



**TO COMPROMISE OR NOT TO COMPROMISE,
THAT IS THE QUESTION:
WATCHMEN
AS ETHICAL AND POLITICAL DIALOGUE**

Three questions come to any mind that pauses to reflect on the philosophy and politics of superhero comics. First, if ordinary people were given extraordinary powers, or even just heightened mental and physical abilities, would they still follow conventional moral rules? Or would they use their powers and abilities to enrich themselves, to gain power over others? Second, even if they were satisfied to follow these rules *in general*, what

GREAT POWER AND GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

would they do when the commands of the state as embodied in policy and law *conflict* with commonsense morality? Would they act as government puppets, or reject these commands in loyalty to a higher ethical law? Third, is it enough to simply *enforce the law*, as most superheroes have been depicted as doing? Or are superpowered beings obliged to make the world a better place? These three questions – to do with morality, law and utopia – are at the core of *Watchmen*.

Watchmen was a special twelve-part series published by DC Comics in 1986–87, written by Alan Moore and drawn by Dave Gibbons. Up to then, Moore was known chiefly for his revival of *Swamp Thing* and *Miracleman*, and for his dystopian graphic novel *V for Vendetta*. The original plan was to revive superhero characters such as the Blue Beetle and the Question, which DC had bought from the defunct Charlton Comics. But after DC decided to use the Charlton characters in their original forms in the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series and beyond, Moore reimagined them and situated them in an entirely original universe outside of the complex multiverse of superheroes populating DC's titles in the 1980s. *Watchmen* represents the high point of graphic noveldom to this day due in part to its political and philosophical sophistication, and to its willingness to depict dialectically opposed ethical and political points of view without compelling the reader to adopt any single position.

Watchmen is a number of things. On a simple level, it's a combination of detective story, science fiction movie and pacifist creed. It takes place in a world where America and the Soviet Union are still fighting the Cold War, where Afghanistan is a flashpoint of global conflict, but where superheroes are very real, with costumed crime fighters making their debut shortly after Superman's own first appearance in *Action Comics*

TO COMPROMISE OR NOT TO COMPROMISE

in 1938.¹ More fundamentally, *Watchmen* is a deconstruction of the history of comics and of the superhero genre from the 1940s to 1980s, along with a dialogue or debate between a series of distinct ethical and political principles. In one of the few published academic commentaries on *Watchmen's* politics, Matthew Wolf-Meyer hints that the graphic novel can be read as a debate between political ideologies, concluding that the brutal masked crime fighter Rorschach is lionized by fans because he's a political conservative who fits into the anti-utopian discourse that comic book readers favour in order to maintain their subcultural position of difference within capitalist culture.² Yet Wolf-Meyer misses the ethical debate, which parallels, though doesn't entirely map on to, the political one. The core of both debates is the struggle between the grimy crime fighter Rorschach and Moore's ersatz Nietzschean *Übermensch*, Ozymandias, with Dr. Manhattan's moral relativism providing a sort of balance point for the Rorschach-Veidt ethical see-saw. I'll focus on the graphic novel as an ethical debate between three fairly distinct positions embodied in the characters Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan and Ozymandias, while also touching on the positions of the other three "Watchmen," the Comedian, Nite Owl II and Silk Spectre II. The differences between the various characters' ethical and political positions is key to understanding why, for many, Rorschach appears as the hero of the piece, despite Moore's own liberal sympathies and his at least implicit identification with Adrian Veidt. Moore did such a good job in sculpting Rorschach's character that from a purely ethical perspective he *is* the hero of the story, despite the lunacy of his ultra-conservative politics and the nobility of Adrian Veidt's intention to try to save the world from nuclear devastation.

GREAT POWER AND GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

The following chart lays out the ethical and political positions of the “Watchmen” themselves.³ This will serve as our map as we navigate our way through overviews of each of the six major characters in the graphic novel.

<i>CHARACTER</i>	<i>ETHICAL POSITION</i>	<i>POLITICAL IDEOLOGY</i>
Rorschach	Kantian/ Existentialist	Conservative Libertarian
Dr. Manhattan	Relativist	Statist (early), Nihilist (late)
Ozymandias	Act Utilitarian	Radical Liberal
Comedian	Hedonistic Nihilist	Authoritarian Conservative
Nite Owl II	Rule Utilitarian	Romantic Liberal
Silk Spectre II	Moral Sentimentalist	Compassionate Liberal

RORSCHACH AS KANTIAN EXISTENTIALIST

Walter Kovacs, a.k.a. Rorschach, is the most fascinating character in the series. He’s modelled on Charlton Comics’ The Question, a character without superpowers who, like Rorschach, wears a mask and a trench coat and prowls the streets in search of wrongdoers. Rorschach is a grimy version of the streetwise crime fighter who relies on his wits and determination alone, hearkening back in part to Will Eisner’s Spirit. His lineage with Steve Ditko’s The Question is important since Ditko, the

TO COMPROMISE OR NOT TO COMPROMISE

co-creator of Spider-Man, was a follower of Ayn Rand's objectivism, a pro-capitalist, anti-state libertarian philosophy that emphasized the individual's responsibility for their own actions and choices. Rorschach is vaguely Randian in many of his political pronouncements, though Rand is never directly addressed.

