chapter three

"i have seen its true face": apocalypse as unmasking

Alan Moore's critically acclaimed graphic novel *Watchmen,* along with Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns,* was hailed in the late 1980s as the beginning of an era of grim, sophisticated adult comics that would finally allow the comics industry to throw off its image as a producer of disposable, pulp kiddie fare. Provocatively reinterpreting the Golden Age superhero comics of the 1940s, both novels took the superhero out of his traditional four-color world of clear-cut right and wrong into a realistic world of conflicting political ideologies, governmental and societal corruption, and irreconcilable moral dilemmas. Unfortunately, the full flowering of the adult comics industry predicted by comics enthusiasts never quite occurred, and the industry as a whole has limped through the last decade in a sorry state of declining sales and increased marginalization. Though in the 1990s DC Comics's Vertigo line as well as myriad independent artists have attempted to target an older, mixed-gender comics-reading audience, many titles have been marred by the misapprehension that "adult" equals a juvenile fascination with gratuitous sex, violence, and vulgarity.[1] Though there are jewels in the rough aplenty for the determined comics reader, and certain books such as Neil Gaiman's richly mythological *Sandman* have even become popular amongst mainstream adolescents and college students, the American comics industry as a whole has sadly failed to become the sophisticated, multi-genred artistic community that the European and Japanese comics industries represent.[2]

[1] In a 1993 interview, Moore himself mourns the unfortunate development of the "postmodern superhero" that followed partially in imitation of *Watchmen*, commenting, "I could see stylistic elements that had been taken from my own work, and used mainly as an excuse for more prurient sex and more graphic violence. . . . And you do get the impression of saying to yourself, 'Oh, my God, I wanted to make comics a better place to visit.'" Moore, Alan, "Alan Moore: Bard of the New Order," Comic Book Rebels, eds. Stanley Wiater and Stephen R. Bissette, (New York: Donald I. Fine, Inc., 1993) 170.

[2] While the reasons for the regression of the comics industry in the 1990s are still a matter of speculation, the fact that Europe and Japan have developed sophisticated industries while America's has remained stunted is due to a quirk of American history. As part of the paranoia of the McCarthy-era 1950s, comics came under attack as contributing to the moral corruption of America's youth. Leading the charge was psychologist Frederic Wertham, whose book *Seduction of the Innocent* gained him national attention for its portrayal of comics as bursting with sex, violence, and anarchic behavior. Though Wertham focused most of his attention on crime comics, superhero comics also bore the brunt of his assault, which included the accusations that Batman and Robin were a homosexual couple and Wonder Woman a lesbian sadist.

Given this environment, Alan Moore's prolific career in American comics and mature writing style is doubly remarkable. Like Gaiman and many of the other well-known comics writers of the late twentieth century, Moore is British, but *Watchmen* nevertheless displays an intimate knowledge and understanding of American pop culture, particularly the history of the comics medium in America. As in all the best examples of the medium, Moore's scripting relies equally on his text and Dave Gibbons's images to articulate its complex, character-driven narrative. The visual format itself is homage to the Golden Age of comics – most of the pages, like the comics of the 1940s, are scripted in grids of three panels by three panels, and the characters are rendered in bright colors, though with far more realistic use of light and shadow than in the art of the earlier era. Though Tom DeFalco dismissed much of the critical praise for *Watchmen* by calling it merely a brilliant superhero story in a long tradition of the same,[3] a careful reading will show that *Watchmen* transcends its roots. Though Moore's masterpiece may well be the most riveting and well-crafted tale of the "costumed hero" in American comics, it also critiques and deconstructs its genre, forcing its characters to confront both the ambiguous validity of their vigilante crimefighting and the very nature of individual and cultural identities in a Cold War-era America on the brink of nuclear apocalypse.

As Miller did with his *Dark Knight,* Moore takes on a difficult challenge by attempting to elaborate the rather simplistic, two-dimensional figure of the superhero into a fully-developed, psychologically realistic character. Unlike Miller, however, whose novel is an intensely introspective exploration of just one such character, Moore's world is populated with a cast of costumed heroes whose individual motivations, beliefs, and attitudes towards themselves and society are wildly different. Equally diverse are their motives for engaging in what society would

This hysteria came to a head in a 1954 Senate subcommittee investigation on juvenile delinquency. The comics industry, fearing government censorship, formed the Comics Code Authority, a self-regulating entity that strictly restricted comic books to content judged fit for young readers. It would be decades before the puritanical Comics Code would be seriously challenged, and in that interval, the comics medium was relegated firmly to the category of disposable children's entertainment in the mind of the public. Daniels, Les, Comix: A History of Comic Books in America, (New York: Bonanza Books, 1971) 83-90.

[3] Editor-in-Chief of Marvel Comics at the time of McCue's interview in 1993. It may be significant to note that Marvel is the main competitor for DC Comics, which published *Watchmen.* DeFalco, Tom, Interview, Dark Knights: The New Comics in Context, eds. Greg S. McCue and Clive Bloom, (London: Pluto Press, 1993) 94.

term a frankly deviant behavior – donning a costume to fight crime. As Sally, the elder Silk Spectre, notes in a retrospective magazine interview that makes up one of *Watchmen's* distinctive prose sections, putting on a costume might have been a "sex thing" for some, but for her, "It was a money thing. And I think for some people it was a fame thing, and for a tiny few, God bless 'em, I think it was a goodness thing" (IX.Appendix p. 4). Though Moore touches on the seamier side of the costumed hero, the narrative concentrates primarily on the varying moral perspectives and choices of the characters. Unlike the superheroes of Golden Age comics, who gladly and easily cooperated in their righteous struggle to protect truth, justice, and the American way, the protagonists of *Watchmen* don't even share a common definition of "good," let alone the unreflective conventional morality that World War II-era comic books took for granted.

Perhaps most outwardly traditional is Rorschach,[4] a far right-wing conservative whose grim outlook is best summed up by the mantra, "Never compromise." Evil, for Rorschach, *must* be punished; the highest good is always for the truth to be known. Underlying his Manichean way of looking at the world, however, is a deep-seated conviction that in the absence of God or any higher spiritual authority, the full responsibility for humanity's acts of horror, cruelty, and violence rests on humanity itself. As the product of an abusive mother and an impersonal foster-care system, Rorschach's experiences with the brutal underworld culture of New York City have convinced him that human existence is barbarous and chaotic, an endless cycle of suffering and horror that is ultimately meaningless. Faced with this shadowy world, Rorschach chooses the role of an avenger, allowing himself to take on the dark qualities of the underworld in order to combat it. Separating Rorschach from the criminals he pursues, however, is a strict code of ethical conduct, an uncompromising good versus evil dichotomy symbolized by the shifting but never mixing black and white blot patterns that become his face (VI.10). Though Rorschach's ideology

[4] Though I refer to the other characters by their given names, I follow the novel's convention by omitting Rorschach's. As Rorschach himself makes clear when he refers to his mask as his "face" (V.28, VI.10), more than any other character, Rorschach has *become* his mask, annihilating his original pedestrian identity.

is undeniably fascist, his clear compassion for those he sees as truly innocent, as well as his loyalty, integrity, and tactical brilliance, make him an oddly sympathetic character.

