

PERSONAL IDENTITY: BELONGING WITHOUT ACCEPTANCE

Proposal

This article examines the theme of belonging, and how people can be individuals, unique to their own, but still have a place in society. I will use the 1986 graphic novel 'Watchmen', by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons. The novel chosen is riveting for its commentary on politics, morality, and most importantly, belonging in a world where you are not accepted by your society. The growing tensions of a cold war, and the hunt for a former hero's killer plague the nature of this novel.

The centre of this article is in the dissection of two contrasting characters, with one similarity: the complete lack of acceptance and the ability to fit in. On one side, you have Doctor Manhattan, former human turned God. What little is left of his humanity is fleeting, and his allegiance to his country, and his world is questioned.

The other side, is Rorschach, a vigilante who believes in the fight between good and evil more than taking care of himself, the classic archetype of a superhero, with a twist. His arrogance, and sheer commitment to his truth prevent him from being a member of society, not that he wants that, anyway.

This article will explore these characters as individuals and their relationship to society. Their quest for belonging is opposite from each other, yet equally alone and isolated, a complete parallel to the audiences that these characters were created for, and those that choose to use social media to champion characters like these, and of their genre.

This article is a study of social media relationships of groups and fandoms, as well as a dive into these two characters minds.

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PERSONAL IDENTITY

BELONGING WITHOUT ACCEPTANCE

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What makes Alan Moore's 1986 graphic novel 'Watchmen' a classic is its subversion of the superhero genre. The relatable moral compass of these characters makes it easier for them to appear human, as like ourselves, they all have stories and a path. Moore exposes superheroes, taking away the idolised perception that modern times has gifted; with the rise of pop-culture in multiple medias.

With the rise of social media, fan accounts of pop-culture are finding home in discussing similar interests and superhero culture on sites such as Twitter. The common theme between these fans, and these characters, is that they are all seeking acceptance. The contrast between characters from 'Watchmen' like Doctor Manhattan, a man turned God, who is slowly concluding that he is not human, as the world fears his power. To that of the every-man, someone who invests into characters like these, for their passion for the genre, and their desire for belonging within a sub-group known as a "fandom."

In this article, I will discuss the importance of 'Watchmen' and its relation to belonging and personal identity. I will attempt to dissect Moore's deconstruction of the genre, and how 'Watchmen' isolates characters, and how the novel plays a part in the genre's presence today, 35 years on.

Alan Moore's 1986 magnum opus, 'Watchmen', is a relevant classic. One of the novel's points of relevancy is the topic of belonging, and the individual state of characters.



Dr. Manhattan Reflecting on Mars
(Watchmen, 1986) Art by Dave Gibbons

One of the most interesting aspects of 'Watchmen' is the character of Doctor Manhattan. Moore subverts the stereotype of an accident that creates a gift, that we see with characters like Spider-Man, by not creating a hero, but God. Moore's vision is far more morbid than the usual hero story. Jon Osterman, scientist, dies, and months later, Doctor Manhattan is born from the deconstructed matter. Manhattan becomes a demi-god, capable of anything. With this power, there comes a cost. In Medeiros' essay,¹ he writes: "Watchmen has a reality check where the heroes face real consequences." This idea follows Jon, turned Manhattan, more than most; his reality blurs what it was like to belong, as he tries to discover the scope of his powers, and his place in this world.

¹ Z, Medeiros. (2016). *God and Dr. Manhattan*

The media is already shaping Manhattan's identity into something that he has no desire to be. They announce him to the world as "The superman exists, and he's American."² The media have given their new bomb a patriotic identity, a new hero to fight communism and Russia in the Cold War. Jon has no identity left. The American people only see Manhattan. This is further instated by the U.S government providing him the name. They may not have created Doctor Manhattan, but they own him. In Jon's own words: "They're shaping me into something gaudy and lethal..."³ His identity was forged as a weapon. Many readers may relate to this, as they can often feel abused and ignored by their governments and their jobs simply to stay afloat.

The superheroes in 'Watchmen' are forced to retire, leaving most without purpose: except Jon. His belonging continues to be a tool for the government, whereas other heroes were perceived as an extended government reach to suppress the 99%. This view goes against how we view modern superheroes, as today, we practically worship them with movies and dedicated fans on the internet; we like to see them as our protectors, not oppressors. There is a reason for box-office numbers growing ever since 2008's *'Iron Man'*.⁴

There is no acceptance of Jon's belonging. Laurie, Jon's lover, rants to a friend, "People are like shadows... Just shadows in the fog."⁵ She refers to Jon's perception of humanity, and it is clear that the woman who has loved and lived with him for years, is seeing him lose what is

left of his identity, and his belonging to what binds people. Manhattan's ultimate decision to leave Earth comes from an invasion of his privacy, and the misunderstanding of his being. How does one relax on a planet where you are unable to fit in? Simply leave it for Mars.

As Manhattan sits upon the surface of Mars, silent and alone, it's for the first time that we see this character at peace: "I am tired of Earth. These people. I am tired of being caught in the tangle of their lives."⁶ The audience can sympathise with Jon. His isolation is mandatory to be at peace. It is here that we grasp that you can belong without acceptance; for Jon, it is easier than others. Jon's power allows him to leave behind everything that entangles him, for the reader, it is not so simple as to leave everything behind.

