ACADEMIC READING GUIDE

WATCHMEN

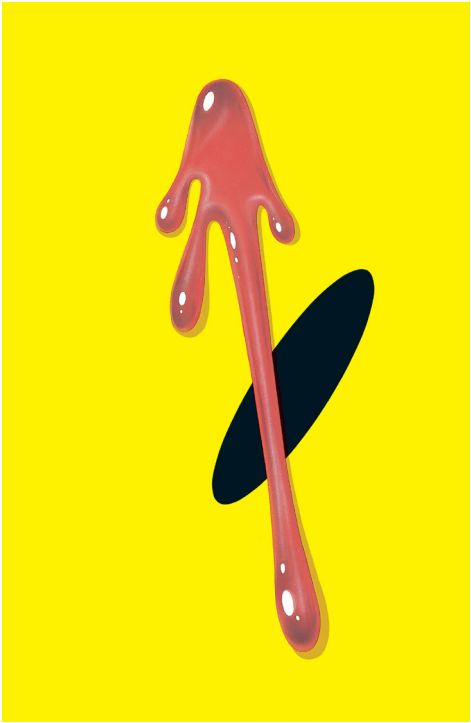
Alan Moore | Dave Gibbons

OVERVIEW

The groundbreaking and multi-award winning graphic novel *Watchmen* (1987), created by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, forever changed the landscape of the traditional superhero comic and elevated the graphic novel medium to new literary heights. Critically acclaimed for its use of multi-genre storytelling, symbolism, and social commentary, *Watchmen* challenges superhero archetypes at the heart of contemporary American culture and attempts to answer the question: What makes a hero in the modern world? Part tragedy, part meditation on modern culture, and part conventional superhero story, *Watchmen* presents readers with a thoughtful deconstruction of contemporary identity, morality, and social and cultural norms in ways just as relevant for today's readers as they were during its initial publication.

Set in 1985 in an alternate history of the United States where Richard Nixon is still president and the world teeters on the brink of nuclear war, *Watchmen* follows a group of disgraced superheroes attempting to navigate an increasingly amoral and chaotic world. The graphic novel opens with the murder of Edward Blake, a.k.a. the Comedian. Driven by a mixed sense of duty, nostalgia, thrill-seeking, and self-preservation, his former teammates reluctantly reunite to investigate the crime. Their investigation takes them from the grimy streets of 1980s New York City to the planet Mars and back, uncovering along the way clues to a traitorous conspiracy that threatens to annihilate, or potentially save, the entire world.

Throughout this journey, each of *Watchmen*'s characters is forced to confront what it means to be a "hero" and each must ask themselves: What does morality mean in an amoral world, where the lines between good and evil are increasingly blurred? By facing the very human flaws just behind their cowls and capes, the characters work to redefine their place and purpose in this world, engaging 21st century readers in vital conversations about the roles of heroism, morality, identity, and many other themes that have transcended generations and elevated *Watchmen* to a modern literary classic.

