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### **Creating Watchmen**

In the early-to-mid 1980s comic book superheroes were enjoying success as the playful and colorful pastime they were originally conceived to be. Superman defeated the bad guys, Batman stopped the robbers, and Captain America mopped up the remaining Nazis still hanging around after the war. Perhaps bored with the status quo and wanting for a greater deal of respect for the genre, comic writers began introducing more adult themes and bodies of work, while retaining the overall look and feel to the medium. There were still colorful pictures, flashy costumes and outlandish settings that could only or should only exist in the imaginations of those that conceived them, but with a new twist. Gone were the happy endings and the dodged bullets, and the smiles on the heroes' faces as they confronted evil. Society was nearing the 21st century, and the time had come to get real.

One of the breakthrough compositions of that time was "Watchmen," a mini-series told in twelve monthly installments in comic book form. Alan Moore wrote, Dave Gibbons illustrated, and the public buried themselves in what would become one of the most cherished literary works of all time, let alone the comic book world. Alan Moore's creative process and decision making in pulling together this story is the focus of this essay. First I will attempt a brief summarization of the plot, characters and overlying tones of the story. This will be followed by an examination of Moore's creative process as influenced by Freudian thought, and an overall deconstruction of the notion of a hero. Lastly I will equate two of the characters in the story to Harold Bloom's

theory on poetic influence. This will support my contention that the heroes in *Watchmen* are written from an emotional and fantastical state of mind in the effort to deconstruct the notion and relevance of a hero.

“*Watchmen*” is set in 1985 in the United States of America. Costumed superheroes abound, but there is only one true super powered being, a government-sponsored hero called Dr. Manhattan, who possesses God-like powers that make him nigh-omnipotent. Foreign relations are falling apart and the country is on the brink of nuclear war with the Soviet Union. The United States won the Vietnam War with help from Dr. Manhattan and Nixon is still President. The story focuses on a handful of costumed heroes, including the most-times narrator, a man dressed in a trench coat and a rubber mask who calls himself Rorschach. Rorschach is one the only masked adventurers to still be active after a government mandated law was passed banning superheroes. Uncovering a plot that he considers is aimed at killing “masks,” or superheroes, Rorschach teams with other past adventurers such as Nite Owl (a gadget wielding Batman archetype) and the Silk Spectre (former girlfriend of Dr. Manhattan.) Upon investigating a series of murders and clues, the three eventually catch up with another former masked hero, Adrian Veidt aka Ozymandias, and uncover his plot to scare the world into thinking an alien invasion is taking place so that Earth’s superpower countries will end hostilities and band together for the common good. Unfortunately for the people of New York, this plan is uncovered too late, as Veidt reveals he sent a self-destructing alien-like creature to New York 30 minutes ago, thereby ending the hostilities and achieving his apparent victory. The many twists, turns, correlations and symbols used throughout the story help to build the intrigue and set up the surprise ending in a manner of shock and horror.

Moore’s tale of heroism in a real-world setting (as opposed to a fantastic one) differs in

that it shows how vigilantes and costumed “heroes” might actually be treated and regarded in our society. In his essay *Deconstructing the Hero*, Iain Thompson explains that

Watchmen gives us a revolutionary history that asks, ‘What would have happened to us if costumed heroes had appeared in reality around the same time they appeared in the American pop consciousness? The story likely stems from Moore’s day-dreaming and thoughts, his wish to arouse emotions, the challenge of tackling real-world thoughts and concerns in a formerly youth-oriented medium, and his wish to correct reality via his fantasies. ...Moore implies that comic book heroes are projections of the fantasies of their readers-as well as their authors. (107)

Here Thomson is referring to Moore’s use of the character Rorschach as one that contends with the notion that fantasies of power and super heroics come not from a fear of being powerless to live up to our own ideals, but that these ideals themselves are projections that we cover over. Sigmund Freud explained creative writers as day-dreamers that do so as a replacement for play. Writers such as Moore will recreate in their minds situations that they would have acted out in play as children. But those situations must remain in their heads so as not to be the source of ridicule and persecution. In *Watchmen*, Moore uses emotion largely in the climax of the story, turning what is sure to be a victory for the marching heroes into utter defeat. This defeat is then shown to be a victory for mankind, by averting nuclear war. In this Moore is impressing upon us the ability to transform our emotions and to let us see from a new perspective, as Sigmund Freud states in his lecture on *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*: “...to arouse in us emotions of which, perhaps, we had not even thought ourselves capable” (Freud 42). We as readers did not enter this story wishing for millions of people to die in New York City. When it was revealed

that it happened, emotions likely included shock, horror and anger at the person who caused this. But then when it is revealed why it was done, emotions turn to perhaps sympathy and gratitude. I believe Alan Moore knows the power of emotion because he grew up experiencing his world through emotion. Like much of this story, this is his way of shocking the world into realizing a certain truth about itself: That the countries of the world must work together instead of against each other.

