

# Watchmen



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALAN MOORE

Alan Moore was born in 1953 to a lower-class family in Northampton, England, where he grew up with his parents, younger brother, and grandmother. Although their region had high levels poverty and low levels of literacy, Moore nonetheless enjoyed his childhood. From an early age, Moore read all manner of literature. He performed well in school until he moved to a middle-class elementary school, where he came to suspect that their curriculum was designed to brainwash students into being docile citizens. In the 1960s, Moore started contributing his writing to independent magazines and even developed one of his own. At the same time, Moore started selling LSD at his school and was expelled for it in 1970, which hampered his future academic interests. Moore spent the next several years doing various jobs, but he felt restless spending his work hours doing something he didn't love. He eventually quit his day jobs to commit himself to writing and illustrating comics, which he published independently and with various small magazines. However, Moore's income was so small that he and his wife collected government unemployment benefits to keep themselves and their daughter afloat. In 1979, Moore created the comic strip *Maxwell the Magic Cat*, which ran in a local paper and earned him a consistent income until 1986, when he ended his relationship with the newspaper because they ran an article that denigrated homosexual people. Moore also pitched a script to the British comic magazine *2000AD*, whose editor saw serious potential in Moore's writing and put him to work on their *Future Shocks* series. Moore's reputation as a comic book writer increased, and by 1984 he was receiving work offers from Marvel UK and DC Comics in the United States. Len Wein, the head of DC Comics, hired Moore to revamp the Swamp Thing character, which Moore did so successfully—both artistically and commercially—that DC hired additional British writers to revamp other failed characters as well. In 1985, DC Comics let Moore write several stories for Superman, on which he worked with illustrator Dave Gibbons. Gibbons co-created *Watchmen* with Moore in 1986. *Watchmen*, which was one of the first comics to subvert the superhero comic genre by depicting deeply flawed heroes, was wildly successful and established Alan Moore as one of the most important comic book writers of all time. However, despite *Watchmen's* success, Moore's relationship with DC Comics soured over merchandising rights and royalties. In 1989, after finishing *V for Vendetta*, Moore left DC Comics. He set up an independent publishing company called Mad Love with his wife, which he ran for several years before returning to mainstream comics in 1999. Under DC Comics, Moore formed the imprint

America's Best Comics, through which he produced many widely successful series, including *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and *From Hell*. In 2019, Moore announced that he was officially retiring from writing comic books.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*Watchmen* creates an alternate version of the American 20th century, imagining the effect that costumed heroes and Dr. Manhattan would have had on contemporary events. The Comedian and Dr. Manhattan help America win the Vietnam War, which in actual history stretched from 1955 to 1975 as a protracted fight against North Vietnamese Communists, and which America thoroughly lost. The Comedian, as a covert operative for the American government, helps bury the Watergate scandal, which actually occurred between 1972 and 1974 and ended Nixon's presidency when the journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein discovered massive corruption and abuses of federal power. Additionally, the Comedian implies that he assassinated President John F. Kennedy, who was truly assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas, Texas in 1963. *Watchmen's* story is set against the building threat of World War III, a looming nuclear apocalypse triggered by tensions between America and the U.S.S.R. (which *Watchmen* often refers to as "Russia"). Though never named, this tension directly refers to the real tension of the Cold War between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. during the latter half of the 20th century. In this era, fearful of Communism, the U.S. government resolved to "contain" Soviet expansion in the wake of World War II. However, after seeing the devastation that America's atomic bombs unleashed on Japan, the U.S.S.R. immediately developed its own atomic weapons. This triggered an escalating arms race between the two powers, leading to the development of the hydrogen bomb and the constant threat of nuclear war. Through the 1950s and 1960s, constant paranoia about nuclear attacks lingered throughout America. Many civilians built bomb shelters in their yards and schoolchildren practiced nuclear attack drills regularly. Fear of nuclear winter thus became a defining factor of American life in those decades, and it subsequently shapes Moore's depiction of American life and security in *Watchmen*.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Watchmen* critiques the same popular comic book hero archetypes that Alan Moore spent much of his career writing. Before penning *Watchmen*, Moore wrote the Superman comics *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?* and *For the Man Who Has Everything*. These both appear to have influenced his depiction of Dr. Manhattan, who parallels Superman, except

that Dr. Manhattan must deal with the moral and psychological consequences of being a superhuman amongst mortals. Shortly after finishing *Watchmen*, Moore wrote his take on Batman, *The Killing Joke*, which explores the psychology of the Joker and argues that he is not altogether different from Batman himself, much like the characters of *Watchmen* blur the line between hero and villain. Moore's dark take on the hero comic genre continued with *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, which features a British crew of superheroes preventing Armageddon in 1898. *Watchmen's* political focus also surfaces in Moore's [V for Vendetta](#), a series about an anarchist revolutionary who campaigns against the fascist state and convinces civilians to embrace an anarchist society. Even outside of Moore's considerable body of work, *Watchmen's* influence permeated the comic book world after 1987. This is especially true of Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*, which follows the character Dream through a dark, mature fantasy world that reinterprets various mythologies in the same way *Watchmen* reinterprets superhero tropes. Mark Millar's Batman series *The Dark Knight Returns* also draws on *Watchmen*, exploring the popular character as a flawed vigilante operating in spite of the government's opposition to him.

## KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Watchmen*
- **When Written:** 1985
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** Published as 12 issues from September 1986-October 1987
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Graphic novel
- **Setting:** The United States between 1940 and 1985; Mars; Antarctica
- **Climax:** Adrian Veidt reveals his plot to fake an alien attack on earth, killing millions of people.
- **Antagonist:** Adrian Veidt
- **Point of View:** Alternates between third-person narration and first-person narration by various characters.

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Sour Relations.** Moore's relationship with DC Comics ultimately soured when he realized they'd written misleading licensing contracts for *Watchmen*, which enabled them to take possession of the story indefinitely.

**Spin-offs.** Although intended as a one-shot story, *Watchmen* has spawned movies, TV series, and numerous prequel comic series.



## PLOT SUMMARY

In 1985, detectives investigate the death of Edward Blake in New York City, after an intruder threw him through the window of his high-rise apartment. After the police leave, the costumed vigilante Rorschach enters Blake's apartment and starts his own investigation, quickly discovering that Blake was the Comedian, another masked vigilante. Believing that he has discovered a "mask-killer conspiracy," Rorschach warns several other retired vigilantes, including Daniel Dreiberg (Nite Owl), Laurie Juspeckzyk (Silk Spectre), Jon Osterman (the superhuman Dr. Manhattan), and Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias), though none of them take Rorschach's theory seriously. At Edward Blake's funeral, Daniel, Jon, and Adrian recall their memories of the Comedian—all of them remember him as vicious, even murderous.

Laurie, currently dating Jon, feels neglected by him and leaves him to date Daniel. Simultaneously, although Dr. Manhattan is America's ultimate weapon against Soviet expansion, a reporter accuses him of causing dozens of former friends' and lovers' terminal cancer. The accusation makes Dr. Manhattan so upset that he teleports himself to Mars, and the Russians quickly take their opportunity to begin invading the Middle East and occupying new territory. On Mars, Jon remembers how he became Dr. Manhattan when he was caught in an experimental machine that tore his body apart with radiation, after which he learned to make himself a new superhuman body. The government immediately enlisted him as a weapon and used him to win the Vietnam War. As a superhuman, Jon is not only physically powerful but also experiences every moment in history all at once—he can see both the future and the past. He is also super-intelligent, and earth's technological progress leaps forward several decades with Jon's new scientific insights.

An assassin attempts to kill Adrian Veidt, but fails and dies in the process. Rorschach, still investigating the "mask-killer conspiracy," walks into a trap and is framed for murdering Moloch, a retired villain. The police arrest Rorschach and imprison him, and Rorschach reveals his backstory to the criminal psychiatrist Malcolm Long: how he grew up in an abusive home and created the persona Rorschach to punish evil-doers. Meanwhile, Laurie and Daniel come out of retirement for one night and go adventuring as Silk Spectre and Nite Owl, mainly as a way to combat their boredom and sense of helplessness against the looming threat of World War III. After becoming Nite Owl again, Dan feels reenergized and decides that they must break Rorschach out of prison. During a prison riot, Rorschach fights his way through the other inmates and Dan and Laurie pick him up in their airship. However, the police already suspect Dan and Laurie of being illegal vigilantes, and they arrive at Daniel's house immediately after Rorschach disappears from prison.

As the police are banging on Daniel's door, Jon appears in his living room and teleports himself and Laurie back to Mars. Jon tells Laurie that he feels utterly disconnected from the human race and needs Laurie to convince him to return to Earth and prevent World War III. Laurie debates with Jon about nihilism and the meaning of life and helps him to see that human life has its own meaning, even without God or any guiding force, simply because it is phenomenally improbable that life can exist at all. Jon agrees to return to Earth with Laurie and save humanity.

Meanwhile, Daniel and Rorschach escape the police and keep investigating who is behind the Comedian's death, Rorschach's framing, and the attempted assassination of Veidt. However, they discover a set of computer files that indicates that Veidt is behind everything himself, from Jon's exile to Mars to the Comedian's murder. Daniel and Rorschach travel to Antarctica to confront Veidt in his remote base. Veidt expects them and reveals his ultimate plan: He has long believed that the many governments on earth would eventually destroy each other and themselves in the process, wiping humanity out forever. To prevent this, Veidt has spent years engineering a massive creature, a squid-like monster that humanity will believe is an alien. He will teleport the creature into New York City, where it will detonate, killing millions of people and simulating an alien attack. This, Veidt hopes, will frighten the U.S. and the Soviets so much that they will lay down arms and form an alliance against this new existential threat, thus bringing about world peace. Veidt's plan horrifies Daniel and Rorschach and they vow to stop him, but Veidt reveals that he already executed it half an hour ago.

