

Moore and Gibbons's *Watchmen*: Exact Personifications of Science

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■ Comic books seem to be eternally stigmatized as garbage for children's minds and sources of potential revenue for the toy market; however, every decade or so a comic book or visionary creator enters the medium, taking the comic world in a different, more adult direction. In the fifties, in his book *Seduction of the Innocent* and in his testimony before Congress, Fredric Wertham, a child psychologist, made people aware of the adult themes that could be transmitted through this so-called kiddie-lit. In the sixties, Robert Crumb rose to prominence with his underground stories—comics that he and others would use to explore such issues as sexual liberation and drug use. These sporadic and often missed explosions of seriousness in the medium, however, have always paled in comparison to the esteem many European and Asian countries give to their graphic literature. But in 1985, two works appeared that would change the way many Americans would view comic books: Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, a dark and violent view of Batman in his fifties, and *Watchmen*, by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, which examines, in a science fiction setting similar to George Orwell's *1984*, the cost of achieving world peace. Moore, as the writer, uses his superhero characters—if they can truly be called “heroes”—as symbolic representations of hard and soft sciences and of their potential, shaped by human failings, to create a utopia.

The origins of *Watchmen* stem from Moore's desire to do a comic series about superheroes and the effect they might have if they were placed in a “real world” setting; there would be real, contemporary issues, such as graphic street crime, the controversy over nuclear disarmament, and human sexual relations; many of these topics would be based around historical events, such as the New York City murder of Kitty Genovese in 1964 or the repercussions of the Vietnam War. Moore already had some success as a writer in his native England and had managed to rejuvenate a tired horror comic, *Swamp Thing*, for DC Comics by turning it from conventional horror and superhero fare to a more introspective

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examination of the human condition. DC had recently purchased another company's comic book universe, which amounted to roughly seven not-so-famous heroes from the sixties and early seventies. Moore hoped to twist these characters to fit his plans; however, the editors at DC were unwilling to let their properties be turned to a project so dark and untried as what Moore suggested. This led to a decision by Moore and Gibbons to create characters based on those they had hoped to use. Both agreed later that this was for the best; it allowed them to explore avenues of development they had previously ignored. Many of the characters' idiosyncracies came from this necessity to reconstruct them along the frames of the previous characters' personas. As inspiration will usually have it, this led to the development of traits previously unplumbed by the creators and served to further—albeit haphazardly—the “real world” aspect the creators sought to evoke.

Likewise, as the characters developed somewhat unsystematically, the story did the same as the writer and artist bounced ideas off each other, continually adding to the depth of the book. The work began to take on a much more postmodern feel as the layers of the book began to deepen. Small stories within the main story began to take place, and the New York City environment itself became as crucial a character in its revelations about the so-called heroes as the actual human characters did. By examining the setting, one sees clues that point toward the eventual outcome of the book. Seemingly insignificant props placed in the background play a crucial role, shaping the tone and narrative of the work; the creator stumbled upon many of these, such as the factually based “smiling crater” on Mars, coincidentally, but this only served to strengthen their resolve that they were indeed on the right track. Posters promoting such films as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *Things to Come* on the placard for the “Utopia Theater” lend hints as to the method the series mastermind will use to achieve his ultimate goal. The theme of the Gordian Knot and how it runs from a locksmith to Mars to Alexander the Great also points to the architect of the mystery behind the plot and to his motives. A duel storyline in the novel, detailed in a comic book about pirates read by the child at the newsstand, parallels one man's descent into the abyss in order to create peace on Earth—a modern-day Dr. Frankenstein. As these story characteristics begin to take shape in a seemingly unplanned manner, the authors sought to use the last few pages of each installment similarly. In most comic books, these pages are reserved for letters sent by readers commenting on previous issues or chapters as they hit the newsstands. With merely twelve issues in which to tell their story, and since responses would not begin arriving until the third or fourth issue/chapter, Moore and Gibbons opted to forego a letters column and instead fill those pages—at least in the initial issues—with chapters of an imaginary autobiography mentioned in the main story. This worked so well for them and added so much to their narrative that they decided to exclude the letters section from future chapters as well; in its place would be such seemingly inconsequential and unrelated

items as articles on ornithology or a police report and psychiatric evaluations of one of the characters. Interviews with or articles about the main players in the story were developed in these sections and further served to define the characters and the bleak world they inhabited.