Most directly in conflict with Rorschach is Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias), a Machiavellian figure who believes that the end justifies the means. Like Rorschach, Veidt began his career as a crimefighter with the moment-to-moment pursuit of evildoers, but found himself increasingly uncertain about the proper role of the costumed hero after the political upheaval and questioning of the 1960s. As he remarks in an interview dated ten years before the novel's mid-1980s setting,

> What does fighting crime mean, exactly? Does it mean upholding the law when a woman shoplifts to feed her children, or does it mean struggling to uncover the ones who, quite legally, brought about her poverty? . . . I guess I've just reached a point where I've started to wonder whether all the grandstanding and fighting individual evils does much good for the world as a whole. Those evils are just symptoms of an overall sickness of the human spirit, and I don't believe you can cure a disease by suppressing its symptoms. (XI, Appendix p. 3)

In the mid-1960s, Veidt's highly-charged encounter with an older costumed hero, the Comedian, convinces him at last that nuclear war is inevitable in the current political and social environment, making the costumed heroes' day-to-day efforts futile and meaningless (XI.19, 22).[5] Not content to be, as the Comedian puts it, "the smartest man on the cinder" (II.11), Veidt becomes a successful businessman, all the while studying sociology, psychology, and political theory in an attempt to discover a way that war might be avoided. Years of study and social engineering leave Veidt the architect of an ingenious conspiracy, one that will avert World War III, but only at the cost of millions of lives. Veidt engineers a scheme of mindboggling complexity, ending with a simulation of a bloody and horrifying extraterrestrial attack on New York. Through this elaborate hoax, Veidt intends to frighten the hostile world powers into reconciliation and peace as they unite against the imagined external foe. This big-picture

[5] The timeline of *Watchmen* diverges subtly from real-world history in 1938 when its first costumed hero appears outside of fiction, apparently inspired by the paradigm-creating *Superman* comic. Thereafter, though the cultural history of *Watchmen* closely follows our own in many aspects, the appearance of Dr. Manhattan changes the balance of military power between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. *Watchmen* charts an alternate history that includes an American victory in Vietnam, an extended Nixon presidency, and a sudden loss of America's military supremacy, resulting in a nuclear crisis triggered by Russia's opportunistic invasion of Afghanistan. Though the addition of superheroes is fantastic, Moore's imaginative reinterpretation of Cold War history incorporates enough authentic detail to remind the reader that World War III seemed chillingly possible as little as 15 years ago.

mentality, however, has distanced Veidt from individual-level morality to such a degree that the reader begins to notice a ring of truth to the accusation that Veidt has certain communist traits: he puts the good of the many firmly above that of the individual and claims the right to dictate humanity's fate from above. Though Veidt's prioritizing the good of the race as a whole is admirable, his egotism and his lack of compassion for those he manipulates makes his character equally as problematic as Rorschach's.

The costumed hero who opens Veidt's eyes to the impending crisis is Edward Blake (the Comedian), a brutal, violent man who essentially functions as a mercenary for the government. Sensing the inherent and irreconcilable chaos of the world as a tremendous joke upon meaning-seeking humanity, Blake takes a basically amoral outlook, his actions serving his selfish desires for violence and raw experience. Though praised as a war hero and a patriot for his instrumental role in winning the Vietnam War and in overturning Marxist regimes in South America, Blake's primary motivating force seems to be the indulgence of his aggressive nature, as exemplified by his attempted rape of Sally, his delight in scattering unarmed political protesters with tear gas, and the hideous murder of his pregnant Vietnamese mistress (II.6, 17, 15). Though Rorschach sees his own uncompromising ideology reflected in that of the Comedian, what appears to be Blake's grim determination in the face of evil is more a simple disregard for such distinctions in the face of the impending end of the world. Blake has spent his life dealing with the perceived meaninglessness of humanity's existence by becoming a sick parody of conventional U.S. morality, sardonically donning a costume of stars and stripes so that his brutal acts of violence will be justified in the media as patriotism (II.27). When Blake accidentally stumbles upon Veidt's plan for averting nuclear war, however, he is simultaneously horrified by the evil with which Veidt intends to purchase humanity's survival and overwhelmed with guilt for his own sins. Veidt's ultimate practical joke on gullible humanity trumps even Blake's most extreme efforts at cosmic black humor. At the same time, the end of the world, which Blake had relied upon to wipe clean the moral slate, has been averted: as Veidt puts it, Blake's "last black laugh at Earth's expense" has been denied (XI.19). Suddenly aware of his own responsibility for his actions, Blake is driven to

his knees before a statue of the Virgin Mary, sobbing, "Oh, Mother. Oh, forgive me" (II.23). Though Blake is not a participant in the novel's narrative present (his death is the opening device that sets the plot in motion), he provides one of the novel's most important motifs in the recurring image of his blood-smeared smiley-face button, the significance of which will be discussed at more length later in the essay.

Transcending all of these moral perspectives is Jon, the novel's only true superhero.[6] Though once a man, Jon acquires godlike powers through a freak accident involving experimental scientific equipment, and he is rechristened "Dr. Manhattan" by government officials as a reminder of his role as a weapon in the arms race. After his transformation, Jon finds he is able to perceive both his past and his future, although he can do nothing to change either. This unique perspective, however, leaves him increasingly incapable of human reactions and emotions, as he is constantly aware of the relative insignificance of human life (and the characters' narrow conceptions of morality) in the context of a vast universe. Asked by the government to serve as a costumed crimefighter in the 1960s, Jon takes the path of least resistance and complies, but muses privately, "The morality of my activities escapes me" (IV.14). Later, while contemplating the chain of events that led to his transformation in the test chamber, Jon comments,

> Without me, things would have been different. If the fat man hadn't crushed the watch, if I hadn't left it in the test chamber . . . Am I to blame, then? Or the fat man? Or my father, for choosing my career? Which of us is responsible? Who makes the world? Perhaps the world is not made. Perhaps nothing is made. Perhaps it simply is, has been, will always be there . . . A clock without a craftsman. (IV.27-28)

Unable to perceive any directing force in the world, Jon comes to view events as essentially random, with life having no more significance or meaning than the beautiful but undirected patterns of dust and wind on the surface of a dead planet. When Laurie, his former lover and fellow costumed hero, argues for the value of humanity, he responds simply that she is "life insisting on life's viewpoint, when alternatives exist" (IX.13). Though potentially capable of averting nuclear war himself, Jon's ambivalence and alienation lead him to separate himself from

[6] Here, I mean 'superhero' in the sense of having genuinely superhuman abilities; even Veidt is portrayed as a mere human being, although a perfectly developed one.

humanity at the point of crisis, unable to see "the point of all that struggling, the purpose of this endless labor, accomplishing nothing, leaving people empty and disillusioned" (IX.12). Like Rorschach, Veidt, and Blake, Jon has been faced with the essential chaos and darkness of the human condition. Though the other three have forced temporary patterns on the chaos (Rorschach's rule-based moral code, Veidt's privileging of the human race's survival, Blake's selfish pleasure-seeking), Jon's non-human status has left him detached and indifferent, feeling no need to take any stance whatsoever towards what he sees as the natural randomness of events.