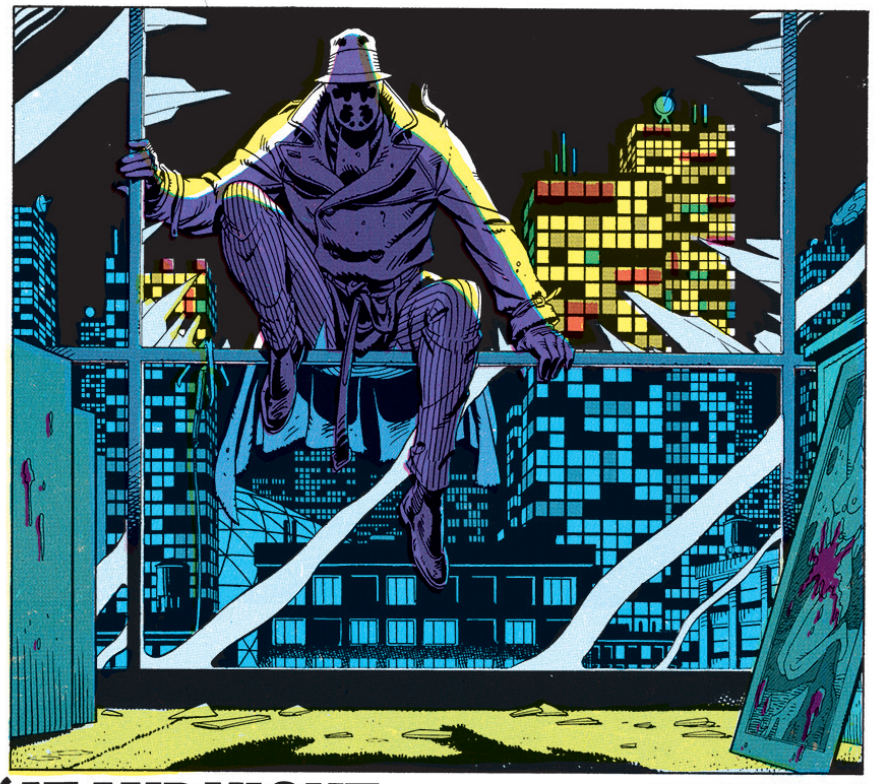


WATCHMEN

ISBN: 9781401245252
FORMAT: Trade Paperback | 448 pp.
PRICE: $19.99 / $25.99 CAN

KEY THEMES

War — At the time the book was published, the Vietnam War and growing Cold War were fresh on the minds of *Watchmen*'s authors and citizens across the globe. The book utilizes the theme of constant, pernicious war to show a time where the lines distinguishing good and evil are blurred and unattainable, and where mutually assured destruction seems ever more likely. Balanced precariously between violence and redemption, war and peace, justice and desire, each of the characters must struggle with the motivations and moral relativity of war. Thematic symbols of war throughout the book include the doomsday clock and other round objects, which convey the inevitability of war while showing that no "straight lines" exist within the modern world.