Jon and Laurie teleport into New York City to find corpses everywhere, along with the remains of Veidt's alien creature. Jon teleports them both to Antarctica. Veidt attempts to kill Jon to stop him from disrupting his plan, but Jon overcomes Veidt and moves to crush him. But then, Jon hears the news report that the America and the Soviets have declared peace. Jon, Laurie, and Daniel realize that they must let Veidt's plan proceed unhindered; if they reveal what he's done, the illusion of an alien invasion will be shattered, along with the world's newfound peace. However, Rorschach is unwilling to compromise his morality for the greater good. He intends to reveal Veidt's actions to the world, so Jon kills him to prevent it. However, Rorschach had taken meticulous notes on his investigation in journal and mailed it to a newspaper before leaving for Antarctica. In the last frame, the journal sits, with an employee at the newspaper potentially about to read its contents.

Kovacs, also known as Rorschach, is a costumed vigilante and one of the main characters in the story. Rorschach wears a white **mask** with shifting black shapes on it, resembling moving Rorschach blot tests. Unlike the the other characters, who most often go by their given names, Rorschach holds his vigilante identity as his main identity and thinks of Walter Kovacs as his costume. He and other people refer to him exclusively as Rorschach, and he is rarely seen without his mask and costume, in part because he endured a horrifically abusive childhood and sees his vigilante identity as a way to feel safe and powerful in a chaotic, painful world. During the day, he pretends to be a doomsayer, carrying a sign that says, "The End is Nigh." Rorschach holds a strict moralistic view of ethics and believes that the world divides easily into good people and bad people. He loathes crime and vice, especially as it pervades the lower class, yet he himself often tortures or kills people for information. When Rorschach finds out that Edward Blake was murdered, he hunts doggedly for his killer. This eventually leads Rorschach to discover Adrian Veidt's plan to avert World War III by killing half the population of New York City. Although the other surviving heroes agree that they must go along with Veidt's plan and compromise their morals to prevent nuclear war, Rorschach refuses to compromise "even in the face of Armageddon." He defies the other Watchmen and tries to return to America to tell everyone what Veidt did, even though the truth would shatter the newly established world peace. To stop him, Dr. Manhattan kills Rorschach. Rorschach accepts his death and pulls his mask off just before he dies, signifying that he chooses to accept his own limitations and die as Walter Kovacs, rather than as Rorschach.

**Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias)** – Adrian Veidt, a brilliant businessman, operates as the vigilante hero Ozymandias for several years before announcing his retirement and publicly revealing his identity. As a young man, Veidt idolizes Alexander the Great but mourns the fact that he never succeeded in his ultimate goal of unifying all of humanity together. As a result, Veidt spends most of his life trying to fulfill Alexander's ambition. Veidt realizes that as Ozymandias, he can only fight petty crime and have minimal impact on the world, so he quits to become a business magnate, using his incredible intellect to become an astute investor. Recognizing that America and Russia are racing towards mutual destruction with nuclear weapons, Veidt uses his massive wealth and intelligence to hatch an elaborate, though devastating, plot to save humanity from itself. He hires a cadre of artists and scientists to engineer a gigantic squid-like monster and teleports it into New York City, intentionally triggering a massive explosion that kills half of New York City and leaves survivors haunted by visions of an alien planet. Veidt correctly reasons that by convincingly faking an alien invasion, he can entice all the major world powers to end hostilities with each other and declare a unilateral peace, uniting themselves against a new existential threat. Veidt's plan embodies a utilitarian ethic, since he murders millions of people



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Walter Kovacs (Rorschach) / The Doomsayer** – Walter

to save the lives of billions. Although Veidt's plan works in the short term, the novel leaves the ending ambiguous by hinting that Veidt's plan may soon be discovered through the notes that Rorschach left after his death, thus breaking the illusion of alien invasion and threatening the world's newfound peace. Depending on whether or not Veidt's ruse is discovered, he is either the savior of the world or its greatest villain.

**Edward Blake (The Comedian)** – The Comedian, also known as Edward Blake, is a masked vigilante and a member of the original Minutemen who later works for the American government as a paramilitary operative. The story begins with Blake's mysterious murder, which is later revealed to have been carried out by Adrian Veidt because Blake learned of his secret plot. Through other characters' flashbacks, the Comedian is revealed to be an amoral, violent man but also a firm patriot. He murders several people, hints that he killed the journalists who would have exposed the Watergate scandal, jokes that he assassinated John F. Kennedy, and tries to rape Sally Jupiter (the original Silk Spectre). Even so, the Comedian's costume has a star on one shoulder and a stripe on the other, making him the embodiment of American patriotism—and thus criticizing American patriotism as loyalty to a war-mongering and corrupt government. Because he tried to rape her mother (Sally Jupiter), Laurie Juspezyk hates the Comedian for most of her life. However, she eventually discovers that her mother fell in love with Blake in later years, despite what he did to her, and Blake is actually Laurie's own father.