The modern generation idolises characters with omnipotent power. With the likes of Twitter, people discuss on online platforms about their favourite fictional characters, and their growing popularity.⁷ characters like Captain Marvel and Thor gain audience through their exposure in the multi-billion-dollar franchise films,⁸ such as the highest grossing movie 2019's *'Avengers: Endgame'*.⁷ Moore makes it hard for audiences to identify with Jon, due to his neutral and emotionally absent nature. Perhaps Moore is commentating on masculinity, as Jon's muscular physique, paired with his lack of emotion, would certainly hint at such. His toxic masculinity, has quite literally turned him into God, but he has lost his belonging.

² Moore, A and Gibbons, D (1986). *Watchmen* ch4, p13.

³ Moore, A and Gibbons, D (1986). *Watchmen* ch4, p12.

⁴ Goldberg, M. (2019). *Marvel Studios at the Box Office*

⁵ Moore, A and Gibbons, D (1986). *Watchmen* ch3, p9.

⁶ Moore, A and Gibbons, D (1986). *Watchmen* ch4, p25.

⁷ Grater, T. (2020). *Alan Moore Gives Rare Interview*

⁸ Brueggemann, T. (2020). *Marvel's 'Avengers: Endgame' Box Office Records May Never Be Broken*

Should we idolise such power when it is a show of a country's strength? Jon alters the history we know by winning America the Vietnam war with his Godly power. It was a needless display of power, a country interfering in business that was not its own. Most superheroes are American, so surely, their strength represents their country, so what makes Jon any different?

Moore intentionally made Jon absent from emotion, too busy living in the past, present and future at once, to isolate him from characters we know. Heroes like Wonder Woman and Captain America are shown as handsome or beautiful. They are eye-candy for the audience. Yet, Jon is glowing blue and bald. His being is as confusing as it is intimidating. Rorschach is also shown as ugly, perhaps Moore is stating that you don't need to have an unobtainable physique, or be a model, to be heroic, creating more reason for audiences to identify with these characters.

Moore contradicts the work of writers that have championed characters like Superman by challenging the notion that one cannot be all good if they are indeed all powerful. Which is where Jon's compromise comes in. To prove he is all powerful but cannot be all good he leaves for Mars: "Gone to Mars. Gone to a place without clocks."⁹ It is here that we can understand Jon's path. He no longer feels connected to humanity. Superman and Clark Kent are accepted and loved by society, showing the contrasting struggle of the everyman, and the heroic feats. Where Jon dies, Manhattan is born; there is no dual-identity.

⁹ Moore, A and Gibbons, D (1986). *Watchmen* ch4, p26.

¹⁰ Moore, A and Gibbons, D (1986). *Watchmen* ch9, p27.

¹¹ Moore, A and Gibbons, D (1986). *Watchmen* ch12, p27.

In superhero fashion, Jon is convinced to return to Earth to save it. He finds his muse in childbirth. He calls it, the "thermodynamic miracle." He philosophises that "we gaze continually at the world and it grows dull in our perceptions."¹⁰ Manhattan shows emotion with the remembrance of life. His belonging becomes clear. Life is what binds all living things, including himself. By the end of the novel, it has inspired Jon. "I'm leaving this galaxy for one less complicated. I think perhaps I'll create some [life]."¹¹ In Valentina's essay¹², she writes that Moore's understanding of humanity is "whatever meaning we want to attribute to it." For the case of Jon, he decides that his version of humanity, is his to create. Jon's acceptance of himself, helps the reader to accept themselves. If Jon can be a God, then there is no barrier in your own acceptance.



Rorschach Unnoticed in New York
(*Watchmen*, 1986) Art by Dave Gibbons

Moore's character Rorschach, is alone. His only source of conversation is his journal, in which he writes: "Why are so few of us left active, healthy and without personality disorders?"¹³ As an audience, we see clear contradiction in his statement, and he is even unaware of how others see him. This is a man we have seen eating raw eggs, cold beans, and whose smell makes children cry, yet he calls himself sane. It is rare for creator Alan Moore to discuss his works, but

¹² V, Valentina. (2016). *We are all puppets*

¹³ Moore, A and Gibbons, D (1986). *Watchmen* ch1, p19.

on one such occasion, he did confirm his influence for Rorschach: “if there was a Batman in the real world, he probably would be a bit mental.”¹⁴ In the same interview, Moore says: “I meant [Rorschach] to be a bad example.” People were not supposed to resonate with this character, but due to the stereotypes of fans of this literature, they would often be single with poor hygiene, resonating with the likes of self-branded incels. This depiction of graphic novel fans has changed over the last 20 years due to the growing popularity of the medium. Fans find belonging together, knowing that most are no longer ridiculed.

