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“*Watchmen*: Deconstructing the Superhero”

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Introduction

Watchmen is an American graphic novel series written by Alan Moore and artistically designed by Dave Gibbons and John Higgins. The comic book series was published by DC Comics in 1986 throughout 1987 and features original superheroes and historical fiction created by Moore (Reynolds 9). The storytelling of the superhero genre is well-known for dealing with issues of social justice and role-model characters, but Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* series challenged the idea of traditional superhero stereotypes through its deep literary narrative, morally conflicted characters, and reoccurring symbols (Flynn 3).

Alan Moore used the *Watchmen* series to reflect contemporary cultural themes and to critique the idea of the popular superhero concept. The story takes place in New York City in 1985 and follows a second-generation of the “Minutemen” superhero team, consisting of Dr. Manhattan, The Comedian, Nite Owl, Ozymandias, Rorschach, and the Silk Spectre. This particular group of characters have recently come together to investigate a series of “masked murders” of superheroes, including the murder of The Comedian. Rorschach, Nite Owl, Dr. Manhattan and the Silk Spectre work together through a series of unfortunate events before they discover that their time on earth is limited. The characters meet up with their old partner Ozymandias in his secret lair, where he reveals his doomsday plot to essentially blow up New York City and kill millions of people in order to bring the United States and the Soviet Union to peace. They also discover that Ozymandias was the vigilante behind the “masked killings” in

order to make sure that none of the other previous superheroes could interfere with his plan for mass murder. The ending of the graphic novel is a twist within itself as New York City does indeed suffer mass destruction and the characters adjust to a new lifestyle (Moore issues 1-12).

Alan Moore's *Watchmen* graphic novel series deconstructs the ideal characteristics of typical superheroes, and his portrayals of the characters in the series fulfill a different social function to society that is different than that of other superheroes. The would-be heroes of *Watchmen* are typically described as having "staggeringly complex psychological profiles beneath the masks" (Itzkoff 1). In order to support this concept, answering questions such as "How do the characters of *Watchmen* defy traditional superhero stereotypes?" and "How do these characters play a different role in society than that of other superheroes?" are important to explaining how exactly these characters defy superhero stereotypes.

These questions are answered through an in-depth character analysis of Dr. Manhattan, Rorschach, Ozymandias, and The Comedian using literary criticism such as deconstruction, new historicism, queer theory, and psychoanalysis to prove how these particular characters are unlike those of typical superheroes in other universes. Contrasting these characters to other superhero groups such as Marvel's *The Avengers* is another way of showing how the *Watchmen* characters fulfill a different role in society than that of other superheroes. Alan Moore's characters in *Watchmen* are different than that of other typical superheroes in the genre and they defy superhero stereotypes, which brings a new meaning to the idea of a superhero and their function within society.

What does it mean to be a “superhero”?

When it comes to analyzing the characters of *Watchmen*, it is important to first understand what it means to be a superhero. In C.W Leshner's article on the philosophy of the superhero he describes a superhero as an invulnerable character that typically possesses extraordinary or superhuman powers that are used to fulfill their role of protecting the public (1). Leshner also explains that these powers do not necessarily need to be “superhuman” for one to be deemed a superhero, in which some cases certain characters are known as “masked vigilantes”. Superheroes typically use their powers and abilities to combat everyday crime and threats against humanity made by supervillians, who are commonly presented as the superhero's criminal counterpart (Leshner 2).

In Richard Reynolds' book *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* he describes five traits that are common to superhero characters, the first of which involves the idea of a “man-god” in which most superheroes are similar to that of “earthbound gods” in their level of powers and abilities. The second trait reflects the importance of justice, and how many superheroes have a strong devotion to social justice that it typically overrides their devotion to the law. The third characteristic that Reynolds describes in his book is the relationship between the normal and the “superpowered”, in which the extraordinary abilities of the superhero character is frequently contrasted with the normalness of its surroundings (14). The fourth trait in Reynolds's book is the concept of the secret identity and how many superheroes have to uphold a split personality of themselves versus their crime-fighting alter-ego. The last characteristic that Reynolds mentions in his book is the role of superpowers in politics, and how many superheroes exhibit acts of patriotism and moral loyalty to the state (15).

Looking at these five traits presented in Richard Reynolds' book, one may think that the characters of *Watchmen* represent certain aspects of typical superhero stereotypes. Dr. Manhattan is frequently described as having "god-like" capabilities like teleportation, control over matter, time traveling, and the ability to see into the past and the future which represents Reynolds' idea of a "man-god." Rorschach's devotion to his alter-ego and the fear of losing his ink-blot mask reflects Reynolds's fourth trait and the importance of a superhero's secret identity. The Comedian is a prime representation of the fifth trait mentioned by Reynolds, in his loyal role of working for the United States government. Ozymandias and his murderous plot is a reflection of the second trait, in which his plan to break the law and kill millions of people in order to save the United States' relationship with the Soviet Union shows his devotion to social justice. Although it may seem like the characters of *Watchmen* reflect various aspects of typical superhero characteristics, looking at these characters through various literary lenses reveals that there are even more traits to each character that make them defy superhero stereotypes instead of following them.

