

The Watchmen – A Shakespearean Tragedy in Twelve Acts

The movie is incredible, but watching it is a little like trying to get a drink out of a fire hose. It is MUCH more powerful than anything I've ever watched - but it needed to be a 1 hour-a-week series, so you could stop and think about what you've seen. And it cannot convey everything you read in the book.

It had been more than 20 years for me, yet the images of the book stayed with me. I think it came out in 1986 - I re-read it about 2006 or 2007, and it was just as powerful then. The only difference was, 20 years after, in the middle of Bush's escapades and Cheney's machinations, it didn't seem as far out there.

I think **The Watchmen** is likely the highest level of literature that comics have ever achieved. I also think it is the lowest comics can go, and should come with a 'not for kids under 18' label. They'll still get their hands on it, but at least they'll know it contains themes for adults. (One friend joked that only Moore could have come up with a story with sympathy for rapists. That is unfair, but has a grain of truth in it.)

But that is only the first of many twists in this book. Like the higher works of literature it emulates, the numerous, massive quirks and twists are so tightly wound, to examine them starts your brain spinning as you hit the grey areas.

Capturing and punishing vile rapists was the step that put Rorschach outside the law - yet he reveres the Comedian, who committed at least the equivalent of that as a teenager. Would he punish him in an equally harsh way if he knew of the incident? Would it matter that Sally, the victim, had agreed to 'forgive, if not forget?'

Sex and the City

Of course, sex pushes lots of buttons in this book. It is Rorschach's mother's sexuality and her prostitution that sends him over the edge as a child. It again pushes him completely over when he found the little girl and her brutal murderer.

But Sally's (the original Silk Spectre) rape changes her, too. And yet Eddie (the Comedian) being caught in the act and punched, kicked, despised and hammered by Hooded Justice does nothing to change the Comedian - or does it simply do nothing positive? Did it do anything negative? Conversely, Sally seems very moved in a negative way by Hooded Justice's tone, which seems to imply she provoked the attack with her outfit and her actions. And, of course, we find out later she has conflicted feelings toward Eddie, as well - and he does end up as Laurie's father - though Laurie is unaware of this.

Sally's daughter Laurie (Silk Spectre 2) claims to understand and embrace sex, but denies her costume trades on it. Or at least, blames others - her managers - for the revealing nature of it. Of course, it seems to function as required - she draws Dr. Manhattan to her at an age that is barely above legal consent. What does that say of our heroes?

Dan's identity (Night Owl 2) and his idea of who he is seemed to be tied with his sexuality - at least, it is causing him trouble in that area in his post-hero mode. Yet he quickly responds to the interest shown by Laurie (Silk Spectre 2), despite knowing that he's messing with the girl of a superhero that could atomize him by simply thinking it. Why would anyone take a risk like that?

Is Moore perhaps suggesting that hormones are more powerful than heroic intentions? Homer did, I think. So I guess he starts in good company!

Real People in Tights

Over and over again, the book examines what would happen to 'real' people who deal with crimes which are outside the law. It affects each differently, doesn't it? Rorschach's brain revolts, and finally recognizes only right and wrong. Yet he sees his actions, which are clearly unlawful, as separate. In fact, all the 'heroes' in the book seem to break the law at some level. Since everyone, hero or normal person, breaks some kind of law, everyone is guilty of something. In fact, on the first pages of the book, Rorschach outlines his fantasy of his ultimate dream: The world will ask him to save it, and he'll whisper, "No" since they are all equally bad and evil.

If that is the case, who is he saving by his actions now? And why is he so driven to save the world?

Yet Rorschach never applies right and wrong to himself, or any of the others that are 'heroes.' He thinks the Comedian is fine. He has distaste for Adrienne, since Adrienne cashed in on his abilities, rather than stay in the trenches. He likes Night Owl 2 (Dan) but regrets Dan gave up the 'work' of combating 'evil.' It is not the same as his feelings toward Adrienne, since Adrienne obviously 'sold out' and Dan merely obeyed 'the law.'