Wolf-Meyer argues that Rorschach's popularity (contrary to Moore's wishes) is based on the fact that he's misanthropic, has poor social skills and is thus ostracized from society, unlike the godlike Dr. Manhattan, or the handsome, rich, intelligent Veidt (508). Hence adolescent male comic fans' choice of Rorschach as their hero reflects their own condition of sub-cultural alienation. Wolf-Meyer further argues that this choice ends up conserving the Cold War status quo, of consumerism at home, and a war between East and West in the broader world. That misanthropic condition is clear from the start: Rorschach's social isolation and all-too-justified paranoia appear in the opening pages of the series as he prowls the streets, recording his grimly apocalyptic thoughts in his journal:

The accumulated filth of all their sex and murder will foam up about their waists and all the whores and politicians will look up and shout 'save us' ...and I'll look down and whisper 'no.' ... Now the whole world stands on the brink, staring down into bloody hell, all those liberals and intellectuals and smooth-talkers ...and all of a sudden nobody can think of anything to say. (#1, 1/3-5)⁴

His ramblings connect sexual promiscuity, crime and liberalism, making him sound like a Bible-belt social conservative. Yet all is not as it seems.

GREAT POWER AND GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

Although there's some truth in Wolf-Meyer's accusation, the real reason why Rorschach comes off as a hero (despite his rather extreme right-wing, though by no means pro-government, ideology) is the fact that he offers a sense of ethical certainty in a postmodern culture saturated with slippery slopes and moral relativism. Rorschach offers the reader a firm moral position that he won't compromise, even in the face of death. In the novel's finale, he shows truly admirable moral courage by refusing to keep quiet about Adrian Veidt's genocidal crime of killing three million New Yorkers in the pursuit of world peace (#12, 20/7-9). He pays for his "stubbornness" by being vaporized by Dr. Manhattan, proving that his belief in the Good transcends any concern for his own life. It's no accident that Richard Nixon is still president in Moore's fictional eighties-era America: after all, one can trace the origins of the culture of cynicism that still burdens American political life today to Nixon's corrupt regime and its offspring, the Watergate scandal of the 1970s. So it's not Rorschach's conservatism or ostracized social status that leads to the audience's identification with him, but his willingness to stick to his moral guns when everyone around him is all too willing to compromise with evil.

Rorschach's mother abused him as a child, earning a living as a small-time hooker. He grew up in a tough neighbourhood, and learned early on the value of fighting back against bullies: we see his brutality even in his youth when he savagely retaliates against a pair of tormentors. He's determined to fight back to negate his status as a victim, to not flinch when punishing the guilty. Later in his career, Rorschach is willing to use intimidation and torture to get information, and seems to have no concern for the rights of criminals. He got his start as a crime fighter after the rape and murder of Kitty Genovese in New York in 1964,

TO COMPROMISE OR NOT TO COMPROMISE

a real event that at least a dozen people witnessed from their windows and did nothing about, making the bad faith excuse that “someone else would deal with it.”⁵ Rorschach comments that Kitty’s murder forced him to face the true nature of human beings “behind all the evasions, all the self-deception,” leaving him ashamed (#6, 10/8).⁶ At the time of the murder, Kovacs is a garment worker. He constructs a mask made out of the special fabric that Kitty had supposedly ordered for a dress: since the black patterns in the fabric shift in symmetrical blots like the ink blots in a Rorschach test, he names himself after the psychiatrist (4/9). Like the patterns on his mask, you can read a diversity of meanings into a Rorschach card, each supposedly revealing your own true nature. The same goes for Rorschach the character.



The Dynamic Duo, Sixties Style: Rorschach and Night Owl set up a thin brown line against crime. (Alan Moore, writer; Dave Gibbons, art.) *Watchmen* #6, 15/2 (1987). © DC Comics

GREAT POWER AND GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

At first teaming up with Nite Owl, Kovacs submerges his identity fully into that of the brutal Rorschach after discovering in 1975 that a kidnapped girl named Blaire Roche had been murdered and her dismembered corpse fed to dogs. He burns the kidnapper alive, afterward becoming a masked avenger pure and simple. When the government passes the Keene Act in 1977 outlawing vigilantes, Rorschach doesn't retire like Nite Owl or sign up to work for the government, as the neo-fascist Comedian and moral relativist Dr. Manhattan have been doing for years: he leaves the body of a rapist in front of a police station with the note "NEVER!" pinned to it (#4, 23/8).