Character Analysis

Dr. Manhattan

The character of Jon Osterman was an atomic physicist during the time period in which the power of the atomic bomb was an important worldwide weapon of mass destruction. During an unexpected accident at work Jon is vaporized in an experimental chamber, but he does not die. His body slowly reforms itself into a powerful creature with blue skin and blank white eyes with superhuman powers to control atomic structure. His new powers make him a crucial tool to America's defense strategy and is renamed Dr. Manhattan after the Manhattan Project (Moore

issue IV). Applying the deconstruction theory to the character of Dr. Manhattan reveals a character that defies superhero stereotypes with his “god-like” abilities and his flawed demeanor of existence.

Christopher Norris describes the process of deconstruction as “the active antithesis of everything that criticism ought to be if one accepts its traditional values and concepts” (Norris 7). The first stage of deconstruction is to recognize the existence and operation of binary oppositions, or opposing concepts, in the text in which one concept is superior and defines itself by its opposite (Bressler 122). When applying the deconstruction theory to the character of Dr. Manhattan, the most recognizable binary opposition is of god versus humankind where “god” would be the privileged center between the two. Dr. Manhattan’s possession of “god-like capabilities” (Flynn 21) would typically be considered a privilege with his power over mankind, but when the binary opposition between god/humankind is reversed one can see that the character’s superhuman abilities are rather destructive.

Applying this aspect of the deconstruction theory to Dr. Manhattan reveals many destructive flaws to his character that dismantle previously held worldviews, making him unlike stereotypical characters. Dr. Manhattan’s god-like abilities leave him alienated from society and emotionally detached from those who surround him. His indifference in human affairs and inability to connect with his loved ones ruins many of the relationships he tries to maintain throughout his existence (Blake 3). His withdrawal from humanity is shown during a conversation with Rorschach about The Comedian’s death, in which Dr. Manhattan states without passion “A live body and a dead body contain the same number of particles. Structurally, there’s no discernible difference. Life and death are unquantifiable abstracts. Why should I be concerned?” (Moore issue I, page 21).

Dr. Manhattan's struggle with humanity is also a result of his objective view of the world in which he experiences the past, present, and future all in one unified reality (Barnes 55). The reversal of the god/humankind binary reveals that Dr. Manhattan's skewed perception of reality proves to be the opposite of beneficial, making his abilities unprivileged through a deconstructive lens. He has the ability to essentially see the future and experience it yet he doesn't stop the murderous plan of Ozymandias, he is unable to save New York City and the lives of millions, and he is unable to maintain his emotional relationships (Bernard & Carter 19) making his these aspects of his super-human abilities defy previously held worldview about gods versus humans. This is seen in a conversation with Laurie when Dr. Manhattan exiles himself to Mars in which he states, "I return to Earth at some point in my future. There are streets full of corpses. The details are vague" (Moore issue IX, page 17).

"He is a prisoner of time, space and matter as he is a master over it" (Prince 821). Applying the deconstruction theory to Dr. Manhattan reveals the existence of the god/human binary, and when the binary is reversed the character's abilities dismantle previously held perspectives in which Dr. Manhattan's powers are destructive rather than beneficial. This allows for multiple interpretations on the character of Dr. Manhattan in which his role in society and as a superhero in general is undecidable. Reversing the binaries reveals that Dr. Manhattan's detachment from society, his lack of emotion and inability to connect with humans and his objective view of reality defy typical superhero characteristics.

New Historicism is a method of literary analysis that focuses on the idea that literature is encased in its cultural history, that texts help shape and are shaped by social forces, that history is an essential element to the interpretation process, and that literature is shaped by historical moments (Bressler 223). This lens can be applied to the character of Dr. Manhattan while

looking at the historical events that the text is shaped by. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons set their story in the real world of 1985, during a time in which the United States is at high tension with the Soviet Union and the power of the atomic bomb is a constant threat against humanity. Looking at the character of Dr. Manhattan through a new historicism lens reveals that his character flaws are shaped by important historical moments like the Manhattan Project and the atomic bomb. After his accident, the United States government essentially uses Dr. Manhattan as a weapon and he is seen as a representation of the atomic bomb with his abilities in which he becomes a character that is generally feared by the public (Flynn 24).