Of course, Dan is the 'traditional' comic book superhero, with complete fealty to the law. But Dan is almost happy to hang up the costume when vigilantes are outlawed, after he sees the Comedian go nuts in the riots. Of course, in an irony not lost on anyone, it is the Comedian that gets sanctioned by the government.

Still, after quitting the superhero business, Dan knows he was wrong to walk away. Evil remains unchecked, and Dan gets totally hung up in life, unable to perform on any level since he has denied his past. But this might be a kernel of the real truth of **The Watchmen**: In Dan's mind, he can't 'break the law' and still be a 'hero.' He continues to go back to a simpler time, and has dinners with the original Night Owl to hear how it was in simpler days, when as a cop, the original Night Owl just acted like a cop. (Again though, reminding us of a time when you didn't need warrants or due process, so it was 'ok' - within the law - to tromp on those things called 'rights'.)

What about the Comedian? The truth is, he 'gets' the joke. He embraces the right wing side of things, and is given 'approval' by the powers that be, so what he is doing is NOT breaking the law. Thus he, and what he's doing, must be 'right.' Despite the hints in the book that even before Viet Nam, he participated in many dark and extremely evil things – including JFK's assassination.

Yet the Comedian knows, deep down, it isn't right. The issue keeps escalating. He killed hundreds, maybe thousands in the war, in a mis-matched battle of technology vs. the requirements placed on him by 'his country.' Yet his efforts are miniscule compared with the number the 'human' atom bomb (Dr. Manhattan) kills in the same war at the orders of a commander in chief. But like soldiers everywhere, killing in war, that's 'right.' Who cares what it does to the instruments that carried out those orders?

(And remember, this was written at a time when the US had yet to come to terms with having killed hundreds of thousands in Viet Nam and FAILED to achieve their goals. It was that FAILURE we couldn't live with - because winners always write the histories. Perhaps our problem was we could not justify doing the things we did and LOSING. Of course, once we got back in the saddle - Desert Storm - we could expunge that detail. But I digress.)

Winning Matters

But actually, that is not much of a digression. One premise of the book is that Nixon is still in power. That's a huge statement made as quietly as an aside in a Shakespeare tragedy. I say that because it is an example of the book telling the truth on one HUGE level: had Nixon 'won' the Vietnam War, Watergate never would have mattered. He'd have finished his term. (Witness Reagan and Iran-Contra, clueless George and Iraq.)

And of course, at some point in the book you realize the Comedian got rid of Woodward and Bernstein before they could ask questions that made Watergate a reality. (The Comedian denies it in a joking aside, but you see later it is true.) And the book indirectly reminds us when you have 'heroes' that can be comfortable making their own choices about who's 'good' and who's 'bad,' and deal with them without courts or judges, the problem is "who watches the watchmen?" Who gives these heroes their final dispensation? In many cases - Comedian, Dr. Manhattan - they answer only to the government. So in theoretical terms it is easy to consider an instance where 'what if' the 'powers that be' were 'certain' Kennedy was not tough enough on communists, and thus leading the country to 'ruin?' As the book shows, the Comedian was certainly able to handle a situation as simple as that....

But to me, here is the hinge of the story: the entire book happens because someone KILLS a 'mask' (a superhero, as Rorschach calls them). Rorschach, the unlikeliest of all the 'heroes,' pulls on a thread and won't let go. So we go through ALL of this, and the 'heroes' (the only ones that might qualify as such - Manhattan, Silk Spectre, Night Owl, and perhaps Rorschach) finally figure out it is Adrienne, another 'hero,' really, the best of them all, that is about to perpetrate mass murder on a large scale. Not a surprise is it, when we realize Adrienne's personal hero is Alexander. (Yet another irony, considering his action will make him closer in numbers to Hitler, not Alexander.) But more importantly, Adrienne is acting on his own. He is without the government backing. He is a law unto himself in this instance. At that point, the rest of them oppose Adrienne, and try to stop him.

When they can't stop his plan, what do these heroes do?