Thrown into this mix are Laurie (the younger Silk Spectre) and Dan (the younger Nite Owl), whose feelings about their vigilante past and their government-legislated retirement are mixed. The two characters serve as Everyman figures, successfully reflecting the reader in their less grandiose goals and their sense of confusion in the face of social chaos and impending apocalypse. Lacking the epic moral views of the other principal characters, Laurie and Dan react to moral situations on a case-by-case basis, allowing their emotions and sense of basic human decency to guide them. Consequently, they may be the best equipped to comment upon the problematic nature of their moral sphere, as they are constantly perplexed, frustrated, and sometimes rendered immobile by the ethical shades of grey that both Rorschach and Veidt ignore – Rorschach by focusing so narrowly on individual conduct and Veidt by dismissing individual conduct entirely. In Laurie's impassioned plea for the value of humanity even in the face of Jon's seemingly unassailable logic, and in Dan's loyalty to Rorschach even though he doubts his friend's basic rationality, we can perceive characteristically *human* reactions to moral dilemmas: a terrible uncertainty as to how individual good can be balanced with the collective good, and a deep desire to do right even when the attempt appears futile.

Through the interactions of these characters, *Watchmen* examines the ongoing destruction and re-creation of individual and cultural selves, a process that empowers the perceiving consciousness to construct meaningful narratives out of its experiences. On the individual level, the characters who identify most strongly with their assumed personalities have generally undergone powerful transformative experiences, usually involving an intensely traumatic or

emotional catalytic event, followed by the partial or total abandonment (symbolic death) of the older identity. This device is a characteristic trope of the superhero genre, perhaps the most famous example being Bruce Wayne, who creates his Batman identity in response to the murder of his parents. In *Watchmen,* however, these transformations are portrayed as apocalyptic in scope, suggesting a strong resonance between the characters' personal transformations and the collective one engineered by Veidt.

Rorschach's transformation from Walter Kovacs to the grim personality that his mask represents is triggered by two traumatic experiences that bring him face-to-face with the dark side of human psychology and then with the constructed nature of meaning. Though Kovacs has clearly been primed to become Rorschach by his unfortunate childhood, the event that triggers the creation of his costume and crime-fighting identity is the infamous slaying of Kitty Genovese in 1964, a murder that was witnessed by almost forty of her neighbors, none of whom called the police or attempted to intervene. Kovacs, recognizing Genovese's name from an order to the factory where he works, realizes that a rejected dress of shifting black-and-white fabric was once meant for the murdered woman. Recalling the incident, Rorschach tells a prison psychiatrist in his distinctively minimalist language:

> I knew what people were, then, behind all the evasions, all the self-deception. I went home. I took the remains of her unwanted dress . . . and made a face that I could bear to look at in the mirror. (VI.10)

The assumption of a non-human face is tantamount to denial of Kovacs's humanity, an attempt to separate and distinguish himself from the corruption that surrounds him. After this especially vivid glimpse into the darkness of the human heart, Kovacs has taken the first step on the road to becoming Rorschach.

Yet this by itself is not enough. Just as children foreshadow their often sudden transformation into young adults through play-acting and dressing up, putting on Rorschach's costume is only preparation for assuming that dark identity. In response to the psychiatrist's comment that Kovacs had "decided to become Rorschach," Rorschach responds, "Don't be stupid. I wasn't Rorschach *then.* Then I was just Kovacs. Kovacs pretending to be Rorschach. . . . All

Kovacs ever was: man in a costume" (VI.14-15). Rorschach's separation of himself from the personality he evolved from is particularly noticeable here, and compelling to the extent that even the psychiatrist begins to find himself slipping, calling him "Rorschach" instead of "Walter" (VI.14). Also significant is Rorschach's use of the past tense: "Kovacs *had* friends," "All Kovacs ever *was"* (emphasis added) (VI.15). As Rorschach goes on to describe, his final transformation takes place in a confrontation with a child murderer who had butchered a little girl and fed her to his two huge dogs. After finding shreds of the girl's clothing in an old house once used as a dressmaker's shop, Kovacs looks out the window to see the dogs fighting over what is clearly a child's femur. Taking a meat cleaver, Kovacs walks outside and splits the dogs' heads open. Rorschach narrates:

> Shock of impact ran along my arm. Jet of warmth spattered on chest, like hot faucet. It was Kovacs who said "Mother" then, muffled under latex. It was Kovacs who closed his eyes. It was Rorschach who opened them again. (VI.21)

With the death of the Kovacs personality (symbolized by the closing of the eyes), the "man in a costume" has been violently reborn as Rorschach. Though this experience is triggered by an entirely personal trauma, it is couched in apocalyptic imagery, emphasizing its revelatory quality and the world-shattering extremity of its destruction. In an image that would not be out of place in a representation of St. John's apocalypse, Rorschach is pictured against a dramatic background of smoke and exploding flames as the murderer, condemned by Rorschach to burn to death, begins to scream horribly (VI.25). Against panels depicting a hellish scene of flames, smoke, and the twisted, human-like forms of burning mannequins, Rorschach describes the nature of his transformation.

> Stood in firelight, sweltering. Bloodstain on chest like map of violent new continent. Felt cleansed. Felt dark planet turn under my feet and knew what cats know that makes them scream like babies in the night. Looked at sky through smoke heavy with human fat and God was not there. The cold, suffocating dark goes on forever, and we are alone. Live our lives, lacking anything better to do. Devise reason later. Born from oblivion, bear children, Hell-bound as ourselves, go into oblivion.