Society's fear of the atomic bomb is heightened during Dr. Manhattan's televised interview, in which he is accused of giving people cancer with his super-human powers and he exiles himself to Mars after people of New York City run him out in fear of what he can do to humanity (Moore issue III, pages 11-17). Using New Historicism to analyze Dr. Manhattan shows that the historical presence of the Manhattan Project, tension between the United States and the USSR, and the fear of the atomic bomb shape his actions and those of the public. This defies typical superhero characteristics by making Dr. Manhattan a risk to life instead of a character that society looks up to, and he also runs away from Earth instead of staying to save it.

Rorschach

Rorschach, also known as Walter Kovacs, is the last active masked vigilante that is not government-affiliated. He is the son of a prostitute who was frequently abusive toward him while he was growing up, which explains his violent and unpredictable behavior as an adult. He is most well known for his home-made mask that displays a constantly morphing inkblot, based on the designs of the Rorschach inkblot tests (Moore, Issues I-VII). Rorschach is completely devoted to his secret identity with his adoption of his vigilante persona as his dominant self (Flynn 20),

which is the opposite of Richard Reynolds' idea of a secret identity where the superhero maintains a split personality (14). The queer theory assumes that "our personal identities are unstable and in constant flux, that we must not allow society to shape our identities and to instead, declare our identities by our acts who we are" (Bressler 283). Queer theory also challenges the notion of a fixed self-identity and examines human activity (Bressler 283). When applying the queer theory to the character of Rorschach, it is revealed that his secret identity shapes his actions that make him unlike typical superheroes.

Analyzing Rorschach with the queer theory does shows that he does not let society shape his identity, and that he declares who he is by his actions. A reflection of the queer theory is seen in his statement, "Existence is random... No meaning save what we choose to impose. This rudderless world is not shaped by vague metaphysical forces... It's us. Only us" (Moore issue VI, page 26). His actions, however, shape his identity into a character that is feared by the public and wanted by the New York City police department making him a character that defies typical superhero characteristics. Rorschach is infamous for using physical violence as a form of punishing criminals, he has killed numerous people, and he is arrested and thrown in jail where he exhibits nothing but violent and physical behavior against other inmates (Moore issues V, VI, & VIII). Queer theory shows that Rorschach is unlike typical superheroes and plays a rather negative role in society through his own personal construction of his identity. An article by Jamie Hughes describes the identity of Rorschach in regards to his violent manner, "Many of the characters in the novel (superhero and normal citizen alike) view him as unclean, disturbing, and somewhat psychotic" (549), which is not typically what society looks up to in terms of a typical superhero.

The deconstruction theory can also be applied to Rorschach in the same way that it is applied to Dr. Manhattan in order to see how Rorschach defies typical superhero characteristics. The main binary opposition is the idea of good versus bad, in which good is the privileged center. When the good/bad binary is reversed with the deconstruction theory, one sees that Rorschach's idea of what is good and what is bad dismantles previously constructed worldviews. This aspect of the deconstruction theory reveals that Rorschach is a paranoid vigilante that has a skewed perception of good and evil, and the reversal of the good/bad binary that surrounds Rorschach defies the rule of law to pursue his preferred form of vigilante justice (Prince 827). Rorschach's dismantled view of good and bad is seen in his statement, "Why does Blake's death matter against so many? Because there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished" (Prince 825).

Psychoanalytic criticism also aids the deconstruction theory when analyzing Rorschach, especially with the application of Freud's tripartite model. The id contains one's secret desires, wishes, and fears; the ego is the rational and logical part of the mind; and the superego is the part of the mind that acts upon social pressures (Bressler 146). When applied to Rorschach in terms of the good/bad binary of the deconstruction theory, Rorschach's ego constantly battles with his secret desires of punishment and social justice (the id), and the rule of law along with society's fear of him (the superego), resulting in his skewed perception of what is good and what is bad. With the deconstruction theory and the reversal of this binary, Rorschach is seen as a character of violent nature whose perception of good and bad is not like the rest of society, making him unlike superheroes of other universes.

Ozymandias

Also known as Adrian Veidt, Ozymandias has been deemed "the smartest man in the world" by society and ultimately becomes the protagonist of the series. Adrian revealed his secret identity two years before vigilante crimefighters were banned and since became incredibly rich, retired from superheroism, and marketed his image to the public. Adrian constructs a murderous plan to blow up New York City and kill millions of people in a catastrophic event to deceive the world into uniting against a common enemy in order to halt nuclear war, in which he planned to murder the rest of the *Watchmen* vigilantes so that his plan would not be altered (Moore, Issues I-VII).

New Historicism can be applied to the character of Ozymandias in the same way that it was applied to Dr. Manhattan to reveal how he goes against stereotypical superhero characteristics, in which the cultural and historical events of the text influence the actions of the character. The same historical events mentioned earlier in the analysis of Dr. Manhattan can also be applied to Ozymandias with a new historicism approach to his character, like the nuclear tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union along with the threat of the atomic bomb hanging over society's head. Although the end results of his actions "provides the greatest benefit for the largest group of people" (Flynn 15), New Historicism reveals that Ozymandias and his destructive plans are shaped by the historical events embedded in the text in which his willingness to commit mass murder and that of his friends reveals that he defies typical superhero stereotypes.

