffectual apart from the passion he invests in his academic interests. Out of the costume he feels powerless, emasculated. When he and Laurie have sex for the first time, he attempts to make love to her for something like seven hours, but fails to get an erection. Later, after he and Laurie suit up and save the residents of a tenement building from a fire, they successfully make love in his aircraft, Archie (short for Archimedes). Afterwards, Dreiberg admits to Laurie, “Yeah, I

guess the costumes had something to do with it. It just feels strange, you know? To come out and admit that to somebody. To come out of the closet...I feel so confident it's like I'm on fire. And all the mask killers, all the wars in the world, they're just cases—just problems to solve” (7.28). Dreiberg uses Nite Owl II to feel more masculine, powerful, super-confident. Without his alter-ego, he is afraid to assert his personal power in the world and lives a lonely life of frustration.

The picture below shows Dreiberg slumped over and brooding beneath the costume he once wore as Nite Owl. It is interesting that the costume figures more prominently than he because without the costume he is, in many ways, a hollow man, and yet, the costume itself is hollow.



Figure 2. Dreiberg overshadowed by Nite Owl.

It is interesting that Moore gives his Nite Owl II character the alliterative name “Dan Dreiberger” in keeping with the comics’ tradition of naming superheroes alliteratively (e.g. Clark Kent, Matt Murdock, Peter Parker, Bruce Banner etc.). It is as if Moore suggests in his naming of Dreiberger that we pay special attention to him and that he perhaps possesses more heroic qualities than that of the rest of the main characters, or at the very least, is less psychologically damaged. Moore finds that characters like Nite Owl II, despite their reliance on their alter-egos for self-esteem, act in the world with some sense of self-reflection and understand the moral complications of the actions they take on the world’s behalf. In “Absent Friends,” as Nite Owl II and the Comedian try to control a riot that has broken out since the New York City Police strike, Nite Owl II becomes concerned. The Comedian tells him that they have to protect society. Nite Owl II insightfully asks, “Protection? Who are we protecting them from?” The Comedian sarcastically responds, “From themselves.” Nite Owl II feels uncomfortable with this answer. He says, “This whole situation... it’s horrible...the country’s disintegrating. What’s happened to America? What’s happened to the American dream?” (2.18). Nite Owl II may be fighting alongside troubling characters like the Comedian and Rorschach, but their motivations are entirely different. Where the Comedian invents reasons for violence ad hoc and Rorschach fights crime to secure power for himself (and to implement his extreme justice on the world), Nite Owl II seems to want to genuinely help people despite his other motivations for becoming a superhero.

Dreiberg's Nite Owl persona is the means whereby he successfully gains more agency in the world. In his Nite Owl persona he is proactive, confident, determined, hopeful, even heroic, but out of the costume he doubts himself and is both emotionally and physically impotent. He uses Nite Owl to combat his sexual repression, but he also relies too much on the Nite Owl to tap into the highest qualities of his psyche. He may be rigorously honest, heroic, friendly and loving towards Laurie, but he has not fully integrated Nite Owl II with Dan Dreiberg. The two halves of him remain fragmented and unharmonious. For all his self-actualizing commitment, he falls short of being an Übermensch.

The character that most resembles Nietzsche's Übermensch ideal is ironically Adrian Veidt, also known as, Ozymandias, who is considered the world's smartest man. He possesses an indomitable will and through it, has consciously made himself superhuman, possessing intellectual genius, peak physical fitness, perfect martial skill, and a business acumen that is disturbing in its cold calculation. He believes anything can be accomplished if one is intelligent enough. At an early age, Veidt possesses a sense of destiny and desires to fulfill it by any means necessary. At age 17, both his parents dead, he begins his quest by giving up his vast fortune to set out for Asia and Europe where he trains and learns all the skills he will need to become like his hero, Alexander the Great. Alexander is, according to Veidt, "the only human being with whom I felt any kinship" (11.8). He is the superhuman (Übermenschen) ideal which he must equal and finally surpass. "I wanted to match [his]

accomplishment, bringing an age of illumination to a benighted world... I wanted to have something to say to him, should we meet in the hall of legends” (11.8). Returning to America, Veidt becomes a masked adventurer for a time with the rest of the Crimebusters. But he soon realizes the futility of fighting crime on such a small scale when catastrophic threats like nuclear holocaust exist. He will need to change the world on a global scale if he is to combat the greatest forces threatening the world. He then retires from adventuring, markets his superhero past, and becomes one of the wealthiest men on the planet. With the wealth he accrues, he begins planning how he will save the world.

Veidt, on the surface, appears to be the ideal human being: intelligent, rich, handsome, athletic, and moral, he seems to be superior to normal humans in every imaginable way; but the closer we examine him, the more his ideal image falls apart. What we find is a self-aggrandizing megalomaniac bent on accomplishing what Alexander the Great could not, and he will sacrifice as many lives as it takes to reach that goal, and is also planning to capitalize on it.