And then, against the background of the psychiatrist's Rorschach blot:

> Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long. This rudderless world is not shaped by vague metaphysical forces. It is not God who kills the children. Not fate that butchers them or destiny that feeds them to the dogs. It's us. Only us.
>
> Streets stank of fire. The void breathed hard upon my heart, turning its illusions to ice, shattering them. Was reborn then, free to scrawl own design on this morally blank world. (VI.26)

This is one of the richest passages in the novel, both in terms of its strong imagery and its articulation of central themes. Images of apocalyptic death and new birth are mingled with the vertiginous vision of what Rorschach calls "the void," the terrifying darkness left by the absence of God or any higher system of meaning. This vision of the void is colored by the physical presence of the burning house, which in the apparent suffering and contortions of the anthropomorphic dressmaker's mannequins vividly recalls the Christian Hell.[7] Yet the house evokes more than a mythical place of torment; the sentence, "Looked at sky through smoke heavy with human fat and God was not there" chillingly recalls the sentiments of many Holocaust witnesses, whose accounts particularly highlighted the evil smoke of the crematoriums and the seeming incompatibility of faith with the existence of such unthinkable horror.[8]

Yet this vision leaves the newborn Rorschach personality "cleansed," its illusions regarding absolute morality shattered. Realizing that, lacking destiny, God, or other "vague metaphysical forces" to use as scapegoats, human beings must take ultimate responsibility for their actions, Rorschach finds himself empowered. Rorschach's strong reactions to atrocities involving children[9] suggest that the inspiration for the design he chooses to scrawl on "this morally blank world" is in fact his own miserable childhood. While good and evil may not in fact

[7] Moore may also have derived this image from a Buddhist parable found in the Lotus Sutra, in which the real world is a "burning house" (a place of suffering) that we are too blind to recognize. Murano, Senchu, The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law, (Tokyo: Nichiren Shu Headquarters, 1974) 61-3.

[8] These images show a striking resonance with this passage from Elie Wiesel's memoir of the Holocaust, *Night:*

> Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.
>
> Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Wiesel, Elie, The Night Trilogy, trans. Stella Rodway, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985) 43.

be absolute concepts, the subjective human experiences of misery, pain, horror, and suffering are tangible expressions of an evil that, while not metaphysically determined, is thoroughly concrete. For the sake of the innocent and the harmless, and perhaps for the sake of his own lost innocence, Rorschach has imposed a rigid moral code on the world around him and accepted the responsibility and authority to enforce it. Though he cannot prevent wrongdoing, he can punish it; though humanity attempts to push off its responsibility for its savagery on the metaphysical, Rorschach's avenging crusade forces individuals to accept that responsibility through retribution.

Though on the surface, Rorschach's moral stance seems simplistic and old-fashioned, his acknowledgement that his morality is of his own design demonstrates a surprising level of philosophical sophistication. To use Sartre's explanation, Rorschach has been confronted with the arbitrary nature of meaning and rejecting nihilism, has taken on the awful burden of responsibility for his own actions. The deliberate quality of this act is important. Rorschach's decision to split the dog's head open, which causes the Kovacs personality to definitively disappear, is what the philosopher Robert Kane would likely refer to as a self-forming action. According to Kane, self-forming actions are taken at significant cusp points in the subject's life, where the decision to act (or to refrain) is one of conscious and directed free will.[10] Such actions strongly influence the subject and make it highly probable that he or she will choose to take similar actions in the future. It is at these transitional cusp points that identity is primarily shaped and formed.

Interestingly, it is the apocalyptic event itself that creates the cusp point and allows Kovacs to transmute into Rorschach – in essence, it provides the environment necessary for radical, willful change. In response to a world that he sees as fundamentally flawed, where the innocent cannot be protected, suffering is inevitable, and there is no redeeming higher power, Rorschach deliberately accepts the only role he believes is worthwhile: to punish evil while causing no additional suffering to the innocent himself. This rigid system of dealing with the

[9] In fact, the one time that Rorschach relents in his moral crusade is out of pity for his prostitute landlady's unfortunate children; one panel shows a rare and striking look of compassion on his normally expressionless face (X.6.7).

[10] Kane, Robert, The Significance of Free Will, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 75.

world, however, makes Rorschach almost inhuman in his single-mindedness and unrelenting crusade – more an archetype than a person. Given the totality of his transformation, Moore's use of end-of-the-world imagery to elevate it to an apocalyptic level is very appropriate. From the wreckage of the battered Kovacs personality has emerged the grim and frightening Rorschach, a paradoxical figure whose blot-face represents both his black-and-white moral outlook and his intense awareness that, as when looking at a psychologist's Rorschach blot, the patterns of meaning that we perceive are only the ones that we impose.

This apocalypse, transformation, and rebirth is a microcosm of both the potential nuclear Armageddon and the manipulative catastrophe engineered by Veidt. Unlike Rorschach, whose "never compromise" philosophy is partially justified by the implicit belief that the fundamental nature of humanity never changes, Veidt is strongly of the opinion that not only can the course of history change, but one man can cause that change to occur. Like his idol and inspiration Alexander the Great, Veidt believes that what is required is to find a solution that works by stepping beyond conventional methods of problem solving, much as Alexander did when he cut the Gordian knot rather than trying to untangle it (XI.25). Veidt seeks to avoid the scenario of nuclear war that, while apocalyptic and transformative, results only in the rebirth of a lifeless planet – a result that none but the immortal and detached Jon would be able to appreciate.

Veidt's conspiracy is so grandiose – far-fetched, fantastic, and contingent on the unpredictable reactions and perceptions of millions of human beings – that it is almost laughable. Indeed, Dan's reaction when Veidt first reveals the full scope of his plan is laughter and disbelief: "Adrian, come on, what . . . You're *serious?"* (XI.25). Veidt responds simply, with a tyrant's insight into human psychology: "Hitler said people swallow lies easily, as long as they're big enough" (XI.26). Though some readers have complained of the *deus ex machina* feel to *Watchmen*'s conclusion, the sensation that the solution comes from forces outside the narrative seems to have been exactly Moore's intention. Veidt has set himself up as a godlike arbiter of mankind's fate, bringing down apocalypse and destruction from outside in order to trigger the birth of a new and better world. Veidt plans to use his strong media presence (as well as other

positions of power) to shape and direct this new utopia, literally invoking the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth with his new product line and associated advertising campaign, "Millennium" (XII.31). Paralleling the radical transformation of Kovacs into Rorschach, Veidt seeks to trigger a transformation in humanity's cultural sense of self. Through his engineered catastrophe, Veidt attempts to force humanity to tell itself a new narrative, to abandon the old rhetoric of the Cold War in favor of the language of unity, oneness, and friendship.