The Comedian

Also known as Edward Blake, the murder of The Comedian sets the plot of the series in motion and appears throughout the series in the form of flashbacks. The Comedian was a member of the first generation masked vigilantes known as The Minutemen, and later became a

government weapon and worked as an assassin and held other various militaristic titles. The Comedian is known for his greedy and violent behavior, along with being a raging alcoholic. He is described in David Izkoff's article as "the only character in the *Watchmen* universe who is almost totally unlikeable" (1).

The deconstruction theory can also be applied to The Comedian in the same way that it is applied to Dr. Manhattan and Rorschach in order to see how he defies typical superhero characteristics. The main binary opposition with this character is the idea of good versus bad, in which good is the privileged center. This aspect of the deconstruction theory reveals that The Comedian is an ethically confused government weapon that has a skewed perception of good and evil, and the reversal of the good/bad binary that surrounds this character defies previously constructed moral standards. (Prince 827). The Comedian's dismantled view of good and bad is seen in his gleeful appreciation of carnage during riots in New York City, the rape of Laurie's mother, and the murder of his Vietnamese mistress (Moore, Issue II). The deconstruction of this character leaves the interpretation of The Comedian in terms of morality and ethical standards open to various interpretations, but it also shows that his grim perspective of good and evil and his actions regarding it make The Comedian far from typical superheroes.

Compare & Contrast

Contrasting these characters to other superhero groups such as Marvel's *The Avengers* is another way of showing how the *Watchmen* characters fulfill a different role in society than of other superheroes. The Avengers is a team of America's favorite superheroes that appear in the comic book series titled *The Avengers* written by Stan Lee and published by Marvel Comics starting in 1963 (Erickson 83). The superhero group originally consisted Iron Man, Thor, The

Incredible Hulk, Ant-Man, Wasp, and Captain America who was added shortly after the debut of the series (Erickson 84).

The Avengers and the characters of *Watchmen* both fulfill a different role to society as a “team”, which can be seen when the two groups are closely contrasted. Looking at the Avengers as a group, one can see that one of the main traits of this particular group of superheroes is that they work cooperatively against an external danger, such as uniting together to defeat Loki, Thor’s evil brother, in his plot to seek revenge against his own brother (Erickson 84). In other words, the group is mainly threatened by external forces in which they use each of their individual powers to achieve one common goal.

In contrast, the characters of *Watchmen* are faced with many threats that are almost entirely internal, versus external like those of The Avengers. They consistently battle moral conflicts and their own individual pursuits of social justice, instead of uniting together to defeat one common goal (Flynn 12). Flynn’s article explains that the personal values of each character regarding their impending doomsday creates conflict within the group rather than the doomsday threat itself, and that the characters of *Watchmen* are “only a team in name, as their actions indicate the different lengths each are willing to engage to avert the disaster” (12). The characters cannot completely unite together as a whole because they are unwilling to put aside their personal differences for the greater good, making their role in society almost the complete opposite to that of The Avengers and representing a departure from the stereotypical characteristics in the superhero genre.

Conclusion

Looking back on the research questions, “How do the characters of *Watchmen* defy traditional superhero stereotypes?” and “How do these characters play a different role in society than that of other superheroes?” it is clear that Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* graphic novel series deconstructs the ideal characteristics of typical superheroes, and that the characters themselves are complex and flawed. After doing an extensive amount of research on the concept of the traditional superhero, conducting an in-depth character analysis, and contrasting the superhero group of Marvel’s comic book series *The Avengers* emphasizes how the characters of *Watchmen* challenge the traditional idea of the superhero.

Using the deconstruction along with the queer theory, new historicism, and psychoanalysis to analyze the characters of Dr. Manhattan, Rorschach, Ozymandias, and The Comedian reveals that these particular characters are unlike those of typical superheroes in other universes, and fulfill a role that is almost the complete opposite of what is typically seen in most superhero stories. This is also seen in the contrast to *The Avengers* in which the concept of a superhero group is almost a complete opposite between *The Avengers* and the characters of *Watchmen*, which only further explains that Alan Moore’s characters dismantle superhero stereotypes.

Looking at the research questions previously stated was important to this particular research project because they recognize the graphic novel genre and emphasize the cultural importance of comic book themes in today’s society. Using these questions to analyze this particular graphic novel series highlights how superheroes seem to meet a cultural need in our society. It is clear that Alan Moore’s characters in *Watchmen* are different than that of other typical superheroes in the genre and they defy superhero stereotypes, which brings a new meaning to the idea of a superhero and their function within society.

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