At the end of the chapter “Two Riders Were Approaching,” we read Veidt’s letter to his Director of Cosmetics and Toiletries. In it, we begin to understand just how calculating and duplicitous his motives are, in that he anticipates a financial gain for his company after the success of his plan and the heralding in of his own global utopia:

It seems to me that the success of the campaign is directly linked to the state of global uncertainty that has endured for the past forty years or more...while this marketing strategy is certainly relevant and indeed successful in a context of social upheaval, I feel we must begin to take into account the fact that one way or another, such conditions cannot endure indefinitely...This new line is to be called the 'Millennium' line. The imagery associated with it will be controversial and modern, projecting a vision of a technological Utopia. (10. supplemental)

Veidt, for all his noble platitudes, fully intends to financially profit from the death of three million people. On one level, he may have noble intentions to save the planet, but competing with his noble intentions, is also achieving his own greatness and financial gain. He may not be authoring his plan solely for financial gain, but he does not seem the least bit ethically concerned about profiting off of the death of millions.

His goal to save Earth is also a lot more practical. Moore says of Veidt, "It struck the most intelligent being on the planet that there wasn't much point being the most intelligent person on the planet if there wasn't any planet" ("Ozymandias"). In the first meeting of the Crimebusters, the Comedian makes a fool out of Ozymandias. It is the Comedian's comments that begin to solidify his intentions to become the secular savior of the world. "You think that matters? You think that solves anything? It don't matter squat...it don't matter squat because inside thirty years the nukes are gonna be flyin' like

maybugs...and then Ozzy here is gonna be the smartest man on the cinder.”
(2.10-11).

We later learn that Ozymandias resents the Comedian for making a fool out of him at the inaugural meeting. He vows to “deny [the Comedian’s] kind their last black laugh at Earth’s expense” (11.19) and also swears that the next time he meets Blake, it will be on *his* terms (as we know, at the beginning of *Watchmen*, it is a disguised Veidt who breaks into the Comedian’s apartment and murders him, thus triggering Ozymandias’ master plan). It is after the Crimebusters’ meeting that Ozymandias realizes his own naiveté. His crime fighting had been largely ineffectual against the greatest threat against the world. He and his fellow Crimebusters have been fighting small time villains while the real threat to humanity was the nuclear holocaust looming over the world since the Cold War began. Ozymandias beats up Rorschach at the end of *Watchmen*, and explains:

I had life’s black comedy explained to me by the Comedian himself...he discussed nuclear war’s inevitability; described my future role as ‘smartest man on the cinder’...and opened my eyes...That’s when I understood. That’s when it hit me...Brutally, I’d been brought nose to nose with mankind’s mortality; the dreadful irrefutable fact of it. For the first time, I genuinely understood that earth might die. I recognized the fragility of our world in increasingly hazardous times. (11.19-21)

Veidt's self-making/Alexander-overcoming cannot be separated from his quest to save the world. His creative (but blind) determination to best his hero is his biggest motivation, and the act of saving the world is simply the means to do it. In the following panel (12. 19) Veidt is shown victorious after he learns that his plan to save Earth has been accomplished. This is when readers discover that Veidt is the villain of *Watchmen*, or at least, the character who most closely resembles an archetypal villain.