It was to be something of an experiment for Moore and Gibbons, but it grew beyond anything they had imagined as they opened a door to an idea, only to be drowned in the possibilities it released. The astounding aspects of this novel are that the creators managed to include most of these ideas—such as the Hiroshima lovers' graphitti silhouette and the murder of Kitty Genovese—and, as admitted by the pair, that there were such coincidences in the way these details, like the smiley face crater on Mars and Rorschach's smiley-face button, interlocked and supported one another. The authors admit to incredible fluke occurrences in their research for the book, and they took these as omens for their success; even as they watched, somewhat helpless in the flood of ideas they were discovering, the novel was evolving into much more than they had envisioned. It continues to surprise them and most readers with each examination.

The importance of science is made clear from the beginning of the novel when, in the first chapter, the reader is immediately made aware of the advanced science at play in the story. Moore immediately and subtly lays out the advanced technology used by the characters in their 1985—a 1985 where Nixon is still president, a 1985 where people drive electric cars and eat at a chain of Indian restaurants instead of burger joints. Cars are electric; readers learn later that one of the heroes has made this possible. Airships travel the skies between buildings much like those in the film *Blade Runner*. It is in the heroes themselves, however, that Moore proposes his primary question: Is humanity responsible and humane enough to properly use science? As such, he personifies the sciences within the major characters and through the text, asks the reader if placing the power of various sciences in the hands of the subject morality and wisdom of human beings is a wise idea. In the minor characters, Moore demonstrates to some extent the results of applied science. Both instances serve to prove that mankind is unable to responsibly handle the power of science.

The story begins with the masked adventurer Rorschach investigating the death of a man he learns to be the Comedian, a former comrade and current government operative. Rorschach immediately jumps to the conclusion that this may be some sort of vendetta against adventurers of the past decades, most of whom were forced to retire or go underground when a law banning the fad of masked adventuring restricted all but those for whom the government had use. Rorschach sets out to warn his former friends and, as he does, he introduces the reader to the remainder of the leading cast: Nite Owl, a.k.a. Daniel Drieberg, a wealthy ornithologist; Ozymandias, a.k.a. Adrian Veidt, "the smartest man in the world," a billionaire industrialist and philanthropist; the Silk Spectre, a.k.a. Laurie Juspechzyk, a woman forced into the role of hero by her mother. Laurie is also the girlfriend of Dr. Manhattan, a.k.a. Jon Osterman, a nuclear physicist and the only real

“superhero” in the book, with amazing extrahuman abilities, used by the government as a weapon against the communists. None take Rorschach’s assumptions very seriously, since he has a reputation as a paranoid rebel; suddenly, however, coincidences begin to take shape that support Rorschach’s claims. Dr. Manhattan is accused of unknowingly giving cancer to his close associates; he leaves Earth out of guilt. Rorschach is framed for the murder of one of his old adversaries and is captured by the police, who have wanted him for more than a decade due to his violent methods. Adrian is the target of an attempted assassination. Dan and Laurie break Rorschach out of prison, and they discover the person behind the plots against them, plots linked to a grander one involving mass murder as a way of frightening the nations of the world into unity and peace. This mastermind wants to save the world from itself and, to do so, will kill all of New York City if he must. During this search for the truth, the characters each discover smaller truths about themselves: Laurie comes to a realization about her father, Jon about what it means to be human, Dan about his feelings for Laurie, etc. These “learned truths” reveal much about the aspect science plays in the representations of three characters: Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan, and Ozymandias.