Despite the effectiveness of Veidt's scheme in averting global nuclear war, Moore casts doubt on the moral justifiability of his goal-oriented approach. Veidt has confidence that after the world's salvation is assured by his engineered apocalypse, utopia *will* ensue, and humanity will be pointed decisively away from self-destruction. As he proclaims in his moment of triumph,

> I saved Earth from Hell. Next, I'll help her towards utopia. It is as Rameses said: "Canaan is devastated, Ashkelon is fallen, Gezer is ruined, Yenoam is reduced to nothing . . . Israel is desolate and her seed is no more, and Palestine has become a widow for Egypt . . . All the countries are united and pacified." (XII.21)

Through destruction Veidt has achieved peace, and his fellow costumed heroes, who have all assembled in an attempt to put a stop to the plan, are in moral checkmate. When Veidt asks if they will expose him, thus undoing the peace that millions gave their lives for, Laurie and Dan are shaken to their cores. Dan finally responds unsteadily, saying, "How can humans make decisions like this? We're damned if we stay quiet, Earth's damned if we don't. . . . Okay, count me in. We say nothing" (XII.21). Yet the enormity of the moral dilemma leaves Rorschach untouched, for perhaps obvious reasons. Rorschach himself foreshadows his later actions on the very first page of the novel, when he scribbles in his journal:

> This city is afraid of me. I have seen its true face. The streets are extended gutters and the gutters are full of blood and when the drains finally scab over, all the vermin will drown. 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." (I.1)

For Rorschach, the impending nuclear holocaust is simply the blood and horror of humanity's crimes overflowing at last, finally putting an end to the world's madness and cruelty. As he predicted himself, he has no desire to save it from its just punishment; the imagery recalls the

book of Genesis, where God sends a flood to cleanse the world of the wicked. The phrase "true face" echoes Rorschach's revelatory experience outside the burning house, all illusions ripped away, humanity's underlying savagery and chaos laid bare. From this perspective, Veidt's transformative apocalypse is merely bloody and horrifying, an atrocity that masquerades as "ultimately good" while merely prolonging and adding to mankind's debauchery and suffering. Fulfilling the vow he made earlier in his journal ("Because there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished. Even in the face of Armageddon I will not compromise this" (I.24)), Rorschach leaves Veidt's stronghold to reveal the truth to the world, his final words hanging in the air as the door closes behind him: "Never compromise" (XII.20).

Moore's characterization of Veidt also complicates his seemingly altruistic actions. Veidt portrays himself as a Christ-like figure with his "Millennium" campaign and characterizes "my new world" as "an age of illumination so dazzling that humanity will reject the darkness in its heart" (XII.17) – a clear parallel to the Kingdom of God on earth predicted by the Bible. Veidt's possessiveness, demonstrated by the phrase "*my* new world" (emphasis added), makes his perception of himself as the world's messiah clear. Yet this seeming arrogance is hardly an exaggeration. Veidt has indeed averted World War III; not only that, but in the conclusion's epic battle between the assembled heroes, Veidt not only defeats Rorschach and Nite Owl easily (while casually chatting the entire time – a classic trope of the cool, collected, and in-control superhero), he temporarily incapacitates the nearly omnipotent Jon and even catches a bullet with his bare hands. Nor is his heroism limited to grand world-saving conspiracies and prowess in battle. As Dan notes earlier in the novel, he is a pacifist, a vegetarian, and a philanthropist, a man who holds massive charity drives for people in starving countries – an all-around "caring, conscientious guy" (XI.15). To all observers, Veidt does seem to be a perfectly developed specimen of a human being, a paragon of all that mankind might one day be able to achieve.

Yet in the possessive language described above and in Moore's ironic juxtapositions, this perfect façade begins to show cracks. Though Laurie is reduced to tears and the others sickened by the spectacle of the carnage in New York, Veidt is jubilant, raising his clenched fists in victory

as he shouts, *"I did it!"* (XII.19). Leaving the others to their grief, he retreats to his meditation room, casually giving permission for the others to freshen up. Later, as he sits grandly in lotus position atop a flattened pyramid, he attempts to justify himself to Jon, saying,

> I know people think me callous, but I've made myself feel every death. By day I imagine endless faces. By night . . . Well, I dream, about swimming towards a hideous . . . No. Never mind. . . . I know I've struggled across the backs of murdered innocents to save humanity . . . but someone had to take the weight of that awful, necessary crime. (XII.27)

Veidt identifies himself with Christ again here. As Christ took the sins of the world upon himself in order to save it, Veidt portrays himself as taking on the burden of this "awful, necessary crime" for the world's sake – in an echo of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, he damns himself so that others might be saved.[11] Yet the lingering suggestion of egotism taints this seemingly selfless action. In the face of the others' grief, Veidt's cool statement that he "feels every death" seems shallow; compared to the great compassion of the figure on the cross ("Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do"), Veidt's pride seems inappropriate and jarring. Perhaps worse still is his compulsion to tell the complete story of his ingenuity and hard work to the costumed heroes who come to his fortress to stop him. The long, involved explanation serves the narrative purpose of informing the reader as well as the characters, and also lampoons the trope of the supervillain revealing his plan just in time for the heroes to stop him, but the attitudes it reveals are more important. Though Veidt does wax poetic briefly, speaking of the grand struggle of the human race and the importance of its preservation, for the most part he seems to approach the world's impending destruction as merely a fascinating puzzle to be solved (or, more specifically, a knot to be cut). Further, when Veidt refers to "my path of conquest," "my masterstroke," and compares himself to "the kingly Rameses" (XI.11, 21, 22, 27), the influence of ego becomes clear. Though it would be simplistic to claim that Veidt had no concern for the human race at all, his sense of

[11] Though it is tempting to draw a strict parallel between Veidt and the Grand Inquisitor, it is significant that though the Grand Inquisitor wants to relieve humanity of its terrible burden of freedom, Veidt wants to ensure its survival so that it may embrace that freedom. Veidt's attitude toward humanity as a whole is characterized by a tension between his belief in humanity's potential ("The means to attain a capability far beyond that of the so-called ordinary person are within reach of everyone, if their desire and will are strong enough" (XI.Appendix p. 2-3)) and his faint but consistent contempt for those who have not reached that potential (as he says condescendingly of Rorschach and Nite Owl, "Really, getting even this far is a breath-taking effort, given their limitations" (XI.2)).

importance and triumph at his messianic role is problematic. Veidt has tackled the world's greatest conundrum and triumphed, but unlike the Christ he has modeled his role after, he is unable to feel simple, human pity. Given Veidt's lack of grief, the reader must question whether he primarily saved the world for its own sake, or to feed his own egotism.

Moore also complicates Veidt's moral status with his use of a second, internal narrative. Inserted throughout the novel is a comic book, a violent and gory pirate tale involving a shipwrecked sailor and a demonic pirate ship, the Black Freighter. This narrative serves as homage to the horror comics of the 1950s while simultaneously casting light on the main narrative it parallels. In the pirate comic, the shipwrecked and starving sailor desperately builds a raft using the bodies of his fallen comrades, hoping to return to his hometown before the Black Freighter arrives and slaughters the townspeople and his family. As he sails for days with little food or water, and with the faces of the dead staring up at him, he descends into insanity, finally arriving (as he believes) too late to save his family. Believing the town to be occupied by the enemy, he swears revenge and makes his way to his family's house, where he proceeds to strangle the occupants. Almost too late, he realizes that the Black Freighter's attack has not occurred, and that in fact it is his own wife he is murdering. Realizing he is damned, he flees to the ocean, where the demon ship accepts him as its own. Moore juxtaposes images from the comic book (which is being read by a young man at a newsstand) with seemingly unrelated text from the main narrative to emphasize themes and motifs throughout the novel.[12] At the end of the comic book, the doomed sailor narrates:

> Gradually, I understood what innocent intent had brought me to . . . The unspeakable truth loomed unavoidably before me as I swam toward the anchored freighter, waiting to take extra hands aboard . . . They'd come to Davidstown to wait until they could collect the only prize they'd ever valued, claim the only soul they'd ever truly wanted. . . . The world I'd tried to save was lost beyond recall. I was a horror: amongst horrors must I dwell. (XI.13, 23)

[12] For example, an image of the sailor's hand reaching for a rope is placed in the same panel with the newsvendor's comment that "people don't reach out and make contact" (XII.23). This subtle use of synchronicity, which occurs perhaps dozens of times in the novel, is one way in which the narrative carries Moore's theme of interconnectedness, which will be discussed in more depth later in the essay.