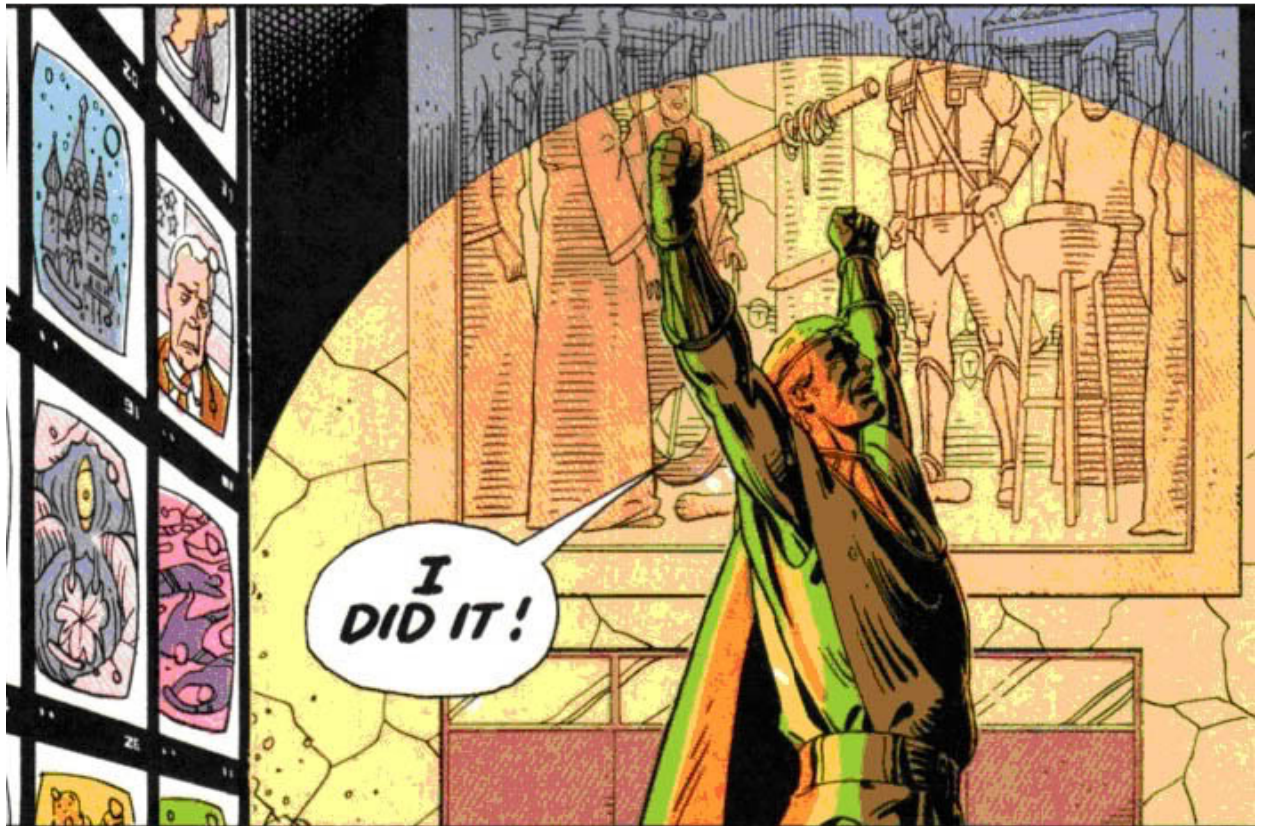


Figure 3. Veidt Victorious?

Sara J. Van Ness, author of *Watchmen as Literature*, comments:

He triumphantly raises his hands above his head, a sign of victory...A yellow aura surrounds him. The glow highlights his grand achievement,

which he perceives to be analogous to Alexander's cutting of the Gordian Knot, pictured in the painting behind him. This, however, is not what the other characters see as they look on...Veidt's declaration of 'I did it!' is a *confession* rather than an accomplishment. He raises his hands in surrender. (141)

It is also finally Veidt's hubris that will not allow the world to be destroyed, that will not allow *him* to be destroyed. In the end, however, it is doubtful if his actions have done any good. As Dr. Manhattan leaves Veidt's Antarctic lair, we hear the news reports on his many televisions asking "Could further attacks be imminent? We think not. Imagine an alien bee, not very intelligent, that stings reflexively upon death" (12.25).

It seems Veidt's utopia will not endure. Soon, people will forget the horror of the "alien attack," no longer fear another one, and began again to turning their fear and aggression towards each other. Nuclear holocaust may have been averted, but it still remains on the horizon as a possibility. As Van Ness again notes, "In order to surpass Alexander's accomplishments to achieve a lasting united world, he would have to manipulate more than the appearance of an otherworldly threat. He would have to alter human nature, something which Veidt cannot possibly control" (134). Veidt may be powerful but he can't alter human nature. His utopia is doubtful.

Veidt completely remade himself in a creative superhuman commitment to human-overcoming. Coupled with his personal desire to surpass his

Übermensch ideal, Alexander, is his desire to create a new world order which unites the nations of the world in peace. Veidt accomplished all he set out to do, and in doing so, becomes the most like the Übermensch as any character. Keeping reminds us that, “Nietzsche conceived the Übermensch not as the height of nihilism, but rather as the overcoming of nihilism...The creation of new values is the end and the goal of this progression” (50). Veidt authors his own utilitarian values in order to fulfill his quest for self-actualization and world salvation/unification. He embodies most of the qualities of what an Übermensch is: in a deeply creative act of will he integrates all the aspects of himself into one harmonious whole in a unifying project of saving the world. He becomes a superman. But he does so at a huge cost. By becoming superhuman, he has alienated himself from the very people he has chosen to help. It is ironic that the character who closest resembles an Übermensch in *Watchmen* is the character who murders over 3 million people and turns out to be the villain of the story.¹⁶ Rafaela Hillerbrand and Anders Sandburg note in their chapter “Who Trusts the Watchmen?” from the book *Supervillains and Philosophy*, that:

Clearly, Veidt acts from good motives, but his moral reasoning brings him to murder millions of New Yorkers in pursuit of his cause... what do we finally say about a man who’s willing to take on such risky projects with millions of lives hanging in the balance? Maybe he’s not some

¹⁶ “But although Ozymandias is a mass murderer, he is not a conventional villain, and most of the characters who learn of his plan come to accept it, if not approve of, it” (White 58).

'Republic serial villain,' but Veidt is still a paradigm example of what this book is all about. (111)

However, the one criterion Ozymandias possibly lacks for fulfilling the qualities of an *Übermensch* is that he fails to transcend conventional values/morals. Like Rorschach, Ozymandias simply authors an extreme version of an existing moral system, in his case, utilitarianism. Because he does not truly transcend conventional values by replacing them with higher values, he perhaps fails to become a true *Übermensch*. But, it could be said that he reevaluated many systems of morality and *chose* for himself utilitarianism (which very well may be the case for Rorschach and his deontological morality system also). If this is indeed the case, Ozymandias would be much closer to the *Übermensch* ideal. Of course, the products of his chosen morality still are doubtful. He does not, at least to my mind, represent any higher way of being and his values certainly do not reflect higher values. Keeping in mind that the true *Übermensch* would transcend *and* include conventional morality, the results of such a transcendence would bring about a more integral, holistic, and beneficial result, *not* the murder of 3 million innocent people despite that their deaths may have staved off nuclear annihilation.

Moore suggests in Ozymandias that the prospect of a true *Übermensch* is such a high ideal for many people that their quest to achieve it is more problematic than their remaining normal moral agents. Because people are

imperfect, when they assume power, the possibility of causing great harm is always likely. The more power they have, the more harm they are capable of causing. Not many people possess the moral qualities that would allow them to wield large amounts of power whether as a superhero, or even as an elected official.