They agree to let it stand, thus verifying Rorschach's complaint that nothing is black and white anymore. And while Rorschach, like his mask, can let black and white re-arrange and totally shift black to white and white to black, he can't create or tolerate 'grey.' So, in the end, Dr. Manhattan kills another 'mask' - Rorschach.

Dr. Manhattan is thus AGREEING with Adrienne's assessment of what he had to do at the START of the book, which was killing the Comedian - the ultimate 'joke' that leaves none of us laughing. This is the true irony of the book.

Puppets and Players

Yet like Shakespeare, Moore piles irony on irony, since the REASON the Comedian had to die was because he finally realized what Adrienne was about to do was TOO massive,

too many deaths, consigning too many people who had done 'nothing' (much) wrong to warrant their death. A man who NEVER failed to kill on an individual level, no matter how high or how low the person in question, could not face the 'reality' that it was going to happen without the absolving approval of a higher power - either the god-given right of an 'eye for an eye' or the OK of his government. That the Comedian was originally the 'Patriot' is made over and over in the story, so in his bedside confession to his nemesis, we come to realize he truly believes in 'God and Country' though perhaps not in that order until faced with a bigger issue.

It also demonstrates Moore's central point that being a 'Patriot' can easily fall into being a zealot and that can lead to far greater trouble. When you believe you have the 'one true way' obviously others are inferior, and need not be treated with the same care or concern. Which today, we would call a terrorist.

Or an action movie star? Or a comic book hero?

This is also the issue with Rorschach: he decides who is guilty, and then dispatches them in brutal ways. We see it is wrong in the Patriot/Comedian's efforts, since someone else tells Comedian who his targets are, and we see they are politically motivated. But we applaud Rorschach. Something scary about that.

We approve of Rorschach because he is never politically motivated. Like Mike Hammer, Dirty Harry, and countless others, he is judge and jury. Of course, Moore shows us that Rorschach sense of values could be skewed, and when rigidly applied, well, there is no court of second appeals. What if the justice were as unbalanced as Rorschach himself? Then what?

Now - what if whole populations/nations were to adopt this attitude? If you fall into this status in the West we call it fascism or perhaps Nazism. (Remember Hitler came to power to right wrongs as the marauding gangs were terrorizing Germans in the uncertain times after WWI. He was a 'hero' to the public.)

If you are not a Western country, though, we call you a terrorist state, and bomb the hell out of you. Thereby proving bombs delivered by aircraft that kill innocents are more 'right' than bombs delivered by individuals that kill innocents. But, then again, isn't that Adrienne's point as well? It is for the greater good that I will kill all these people!

But here Moore throws us one more twist, the 'joke' that the jokester Comedian can't deal with. Unlike Rorschach, though, the Comedian falls short in the hero department in this final test. He could not bring himself to oppose Adrienne's actions, knowing he would die in the effort. Thus, his un-heroic lack of resolve sealed his fate with a passive gesture - by finally starting to crack when he couldn't resolve the internal conflict.

Yet again, while you cannot say you 'admire' Rorschach, at least he has no problem trying to do what he deems right, and without fear. Who in their right mind would attack Adrienne, second only to the incredible Dr. Manhattan in power? And of the few that would try, who would do so with only a fork as a weapon?

But Rorschach is equally brave in his resolve standing against all the 'heroes' by telling them to go to hell at the end of the book for covering up Adrienne's crime.

Stalking out into the icy cold to continue his attempt to thwart Adrienne's success should have been enough. With no coat, no transportation, no help, he will certainly die in the snow. But despite the fact the cold ought to kill him, Dr. Manhattan makes it final and summarily terminates Rorschach.

Thus Rorschach's demise can be construed in normal heroic sacrificial terms, and might be redemptive, and positive, and the final, traditional proof he was a hero. Rorschach alone continued to fight for 'righting wrongs' even though he himself told us at the start of the book if the choice were his, he'd let the dirty and evil world die rather than help it.