**Daniel Dreiberg (the second Nite Owl)** Daniel Dreiberg is an inventor and the second Nite Owl, taking up the heroic identity after Hollis Mason, the original Nite Owl, retires. Although Daniel retires when the Keene Act of 1977 passes, outlawing masked vigilantes, he finds that he feels helpless—and sexually impotent—to face the chaos in the world and the looming threat of war until he resumes his role as Nite Owl, suggesting that his hero's identity allows him to cope with uncertainty and world events. He takes up his role as Nite Owl again when he starts dating Laurie. Although he is hesitant to believe Rorschach's "mask-killer conspiracy," when Dr. Manhattan exiles himself to Mars and Rorschach is framed for murder, Daniel realizes that some sort of plot is indeed in motion. After helping Rorschach break out of jail, Daniel joins Rorschach's investigation and discovers Adrian Veidt's plot to avert World War III by faking an alien invasion, killing three million people in the process. When Veidt explains the logic of his plan, Daniel (unlike Rorschach) realizes that though it's horrific, he must let it proceed so that humanity does not wipe itself out. At the end of the novel, Daniel begins a new life with Laurie under an alias.

**Laurie Juspezyk (the second Silk Spectre)** – Laurie Juspezyk is Sally Jupiter and Edward Blake's daughter, though she does not know that Blake is her father until Jon Osterman reveals it to her on Mars. From a young age, Sally grooms Laurie to be a costumed hero and succeed her as the second Silk Spectre, but

Laurie resents her mother for this and the two have a strained relationship. At the start of the novel, Laurie is in a relationship with Jon Osterman. Though she is unhappy, the government insists that she stays to keep Jon happy, since, as Dr. Manhattan, he is their ultimate weapon. Laurie eventually leaves Jon and starts dating Daniel Dreiberg instead. Although she does not like running around as a vigilante, she dons her costume with Daniel and acts as a vigilante again to help him regain his confidence, thus setting him on the path to pursue Adrian Veidt alongside Rorschach. During Jon's exile on Mars, Laurie goes with him to convince him that human life has enough significance to be worth saving. Although she briefly doubts it herself—when she discovers that Blake, who once tried to rape her mother, is actually her father—she helps Jon to understand that human life is a miracle, valuable simply because it exists. After Adrian's plan succeeds and millions of people die, Laurie realizes that having the chance to live at all is a beautiful gift, and she elects to love Daniel simply because he is there with her and they are alive. She continues living with Daniel after the story, though under an alias.

**Jon Osterman (Dr. Manhattan)** – Jon Osterman is a blue-skinned superhuman and the only person in the story who possesses actual superpowers. After Jon, a Harvard scientist, accidentally locks himself in a radiation test chamber, he dies and is reborn as Dr. Manhattan, a being who has complete mastery over the laws of physics and matter, can look backward and forward through time, and can teleport himself and other people at will, making him effectively a god-like figure. As soon as Jon becomes a superhero, the American government claims him as their ultimate weapon, naming him Dr. Manhattan to evoke memories of the Manhattan Project and the atomic bomb. At the start of the story, Jon dates Laurie, though he struggles to relate to her or any human now that he is no longer human himself. Laurie leaves him, and in the same evening, a reporter accuses him of causing dozens of close friends and associates to get terminal cancer, which makes him so upset that he leaves Earth and lives on Mars. Although Jon wants to be rid of his attachments to humanity, Laurie helps him realize that human life is still meaningful because of how rare it is, and he returns to Earth to try to prevent the end of the world. When Jon and Laurie return to New York City, they witness the carnage Adrian Veidt's plan has wrought and go to Antarctica to find him. Veidt briefly tries to kill Jon, and Jon in turn tries to kill Veidt, but they both stop fighting when they hear on the news that Veidt's plan worked: the Americans and the Soviets have declared peace, so Jon accepts Veidt's actions. Although Veidt wants Jon to stay with him and help him build Earth into a new utopia, Jon decides he wants to create life on a new planet and disappears.

**Hollis Mason (the original Nite Owl)** – Hollis Mason is the original Nite Owl and one of the Minutemen. Hollis becomes a masked avenger while he is a police officer, after he finds

himself enamored by children's comic books and reads about other costumed vigilantes in the newspaper. Hollis retires decades before *Watchmen's* story takes place in 1985, passing the identity on to Daniel Dreiberg and opening an auto shop. However, during his retirement he writes an expose of his experiences as one of the Minutemen in a memoir called *Under the Hood*, which reveals that the Comedian (Edward Blake) tried to rape Sally Jupiter, among other grim details. Hollis dies on Halloween night after a local gang breaks into his house and bludgeons him to death in a random act of anarchic violence.

**Sally Jupiter (the original Silk Spectre)** – Sally Jupiter is Laurie's mother and one of the Minutemen. Sally grooms Laurie to succeed her as a costumed hero from a young age, and Laurie resents her for it as an adult. From the start, Sally uses the exposure she receives as a hero to make money through her modeling career, which makes her into a national sex symbol. She marries her publicist, Laurence Schexnayder, and the two have an unhappy marriage for several years before divorcing. Although Edward Blake once tries to rape her, Sally eventually falls in love with Blake, especially as she grows older. Blake is Laurie's father, but Sally conceals this fact from everyone, including her own daughter. When Laurie forgives Sally for everything and tells her that it's okay that Blake is her real father, Sally kisses Blake's picture and cries, revealing that she still loves him.