For Moore, becoming an *Übermensch* is an ideal too lofty for many humans. As he shows us in *Watchmen*, the attempt at becoming an *Übermensch* in the real world might be a terrifying prospect, especially if those attempting it are pathological. However, I don't believe Moore would deny that the *Übermensch* is a worthy ideal, only that in the real world, such an endeavor is fraught with complications derived from the seeker's own often deeply-ingrained pathology. In the real world, as in the world of *Watchmen*, it is often the unhealthy that attempt such lofty goals, usually for dubious reasons, and often to disastrous effects. Heroes, I believe, are still important to Moore, but the kind of heroism he supports is perhaps the kind that is most often overlooked in comic books. Speaking of his own characters in *Watchmen* in a roundtable discussion with John Coulthart and other comic book creators, Moore says, "We tried to make it so that all of them are the heroes" ("Watchmen"). Although each superhero possesses heroic qualities they also possess competing un-heroic qualities, which complicate a simple reading of their morality.

In the next and last chapter, I discuss just what kind of heroism Moore supports, how he suggests alternate ways we respond to nihilism, and finally, whether the superhero has survived Moore's deconstruction of its archetypal foundations.

Twilight of the Superheroes?

The influence of *Watchmen* on the superhero genre cannot be overestimated. The alternate universe that Moore created with superheroes possessing all too human pathologies in a world whose morals are no longer anchored to a conventional God was something of a shock to readers. The nihilistic force of *Watchmen* on superheroes altered the way comic book readers thought of their most prized heroes and heroines. In the past, they had, for the most part, been the shining moral exemplars that sought to inspire readers to their own morally heroic acts. They were an extension of the law, agents of the status quo, who protected the order of society. Although superheroes' authority was always in doubt, within the pages of comic books, they were, with few exceptions, portrayed as justified in their authority. Characters such as Batman worked alongside Gotham City's Commissioner Gordon in the 1950s to administer justice, and Superman is almost universally equated with the democratic ideals of the United States. Superheroes before *Watchmen* rarely questioned their own moral existence. They were, with few exceptions, larger than life heroes in their idealized moral dimensions.

These idealized figures were satisfying to readers because the worlds of superheroes were, for the most part, solid, unchanging, and fixed. There was rarely any serious question about what the right thing to do was, and identity was as fixed as was the simplicity of their moral universe. Superheroes rarely questioned their identity, and they always knew what the right thing to do was (and if they didn't, readers knew they would figure it out pretty quickly). They

were never beset by serious anxiety, confusion, and doubt as readers were, hence, on one level, superheroes' enduring popularity with younger audiences.

But after *Watchmen*, the moral status of superheroes was no longer sure. With Moore's deconstruction of the superhero by placing them in a universe more like our own and treating the superhero as the vigilantes they always were (thus making explicit what was always implicit), superheroes took on a darker, more sinister existence where their actions and motivations were not always noble. They were, in short, like *us*. It was Moore's strategy, in part, to treat superheroes as if they were real, with all the foibles and paradoxes that real people would have if they donned a mask and cape to fight crime. This deconstructive strategy basically accepted the superhero archetype and then extended it until it was broken, pushing it to its logical conclusion: superheroes as nightmarish vigilantes with fascist undercurrents.

The deconstruction of the superhero archetype at its most basic level is the examination of our own fears of being powerless, and that perhaps our own ideals, like that of our superheroes, are essentially meaningless. It is postmodernism via Nietzsche's conception of nihilism that creates the space in which *Watchmen* exacts its nihilism through superheroes. On one level, *Watchmen* is about examining superheroes from a postmodern perspective. In a world without objective morality where do superheroes derive their moral authority? Does their lack of institutional sponsorship color their moral status in terms of their justification to act? Do superheroes have any more moral

authority or access to rigorously moral acts than the authorized systems of justice they work beyond? How is authority, *any* authority, justified in a world absent of God, where morals are not objectively fixed but relative?

While it is true that official agents of the law, such as the police, have systems in place to monitor their own actions (such as Internal Affairs), it does not guarantee that their actions and intentions are morally rigorous. There are, of course, bad cops and agents of the law who are corrupt. Being authorized to act on behalf of the law does not guarantee one's moral superiority. All of these questions frame the world of *Watchmen* and ask the reader to formulate their own conclusions. There are strong hints of what Moore suggests is his own answer to these questions, but Moore's anti-paternalistic energies resist leading readers to overly simplistic answers.

Nietzsche's nihilism provides Moore with the philosophical background in which to situate his superheroes. As we have seen, nearly all of his characters represent nihilism in one form or another—whether it is the naïve absolutist morals of Rorschach, the scientific materialist's view of the universe presented as Dr. Manhattan, or the Comedian's apparently total denial of *any* meaning other than the world as a joke—but some of the characters of *Watchmen* design various means to counter the nihilism they experience, even if most are unsuccessful. Characters like Ozymandias affirm meaning through trying to become an Übermensch while characters like Nite Owl II and Silk Spectre II simply struggle with how to act at all. Moore's comic book grapples with a

rudderless world without God. But what responses does Moore seem to suggest? How can a world without God be meaningful? Is it as Rorschach would have us to believe—all there is is what we imagine and nothing more? And if there is no absolute moral compass what of the values and ideals of superheroes? Are we truly living in a post-heroic age? Did Moore deconstruct superheroes so thoroughly that they can never be reconstructed again?