Rorschach, Walter Kovacs, as he investigates the death of the Comedian, is the first character encountered by the reader. Like his name implies, his link to the sciences comes through psychology. He wears a mask that resembles a Rorschach test itself—a black fluid trapped between a layer of white and a layer of transparent material, with the black constantly changing its pattern to feature test upon test upon test. While he is the link that initially joins the main characters as he seeks out each to deliver the news of the Comedian’s death, his own link—besides the obvious symbolic one of his name—is not truly explored until chapter six, after he has been captured by the police. In this chapter, a psychologist comes to examine the imprisoned Rorschach, the man now revealed to be the nameless man in the background who has, up until this point, walked the streets carrying a sign announcing that “The End is Nigh,” his true identity unknown to the reader.

This examination of Rorschach and the revelation of his true identity and past are the most obvious links of this character to the soft sciences. Rorschach was created entirely by his environment, and it is that environment which has driven him to the extreme behavior he so often demonstrates. At first, the psychiatrist uses Rorschach tests to examine the patient, but the reader sees what the doctor cannot; Rorschach lies in his responses. What Kovacs sees are not the simple, pleasant images that lead the doctor to believe his patient is making progress but images from Walter Kovacs’s past, which reveal his motivations for becoming Rorschach, Walter’s truest identity, and memories that pushed him into his obsessive behavior. Walter sees in the ink spots his prostitute mother turning a trick, a trick which skipped out on full payment for her services, a trick Walter was beaten for interrupting. He was removed from his mother’s custody and placed in an orphanage until he left during his late teens to work as

an unskilled laborer in the garment industry. When he was twenty-two, a woman failed to pick up a dress made of an experimental fabric, "Viscous fluids between two layers of latex, heat and pressure sensitive. . . . Black and white. Moving. Changing shape . . . but not mixing. No gray." The woman who ordered the dress never collected it; she thought it was ugly. The young Walter put the dress away and forgot about it and her for two years. In 1964 she turned up dead, raped and murdered in an alley while almost forty neighbors listened to her screams or watched her torture; her name was Kitty Genovese, and she presents still another example of how Moore draws the horror of reality into the story. This is a spark that proves to be the ignition of Walter's real life, the ignition but not the full flame. Walter cut up the dress and made it into "a face that [he] could bear to look at in the mirror" (Moore and Gibbons 6:10).¹

He joins the fad of costumed crimefighting not for fun, but out of guilt—guilt over what his entire race has become, guilt spawned not just from the events surrounding Kitty Genovese's death but from his own misbegotten upbringing. In 1975, Walter has an epiphanal experience that will overwrite his Kovacs personality into that of Rorschach. In that year, a child is kidnapped under the false assumption that she is related to a wealthy family; Rorschach promises to return her safely. He tracks the criminal to his home, only to discover the man has killed the child and fed her to his German shepherds rather than admit his mistake. "Walter as Rorschach" silently examines the chopping block and the tools, the potbellied stove where a few scraps of the girl's clothes remain, and a thighbone over which the dogs fight. Walter closes his eyes when he kills the dogs and has fully become Rorschach when he opens them; these images of the dogs, heads split by his blows, resurface during his testing by the psychiatrist. It proves to be the turning point in his life. He no longer "mollycoddles" the criminals by allowing them to live and kill again or by walking away from the encounter with his foes merely bound. The kidnapper and murderer of the child is faced with a choice upon his capture: Cut off his arm with a hacksaw to escape his handcuffs, or burn to death in the building Rorschach sets afire. From this point forth, Kovacs becomes a mask for Rorschach instead of the converse as it had been. He is no longer "soft" on criminals, as he puts it; he is more often than not, ready and willing to kill them to rid society of their filth (6: 14–26).

This leads to a conclusion at the end that will cost Rorschach his life. There is no compromise when it comes to evil; it must be cut out and destroyed like the cancer it is. At the novel's end and faced with the decision whether or not to expose the hoax which has frightened the world into peace, he chooses truth, knowing that the other heroes will kill him to protect their grand lie. Those who disagree with him justify the act in that millions have already died for world unity; would Rorschach make their sacrifices in vain? However, Rorschach will not lie, and the others kill him to protect the peace: "Joking, of course. . . . No. Not even in the face of Armageddon. Never compromise. . . . Evil must be punished. People must be told" (12:20, 23).