Politically, he's a libertarian conservative lionized by the right-wing conspiracy-mongering tabloid *The New Frontiersman*. He rejects conventional law, sheepish liberal morality and corrupt political authority. Ethically, he believes in a combination of Kantian universal laws and existentialist responsibility, berserkly pursuing retribution against criminals, breaking the Kantian imperative to not harm the innocent if it suits him (though to be fair, he doesn't see those he harms – e.g., the retired master criminal Moloch – as innocent). We get an early glimpse of Rorschach's ethics in the first chapter in a journal entry he writes during his investigation of the Comedian's murder where he bemoans the fact that no one cares about the crime: "there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished. Even in the face of Armageddon, I shall not compromise in this" (#1, 24/6). Structurally speaking, he's a Kantian: consequences don't matter, just the universal moral law. He's also a moral absolutist who sees the world in blacks and whites. Good and evil are distinct entities, and even though their incarnations in the world are in constant flux, they can always be perceived. His mask symbolizes this: though the black and white shapes

TO COMPROMISE OR NOT TO COMPROMISE

are constantly shifting, they never mix together. When he first sees the special fabric he uses to make his mask, with its shifting blobs of black and white, he says it's "very, very beautiful" (#6, 10/3). He admires its aesthetic sharpness as a symbol for his own search for moral clarity. Rorschach never compromises: in his last entry before he mails his journal to *The New Frontiersman* he says that he's happy to have lived a life free from compromise, seeing his own death on the horizon (#10, 22/6-7). He follows a vicious version of one part of the Kantian ethic: he never lies, and pursues the moral law regardless of the consequences. For instance, criminals must always be punished because the moral law, which we intuit through our reason, says this is necessary. For Kant, telling the truth was an example of an absolute moral law. Even if a murderer is at your door and asks you where your brother is, and he's at home with you, you can't lie to protect him because it's your duty to tell the truth, no matter what the consequences – though of course you can defend your brother against the murderer!

Mind you, Rorschach *does* seem to use people as the means to his ends, which Kant also said was wrong. But usually Rorschach uses only criminals present and past in this way. It's impossible to imagine that he'd sacrifice millions of men, women and children to achieve a goal, as Veidt does, however laudable that goal is. And he does his dirty work up close and personal: there's blood on his hands, unlike Veidt, who does much of his killing through servants and intermediaries or with fantastic technologies.

There's some debate over just how authentic a Kantian Rorschach is. J. Robert Loftis argues that the ultimate target of *Watchmen* is authoritarianism, with the various ethical philosophies and political ideologies explored in it merely rationalizations of the masked adventurer's pursuit of power (65).

GREAT POWER AND GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

He sees Rorschach's career as a shadow of deontology used to "rationalize fascist thuggery" (71). For Loftis, there are three problems with seeing Rorschach as a true Kantian. First, unlike a pure Kantian, for whom the rightness of an action depends on whether it follows a universalizable moral rule, Rorschach slips into consequentialist reasoning: he sometimes gauges the morality of his choices by their results. Loftis adds that Kant's logic never justifies Rorschach's "hypermasculine display of power and violence" (72). Instead Rorschach shows all the elements of classical fascism – obsession with moral decline, idolization of masculinity and the belief that democracy has failed. Second, Rorschach engages in simplistic, dichotomous black-and-white moral reasoning to treat people as wholly evil if they performed even one evil act, contrary to Kant's more subtle position. Third, Rorschach shows no respect for people as inherently worthy, as Kant believed we must, often using them as the means to his ends (72–73).

Yet for Jacob M. Held, on the other hand, Rorschach is an overly enthusiastic retributivist with pure motives and a real concern for justice and doing the right thing: punishing the guilty (21). He does follow the Kantian formula of giving criminals the dignity and respect they deserve. As moral agents, they are responsible for their actions. If they do the crime, they have, in effect, accepted that they might have to do the time. He is brutal, confident and proud, refusing to listen to others (30). But he also adheres to Kant's formula of rightful honour: he is "consistent, honest, transparent, and, above all else, honorable in his treatment of others. They are treated as their actions merit, they are respected as the authors of their acts" (27). The problem with his retributivism isn't the idea itself, but its excessively violent application.