Thomson also asks if perhaps heroes have outlived their usefulness:

Have we indeed reached the point in history when, in pursuit of autonomy, we need to put away such childish things—as heroes? Or is the intense cynicism of the times perhaps merely a burnt shell that hides (and thereby also shelters and protects) an inextinguishable human need for something better: Hope, ideals, a future worth pursuing, and heroes to lead us there? (110)

Thomson's questions are certainly insightful and are in line with Moore's own questions about superheroes, but the one qualification that needs to be made, at least in terms of the way Moore sees heroes, is that they do not "lead" in the usual sense, but lead as examples only, as ideals of self-actualization. This distinction will be further made clear in this chapter.

I believe Moore would say the world *desperately* needs its heroes, but perhaps not the kind usually appearing in comics, at least, not in the real world. The kind of hero Moore prefers is the everyday hero who does not act out of extreme political positions or absolutist moral ideals, but one who simply

helps other people in mundane, but significant, ways. It is the moral extremism of the superheroes in *Watchmen* that causes more harm than good. The character who, on the surface, seems most heroic, is found out to be, at the end, a mass-murderer and megalomaniac (Ozymandias); the only character in *Watchmen* who actually possesses superpowers (Dr. Manhattan) is appallingly divorced from humanity and feels very little connection to the world of humans at all, so little that the only real agency he practices is killing Rorschach, then deciding to leave the galaxy for one “less complicated;” the character who seems to possess the most moral integrity is a psychopath (Rorschach); and Nite Owl II for all his noble qualities in part uses his superhero persona to feel more sexually confident. The rest of the characters simply react to the world while attempting to find meaningful ways to navigate the nihilism and the extreme reactions to nihilism of other characters. So what kind of heroes does Moore support?

Laurie Juspecky also known as Silk Spectre II, is the most normal of all the main characters in *Watchmen*. Her relationship with Dan Dreiberg is the healthiest relationship in the comic book. In a world where men become superheroes out of severe pain, suffering, loss of innocence, through a horrific lab accident, or where men use their power to inflict pain and suffering on others, where human beings can't seem to find a psychological and spiritual balance to their lives in order to do something so human as love, Laurie's relationship with Dan is remarkable. Their response to nihilism is perhaps the best insight *Watchmen* has to offer: to love.

Laurie¹⁷ is also perhaps the least complicated character in *Watchmen*. She became a superhero simply because her mother wanted her to become one. Her mother, Sally Jupiter, the original Silk Spectre, trained Laurie from childhood to take up her mantle as the next Silk Spectre. As with the Comedian, even though Laurie does not *seem* to figure largely within the plot (and is not as obviously captivating as characters like Ozymandias or Rorschach), she nonetheless plays a vital role in the narrative.

Laurie is the humanizing element within the *Watchmen* world. She is Dr. Manhattan's only link to the world of humans, but she also plays the same role for readers. Although a superhero, she is a character that readers can identify with on a human level. Even though at the beginning of *Watchmen* she is in a relationship with a being that is indestructible and all-powerful, her problems are still very mundane ones. Dr. Manhattan does not know how to relate to her because he is slowly losing his connection to his humanity, and so, he increasingly feels distant from her until his cosmic aloofness drives her into the arms of Dan Dreiberg, the everyman of the *Watchmen* world (and what woman hasn't dated a man who is sometimes aloof?). It is precisely her relationship with Dr. Manhattan, and later the Comedian, who while on Mars she finds out is her father, that provides the salvation for the *Watchmen* world. Because Sally Jupiter, against all odds, loved Edward Blake, the man who attempted to rape

¹⁷ "The Silk Spectre was just a female character because I needed to have a heroine in there. Since we weren't doing the Charlton characters anymore, there was no reason why I should stick with Nightshade, I could take a different sort of super-heroine, something a bit like the Phantom Lady, the Black Canary, generally my favorite sort of costume heroines anyway. The Silk Spectre, in that she's the girl of the group, sort of was the equivalent of Nightshade, but really, there's not much connection beyond that" (Moore "Toasting Absent Friends").

her, and they produced a child together, Dr. Manhattan realizes the value of human life (even if he values humanity simply because of its statistical rarity).

It is not Laurie's fighting skills (although significant) that is her greatest power, but her humanity. It is she at her most human and most vulnerable that is at the heart of *Watchmen*. Her relationship with Dreiberg is the most humanizing element of the story. Because they can love each other in a relatively wholesome and healthy way, the world is that much safer. At the end of *Watchmen*, we see Dan and Laurie married and taken on the names Sam and Sandra Hollis (after Hollis Mason, the first Nite Owl), but their adventuring days seem far from over. As they are leaving Laurie's mother's house, Laurie says to Dan, "Silk Spectre's' too girly y' know? Plus, I want a better costume, that protects me: maybe something leather, with a mask over my face...Also, maybe I ought to carry a gun" (12. 30). Judging from both Nite Owl II and Silk Spectre II's characters, it is not hard to imagine them being able to healthily integrate adventuring with their normal everyday lives, and doing so not with some impossible ideal of saving the world in mind, but just making a difference. If it is possible, they stand more of chance than anyone else in *Watchmen*.