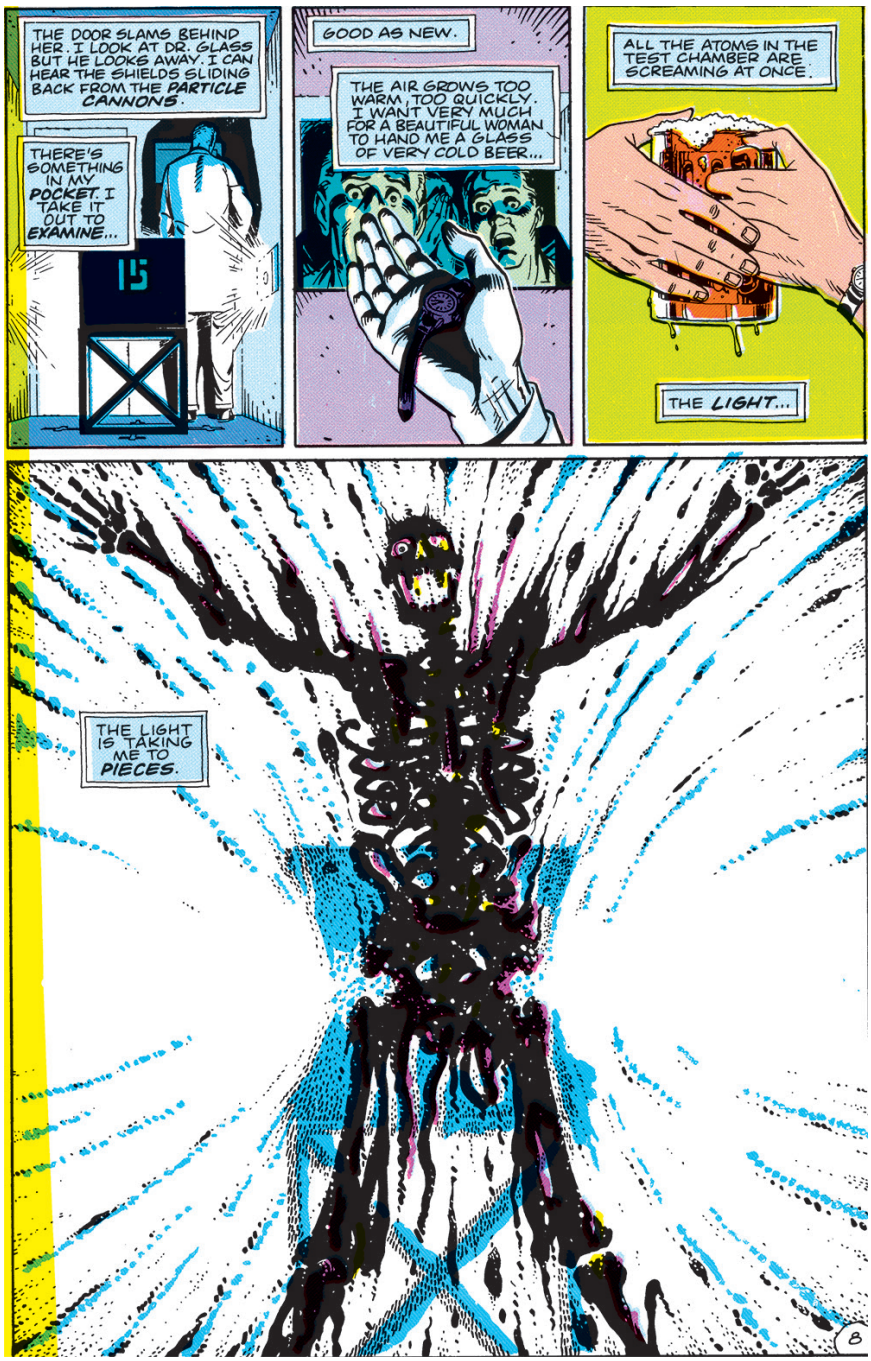


Public vs. Private — The concept of public and private spaces, and the ways in which they overlap, is a constant thematic reminder throughout *Watchmen* of the ever-shifting barriers between our various public and private identities. Within the superhero genre and the world of *Watchmen*, where our heroes grapple with issues of intimacy, identity, family, and power, this juxtaposition between public and private shows the intrinsic difficulties of being moral or heroic in an amoral world. Thematic symbols of this dichotomy between public and private include the heroes' costumes and Rorschach's journal.

Morality — A central question posed by *Watchmen* and its characters is: Is there such a thing as right and wrong? Do the ends justify the means? And who decides? Many argue that there is no central moral to the story, and that each character demonstrates their own definition of morality based on the choices in front of them. Thematic symbols of morality include the bloody smiley face, Rorschach's mask, and Dr. Manhattan himself.

KEY SETTINGS

New York City acts as the birthplace of *Watchmen*'s superheroes in the 1950s, in which first generation of young and naïve self-proclaimed crime-fighters—the Minutemen—inspired by a new wave of comic book heroes to don costumes and become heroes themselves. The book opens 30 years later, in a grittier 1980s version of NYC—a place where crime is on the rise, nuclear war looms in the collective consciousness, and costumed heroes are outlawed. At the center of this are the Minutemen, once New York City's most famous heroes but now forced into retirement and spread across the globe.



Mars is where Dr. Manhattan, the least connected to human nature and the most superpowered character in the story, travels in order to deal with his increasing distance from his own humanness and humanity as a whole. His foreignness from himself and from others is perfectly represented on the cold, isolated planet of Mars and the empty, ornate palaces he builds there.

KEY CHARACTERS

Each of the characters in *Watchmen* must navigate the conflicting relationships between their human and heroic identities in an increasingly complex world. In doing so, they challenge our preconceived notions of morality and the archetypal "hero." By the end of *Watchmen*, each character must decide: Is there really such a thing as good and evil in the first place?

Rorschach (Walter Kovacs) is an enigmatic and mentally unstable vigilante who acts as the narrator of *Watchmen*. A distorted callback to the detective comic heroes of the mid-20th century, Rorschach operates under a strict vigilante code of ethics that works to justify his violence and "zero tolerance" policy. Through his journal, a central narrative device in the story, readers learn about his evolving conspiracy theories and efforts to bring his former superhero team back together to solve the Comedian's murder.

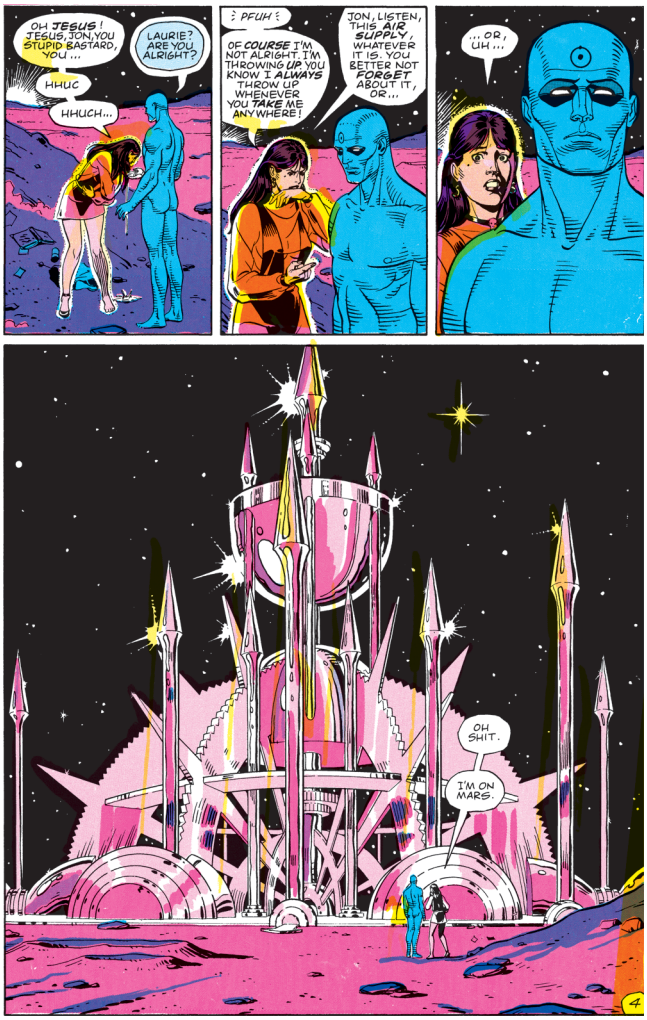
Edward Blake (The Comedian) is a cigar-chewing, gun-toting, and bloodthirsty manifestation of modern war. An original member of the Minutemen, by the 1970s the Comedian has devolved into a corrupt and merciless tool of war for the U.S. government during the Vietnam War. His sexual assault of Sally Jupiter, the original Silk Spectre, is also a major plot point of the novel.