Rorschach is the epitome of soft science not only in his obvious connection to psychology but in his subtle connections to it as well. Two easily recognized examples of this link are revealed in his relationship with his psychiatrist and in the way he is shaped by his environment. The former begins when Rorschach is captured by the police and is given a psychiatric exam involving, ironically, Rorschach tests. The subject knows the game, though, and gives safe, pat answers to the doctor's questions. The doctor is initially pleased with Rorschach's seeming progress but is troubled later by the easy answers as he studies Rorschach's file, so he chooses to review the same ink blots the following day. On the second showing, Rorschach reveals to the doctor what he truly sees and tells the psychiatrist that the knowledge will cost him more than the fame he gains from his patient is worth. Rorschach reveals the abuse through which his mother put him as a child and the inhumanity of the man who fed the child to his dogs (6:9–26). Kovacs is no more, and the doctor sees the validity of Rorschach's existence; he sees the necessity of the vigilante's ruthless presence, and it cannot help but color his view of the world from that point forth. Instead of the doctor helping Rorschach, Rorschach has brought the doctor around to his way of thinking. And this new outlook on the world is visible in the psychiatrist's later actions in the book where he now has no choice but to involve himself in the violence; he cannot look the other way (6:27; 11:20).

Secondly, the whole "nurture versus nature" debate is reawakened with Rorschach's examination. How much of the violence he exhibits is inherited from his prostitute mother and unknown father? On the other hand, this violent behavior may be due to the childhood home and the environment in which he continues to develop. He grows to adolescence in an abusive home and knows Kitty Genovese, the victim of a brutal rape and murder. He witnesses the barbarity of a man who killed a child for no reason and fed her to animals—animals he seemed to love more than other humans. The senseless violence hits too close to home. Is the violence a gene in Rorschach's family, carried by all those of his line, or does it spring from society's ills? Both are represented in Rorschach and his retributive outrage towards crime.

Dr. Manhattan, or Jon, is at the opposite end of the science spectrum; where Rorschach represents the soft, personal, somewhat subjective sciences, Jon represents the cold, hard, true mathematical and chemical sciences. He begins his life wanting to be a watchmaker like his father; however, while Jon is in his late teen years, the first atomic bomb is dropped, and Jon's father sees no future in watchmaking. Jon becomes a nuclear physicist and, one day in the laboratory, is caught on the wrong side of an experiment that removes the intrinsic field from objects. Months later, Jon manages to reintegrate his body, but he now has great control over matter and energy. The government immediately capitalizes on this and names him "Dr. Manhattan," making him a very public deterrent to the cold-war Russians. The heroes from the fifties begin to feel outclassed by Jon and his incredible abilities; however, Jon is satisfied simply to have a place in

which to continue his experiments. Separated as he is from normal humans by his neon blue appearance and godlike powers, Jon begins to distance himself from humanity. He now has to guess at what things a “human” woman such as Laurie might want from a mate and does not see that he is failing to meet a need for her in the area of human spiritual connection. During a television interview, Jon is accused of unwittingly giving cancer to many of his past associates and leaves Earth for Mars to ponder his existence. He returns for Laurie and brings her back to the red planet in an effort to rediscover his lost humanity; he manages to do this to some extent and comes to realize the gulf his power must cause between him and humanity. He returns to Earth too late to save New York from Veidt’s plan, but it is these newly discovered qualities that lead him to question the methods by which peace has been forced on the planet.