Through Dreiberg and Juspeczyk's relationship, Moore suggests that it is not always Übermensch-like superheroes who exercise their power on the world to save it, but that sometimes ordinary humans with ordinary morals can exercise a great amount of good in the world. In *Watchmen's* case, they

may even help save it. Of course, it is the actions of all the superheroes of *Watchmen* that help bring about Earth's temporary salvation, but it is the humanity rooted at the center of the story through loving characters like Laurie Juspecky , Dan Dreiberg, and Sally Jupiter that most affects the world for the better. It is loving that saves the world in *Watchmen*. But it is also characters out of costume who make a difference—characters that seem to exhibit the kind of heroism most people can healthily emulate.

One of the few characters in *Watchmen* to act heroically (but without extreme ideals or pathological motives) is Dr. Malcolm Long. As is usually the case in *Watchmen*, one of the least captivating characters is actually an important key to understanding the kind of heroism Moore supports. Dr. Long, however, struggles with nihilism too: "I sat on the bed. I looked at the Rorschach blot. I tried to pretend it looked like a spreading tree, shadows pooled beneath it, but it didn't. It looked more like a dead cat I once found...The horror is this: in the end, it is simply a picture of empty meaningless blackness. We are alone. There is nothing else" (6. 28). But Dr. Long does not give into the meaninglessness. Ever since he began to "treat" Rorschach, his fixed ideas of the world become destabilized and he slowly begins to lose his grip on it. His marriage begins to fail and his wife kicks him out of their home; he even feels less confident in his abilities to treat his patients, but he still manages to find meaning. It is his particular response to nihilism and his kind of heroism that I believe Moore subscribes.

Weeks after Dr. Long's wife kicked him out of the house, he walks the streets at night lost in thought. His wife, Gloria, unexpectedly approaches him. As they talk, two lovers are arguing and one of them attacks the other in rage. Gloria says she misses him and wants him to become the man he used to be, the man who didn't help helpless cases and didn't bring his patients' miseries home with him. She says, "I'm not going to share you with a world full of screw-ups and manic depressives. I'm not going to share my life with them." As Gloria talks, the woman beating up her lover becomes more violent. The two women began fighting. Dr. Long watches, but can no longer stand by and do nothing. "Gloria, I'm sorry...those people...they're hurting each other...Gloria, please. I have to. In a world like this...I mean, it's all we can do, try to help each other. It's all that means anything..." Gloria screams that if he leaves her to go help them, she'll never see him again. "Gloria...I'm sorry. It's the world...I can't run from it" (11.20). Dr. Long chooses to help others, to affirm life rather than return to the comfortable, unexamined, and selfish life he had before he met Rorschach. As Moore says in the journal "{feuilleton}," "Malcolm Long's a hero" (Coulthart). Of course, Dr. Long pays a significant price for his new found heroism and virtue by losing his wife, but he is acting out of his own tested experience. In a nihilistic world, establishing meaning by helping others becomes all the more important. Meaning is precious and rare, so when it is found, it must be affirmed. Dr. Long chooses a meaningful life by helping others.

It is the everyday hero Moore supports. To want to save the entire world is, at best unhealthy, and at worst, completely pathological. No one has the moral authority to act on behalf of an entire world, or anyone, for that matter, other than themselves. No one has the right to assume they know what the entire world needs and to act on that assumption. This kind of power is disturbing in its consequences. As we see in *Watchmen*, those who have the power to act on behalf of millions usually do not have people's best interests at heart, nor are they even capable of carrying out highly disciplined moral acts. People are imperfect. People endowed with power become problematic because their pathologies affect a great many people. To be responsible for one's own life is responsibility enough. On a global scale, personal pathologies are magnified and spread like a virus. One's potential for causing harm becomes exponential. One only has to think about Ozymandias' plan to "save the world" and the horrific consequences resulting from his actions. Perhaps he did momentarily produce a truce between nations and halt nuclear war, but at the expense of murdering Edward Blake,¹⁸ giving cancer to Wally Weaver, Janey Slater, and Moloch, manipulating everyone connected with his life, and killing over three million people and the psychic injuring of countless more. And for what? In the end Rorschach's journal ends up at "The New Frontiersman" and will likely be published, thus revealing Ozymandias' terrible plot.

¹⁸ And what is even more disturbing is Veidt's lack of guilt. In "Look on My Mighty Works, Ye Mighty..." Rorschach asks Veidt to confess to Blake's murder. Veidt responds, "Confession implies penitence. I merely regret his accidental involvement" (11. 24).

Morally, the world of *Watchmen* is like our own. We face the same threat of nihilism as do most of the characters of *Watchmen*, which is in part why the comic book is still as relevant today as when it was first published. We still face the exact same moral questions. Who has the moral authority to take responsibility for others' lives? Moore seems to answer the problem of authority in this way: In a nihilistic world, all forms of authority, especially institutional authority, are unjustified. But the question is less about whether vigilantes have the right to act or not, but whether their actions are rigorously moral. We are held no less to the same standards. The kind of hero Moore supports is the fully individualized human, a hero who has internalized his or her *own* values derived from self-reflection and a rigorous dedication to truth, not bound to dogmatic, life-denying beliefs and values, but freely acting in society out of his or her own critical intelligence. What Moore suggests is perhaps an Übermensch, yet one who does not force his or her values on the world, but lives in harmony with it. One path to Moore's kind of Übermensch is through anarchy.