Hollis T. Mason (First Nite Owl) is a founding member of the Minutemen, the original crime-fighting team that began in the 1940s and 1950s. He has agreed to pass on the Nite Owl heroic title to Dan Dreiberg (the second Nite Owl), and often meets with Dan to reflect on past heroic actions and offer guidance on present heroic challenges. Nostalgic and a bit idealistic, Hollis' insights provide solid evidence for readers to better understand what it meant to be a hero in 1950s New York City.

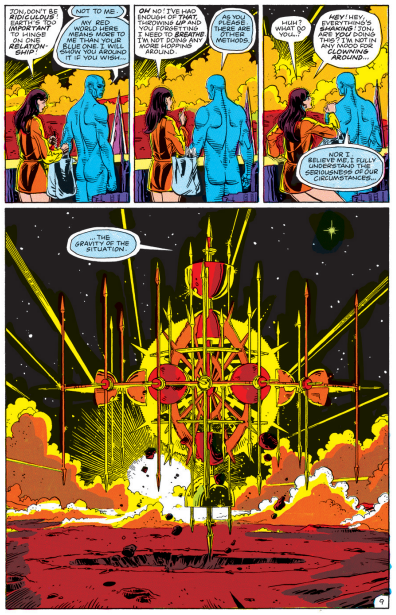
Dan Dreiberg (Second Nite Owl) is a wealthy and brooding inventor with a secret lair he has been keeping active, even after his supposed retirement from the team. Jaded and a bit older, however, Dan is initially not sure he wants to help solve the Comedian's death. That is, until his fellow superheroine and love interest Laurie Juspeczyk (Silk Spectre) starts to get involved again as well and rethink her own involvement in heroic activities.

Laurie Juspeczyk (Second Silk Spectre) is the daughter of Sally Jupiter, the original Silk Spectre. She is the only female superhero on the reunited team. Despite her role as a hero, she's still seen as a woman first—as evidenced by her costume design and her complex and fraught relationships with Jon Osterman, Dan Dreiberg, Edward Blake and other male characters throughout the book.

Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias) is a genius billionaire inventor, entrepreneur, fashion model, and media mogul who has used his heroic identity to create a vast corporate empire. One of the most influential businessmen in the world, Adrian Veidt is armed with superior intelligence and advanced fighting abilities. Seen by some as a hero and others as a villain, he seeks out solutions to a potential nuclear war by rationalizing an "ends justify the means" approach to heroism.



Jon Osterman (Dr. Manhattan) is a former physicist who becomes an all-powerful, practically omniscient being thanks to a lab accident. The only member of the team with "true" superpowers, Dr. Manhattan is part of both the first and second generation of heroes. As his powers grow, he helps the United States end the war in Vietnam and advance its technological presence around the globe. His efforts to navigate the lines between his superpowers, their effects on the world around him, and the lingering traces of his humanity are at the heart of Dr. Manhattan's struggle in the graphic novel.



PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

1. Ask students to think about the last time they felt morally challenged and how they solved or didn't solve their own challenge.

2. Provide students copies of Golden and Silver Age comics to read and discuss how the heroes present themselvers in these classic tales. Prompt students to think about heroism and anti-heroism and define each perspective. Next, ask students to think of the best literary and/or pop culture examples (outside of comics) they have previously read that deal with a hero and an antihero. List examples and relative discussion points on the board.