**Nelson Gardner (Captain Metropolis)** – Captain Metropolis is a first-generation vigilante hero who establishes the Minutemen with the help of Sally Jupiter. After the Minutemen disband in 1949, an aging Captain Metropolis tries to form the Crimebusters in 1966. However, the group immediately falls apart, and Edward Blake accuses Captain Metropolis of only wanting to prove that he is still capable in his old age.

**Hooded Justice** – Hooded Justice is a masked vigilante and one of the Minutemen. Although Hooded Justice's true identity is unknown, rumors persist that he is actually a foreign-born Communist named Muller. Adrian Veidt believes that Edward Blake hunts down and kills Hooded Justice on behalf of the American government, though this is unconfirmed.

**Edgar Jacobi (Moloch)** – Moloch is a former costumed villain who opposes the Minutemen and Dr. Manhattan in his youth. Despite being labeled a villain, Moloch only exists in the story as Edgar Jacobi, a retired old man who lives alone quietly. However, Rorschach attacks him when he believes that Moloch is tied to Edward Blake's murder. Adrian Veidt murders Moloch and frames Rorschach for his death as a way to get Rorschach arrested and off his trail.

**Laurence Schexnayder** – Laurence is Sally Jupiter's publicist, who briefly runs publicity for all of the Minutemen, helping them reach their greatest level of fame in the 1940s. When Edward Blake tries to rape Sally, Laurence convinces her not to press charges, since it would tarnish the group's public image.

Laurence marries Sally, prompting her to leave the Minutemen, but eventually divorces her a decade later.

**Dr. Malcolm Long** – Malcolm Long is a psychiatrist who interviews Rorschach several times while he is in prison. Long is initially determined to psychoanalyze and cure Rorschach, since such a success would make him famous. However, rather than rehabilitating Rorschach into a healthy, positive person, Rorschach's description of the world he's seen causes Long to become increasingly nihilistic and disturbed, just like Rorschach.

**Kitty Genovese** – Kitty Genovese is a woman who orders the dress that Rorschach ultimately makes his **mask** out of. When Rorschach is 18, Kitty is tortured, raped, and murdered in plain sight in front of her apartment, which so infuriates him that he begins hunting criminals as his vigilante persona. Kitty Genovese is also a real-life historical figure whose brutal murder—which was overheard by many of her neighbors—gave rise to what's now known as "the bystander effect." The bystander effect is a phenomenon in which people in a group who notice something obviously wrong assume that, because the problem is so obvious and there are plenty of people around, someone else will handle it—but because everyone thinks this, no one actually does anything to intervene.

**The Survivor** – The survivor is the nameless narrator of the **pirate comic**, which is read by an unnamed character throughout the novel. After the survivor's ship and crew are destroyed by pirates, the survivor becomes convinced that the pirates will sail to his home and murder his family as well. He makes his way to his hometown, growing more desperate and crazed the closer he gets. When he reaches his hometown, he accidentally murders his wife, believing that she is a pirate who's already murdered his family.

**Janey Slater** – Janey is Jon's first partner listed in the story. Jon falls in love with her and they live together for several years, including the period in which Jon is reborn as Dr. Manhattan. However, as Janey grows older and less attractive, Jon leaves her for 16-year-old Laurie Juspecky, which makes Janey furious.

**President Nixon** – President Richard Nixon is the President of the United States. In the novel's fictionalized version of history, after Edward Blake kills the reporters who would have uncovered Watergate, Nixon amends the constitution to allow himself to serve five consecutive terms in office. (In reality, he resigned in order to avoid being impeached as a result of the scandal.)

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Silhouette** – Silhouette is the only other woman in the Minutemen besides Sally Jupiter. Little is said of her except that the public discovers she is in a lesbian relationship, which causes such a furor that Laurence Schexnayder convinces the

Minutemen to force her out to preserve their public image.

**Bernard (the News Vendor)** – The news vendor, who eventually reveals his name is Bernard, stands on the street corner, selling newspapers, chatting with passersby, and commenting on the headlines. The news vendor represents the average citizen in the story, since most of the characters are vigilante heroes.

**Gloria Long** – Gloria Long is Malcolm’s wife, who resents the fact that her husband’s work takes his attention away from her. Gloria wants Malcolm to choose between helping the world and being with her.

**Big Figure** – Big Figure is a crime boss who tries to get revenge on Rorschach while Rorschach is in prison. However, Rorschach kills Big Figure’s goons and presumably him as well.

**Rorschach’s Landlady** – Rorschach’s landlady prostitutes herself, but falsely claims to reporters that Rorschach sexually propositioned her after he is thrown in jail and his identity is revealed. When Rorschach escapes, he considers punishing her for the lie until he sees her frightened children and takes pity on them.