Where the Comedian, in death, shows he was always a puppet, never a hero. First he was a puppet to his sexual urges, coming to the 'hero' business too young, and using his strength not for good, but for self gratification. Finally, we see he continued to sell out, becoming a puppet to his government. He comes to his end when he becomes tangled in his own strings - he could not face the truth that standing against Adrienne might save lives, but would cost him his own. His fall from his high tower is an ultimate example of having climbed too high on the weak reeds of his morals, and when his puppet strings are finally cut, he has no place to stand, and falls forever. That Rorschach considers the world 'on the streets' a 'hell' where monsters dwell is yet another fine symbolic touch.

So, the ultimate irony in a book of ironies, that killing a mask to keep the secret to stop the events was bad. Yet killing a mask to 'keep' the secret is now deemed 'good.'

The Truth Behind the Mask – or in front of it?

Perhaps that is Moore's sharpest touch - he calls them masks, not heroes. That alone is telling. But there is also much to be said about those masks, as it turns out.

- Rorschach's mask is his world - a place of black and white that is always shifting. What is wrong 'today' might be right 'tomorrow' or in a different context, but Rorschach can't see that.
- Dan's 'mask' - his goggles - lets him see things clearer than he can in real life.
- Silk Spectre 2 has no mask, and really is the same self-centered person either way. Though her suit showcases her sexuality, while she claims she is revolted by her mother using sex to 'get ahead.' Yet Laurie uses it herself, with Dr. Manhattan and with Dan, for self satisfaction. But her entire life is a ying/yang to her mother's embrace of sexuality. Her mother understood she was using her sexuality to boost her career, not lying to herself that she was 'doing good.'
- Dr. Manhattan, of course, not only has no mask, but no clothing of any kind, and hides nothing from the world. It has nothing to do with sexuality, just the lack of pretense, artifice, or any wants or needs. Though if that were really true, why dump his wife for Laurie?
- Adrienne, of course, gave up his mask when Dr. Manhattan put them out of business - yet we find out his face *is* his mask. We, and the world, do not see who he really is. He is more hidden than anyone in the book.

Of course, the theme of the book is how what is good is really bad in most popular culture outlets, isn't it? We cheer for the heroes in comics - as they trample the rights of others because we've been assured they know what is ultimately right, so it is ok. We embrace Dirty Harry, and the Shadow before him, for gunning down the bad guy, and cutting through the red tape. Isn't that another 'mask' hiding the truth? We WANT the action, and are willing to believe it is 'ok' for the vicarious thrill?

But if it is about how in comics good is bad, notice too that the redemptive moment for Dr. Manhattan is his recognition and coming to grips with the 'reality' that out of a 'bad' thing - Sally's rape - came a 'good' thing - her child, whom Sally loved, he loved, and Dan loves, and of course, even the Comedian loved. Is this not a counterpoint to the fact that in this book, much bad comes of things meant to be good? Rorschach's pursuit of evil as he defines it drives him to do evil to innocents. Breaking fingers of a random person in a bar? Isn't that 'the end justifies the means?' And in the end, that's the point of Adrienne's entire plot. He will do the ultimate 'bad' thing - kill millions - to achieve something good. Or so he believes.

Which goes to the larger question, then, that out of a 'bad' thing - Adrienne's attack - does a 'good' thing - world union and peaceful co-existence - come?

If so, was it really worth putting your name on a listing that will rank you as one of the top 5 murderers of all time? But you are saving the world! Of course, didn't Hitler believe HE was doing something ultimately to 'save' his country by eliminating those that he saw as dragging Germany down?

So, Mass Murder is OK if you do it for the Right Reasons?

Does Adrienne's effort at mass murder make it ok because he is an equal opportunity murderer? No one class or group is identified, so all will die as 'equals.' And of course, the fact that there is no malice involved makes it ok, right? Isn't it the same as choosing who has to leave the overcrowded nuclear fallout shelter so that those remaining people inside will survive?