3. Choose a current event with moral ambiguity and ask students to think about the pros and cons of each party's choices.

4. Watch *Dr. Strangelove* and discuss the Cold War, as well as how authors and artists have used satire to undermine our concepts of morality, confront our cultural anxieties, and interrogate the absurdity of war.

5. Using articles and media from the Cuban Missile Crisis standoff, have students analyze what happened, who was at fault, and the varying perspectives on the situation—both at the time and today.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What defines true heroism in *Watchmen* and how do you know? Are there specific characters or decisions that resonate as "heroic" more than others? Does being heroic mean sticking to a certain code, or does it depend on context? Why or why not?

2. What is mutually assured destruction and why is it so critical to understanding heroism and morality in *Watchmen*?

3. Form is key to understanding *Watchmen*'s many overlapping narratives and characters. Looking specifically at the funeral sequence at the beginning of chapter 2, have students analyze the parallel stories being told and discuss how the various forms of visual storytelling by Moore and Gibbons inform the larger themes and motifs of the story.

4. How do the fictional found objects—i.e. the pirate story, journal entries, articles, photos, and others—act to advance the plot and characters throughout the book? Why did Moore and Gibbons decide to include them in the graphic novel?

5. How does *Watchmen* reflect the elements of an epic and utilize epic conventions to challenge and at times undermine our conception of superhero archetypes?

6. Why do you think the authors used an alternate history as the setting for *Watchmen*? What social or political commentary do you think they intended to make?

7. Why are symbols like the clock, the smiley face, and Rorschach's mask used so prominently in the book? How do they affect our reading of the story?

PROJECT IDEAS & HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS

1. **Compare/Contrast:** Compare and/or contrast each character's choices and individual storylines throughout *Watchmen*, reflecting specifically on the moral implications of their choices. Was a character's choice good or evil? Based on whose judgment? What unexpected complications arose from their choices? Does, as many characters claim, the end justify the means? And who, in the end, is the most "heroic"? Provide clear claims with identifiable evidence (citable text and images) to support your discussions.

2. **Found Objects:** Create a found object collection—composed of fictional and/or real-life objects—as in *Watchmen*, then use your collection as a foundation for creating your own "fallen" superhero who would fit into the *Watchmen* universe. After creating the collection, use the students' found object collections as an opportunity to explore the symbolic and moral nature of the newly created characters' choices if they had been faced with circumstances similar to those of the characters in *Watchmen*.

3. **Alternate Histories:** Research historical events from the book, then compare/contrast with *Watchmen*'s "alternate histories" of these same events, noting especially where Moore and Gibbons' stories are true to history, and where fiction has blended with fact. Have students analyze and discuss why these changes to history were made by the creators, and then create an alternate history of their own that parodies and/or provides social commentary on an event, place, and/or historical figure.

4. **Braided Storylines:** Have students choose a sequence out of the story that reveals interlaced or framed narrative (where the story goes back and forth between two narratives) or an interaction with the pirate comic, and create their own mimic story of it, using two lines of narrative that happen simultaneously. How would they reveal the needed details of each and help the reader to distinguish between the two narratives?

5. **Rorschach Test:** Research the history of the Rorschach test and discuss how and why it plays such an important role in *Watchmen*. Why does it appear on the character Rorschach's mask, and how is it a vital piece of his character and the book as a whole? Why does the mask seem to change throughout the book? Using a real Rorschach test, make an attempt at psychologizing the character of Walter Kovacs in relation to his alter ego, Rorschach, and then speculate about why this particular psychology test represents him.

6. **The Greco-Roman Gods:** Explore the history of Greco-Roman gods, in particular how they changed once the Greek gods become Roman gods. The difference between Homer's pantheon and Ovid's pantheon are vast. Have students discuss how mythology operates as a central influence on Moore's book. Which myth(s) influenced Moore in his writing of *Watchmen*? Why did he select these myths over others as inspiration?

FURTHER READING

- Allusions present in *Watchmen*:
  - William Blake's "The Tyger"
  - Percy Shelley's "Ozymandias"
  - Nietzsche
  - Greco-Roman myth
  - Bob Dylan and other popular music from the 1960s-1980s
- Excerpts from *The Odyssey* and *Metamorphoses* that highlight interactions with gods
- *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell
- *Laika* by Nick Abadzis
- Opening sequence to the movie adaptation of *Watchmen* (Bob Dylan song)
- Summaries of the Vietnam War and the Cold War
- Overview of fascism and anarchism
- For more advanced students: a carefully chosen passage from Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, particularly as regards the nature of evil in the world

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