Veidt echoes the sailor's final speech when he begins to speak of his dream of "swimming towards a hideous" *something*, which he decides not to name. Though Veidt has never seen the comic book, the implication is clear – both have "struggled across the backs of murdered innocents" as a means to a desired end. Veidt's dream of being accepted by the demonic ship suggests that the salvation of humanity will not absolve him of responsibility for his actions.

If we consider Veidt's attack on New York to be a self-forming action, Veidt's ends-based system of morality appears even more problematic. Veidt foments his apocalypse and resulting utopia on the assumption that his intelligence and virtue will allow him to successfully guide it in a path of peace – in essence, he will act as a benevolent behind-the-scenes dictator, pulling the world's political strings for its own good. Yet if this atrocity is a self-forming action, his identity as one of the "good guys" has been seriously compromised. Given the enormity of the destruction Veidt has wreaked, is it reasonable to assume that he will take such measures only this once? Veidt has set his foot on the path to Stalin-level tyranny; he has made a deal with the devil in order to become the world's savior, and the resulting taint may well threaten his ability to bring that salvation to fruition. Like the sailor, he too has become a horror, and it is uncertain whether such a man (whatever his intentions) may thereafter succeed in doing good.

So is the world that Veidt has tried to save also "lost beyond recall"? Part of Jon's reaction suggests that it may be, shaking Veidt's irrepressible confidence at last. In response to Veidt's question, "I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end," Jon answers, "'In the end'? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing *ever* ends" (XII.27). Contrary to Veidt's assumptions, the salvation he has bought for humanity is provisional. Veidt believes he has changed humanity's identity on a fundamental level, leading it to decisively reject "the darkness in its heart" and put on a new face of peace, prosperity, and enlightenment. Yet this assumes a level of objectivity and permanence to humanity's cultural narrative that does not exist in Jon's eyes. Veidt has forgotten the moral of the poem titled after his own namesake, Shelley's "Ozymandias": even the grandest accomplishments will eventually be eroded and forgotten with the passage of time, lending an ironic double entendre to the phrase, "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" (quoted

XI.28). As one of the mighty himself, Veidt might well look back on the fallen empires and ruined cities of the past and realize the ephemerality of his own accomplishment, but his hubris has denied him this insight.

The fact that Jon takes steps to protect Veidt's new utopia, however, demonstrates that his confrontation with Laurie has finally made him alive to the value of life. In the course of their conversation, Laurie re-experiences some of her most significant memories and finally teases out a pattern from them – the shocking fact that her real father is a man she hates, the brutal Edward Blake. This moment, though not as extreme as Rorschach's revelation, is nevertheless portrayed as apocalyptic. Laurie cries out in horror, hurling the object in her hand[13] at the crystal palace Jon has constructed, and the massive edifice shatters, crashing down into ruins even as she collapses before it. Not only has her mental world been destroyed, but the physical world around her sympathetically crumbles in response (IX.24-25). For a moment, deprived of the narrative she has told about her life to give it meaning and sense, Laurie is left in limbo; echoing the joke motif, she sobs brokenly, ". . . a gag . . . My whole life's a joke. One big, stupid, meaningless . . ." (IX.26). Despite his earlier insistence on life's insignificance on a cosmic time scale, however, Jon undergoes a sudden change in perspective and gives one of the most passionate speeches in the novel.

> [I]n each human coupling, a thousand million sperm vie for a single egg. Multiply those odds by countless generations against the odds of your ancestors being alive; meeting; siring this precise son; that exact daughter . . . until your mother loves a man she has every reason to hate, and of that union, of the thousand million children competing for fertilization, it was you, only you, that emerged. To distill so specific a form from that chaos of improbability, like turning air into gold . . . that is the crowning unlikelihood. . . . the world is so full of people, so crowded with these miracles that they become commonplace and we forget . . . I forget.
>
> Come . . . dry your eyes, for you are life, rarer than a quark and unpredictable beyond the dreams of Heisenberg; the clay in which the forces that shape all things leave their fingerprints most clearly. (IX.26-28)

[13] Ironically, this is a bottle of Veidt's cologne "Nostalgia" – appropriate for the exploration of memory she has just completed.

Confronted with the irony and improbability of Laurie's contradictory life, Jon is able to view humanity with a new respect and appreciation. Though life may have arisen from the same processes that shape all of existence, and though its duration is brief relative to being as a whole, the unique patterns that emerge from the chaos of nearly infinite possibilities make life both valuable and beautiful – a miracle, as Jon says.

The theme of patterns arising from chaos is present throughout the book, and though Rorschach dismisses this phenomenon as purely a product of the human mind, not even he advocates nihilism as a result. In fact, the book as a whole suggests that the interpretation of recurring images, themes, and motifs is the key to the characters' finding meaning in their lives and in their world as a whole, as well as to the reader finding meaning in *Watchmen* as a work of art. Laurie's revelation is probably the best example of this technique within the novel. The process through which she discovers the truth about her father is one of identifying recurring phrases and images in her memories until, like a puzzle, they fit together into a coherent whole. Yet this is not enough by itself to create a meaningful narrative of Laurie's life; in fact, because her discovery does not fit into her current life narrative at all, it has the effect of pulling that existing narrative apart, leading Laurie to doubt her own identity and worth. Although we do not see the process by which Laurie interprets her discovery and integrates it into her identity, it is clear by the end of the novel that she has made peace with it and become more certain of her own sense of self in the process. When she first tells her mother Sally that she has found out who her father is, Sally is horrified, fearing her daughter's hurt and anger. But Laurie is calm and matter-of-fact: almost forgiving, except that she has come to understand that there is nothing to forgive. She tells Sally, "People's lives take them strange places. They do strange things, and . . . I love you, Mom. You never did anything wrong by me" (XII.29). Laurie's revelation has led her to realize that the world is not nearly as consistent or as simple as she had once imagined, and that not one, but many points of view are possible. Though she has previously condemned Blake, the knowledge of her parentage combined with the moral compromise of keeping silence about Veidt's conspiracy has made her unwilling to pass such harsh moral judgment on others. Laurie's

new narrative of her experience includes the idea that right and wrong are slippery and ambiguous, and clear judgment requires an objective perspective that human beings lack. Dan says in response to Veidt's request for compromise, "How can humans make decisions like this?" (XII.21). Moore seems to be suggesting that in fact, they can't, at least not on any basis that isn't somewhat arbitrary and inadequate.