Of course, Moore also hints that perhaps Adrienne might not be totally altruistic. The allusions to Alexander are everywhere. And like Alexander, hasn't he convinced himself that uniting the known world is for the best of everyone involved? Add to that the fact that no one else has ever achieved world domination except perhaps old Alex, but that couldn't have any implication for Adrienne could it? He'd gladly die to do it, if necessary - so he says - but notice; he gladly sacrifices others, not himself. And isn't it funny: now that Dr. Manhattan is leaving, Adrienne *must* stay alive. He will become the most necessary man since the world will need 'smarts' to prepare for the threat from outer space. Wow - what a coincidence! Lucky he's around to help!

So, could it be that all this happened really because Adrienne was tired of playing second fiddle to Dr. Manhattan? So tired he dropped out of the hero business because Manhattan, who could see ahead and behind with 20/20 vision, made Adrienne, who could only postulate based on 'knowledge' and 'superior intelligence,' superfluous? Isn't every step in Adrienne's plan based on outwitting not the humans, but Dr. Manhattan? He even couches his reasons in the fact that Dr. Manhattan's shield might not be able to stop ALL the nukes. Wow - what a nice guy. Helping the world by taking some of the load off that poor old blue guy who had all this placed on his shoulders.

With Great Power Comes ... What?

So, in the end, isn't the entire book truly the real-life response to Stan Lee's Credo? ('With great power comes great responsibility.') Moore's Corollary, if you will, harkens back to real life, and asks, if you give people superior powers, 'Who watches the Watchmen?' As we've seen above, it isn't completely outside the realm of reality. Remember, Hitler came to power as a 'hero' to Germany, when gangs were terrorizing the public, his gangs (sometimes the same people) re-asserted order. Hmmm. And he eventually came to believe mass murder

was necessary to save his country. Yet WWII proved mass murder was wrong, even when it is approved by the government, right? Right? Yet ignorant of the subtleties of history, we live vicariously through comic books and the action movies they have inspired. But Moore makes us evaluate our choices, and ironically, in the 25 years since *Watchman* appeared, we see the Stan Lee prototypical hero in the comics replaced by those more akin to Moore's *Watchmen*.

It is interesting to realize that many of today's comic's heroes would qualify as the 'bad guys' in a Stan Lee comic.

Ironically, Moore's Corollary to Lee's Credo does not appear to embrace Lord Acton's Rule ('Absolute Power Corrupts Absolutely') since it is NOT Dr. Manhattan, who does have absolute power, who is corrupted. Moore's rule aims at the modern world: Well-meaning 'heroes' become co-opted – someone used by others to further their own needs. (Who isn't co-opted in this book? Night Wing 2, who resigned rather than submit or fight. And again, Rorschach – because he's crazy.

But in our world, anyone that doesn't get co-opted (i.e., refuses to 'sell out') is considered crazy by society anyway, right?

Dr. Manhattan is the true example of the dangers of allowing yourself to be co-opted. First, as a weapon in the 'hot' Cold War to Nixon's ultimate gain, and finally as an unwitting henchman to Adrienne. But that has happened since his creation - not as Dr. Manhattan, but as a child unable to push past his father. Which makes him much like Silk Spectre 2! Despite the reality that they are the Alpha and Omega of the hero world as she is the weakest and he is certainly the strongest of all the 'masks.' Both are simply pawns in someone else's game. (Nixon's, Adrienne's, etc.)

Only in his choice of the Silk Spectre 2 as a lover does Manhattan show any free will - and he seems to claim that was ordained, too. So in the end, he is leaving to get away from those that are pushing him around.

Of course to me, the 'ULTIMATE' irony in the book is that we see how fleeting such a uniting sacrifice can be. We saw it happen for real in 2001 with the sacrifice of the Twin Towers 'uniting' America - and we see how, like Nixon in the book, politicians today will twist or trade anything for their own gain, and screw up a good thing as quickly as humanly possible. So we now know that in the 'theory' posed by the book, all the lives lost, beginning with the Comedian's and ending with Rorschach's, and the million or so in between, would actually be meaningless in a few years....