**Bubastis** – Bubastis is Adrian Veidt’s giant, genetically altered pet lynx.

**Byron Lewis (Mothman)** – Byron Lewis is one of the first-generation vigilantes. He loses his faculties in his old age due to dementia and alcoholism.

**Steven Fine** – Steven Fine is a detective who appears occasionally throughout the story, first at Edward Blake’s apartment, though he does not reveal his name until he investigates Daniel Dreiberg on suspicions of resumed vigilante work.

**Max Shea** – Max Shea is the author of the **pirate comic**, whom Adrian Veidt hires to help him design his “alien.” Max Shea dies when the ocean liner is blown up.

**Hira Manish** – Hira Manish is an artist whom Adrian Veidt hires to help him design his “alien.” Hira Manish dies when the ocean liner is blown up.

**Milton Glass** – Milton Glass is one of Jon Osterman’s research associates.

**Hector Godfrey** – Hector Godfrey is the editor of the “right-wing” newspaper *New Frontiersman*. Godfrey is a firm patriot and a vigilante supporter, and he accuses his liberal opponents of being Communists.

**Seymour** – Seymour works for Hector Godfrey on *New Frontiersman*. In the last scene of the story, Seymour considers looking through Rorschach’s journal, which the vigilante mailed to the newspaper, suggesting that Veidt’s plot may or may not be revealed to the world.

**Doug Roth** – Doug Roth is the editor of the “left-wing” newspaper *Nova Express*. Roth opposes most

vigilantes—though he likes Adrian Veidt—and starts the rumor that Dr. Manhattan gives people cancer.

**Sylvia Glick** – Sylvia is Walter Kovacs’s abusive mother. Someone murders her when Kovacs is a teenager, to which he responds, “Good.”

**Jon Osterman’s Father** – Jon’s father is a watchmaker until the atomic bomb convinces him that the modern world needs physicists, not watchmakers.

**Joey** – Joey is a woman who visits the news vendor. She is Aline’s girlfriend.

**Aline** – Aline is Joey’s girlfriend.

## TERMS

**The Minutemen** – The Minutemen are a group of masked vigilantes, founded by **Captain Metropolis** (Nelson Gardner) and the original Silk Spectre (**Sally Jupiter**) in 1939. The Minutemen represent the first generation of costumed heroes. They disband in 1949.

**The Crimebusters** – The Crimebusters are a failed attempt by an aging **Captain Metropolis** (Nelson Gardner) to create a follow-up version of the Minutemen in 1966. The Crimebusters only hold one meeting before falling apart.

**The Keene Act of 1977** – The Keene Act of 1977 is a fictional American law that outlaws all vigilantes and caped crusaders except for the **Comedian** (Edward Blake) and **Dr. Manhattan** (Jon Osterman), who work on behalf of the American government.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### HEROES, VILLAINS, AND VIGILANTES

Alan Moore’s graphic novel *Watchmen* tells the interweaving stories of a handful of American heroes between the 1940s and 1980s, loosely referred to as the Watchmen (referencing a 1963 speech by John F. Kennedy). Although the Watchmen do not possess superhuman powers—except for Jon Osterman (Dr. Manhattan)—they occupy archetypal hero roles, fighting crime, wearing costumes, and forming leagues. However, contrasting with popular depictions of superheroes past such as Superman, Moore’s heroes are far from perfect paragons of virtue. *Watchmen*’s deeply flawed characters critique popular notions

of heroic vigilantes, arguing that even people society deems heroes possess villainous flaws and the capacity for evil.

Although much of American society in the novel regards the Watchmen as heroes, many of them exhibit deeply flawed morality, suggesting that notion of a pure “hero” is fundamentally misguided. Edward Blake (the Comedian), whom the American government employs as a special operative—fighting in wars, assassinating targets—and celebrates as a patriot, tries to rape his teammate Sally Jupiter (the original Silk Spectre). Later, as Blake is about to leave Vietnam (after the Vietnam War is over), he tells a Vietnamese woman he impregnated that he will simply abandon her and the child to fend for themselves. When the woman angrily hits him with a glass bottle, Blake shoots her in the head. Despite his public image as a hero, Blake’s horrendous behavior suggests that such icons are not the pure and virtuous figures that society imagines they are. Rorschach (Walter Kovacs), another masked hero, exhibits “psychopath[ic]” behavior. While seeking information, Rorschach routinely tortures people to make them talk. While this approach is effective, often Rorschach gains no new information and even admits that he unnecessarily hospitalizes people. He kills people he deems “bad” without trial or input from others, and even his fellow masked heroes view him as an unhinged lunatic. Like Blake, Rorschach’s behavior suggests that many of society’s heroes are deeply flawed, operating from a skewed concept of morality and justice.