Jon is the ultimate scientist—so much so that he loses touch with real life and the applications of knowledge beyond the theoretical. Until Laurie reawakens his humanity towards the end the book, Jon is on a downward slide of his disassociation from the human race. Moore relates this in his notes:

Try to imagine what it would be like to be [Dr. Manhattan]. The desk you’re sitting at and the chair you’re sitting on give less of an impression of reality and solidity to you if you know you can walk though them. . . . Everything around you is somehow more insubstantial and ghostly, including the people you know and love. . . . While most of us are intellectually aware of that both our bodies and the reality surrounding us are composed of billions of gyrating waves or particles or whatever the current quantum theory states, we can forget this disconcerting fact quite easily. . . . [Dr. Manhattan] would not be so fortunate. He would know himself and the world about him from a perspective far more alien than that of the most rabid quantum theorist. He would experience the paradoxes of reality at a quantum scale of existence: that all things can exist in two places at the same time, that certain particles [tachyons] can travel backwards through time and exhibit physical properties that are exactly the reverse of normal physical laws. . . . [Dr. Manhattan] is no longer human enough to be driven mad by the experience, he is no longer human enough to feel an attachment to the world and its concerns. . . . (*Watchmen: Special Edition*, “Minutes”)

After his transformation, Jon, like God, experiences every minute of time simultaneously. In 1959, he knows what will happen in 1969 because he is already there; he knows about JFK’s assassination at his rebirth because he was already experiencing it, unable to change the course of history:

Janey: So what you re saying is you knew he’d get shot? Jon, I . . . I mean, if you’re serious, I mean, why didn’t you do something?

Jon: I can’t prevent the future. To me, it’s already happening. . . . In 1959, I could hear you shouting here, now in 1963. Soon we make love.

Janey: Just like that? Like I’m a puppet? Jon, you know how everything in this world fits together except people. Your prediction’s way off mister.

Jon: “No. We make love right after Wally arrives with the earrings I ordered for you. [Janey interrupts, but Wally comes to the door.] (*Watchmen* 4:16)

He declines dinner with his friends to locate a “gulino” which would validate his “supersymmetrical theory.” He creates a double of himself so he can make love to Laurie and continue working on an experiment; Laurie is noticeably upset at his lack of attention (1:23; 3:4, 5). He is obsessed with the abstract principles of the universe and, only at the end of the novel, is he interested in how they apply to life—Veidt: “But you’ve regained interest in human life.” Jon: “Yes. I think I’ll *create* some” (Moore’s emphasis, 12:27).

If Rorschach is the ultimate personification of the soft sciences and Jon is the totality of the hard ones, Adrian Veidt, Ozymandias, is the perfect melding of the two. He is born wealthy and orphaned young, but he gives away all of his inheritance in order to prove that he can achieve greatness on his own, without any head-start. Idolizing Alexander the Great, Veidt retraces his hero’s path and tries to understand how Alexander, at so young an age, had come to rule and unite most of the civilized world. Veidt, too, becomes a costumed adventurer during the late sixties, but he foresees the end of the fad and retires two years before costumed vigilantism is banned in 1977. He is more interested in the future than the present, more interested in the big world picture than the local one; the “smartest man in the world,” he sees the growing escalation of nuclear armament and realizes before anyone else the probable coming holocaust. It is then—years before the events of the book take place—that he begins to implement his plans for saving the world through uniting it without anyone knowing how or why the new world order has arrived. He is not out to conquer the world but rather to save it from itself. It is not power or fame that he sought, for his part in the united world will never be known; he has killed to protect that secret, but his pride, his limitless hubris in the belief that only he could save the world, leads to his possible failure. No one will know that he saved the world, but Veidt will emphasize the belief to those that discover his secret that only he could ever accomplish such a task.

Veidt is the embodiment of the soft science; however he manipulates the hard ones to achieve his plans. He manipulates the future by analyzing the past. He studies Alexander and Ramses II to acquire the wisdom they used to bring peace to their enormous kingdoms (11:8, 10). He studies the backgrounds and weaknesses—both physical and psychological—of those liable to interfere with or pose a threat to his goals, such as Jon and the Comedian, in order to plan for their removal (11:19, 24–26). Adrian analyzes the sociology and trends of the present; he builds his fortune on knowing the psychology of people. He sits before his wall of television screens, analyzes what he sees and plans accordingly (8:7, 8). He knows the audience to which he plays in both his business- and peace-related goals. Like Rorschach, he knows the value of appearance, violence, and reputation, and he knows the how to make the most of them. Like Jon, Veidt genetically builds an “alien” which he will teleport—technology gained from Jon—to New York City. The enormous monster will die on arrival,

