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Rationale for Watchmen

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Watchmen

By Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons

Rationale by John C. Weaver, Williamsport Area High School (Williamsport, Pennsylvania)

Grade Level and Audience

Watchmen is recommended for mature high school junior and senior English classes.

Plot Summary

In 1985, in an alternate United States, Nixon is still president and the Soviet Union invades Afghanistan, driving the Soviets and the Americans to the brink of nuclear war. Against this backdrop, the masked vigilante Rorschach, wanted by the police for his murder of several criminals, investigates the homicide of another former vigilante, the Comedian.

Rorschach warns several other masked adventurers, whose activities were outlawed in the wake of the police strike of 1977, that their lives may be in danger: Dan Dreiberg (the Nite Owl), Laurie Juspezyk (Silk Spectre), Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias), and Jon Osterman (Dr. Manhattan). The former superheroes do not take Rorschach's warnings seriously.

But soon, an assassination attempt is made against Adrian's life; Dr. Manhattan, the novel's only superpowered being and America's main nuclear deterrent, leaves Earth for Mars after being accused of causing cancer in his old friends; and Rorschach is set up for the murder of a retired supervillain and arrested.

As tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union escalate and nuclear war becomes a more distinct possibility, Dan and Laurie don their old costumes and continue Rorschach's investigation. They break Rorschach out of prison, and Laurie tries to convince her old lover, Dr. Manhattan, to save the world from nuclear holocaust while Dan and Rorschach trace the web of conspiracy to its center.

By the end, we learn many secrets: about Laurie's relationship to the dead Comedian and about Adrian's plan to avert nuclear war and remake the world in his own image. Dan, Rorschach, and Laurie could not face a more dangerous opponent than Adrian Veidt.

Strengths and Unique Characteristics of the Work

Watchmen, with its rich language, its complex and interwoven themes, and the interplay between words and images, is the *Hamlet* of graphic novels. A critique of the comic book superhero, *Watchmen* serves to question our notions of what is heroic. In addition to the graphic storyline, Moore adds at the end of the first eleven chapters a variety of

prose genres, including memoir, magazine profiles, business letters, advertising copy, and political propaganda, which allows a teacher to examine the conventions of a wide range of genres.

Perhaps most fascinating is Moore and Gibbons' comic within a comic. Similar to *Hamlet's* Mousetrap play, *Tales from the Black Freighter* is a *Watchmen* in miniature, which intensifies and expands upon the themes in the larger novel.

Possible Objections

Violence and sex are depicted graphically in *Watchmen*. In terms of violence, the fight scenes include large amounts of blood, and the final attack on New York shows streets filled with bloody dead bodies. Gibbons and Moore chose to create such a graphic depiction in the last chapter to highlight the consequences of Adrian Veidt's plan to save the world by destroying Manhattan. It contrasts with his exalted image of a world of peace, love, and cooperation between nations.

Sexuality, which is sometimes graphically depicted, appears either as a degrading activity or an expression of deep personal connection. There are representations of prostitution, mainly through silhouette, and references to some costumed heroes who are attracted to the lifestyle for reasons that are decidedly sexual. *Watchmen* also represents the attempted rape of a female superhero. On the other hand, the sex depicted between Dan and Laurie is presented as positive and tender, two people reaching out to each other.

Watchmen also contains adult language. As well, some may see Dr. Manhattan as a God figure or find problems in the text's suggestion that God does not exist. The text also expresses a range of political views, from conservative to liberal. It critiques all of them, but some many find concern with some characters' beliefs or ethics. While it explores many mature themes, *Watchmen* is not a text that offers answers so much as it offers multiple critiques and raises questions of every form: moral, historic, philosophical, political, religious, etc.

Ideas for Implementation

TEACHING THE FORM OF COMICS

Although a number of students will have read comics before, far more will have little experience with graphic fiction. You may wish to introduce the form by examining simple one to four panel newspaper strips, such as *Dilbert*, *Peanuts*¹, *Bloom County*², and so on. Most students will have read newspaper strips and will feel comfortable with the form. You may discuss the interplay of text and image and the flow from panel to panel to prepare them for the complexity of graphic novels.

To further prepare students for *Watchmen*, consider teaching Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, particularly chapter 3, which examines the different types of

transitions from panel to panel. Applying McCloud's ideas to the newspaper strips would be useful for your students to understand how comics work in the small scale before moving to a full graphic novel.

CREATING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Watchmen, written in the 1980s and located in that particular historical moment, requires some prior knowledge of the Cold War. So that the class may understand the novel, small group research projects, leading to class presentations, effectively transmit the necessary background knowledge students will need to fully appreciate the novel. Such topics may include the Manhattan Project, the Soviet/U.S. arms race, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Bernard Goetz (as an example of vigilantism), and other topics you find relevant to the text.

TRACING THE THEMES OF *WATCHMEN*

While your students read *Watchmen*, as with any other text, they should watch out for questions that emerge, including what makes a character heroic or criminal. Some characters, like Rorschach and the Comedian, appear more violent than the criminals they battle. A corollary idea to consider in their reading is what constitutes justice, and can a vigilante really represent justice? By the end of the story, when Adrian Veidt kills millions of New Yorkers to avert worldwide nuclear catastrophe, your students may engage in a lively debate as to whether the ends ever justify the means.

Those who choose to examine the more philosophical side of the novel should consider the questions raised by Dr. Manhattan. This character experiences time as simultaneous: Dr. Manhattan sees his past, present, and future as a single time. Though he foresaw the Kennedy assassination, he did nothing to stop it, because to him it was something that already happened. Students may find it useful to discuss whether the future is predetermined, or if we have the power to shape our destiny. If the former is true, then what happens to our sense of personal responsibility?