Tragedy, heroism and conflict have been transformed in this story into that of art, and as Freud explains, parts of which that are unpleasing in real life can become part of a pleasing whole: "...for many things which, if they were real, could give no enjoyment, can do so in the play of phantasy, and many excitements which, are actually distressing, can become a source of pleasure for the hearers and spectators at the performance of a writer's work..." (43). Another sequence in the story involves the character Rorschach, and his upbringing as an abused child in an unsafe home. His mother sells her body for money and he gets beaten and screamed at for happening upon it. He is beaten up and abused by bullies until finally fighting back with a fury that leaves one of them blinded by his own lit cigarette. Forced into state schools and constantly observed existence, his life as Walter Kovacs recedes further and further until his real persona of Rorschach the avenger dominates. As Rorschach he becomes a hero to the people (without their knowledge and consent, aided by the media and police disliking of his tactics,) and to the reader he is understood. His hatred of evil and what is wrong with the world is shared because the reader has lived his life with him and has observed what has lead him to this point. That is part of the reason why the harsh images of his upbringing are entertaining and pleasurable, because it leads to a better good. This also mirrors the story's climax and then murdering of millions to save the world.

Transforming the reader's view of heroism is also an important part of what Moore seems to dwell on when writing "Watchmen." Thomson says that "Watchmen helped accomplish this coming of age...by developing its heroes precisely in order to deconstruct the very idea of the hero, overloading and thereby shattering this idealized reflection of humanity and so encouraging us to reflect upon its significance from the many different angles of the shards left lying on the ground" (101). To bring this point home Moore creates Dr. Manhattan, a being in possession of powers unfathomable to mankind. He is able to grow and shrink to many magnitudes, can manipulate matter on the molecular level, and possibly more, as he leaves our plain of existence to explore his potential at the end of the story. The rest of the so-called "super heroes" are left feeling worthless after Manhattan almost single-handedly ends the Vietnam War, provides for new technological breakthroughs, and prevents nuclear war with just his imposing and all-powerful presence. But when he decides to leave Earth, his absence causes upheaval to the highest degree and his omnipotent power is looked down upon as "too high and mighty" to connect him to normal, everyday humans. Thomson describes, "...in Watchmen, the hero is destroyed by the superhero, who is more heroic than any hero, but whose extreme "heroics" are no longer recognizable as heroics" (106) and that "Watchmen develops its heroes precisely in order to ask us if we would not in fact be better off without heroes (109). This is implied heavily, as in the end of the story all of the heroic characters from the series are either off-world, dead, or integrated as normal citizens once again. The world has become a safe place for the time being, and evil has taken a backseat to fear-based optimism.

Two of the story's main characters, Dan "Nite Owl" Dreiberg and Laurie "Silk Spectre" Juspezyk seem to reflect on certain motifs called upon by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence*. Both Dan and Laurie are costumed adventurers that are taking on the mantle of heroes

as legacy bearers. Dan was preceded as Nite Owl by his hero, Hollis Mason. Laurie was inspired by her mother, Sally Jupiter, the former Silk Spectre. In this we see imitation in art, in life, in character and in lifestyle. Bloom quotes, in suggesting that influence was not a problem to a poet such as Ben Jonson, as seeing it more as health: "Of imitation, he says he means 'to be able to convert the substance or riches of another poet to his own use. To make choice of one excellent man above the rest, and so to follow him till he grow very he, or so like him as the copy may be mistaken for the original'" (Bloom 27). Moore describes in the story of how Dan Dreiberg always looked up to Hollis Mason, and aspired to be as good of a hero as he was one day, but that he will never get there. Laurie on the other hand never wanted to be like her mother, she was more or less pushed into the role when she was very young. This can be attributed to question posed by Bloom: "Is there not the shibboleth bequeathed us by Elliot, that the good poet steals, while the poor poet betrays an influence, borrows a voice?" (31). Perhaps Laurie is meant to be that betrayal to the heroic name her mother built up in her career. But the role of predecessors in this story plays an important one, in that it also shows how these newer versions of the heroes can be hindered by the legacy of the names they carry and the weight of the history upon that name. The triumph of Dan and Laurie in the end of the story (meaning that they survive and go on to live more normal lives) may be Alan Moore's way of saying that they beat the influence suggested by Bloom, that they were able to go through the motions of influence and were able to come out the other side stronger and not weaker.

In conclusion, the creative process used by Alan Moore in writing *Watchmen* includes emotional and fantastic elements that help to deconstruct the popular image of the hero and super hero. The dramatic climax and conclusion along with story elements that closely mirror yet slightly distort a reality much like ours cause our emotions to almost betray themselves, allowing

for a new perspective on things like the value of life itself. Also, the use of distressing and unpleasurable elements can help to drive a story, and to engage the reader in by actually entertaining them. Finally, Moore's use of influence runs the course of positive and negative influences, while arriving at a favorable conclusion and perhaps resolution at the end.

"Watchmen" is truly a breathtaking work of art that resides on a different level than other comic books of its time or any era.

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