but using cloned genes from a psychic sensitive, the creation will send psychic shockwaves around the world, killing millions in the immediate vicinity and causing brain damage and nightmares worldwide. When Veidt implements his plan, he achieves the result he knew he would. The world sees this as an alien invasion; hostilities between nations halt in order to combat what they believe is a greater menace. Veidt achieves world peace by frightening the countries into working together, much like the alien visitor does in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. It seems that Veidt has taken everything into account—everything but the fact that neither Alexander's empire nor the works of Shelley's poetic Ozymandias survived the kings' deaths. Adrian is a perfect melding of the sciences, but in the end he is still human.

While Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan, and Ozymandias are one-sided representations of science, the other major cast members, the Silk Spectre and Nite Owl, demonstrate the affects of these sciences on "ordinary" people. Laurie, the Silk Spectre, can easily be seen as a character containing all of the psychological conflicts personified in Rorschach. Sally, her mother and the original Silk Spectre of the forties, seeks to relive her youth vicariously through her daughter and compensate for all of the deficiencies she possessed as a hero. Sally trains her teen daughter mercilessly, yet she will not allow Laurie to be included in discussions of the older heroes; she actively seeks to suppress certain information concerning her own past—both as a heroine and a mother—for there are incidents in it that may frighten her daughter from the path Sally has chosen for her. These missing pieces of Laurie's life will be revealed in chapter 9, when she realizes the truth about her father, a truth hidden from her by those closest to her and repressed by herself. While Rorschach raises the question of "nature versus nurture," Laurie answers it to some extent when she breaks free of her mother's conditioning and begins to make realizations and choices for herself.

If Laurie is like a humanized Rorschach, Nite Owl can similarly be compared to Dr. Manhattan. While Jon is interested in science for science's sake—he wants to know merely to know—Dan is interested in science for the sake of its beauty and for its value to the heroic human spirit. He is an ornithologist and, in his essay, "Blood from the Shoulder of Pallas," at the end of chapter 7, he reflects that it is possible to study birds so closely that the wonder of them is lost.

Is it possible, I wonder, to study a bird so closely, to observe and catalogue its peculiarities in such detail, that it becomes invisible? Is it possible that while fastidiously calibrating the span of its wings or the length of its tarsus, we somehow lose sight of its poetry? That in our pedestrian descriptions of a marbled or vermiculated plumage we forfeit a glimpse of living canvases, cascades of carefully toned browns and golds that would shame Kadinsky, misty explosions of color to rival Monet? I believe that we do. I believe that in approaching our subject with the sensibilities of statisticians and dissectionists, we distance ourselves increasingly from the marvelous and spell-binding planet of imagination whose gravity drew us to our studies in the first place. (7:29–30)

This reflects exactly what has happened to Jon, who has become a scientist to the extent of losing his humanity, his appreciation for the beauty of science. Dan recognizes the danger of such a mindset and continues to expound upon it when, in the same chapter, he explains how technology—represented in his prototype exoskeleton—can be dangerous when not tempered with humanity. With this realization, he becomes a humanized Jon—seeing all the wonder and potential of science but also its risks and responsibilities.

Although Moore and Gibbons give exact personifications of the potential uses of science, they are also quick to illustrate the need for emotion and humanity in decisions concerning the morality of such uses and the weaknesses these same human traits bring to any such implementation. Rorschach is all passion and no reason while Jon is the exact opposite. Rorschach will not change and thus is killed. Jon accepts Veidt's plan for the sake of those already dead and regains some of his humanity. Veidt, a blend of the two extremes, is conquered by that same humanity—too much pride; he sees himself as the only possible messiah for which mankind can hope, and he believes that in the universe his work alone is eternal. In this book, science has become a moral object lesson from the authors, working on many levels.

Note

1. Since the story was initially released as a monthly series, each of the book's chapters begins with page 1. Thus, references are given here with the chapter number followed by the page number(s). For example, this reference concerns chapter 6, page 10.

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