Along with their flawed moral characters, most of the Watchmen have selfish motives for wearing costumes and fighting crime, suggesting that society’s heroes may be seeking their own self-interests, rather than the good of society. Several of the heroes are primarily in it for the money. For instance, Sally Jupiter uses her publicist to turn her into a national sex symbol. Her comrade Hollis Mason (the original Nite Owl) says that she “used her reputation as a crimefighter primarily to [...] receive exposure for her lucrative modeling career,” but adds that none of the heroes “begrudge her a living.” Sally even grooms her daughter Laurie Juspezyk to take her place as the second Silk Spectre and continue making money after she retires. Sally’s blatant profiteering and the other heroes’ acceptance of it suggests that many of them are motivated more by money than by doing good for society. Other heroes do their work purely for the thrill of adventure. In their retirements, Laurie and Daniel Dreiberg (the second Nite Owl) find themselves bored with middle age until they don their costumes and go gallivanting around as heroes like they did in their younger years. Although they rescue some people from a burning building and beat up a few muggers, Laurie and Daniel’s vigilante crusades are motivated primarily by their wish to feel adventurous again. Other masked vigilantes’ heroic identities arise from their own hubris—their belief that they can save the world and fix all of society’s ills. When the aging

Captain Metropolis (Nelson Gardner) tries to form a new coalition of heroes to fight small “evils” like drugs, robbery, and anti-war sentiment, Blake points out that none of these small issues matter when nuclear war is on the horizon. Rather than dealing with significant dangers, Blake argues, Captain Metropolis is just trying to protect his own ego and prove that he is still relevant and capable, despite his old age. Blake’s criticism of Captain Metropolis reflects how, for some, being a hero is more about feeling important and self-righteous than actually making a difference. In each case, the Watchmen’s personal motivations outweigh their desire to help society, suggesting that many heroes’ motives are as flawed as their moral characters.

Although the masked crusaders in *Watchmen* do some good, the destruction they also cause further indicates that society’s heroes are as flawed and selfish as anyone else. Heroes like the Watchmen are dangerous in vigilante roles, and some of their behavior could even be considered villainous. Despite the novel’s plethora of masked heroes, *Watchmen* only contains one typical villain, Moloch, who by 1985 is retired and lives alone. Although the Watchmen reference Moloch’s past as a villainous mastermind, his role in the story is completely passive. He hurts no one, compared to the many people that the presumed heroes kill, suggesting that heroic vigilantes may actually be worse than society’s supposed “villains.” None of the Watchmen better represents the nebulous difference between hero and villain than the billionaire Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias). Veidt hatches a plan to avert World War III by faking an alien invasion, which scares the U.S. and Russia into putting down their nuclear weapons and becoming allies. To make the alien threat seem adequately severe, Veidt teleports his supposed alien into the middle of New York City, intentionally triggering an explosion that kills three million people, and believes that he has thus saved the world. Although Veidt prevents World War III for the time being, his heroism is offset by the millions of deaths he causes, leaving his status as the world’s greatest hero or the world’s greatest villain ambiguous.

The heroes’ questionable behavior and lack of oversight leads many people in society to take up the refrain, “Who watches the Watchmen?” This question suggests that no one in society, not even supposed heroes, should be so trusted that they are above accountability. Heroes, the book suggests, are often not as noble as they may seem.



### MORALIST VS. UTILITARIAN ETHICS

Though both are vigilantes, Rorschach (Walter Kovacs) and Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias) adhere to opposing ethical systems. Rorschach holds a strict view of morality and condemns any breach of the law in any form. Veidt takes a utilitarian approach, disregarding small breaches of the law if they serve a greater good. The two heroes’ opposite views of ethics inevitably draw them into

conflict with each other, pitting one system against the other. Rorschach and Adrian Veidt's ethical conflict compares strict moralism with utilitarianism, ultimately suggesting that utilitarianism is more effective, though neither system is necessarily more morally right than the other.

Rorschach's methodology embodies strict moralism and the pursuit of justice, demonstrating how such an outlook leads to callousness and "psychopath[ic]" behavior. Rorschach sees the world through a moralistic, black-and-white lens. In his mind, all of the world is either good or evil—but most of it is evil. In his journal narration, Rorschach rails against the drugs, violence, and promiscuity of New York City, even though he belongs to that same world himself. He calls women who prostitute themselves "whores," punishes people for possessing non-prescription drugs or unlicensed guns, and burns a man to death for kidnapping and murdering a young girl. For every crime, both large and small, Rorschach does not consider the broader circumstances of one's crime (why a woman might resort to prostitution, for instance), but rather makes his moral judgment based solely on the crime itself. Because of his rigid morality and insistence on justice, Rorschach ultimately fails to understand complex situations or moral ambiguity—thus demonstrating both the callousness and short-sightedness of strictly moralistic ethics. Despite Rorschach's obsessive moralism, he often fails to hold himself and his allies to the same standard. Rorschach tortures people for information, but sometimes hurts the wrong people. He kills dozens of people, usually justifying himself by claiming that they are bad people and he has "no choice." After Edward Blake (the Comedian) is murdered, Rorschach hunts for his killer and even defends his friend's honor, even though the Comedian was a murderer and attempted rapist himself. **Rorschach's mask**, which is white with black ink blots that constantly move (resembling a Rorschach test), symbolizes his ethical stance: he sees morality as black and white, though inconsistently, since his judgments of what makes a person good or evil constantly shift and morph. Such shifting—yet absolutist—concepts of morality suggest that a moralistic person's ethical code tends to be subjective and inconsistent, even if it aims to be firm and resolute.