TO COMPROMISE OR NOT TO COMPROMISE

We must admit that Rorschach is a nasty loner whose brutal retributivism would be tempered if he spent more time in dialogue with people like Dan Dreiberg. And his black-and-white reasoning does get out of hand from time to time. Yet Loftis' critique of Rorschach fails on multiple levels. First, it's one thing to say that a given person matches some idealized version of an ethical principle, while it's quite another to say that they're *trying* to do so, or *believe* that their actions embody the principle in question. So while Rorschach may be a partially failed Kantian, he's still a Kantian (as opposed to a utilitarian). Second, a cursory reading of high school history texts will show that the basic elements of "classical fascism" are the *Führerprinzip*, the need for a strong leader, and race hatred leading to military expansionism, and *not* the things Loftis lists, which are secondary. There's absolutely no evidence in *Watchmen* that Rorschach wants a führer – after all, wouldn't Adrian Veidt, who he despises, be the obvious candidate? – or advocates racial prejudice. Third, the whole idea behind Rorschach's dichotomous moralizing is the avoidance of the sort of utilitarian compromises that the other heroes and the general populace are so fond of making. Lastly, Rorschach thinks that the people he roughs up for information are either criminals themselves or withholding vital evidence, so he's still within the realm of retributive punishment, only incidentally using them as means to his ends.

Rorschach is also a mildly warped existentialist: he thinks that we live in a godless universe on a morally blank world where human beings are entirely responsible for whatever evil we find there. In a Sartrean sense, Rorschach understands good and evil not as religious or metaphysical forces, but as rational descriptions of actual human acts. Killers kill, not gods

GREAT POWER AND GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

or vague metaphysical forces. Chapter VI, “The Abyss Gazes Also,” illustrates Rorschach’s existential side. It takes place after he’s been captured by the police, and shows his life in prison and interrogation by Dr. Malcolm Long. The chapter’s literary motif is a quote from Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* that says if we battle with monsters we will become one, and if we gaze into the abyss, it gazes back at us. In this chapter the reader gazes into Rorschach’s monstrous past while Dr. Long gazes into the abyss of Rorschach’s mind. Rorschach tells him about the key event in his crime-fighting life: the 1975 Roche kidnapping case, where the kidnapper killed six-year-old Blaire Roche, chopped her up and fed her remains to his dogs. We see Rorschach’s Holmesian investigations in a series of moody silent panels on pages 18–21. After he figures things out, he kills the dogs that ate Blaire Roche’s remains and burns the kidnapper alive, though he gives him the choice of saving himself by cutting through his own arm with a hacksaw (he’s handcuffed to a wood stove). As the fire burns, we read Rorschach’s existential musings: “Looked at the sky through smoke heavy with human fat and God was not there. The cold, suffocating dark goes on forever, and we are alone” (#6, 26/2). We can hear echoes of Meursault in Camus’s *Outsider* or of Garcin in Sartre’s *No Exit* in Rorschach’s bleak view of human affairs: there is no God to judge our actions, there’s only we all-too-human beings.

More bleakness follows in his interview with Dr. Long. He tells him that: “Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it too long. No meaning save what we choose to impose” (#6, 26/4). He goes on in the next panel to observe that the world is “rudderless,” without any divine controller: “It is not god who kills the children. Not fate that

TO COMPROMISE OR NOT TO COMPROMISE

butchers them or destiny that feeds them to the dogs. It's us. Only us." Finally: "Was reborn then, free to scrawl own design on this morally blank world. Was Rorschach" (#6, 26/5-6).⁷ Dr. Long is shocked by Rorschach's seemingly nihilistic ramblings. Yet as he walks home, he sees news that President Nixon is threatening nuclear war with the USSR, and thus opening the Pandora's box of global genocide: maybe Rorschach isn't so crazy after all! So not only is Rorschach a skewed deontological ethicist⁸ who believes in absolute human freedom and thus absolute moral responsibility, he situates that responsibility within the existentialist universe of Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus, where human beings make free moral choices that paint a picture of the actor's ideal moral order without being able to ground these choices in any theological foundation. Kovacs' choice to be Rorschach was his own existential leap of faith, one away from an ordinary life into the bizarre world of the costumed crime fighter pursuing justice as a moral ideal.

DR. MANHATTAN AS DISENGAGED RELATIVIST

Jon Osterman, a.k.a. Dr. Manhattan, is modelled on Charlton Comics' Captain Atom. Osterman was a nuclear researcher who, in 1959, was accidentally caught in an intrinsic field chamber that seemingly obliterates him. Yet, echoing all those "nuclear accident" origin stories seen in Marvel superhero comics, Osterman rematerializes several weeks later as a blue-skinned superbeing who can manipulate matter on a massive scale, teleport himself and others, is presumably immortal, and can see past, present and future as a single continuum. He has become, in effect, a god.

After spending a decade or so using his godlike powers to fight crime and act as America's super-deterrent in the Cold