Superheroes like Batman have two identities. We see the costumed vigilante, and the billionaire, charismatic playboy. With Rorschach there is no distinguishing. In his own words, “Without my face, nobody knows.”¹⁵ The mask is his face. Rorschach doesn’t know where he belongs because he doesn’t understand himself. Jon is similar in the sense that they cannot relate to society, or the reader, as they are not an average person.

Most superheroes that hide their identity are someone special. Yet, Rorschach, in the police’s own words is: “An ugly little zero.”¹⁶ This person is no-one, the mask is what makes him feel special. He refuses to take care of the person behind the mask, because that is not who he wants to be. He wants to embody justice. Rorschach’s hidden identity may have more to do with society’s perception of beauty than it has to do with a secret identity. He is seen as ugly; most heroes and stars are seen as beautiful.

Is it right for audiences to idolise this character? His dark demeanor and quest for justice is how we idolise figures like Batman, but Rorschach is different. Rorschach is a hypocrite. Everyone that disagrees with him is a liberal, a whore, or a criminal. He walks into a bar to question patrons and writes in his journal after, “I leave the human cockroaches to discuss their heroin and child pornography.”¹⁷ Rorschach’s opinion cements his ignorant insanity, and his distance from society. He uses his journal to cope with his loneliness, and search for belonging. Perhaps, lonely readers idolise this character for that reason.

Rorschach is a self-proclaimed patriot. He craves “American love; like coke in green glass bottles... They don’t make it anymore.”¹⁸ He seeks his own lonely, ideal American dream. One free from perversion and politicians. Something Jon, the forced personification of America’s power, can simply achieve by teleporting away. Rorschach lives in a dream world, and audiences read novels to escape to their own dream world.

There are seeds of foreshadowing early in the novel. Rorschach ponders on the life of a hero: “Violent lives, ending violently.”¹⁹ There is no escape for the way he lives, and no better way to die. Rorschach’s final words reflect upon his motives earlier in the book. This character remains unchanged. His world remains black and white. There is evil, and there is good. These binary oppositions are commonplace in comics, yet real-life can never be so simple. Brian Doherty describes Rorschach as an “Objectivist saint,”²⁰ and writes, “by the end he sacrifices himself in the name of avenging the deaths of millions who he doesn’t know.” In true

¹⁴ Surman, S. (2015). Alan Moore’s Watchmen and Rorschach

¹⁵ Moore, A and Gibbons, D (1986). Watchmen ch5, p11.

¹⁶ Moore, A and Gibbons, D (1986). Watchmen ch5, p28.

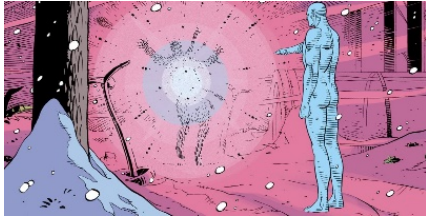
¹⁷ Moore, A and Gibbons, D (1986). Watchmen ch1, p15.

¹⁸ Moore, A and Gibbons, D (1986). Watchmen ch2, p25.

¹⁹ Moore, A and Gibbons, D (1986). Watchmen ch2, p26.

²⁰ Doherty, B. (2009). Rorschach Doesn’t Shrug.

Objectivist fashion, the truth is a pillar to follow,²¹ and reality is far more important than a fake one, even if the fake one creates peace. The people have a right to know, and in Rorschach's mind: "Evil must be punished. People must be told."²²



Dr. Manhattan kills Rorschach
(*Watchmen*, 1986) Art by Dave Gibbons

It is ironic that Jon must kill Rorschach to protect the peace. The two loneliest people in the novel become just one, and even then, Jon obtains a happy ending. Rorschach's life had to close, as tragic as he was, there was no room for a life outside of justice. He would not compromise his principles, even if that meant his own demise. The fascinating detail of Rorschach removing his mask, tears streaming down his face, is not only that he was ready to die by the hands of a God, but more so that by removing the mask, it isn't Rorschach that dies: It's Walter Kovacs. This is Rorschach's only hope for a successful plan. Pass on his journal, keep his mask untainted, and hope that someone picks up the pieces, and maintains his ideology, staying true to Rand's system of Objectivism. Rorschach's belonging is complete with his death, he never compromised his morals.

There is a clear contrast in the characters of Doctor Manhattan and Rorschach. If anything, the moral that Moore tries to teach is that the world cannot be all black and white. Manhattan finds belonging, Whereas Rorschach gets the death he wants. In the end, Rorschach is the true tragedy. As he once said, "no time for friends..."

so that when it's done, only our enemies leave roses."²³ No-one was an enemy to Rorschach. There were no roses for him out in the snow. These two characters manage to parallel in every way but one: they were not accepted in society. One leaves the galaxy, and one leaves mortality. Moore injects conflict in decision with the ending of the novel. Who are we supposed to sympathise with? Who was the villain? What makes 'Watchmen' a classic, is that the answers are not so simple, and neither is the idolisation over these characters. Belonging is what the individual makes of it.

²¹ Rand, A. (1991). Introduction to Objectivism.

²² Moore, A and Gibbons, D (1986). *Watchmen* ch12, p23.

²³ Moore, A and Gibbons, D (1986). *Watchmen* ch2, p26.

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