Just as Laurie comes to understand the complexity and ambiguity of her identity through the repetition of elements in her life narrative, *Watchmen*'s themes of moral ambiguity and interconnectedness are articulated through the repetition of phrases and images. Perhaps the most-repeated image in *Watchmen* is that of the Comedian's smiley-face button with its angled smear of blood. This symbol is complex, echoing both Rorschach and Blake's vision of the human condition as one of pointless brutality and madness, as well as Blake's treatment of this bleak reality as a sick joke. The image also recalls Veidt's own cosmic joke, an act of supreme violence that nevertheless will "frighten [the world] towards salvation" (XI.24). Yet this image is also important because of the other images it resembles. Because of the angle of the bloodstain, the button recalls the Doomsday Clock that graces the front cover of the paperback edition and the last page of each chapter, its hands pointing a few minutes to midnight to indicate the proximity of nuclear war. This same angled line can be found as a smear of red wax on a Halloween pumpkin (VIII.12); as the scar on the Comedian's face, given him by his scorned Vietnamese mistress (II.23); as a smear of blood on a poster of the Buddha after a brutal murder (V.7); and as a streak in grime on a window looking out onto a full moon (VII.18). Also recurring in this fashion are the images of two lovers' silhouettes, which recall a traumatic image from Rorschach's childhood as well as the shadows left behind by those instantly disintegrated at Hiroshima. More generally, Moore and Gibbons frequently use a variation on a technique that comics artist Scott McCloud calls interdependence.[14] In an interdependent panel, both the text and the image are necessary to communicate the panel's meaning. In some panels of *Watchmen,* text and images that

[14] McCloud, Scott, Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, (Northampton, Mass.: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993)158.

refer to different subject matter resonate oddly when combined, calling attention to or reinforcing a theme or motif that emerges from their interaction.[15]

The relentless repetition of these images in such various manifestations gives the reader a disturbing sense of synchronicity, as though the disparate elements of the world of *Watchmen* are compelled to express a pattern that predicts and reflects Veidt's complex and terrible apocalypse. In *Watchmen,* everything is interconnected, patterns emerging from the chaos despite the opposing wills of the costumed heroes, the future foreseeable by the thematically related ripples that extend out from significant events. As Jon muses, recalling the recurring image of the mechanical watch in his own life starting with his adolescence:

> I am standing on a fire escape in 1945, reaching out to stop my father, take the cogs and flywheels from him, piece them all back together again . . . But it's too late, always has been, always will be too late (IV.28).

As patterns emerge, humanity is spun around them, compelled to participate in their making not against its will, but *through* the complex interactions of individual human wills, the overall results of which they are unable to see, let alone control. Even for Jon, the patterns are already set, and it is too late to resist: "We're all puppets, Laurie. I'm just a puppet who can see the strings" (IX.5). Though this may initially seem to contradict Rorschach's impression of the universe as one of disordered chaos upon which a pattern is imposed, the notion is in fact compatible. Though Rorschach chooses to see the imposition of pattern on chaos as an act of individual will, *Watchmen* suggests that it is also an act of collective will, a narrative-creating task that humanity as a whole engages in on a less-than-conscious level, leading to sometimes unnerving synchronicities.

---

[15] There are too many instances of this technique to list in full, but I will include a few examples here. Dan and Laurie's first sexual encounter takes place against the background of a television program featuring a gymnastic performance by Veidt. As Dan and Laurie awkwardly adjust themselves on the couch, trying to get comfortable, the television announcer blares, "The grace of each movement is extraordinary. This is a man in his forties . . ." (VII.14). Dan is also a man in his forties and a former costumed hero, and the comparison with Veidt emphasizes his clumsiness and lack of confidence. Later, another such juxtaposition adds a touch of black comedy: on one of the novel's striking full-page splash panels portraying the destruction of New York, a detailed image of the grotesque "alien invader" also features a discarded magazine with an advertisement for Veidt's mind-body improvement technique. The advertisement reads, "I will give you bodies beyond your wildest imaginings," recalling both the alien body which Veidt has created, and the millions of dead bodies that litter New York City (XII.6).

Just as the characters come to identify significant events in their lives by noticing and interpreting repetition, the repetition of imagery in *Watchmen,* as with any work of literature, is a primary technique through which the reader identifies its themes. Unlike most such works, however, Moore uses the characters' thoughts and actions to consciously reflect on the process of creating narrative in such a way that the reader herself becomes aware of her own role in the interpretive process. Just as the characters are faced with the difficulties of making moral judgments given the subjectivity of human perception, the reader is also faced with the same difficulties. Both Veidt and Rorschach, though fundamentally opposed in their moral views, are sympathetic yet flawed characters who make strong cases for and against Veidt's redeeming apocalypse. On a more abstract level, *Watchmen* also presents compelling representations of a universe that alternately is meaninglessly chaotic and strongly ordered by the emergent will of a perceiving humanity. Though it is tempting for many readers to choose a single major character with whom to sympathize, and to see the novel as strongly supporting one ontological view over the other, this may well defeat the novel's intent. Like the Rorschach blot that serves as so important a symbol in the novel, there are many possible interpretations of *Watchmen,* and each such interpretation can be supported by some of the facts of the novel and problematized by others. The beauty of *Watchmen* is that it so vigorously denies the careful reader true closure, forcing her to simultaneously accept a multiplicity of contradictory but equally compelling interpretations.

Within the narrative, Moore drives his message of ambiguity home by showing the uncertainty of the characters themselves at the novel's conclusion. Laurie and Dan are obviously deeply troubled by the necessity of compromise, with Dan remarking on its "damned if we do, damned if we don't" quality (XII.21), and even Adrian's confident exterior cracks briefly as he seeks approval of his actions from Jon (XII.27). Perhaps most troubling, however, is the ambiguous nature of Rorschach's death. While still on Mars, Jon tells Laurie of his glimpses of the future, ending with, "I am standing in deep snow . . . I am killing someone. Their identity is uncertain" (IX.18). This last line takes on a significant double meaning when Jon confronts

Rorschach, intending to prevent him from returning to the United States to reveal Veidt's crime. Faced with death at Jon's hands, Rorschach tears off his mask – his *face* – to reveal the fact that he is weeping bitterly: "Well, what are you waiting for? Do it. . . . *DO IT!"* (XII. 24). Does Rorschach admit some ultimate doubt by removing the symbol of his uncompromising, moralistic identity? If his identity is uncertain at that moment, as Jon foretells, then the integrity of the moral system that defines that identity is also in question. In his last moment of life, even Rorschach's determined faith in his beliefs is shaken – not enough to cause him to abandon them through compromise, but enough so that the reader is given a surprisingly human glimpse of this strong-willed character, defiant even as he demonstrates that not even he can be certain that what he has done was right.