In many ways, the opposite of nihilism is anarchy. It is the self-affirming self-actualizing person who stands a much better chance of helping the world than any authorized institution, government, or agent. Centralized authority and power such as that of the state and its agents must justify its authority. No external source of authority is ever self-justified, but must be justified. And as is often the case, authority is rarely able to justify itself. True authority is achieved through intense inner work, and cannot be accomplished by any

external source. All authority must be justified through the relationship between one's inner work with values and one's own psychology in relationship with the external world. This is precisely the work a true anarchist (and Übermensch) must undertake. Moore describes his ideas of anarchy in terms of personal development, where in most cases, without anarchist foundations, the individual in society is coerced to give up his or her own intrinsic authority over his or her life by a paternalistic state designed to take responsibility (and thus, true agency) from the individual:

This is one of the things about anarchy: if we were to take out all the leaders tomorrow, and put them up against a wall and shoot them...society would probably collapse, because the majority of people have had thousands of years of being conditioned to depend upon leadership from a source outside themselves. That has become a crutch to an awful lot of people, and if you were to simply kick it away, then those people would simply fall over and take society with them. In order for any workable and realistic state of anarchy to be achieved, you will obviously have to educate people—and educate them massively—towards a state where they could actually take responsibility for their own actions and simultaneously be aware that they are acting in a wider group: that they must allow other people within that group to take responsibility for their own actions...So if people are going to be educated to the point where they can take responsibility for their own laws and their own actions and become, to my mind, fully actualized human beings, then it

will have to come from some source other than the state or government.
("Authors on Anarchism")

To become what Moore has in mind would indeed be *superheroic*. To treat one's life with the serious care and concern necessary to develop one's self along many the major lines of development from moral, spiritual, emotional, cognitive, even kinesthetic, is an engagement with the world on such an intimate level that it becomes heroic. What Moore is suggesting is fully alive human beings engaged in the world at a high level of consciousness and internal reflectivity. This kind of heroism, Moore says, is what the world actually needs. He emphasizes the moral strength of the everyday person who with a kind of Cartesian common sense, has no other aspirations than to be a good person with no grand plan to save the world or become a "hero." Saving the world is no one's responsibility. The only control we have is over our own lives and our own immediate actions. Taking responsibility for more than that tends to create a nightmare of boundary issues, self-aggrandizement and personal pathology inflicted on countless others. The healthy kinds of heroes are those such as Dave Gibbons describes in an interview on the special features DVD of *The Complete Watchmen*: "There probably are people out there in the community who do do heroic things but who don't dress up, who don't announce themselves. And I think that would be my definition of a real-life superhero" ("Real Superheroes: Real Vigilantes").

Some might think “*Watchmen*’s deconstruction of the hero suggests that perhaps the time for heroes have passed” (Thomson 111), but this is far from the truth. Moore and Gibbons suggest that the time for superheroes is always now. As Nietzsche reminds us, we must choose our heroes wisely, because the hero we choose to admire informs our developmental lives. Who we choose to honor propels our own development in the direction of that ideal (even if subconsciously). The superheroes of *Watchmen*, although monstrous in many ways, inspire readers in a new kind of way. They inspire readers to think about their heroes critically, and to take responsibility for their own lives. In the very last panel of *Watchmen*, we see Seymour (read: see more), a junior worker at the *New Frontiersman* reach for Rorschach’s journal in a stack of what his editor calls the “crank file.” His editor tells him, “I leave it entirely in your hands” (12. 32). The world literally is in the hands of Seymour, an overweight nerd eating a messy hamburger. And Moore leaves *Watchmen* in *our* hands. It is up to us to make of the world what we will. It is our personal responsibility to help the world through the commitment to our own moral lives, and no authority outside of ourselves can ever justify or validate our actions. As Rorschach says, “It’s us. Only us.” (6.26).



Figure 4. He's got the whole world in his hand.

In an interview in the journal “[feuilleton],” Moore briefly explains the moral of *Watchmen*:

I believe that with *Watchmen*, if we’ve achieved anything in terms of the moral aspect of it, I don’t believe that optimism is possible without looking very long and very hard at the worst possible case... So if we have any optimism in the series it’ll be valid optimism because it won’t simply be based on ignoring the nasty facts of life. To me, just in that last panel, in Godfrey’s last line “I leave it entirely in your hands”—that’s talking to the reader as well... I leave it entirely in your hands, how do we sort out this Gordian Knot? If the question is who makes the world? Then if there’s an answer it is that everybody does. (Coulthart)

Watchmen is an indictment of our own moral centers. It is at once a call to be vigilant in policing our own dark desires, our own hopes, but it is also a call to arms to begin living a life that fully expresses the most authentic parts of us, uncoerced by outside inauthentic forces which severely limit our personal evolution. It is this aspect of honoring the individual's intrinsic worth as an existential moral agent, responsible for the destiny of one's own life, that *Watchmen* becomes a profound humanist statement. In its dialectic between authority and morality sits the individual heroically vying for his or her place in the moral universe. *Watchmen*, although it questions a world without God, is ultimately not in search of God but rather in search of a better type of human being, of a better way of being in the world. Superheroes, whether of the *Watchmen* type or other, help us get there.