Of course, Moore told us that anyway, with his sly ending with Rorschach's journal heading to publication. I also thought he was saying, "The truth is out there – but no one believes it." (Oops. That's the X-Files mantra.)

Ok, it is good, but is it Literature?

What is the defining point of 'literature?' It is the fact that it takes what we bring it, and gives us back something meaningful, no matter what our level of ability, or need, is? We can read *Huck Finn* as a youth, and see an exciting adventure story, but it might also plant a seed about 'well, Jim is black, but Huck treats him like a real person. Hmmm.' We read the same book again as young adults, and see it is not Jim that is different, it is the rest of

society, pushing in on the 'natural' order of things, as represented by the characters that screw with them as Huck and Jim pass down the 'peaceful' river.

And then we read it again as adults, and see that it is Twain, writing an 'adventure' that might pull in EVERYONE, but is trying to educate his country that their beliefs about what's right and what's wrong on racial issues is totally incomprehensible with facts. But it is significant that Twain does it by pulling strings, since confronting his countrymen directly would only get him strung up from the nearest tree.

Vonnegut achieves the same thing with *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Look at war as war, not as a heroic act, or a once a week entertainment show, or a movie of 'good guys' and 'bad guys', like most of the 1960's movies were. He tells a real story, but has to dress it up with a science fiction plot to make it outlandish enough to be believed.

But Moore isn't doing anything like that, is he?

Let's see - Moore gets us to look at real society circa 1986, and dresses it up with a postulate of what happens if we had heroes as in comic books or movies.

- What if those heroes continue to have blind faith in those 'above' us? What could happen? Or what if a guy said, 'my country, right or wrong' and broke all the rules on his own, and decided to supply arms to one group, to get money to supply arms to someone that Congress had specifically said we can't sell arms to. Or would it matter if the President had ok'd it, but he lied to protect the President? Why ask – that never happens in real life, right? (See Oliver North, media star.)

Moore then looks at popular culture and their willingness to follow - anybody. He looks at the power and the powerful, but examines the believe that the majority rules.

- He also shows us what happens when crowds get to rule - they can be easily and yet covertly manipulated by people with an agenda of their own (the anti-vigilante rule, and many other points in the book.) No crowd has ever been led into rising by newspapers, (Remember the Maine?), radio (Are you now, or have you ever been...), a TV report (Four Cops Innocent on King Beating) or a misplaced belief as interpreted by others, have they? (anyone for Rush? Or any of the rest of the TV Ranters?) At least never in America, right?

Moore also takes on the reality that humans are human. Perhaps, he is saying, some of the problem is when you 'decide' who is a criminal, and who isn't, and then throw those that don't pass your test in a hole, and those that do get placed on a pedestal.

- That never happens in our world right? Everyone is treated fairly and equally? Hmmm. Let's see cocaine gets you a slap on the wrist, where crack gets you a set of handcuffs? Or if you are rich, you can circumnavigate the system and get a different standard applied? That doesn't happen here does it?

Or like Nixon in the book, where winning a brutal war by means that were far too costly in human lives you gets you a third, fourth and maybe a fifth term?

- Not that an invasion of a country that did nothing to us didn't get Reagan a bump (Grenada), or Bush re-elected (Iraq).

So let's look at Adrienne, where your choice of 'saving' the world might get you a war crimes trial, but since your motives were pure, it means you get a pass?

- Had we lost WWII, is it difficult to imagine Churchill hanging for his actions? Or Truman standing trial as a mass murderer for indiscriminately using a weapon deadly to non-combatants? Why not? When we won, didn't Nazi and Japanese commanders swing from the hanging tree? What about Saddam a few years ago?

So, really, ***The Watchmen*** is just a comic book, right? I mean, there is nothing in it that relates to our world. And really, the more you bring to the book, it is still the same book. You don't get anything else out of it. And the critics of the movie are completely correct - it is just an ugly, violent movie with no redeeming values at all...

Not bad for a monthly comic published once on cheap paper and muted colors almost 25 years ago.