Watchmen is unquestionably a challenging work, one that not only subverts the superhero genre but uses the comics medium's unique blend of text and images to present the problematic consequences of existentialist and postmodern thought. The work explores the notions of constructed meaning and narrative on an emotional as well as an intellectual level, and succeeds in engaging and unsettling the audience in a way that many of the more detached and cerebral works of existentialist fiction do not. *Watchmen*'s crowning achievement, however, may be that it offers a ray of hope without softening the brutality of its vision. Rorschach and the Comedian offer a glimpse of the dark side of existence, describing a universe that is fundamentally chaotic and a humanity that is both savage and deluded, shirking its responsibility by postulating an outside source of authority in the universe. Jon seems to initially support this view, describing the universe as a "clock without a craftsman," a purposeless instrument that is formed and operates on principles of random chance. These views are balanced, however, by *Watchmen*'s repeated demonstration that meaning and order arise from chaos through the mechanism of perception. Though Rorschach focuses on the negative side of this, commenting that in the absence of God, only we are responsible for our horror, it is equally true that we are solely responsible for the beauty and order that humanity creates collectively and as individuals. Pattern is not, as Rorschach says, "what we imagine after staring at it for too long," but also what we cannot help

but see simply by opening our eyes. As perceivers whose fundamental nature is to impose patterns on our experiences, our collective functioning gives rise to emergent patterns of a vast scope, a complex amalgamation of our experiences comparable to C.G. Jung's collective unconscious. Though we may be alone in the universe as Rorschach believes, our existence is far from meaningless; patterns must and do emerge, as both the novel's characters and we as readers observe. We are born from a place of undefined and undifferentiated emptiness, but as Moore reminds us in a carefully selected quotation from C.G. Jung, "As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light of meaning in the darkness of mere being" (IX.28). The presence of the void does not snuff out our light; just as Laurie cannot abandon her deeply felt love of humanity even when Jon has easily rebutted her arguments, we find patterns and meaning in our lives even knowing that these patterns may well be entirely of our own invention. To remind ourselves that we create our own meaning is not in any way to diminish its reality.

Moore sheds a poetic light on *Watchmen*'s portrayal of the human condition when Jon tells Laurie that life is "the clay in which the forces that shape all things leave their fingerprints most clearly" (IX.28). This beautiful line evokes the second of the two creation stories in Genesis, where God lovingly shapes Adam from clay. Despite *Watchmen*'s ambivalence towards religion, given this strong allusion it is difficult not to recall that the same biblical passage also tells us that man was created in the image of God, or *imago dei*.[16] In the absence of a transcendent, creator God (though not necessarily an immanent one), what might it mean for life to be in the image of "the forces that shape all things"? Perhaps this is a further elevation of life's perceiving nature, and of the peculiar ability of humanity to shape its own destiny through the construction of meaningful narrative. Just as life is shaped by the natural processes of the universe, so the collective consciousness of humanity is molded and ordered by billions of individual perceiving minds. Given that the pivotal events in humanity's history are symbolically reflected in the minute detail of everyday life (the clock images, etc.), this may another instantiation of "as above, so

[16] From Genesis 1:26-27.

below" – the clearest evidence of having been shaped by the forces of being is the ability to shape being yourself.

The notion that the *imago dei* is connected with the ability to shape reality gives Veidt a privileged position in the narrative. Though for the most part, the patterns in humanity's narrative seem to emerge unconsciously from the interactions of human beings, Veidt has actually imposed his will on the whole of humanity, diverting it from the suicidal path on which it was intent. To some extent, Veidt seems to have partially removed himself from humanity, stepping back to gain perspective until he has begun to lose his human point of view (which may explain his inability to engage with the horrific aspects of his actions). Though Veidt makes a poor Christ figure, he does make a passable god-figure, particularly the god of Revelation: Veidt's psychically broadcast massacre by the mammoth alien creature with squid-like tentacles and carnivorous young easily rivals St. John's terrifying vision of seven-headed beasts, plagues, and seas of blood. Further, Veidt's plan is carried out with no one's consent by his own, an apocalypse that is brought down without warning from outside human history, a holocaust with as little obvious explanation as the biblical one. Not for nothing have some critics called *Watchmen*'s ending a *deus ex machina.*

Veidt's success in turning the course of humanity's will with his own demonstrates his awareness of a theme that is repeated throughout the novel – the idea that apocalypse is often a mechanism of willful change. The power of apocalypse to violently sweep away the old while shaping and molding the new is demonstrated by both Rorschach, whose new identity is based almost entirely around the revelation that his traumatic experience brings, and by Veidt's attack on New York, which forces East and West to construct a new, united identity centered on the idea that they must stand together against an outside foe. Fearing that when the opposing nations reached the cusp point of nuclear crisis the result would be mutually assured destruction, Veidt has engineered an earlier cusp point, one that presented the two most powerful conglomerates of people in the world with the opportunity for a self-forming action. Faced with destruction from outside, the nations choose to unite, thus setting a precedent that Veidt believes will definitively shape a peaceful world – at least for a time. Kane notes when articulating the concept of a self-

forming action, however, that while the new self is likely to continue to take actions compatible with the self-forming one, this is a matter of probability, not a guarantee. As Jon notes, nothing ever ends; the fate of life on earth is still in the process of articulation.

In *Watchmen,* the role of apocalypse is that of a trigger for radical change, a mechanism that rips away existing structures and assumptions (moral and otherwise) to get at the often frighteningly infinite possibilities that lie beneath. Clearly, however, this traumatic experience is far from purely destructive; in fact, it has the potential to be greatly empowering, as it reveals the blank canvas upon which life, with its unique ability to shape reality through its perceptions, can express its will. Though their glimpses of the void are terrifying, the characters of *Watchmen* come away well-equipped to participate fully in the universe's process of self-creation, to add their own individual experiences and points of view to the vast consciousness that surrounds and proceeds from them. Though Moore's vision is often dark, it is ultimately one of hope, an exhilarating portrait of a universe in the process of becoming. As we close the novel, Gibbons's suggestive last image leaves the fate of humanity in suspense. A young newspaper clerk extends his hand toward a pile of papers containing Rorschach's revelatory journal; his smiley-face sweatshirt is stained with a bright red streak of ketchup. Yet from the inconclusiveness of this ending comes a flash of insight. The drama isn't over yet; the clock is still ticking, and the reader is finally able to answer Jon's question, "Who makes the world?" (IV.27). For the answer is – we do.