Superheroes derive their strength from inner authority, their superpowers metaphorically representing their moral and spiritual strength. This is why they will never go out of style or be so deconstructed they collapse as the American cultural symbols and moral signifiers they are. Superheroes, in their transformative and moral dimensions are like Superman, the father of all superheroes, *bulletproof*. They inspire readers to become more than they are. The time for superheroes is now. As Nietzsche implored us: "But by my love and hope I beseech you: Do not throw away the hero in your soul! Hold holy your highest hope!" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* trans. By Kaufmann 156). Superheroes are the cultural seeds of transformation. It is superheroes and the

medium of comics as transformative catalysts that Moore himself hopes will inspire readers:

I would like to think that some of my work has opened up people's thinking about certain areas...I'd also like to think that perhaps, on a higher level, that some of my work has the potential to radically change enough people's ideas upon a subject. To perhaps, eventually, decades after my own death, affect some kind of minor change in the way that people see and organize society. Some of my magical work that I've done is an attempt to get people to see reality and its possibilities in a different light. ("Authors on Anarchy")

But Moore does not suggest that superheroes in comics, or heroes in real life, lead us, rather, we lead ourselves, and take responsibility for our own actions. Superheroes in their idealized dimensions certainly inspire readers to undertake their own self-making projects, but never should they be something that is not interpreted with critical eye. It is readers' critical insight that will serve them much more than merely following an ideal blindly even if it is a superhero.

Who watches the watchmen? In the infinite regress of moral authority, *everybody* watches the watchmen. There is no God keeping score. There is only us. It is the dedication to the moral dignity of one's own life that eases the suffering in the world. As Nietzsche said in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "Insanity in individuals is something rare -- but in groups, parties, nations, and epochs it is

the rule” (34). The moral terminus is the individual. It is the understanding that the individual is the world that creates the radical shift from collectivist paternalistic notions of government and human organization to the more personal (and transpersonal) authentic forms of government (not arbitrarily imposed externally and are justified) such as anarchist modes of being and self-organization. This evolutionary shift from seeking authority from outside ourselves to finding it within us, results in nothing less than personal liberation. In policing our own lives with heroic openness to new ways of being and thinking, the Gordian Knot of justified authority is broken. We watch *ourselves*. In deconstructing the superhero archetype, Moore brings into relief just why we love superheroes: they are us in our morally and spiritually idealized dimensions. They inspire us to become more than we are. It is their moral authority constructed from their innermost being that inspires us to do the same. Even in Moore’s *Watchmen*, where superheroes are nightmarish in the ways they assert their moral authority, they still act as inspiration for readers and act as a warning of just what can go wrong if we are not vigilant in our search for personal truth.

Today, superheroes are very much alive and thriving, ironically even more so after *Watchmen* than before. Superheroes are not only in the pages of comic books, but in recent years are on the big screen in such movies as *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, *The Dark Knight Rises*, *Superman Returns*, *The Man of Steel*, *Watchmen*, *Thor*, *Spider-Man*, *Spider-Man 2*, *Spider-Man 3*, *X-Men*, *X-Men 2*, *X-Men 3: The Last Stand*, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, *Fantastic*

Four, Fantastic Four 2: Rise of the Silver Surfer, Hellboy, Hellboy 2: The Golden Army, Green Lantern; on the small screen: in *Smallville, Heroes, Wonder Woman, The Cape, Batman: the Brave and the Bold*; not to mention animated movies going straight to DVD: *Thor: Tales of Asgard, All-Star Superman, Green Lantern: Emerald Nights, Batman: Year One, Superman/Batman: Public Enemies, The Invincible Iron Man, Ultimate Avengers, Ultimate Avengers 2, Justice League: The New Frontier, Wonder Woman, Dr. Strange, Justice League: Crisis on Infinite Earths, Green Lantern: First Flight, Superman/Batman: Apocalypse, Superman: Doomsday*. Superheroes seem to have lost none of their inspirational impact on readers and audiences alike. If anything, Moore's deconstruction of superheroes helped reinvigorate the genre, albeit not as Moore would have imagined. Grant Morrison, who in the last few years has been at the forefront of the reconstruction of superheroes, remarks:

People like superheroes, particularly in stressful times, because there are very few fictions left which offer up a utopian view of human nature and future possibility...The superhero is a crude attempt to imagine what we all might become if we allowed our better natures to overcome our base instincts... the superhero is the last, best shot at imagining where we might be headed as a species. The superhero occupies a space in our imaginations where goodness and hope cannot be conquered and as such, seems to fill what I can only describe as a spiritual hole in secular times. (Klaehn)

The superhero genre is alive and well and does not look to be tapering off in popularity; in fact, with each new film superheroes appear to be gaining in popularity. No longer are superhero stories considered the ephemeral products they once were; today, they have a moral depth and aesthetic complexity that in many cases, their original creators could never have imagined. Moore's *Watchmen* serves an important function in comics: it reminds readers what was so great about superheroes in the first place, and why, year after year, no matter what age we are, we return to them. They *inspire* us. And though Moore's deconstruction of superheroes uncovered some very important moral considerations, such as how authority is justified, how morality can be constructed without God, and the dangers of an *Übermensch* ideal as a goal, superheroes have not lost their transcendent dimensions. They may have become more morally realistic, but overall, they have remained the moral and spiritual inspirations they always were. Like the religious myths of the past that inform them, superheroes persist because they are *meaningful*.

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