Of course, one must also consider the graphic aspects of *Watchmen*. Not only does the art clarify the emotions inscribed in the dialogue, but Moore and Gibbons also use dialogue from one conversation and juxtapose it with the action of another scene. The pirate comic, *Tales of the Dark Freighter*, has particular relevance to the main action of *Watchmen*. The Mariner in the comic is shipwrecked and the pirates who attacked his ship are threatening his hometown. To save his wife and children, he must try to get home, and the horrors he faces along the way have deep connections to both Rorschach's and Adrian Veidt's story.

Ideas for Thematic Braidings

Fundamentally, *Watchmen* is a critique of the heroic ideal. In western civilization, we often see the hero as a individual who is stronger, braver, and often more intelligent than

the rest of us. They represent the highest ideals of their culture. *Watchmen* examines a twentieth century ideal of the hero—the superhero—and questions the whole idea of heroism. The costumed adventurers believe that they are there to protect society, but instead, many are either more violent than the criminals they fight or they are ineffectual. Nearly all dress up in costume for their own agendas, and not for the good of society. Therefore, *Watchmen* would work very well in a unit on the heroic idea. Braiding the critique of heroism in Moore and Gibbon’s novel with texts like *Beowulf*, the *Song of Roland*, or *The Odyssey*, which represent typical western heroic ideas, would be a useful exercise. The reason such a unit would be particularly powerful is that once your students look at the self-serving nature of the hero in *Watchmen*, they may identify the same flaws in *Beowulf*, *Roland*, or *Odysseus*. *Watchmen* has the tendency to make all stories of heroes look like critiques of the heroic ideal.

Another, very different, unit would be one on dystopias. Novels like *Brave New World*, *1984*, and *The Giver* have some connections to *Watchmen*. The graphic novel exists in an alternate United States in 1985, where costumed adventurers exist and attempt to make the world a better place, and generally fail miserably. The other dystopic novels also illustrate the horrible societies that result from the attempt to make the world a better place.

Awards

1988 Hugo Award³
1988 Eisner Award for Best Finite Series⁴
1988 Eisner Award for Best Writer: Alan Moore

Resources/References

General:

The annotated *Watchmen*, A chapter-by-chapter Guide:
<http://www.capnwacky.com/rj/watchmen/chapter1.html>

Watchmen Companion Reader: <http://iat.ubalt.edu/moulthrop/hypertexts/wm/watch.cfm>

Watchmen at Wikipedia:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watchmen#Publication_and_reception

Academic Articles:

Brandy Ball Blake’s “*Watchmen*: The Graphic Novel as Trauma Fiction”:
http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v5_1/blake/

Mark Bernard and James Bucky Carter’s “Alan Moore and the Graphic novel: Confronting the Fourth Dimension”:
http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v1_2/carter/

Teaching The Text:

James Bucky Carter's "Teaching Watchmen in the Wake of 9/11" in *Teaching the Graphic Novel*: <http://www.mla.org/store/CID44/PID390>

John Weaver Teaches *Watchmen* to High Schoolers:

<http://www.graphicnovelreporter.com/content/who-teaches-watchmen-op-ed> and
<http://www.graphicnovelreporter.com/content/reteaching-watchmen-op-ed>

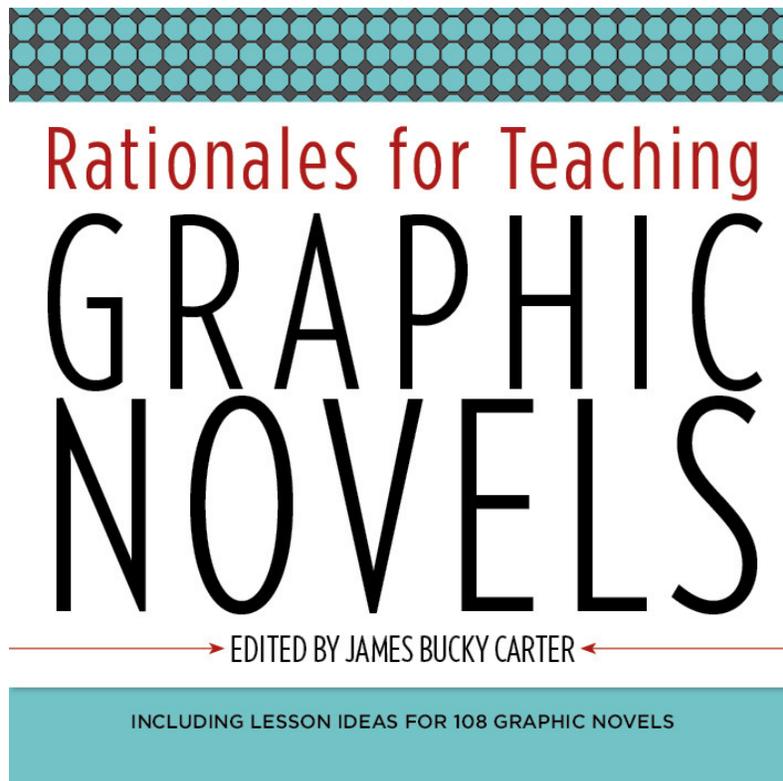
¹ <http://www.comics.com/> This site offers many different comic strips to choose from to introduce students to graphic storytelling.

² http://www.berkeleybreathed.com/pages/favorite_strips.asp

³ <http://www.thehugoawards.org/hugo-history/1998-hugo-awards-2/>

⁴ http://www.comic-con.org/cci/cci_eisners_pastwinners.php - 1988

For rationales for teaching 107 more graphic novels, see this resource:



available at <http://maupinhouse.com/>