Contrasting with Rorschach, Adrian Veidt embodies a utilitarian view of ethics, demonstrating how such an approach can address moral ambiguity but also appear callous, neglecting the rights of individuals in favor of the good of the majority. Unlike Rorschach's black-and-white morality, Veidt recognizes gray areas and the presence of moral ambiguity. In a newspaper interview, Veidt reflects, "What does fighting crime mean, exactly? Does it mean upholding the law when a woman shoplifts to feed her children, or [...] uncover[ing] the ones who, quite legally, have brought about her poverty?" Veidt recognizes that the societal injustices people face—like poverty, in this example—contribute to individual infractions of the law. Unlike Rorschach's strict moralism, Adrian Veidt's utilitarianism

takes a broad view of ethics and society, recognizing not only individual crimes, but also the (often legally-enshrined) forces that lead desperate people to commit such crimes. However, in Veidt's effort to fight injustice on a broad scale, he arguably takes too much power into his own hands. To prevent World War III—which is brewing between the U.S. and Russia, who are both armed with nuclear weapons—Veidt hatches what is effectively a terrorist plot. Using a cohort of artists and scientists, he engineers a gigantic "alien" and teleports it into New York City, causing a massive explosion, killing three million people, and convincing the world that they are under threat of alien invasion. This new existential threat forces the U.S. and the Russians to disarm, sign a hasty treaty, and create a strong alliance, leading the world as a unified force. By killing millions of people, Veidt prevents World War III. However, Veidt's utilitarian action fails to account for the millions of people he kills in order to avert a nuclear apocalypse. Though many more are presumably saved, those millions who die never have the choice of whether or not to sacrifice themselves. Although his actions are effective, Veidt essentially plays God, and his utilitarianism thus appears just as callous as Rorschach's strict moralism.

*Watchmen* pointedly avoids presenting either Rorschach or Adrian Veidt's ethical system as morally defensible or "correct," leaving readers to decide for themselves. When Rorschach learns of Veidt's plan—which has already been carried out—Rorschach chooses to remain morally rigid and refuses to compromise, "even in the face of Armageddon." He believes Veidt must be brought to justice before the government, even though exposing the plot will shatter the illusion of an alien invasion—thus ruining Earth's newfound peace and rendering the millions of deaths in New York City meaningless. Although Rorschach remains true to his own values until Jon Osterman (Dr. Manhattan) kills him, he ultimately accomplishes nothing. Adrian Veidt, by contrast, prevents an evil end to the world by committing what many—certainly Rorschach—would regard as an evil of its own. He makes a massive ethical compromise, but does exponentially more to prevent injustice than Rorschach ever does, suggesting that at the very least, utilitarianism is a more effective ethical system in terms of creating change, though not necessarily a more virtuous one. Additionally, the final panel of the novel shows a newspaper printer about to find Rorschach's journal of notes which may reveal Veidt's scheme, thus making the final outcome of events even more ambiguous. The novel intentionally lets the tension between moralism and utilitarianism stand, leading readers to decide for themselves what they believe is right in a situation without easy or clear answers.



## IDENTITY AND EMPOWERMENT

Every one of the Watchmen does their vigilante work under a constructed identity. For some of the

heroes, their masks are only a convenient way to hide their given names—but for many of the Watchmen, their alter egos become a convenient way to cope with their own insufficiencies. This is particularly apparent for Walter Kovacs, who finds a sense of power and control in his heroic identity as Rorschach. Walter Kovacs uses his secret identity as Rorschach to feel a sense of power and control in a dark and chaotic world, suggesting that constructing a powerful identity can help one cope with one's own fear or powerlessness, though one may eventually lose oneself in that identity.

For Walter Kovacs and people like him, the world feels grim, violent, and beyond their control, leaving them fearful and with a keen sense of their own powerlessness. Walter Kovacs grows up in an abusive home, surrounded by drugs, prostitution, and violence. Walter's mother hates him and treats him so monstrously that when Walter hears that someone murdered her, he simply responds, "Good." Other boys constantly beat Walter up and mock him. From this beginning, his life is rife with fear and violence. Throughout his childhood, Walter is only a victim. He suffers and has no control over his own safety or the world around him. People like Walter who grow up weak and defenseless in a chaotic world are often left feeling fearful and keenly aware of their own powerlessness even in adulthood.

Creating an alter ego allows Walter to feel powerful and capable of doing what he believes must be done, suggesting that constructing such an identity can empower one to feel confident and capable amid grim circumstances. When Walter is 18, he reads about Kitty Genovese, a woman who was raped and tortured to death in New York, within earshot of at least 40 people. No one tried to help. Walter is so disgusted with the world—both its criminals and its apathetic civilians—that he begins roaming the streets at night as Rorschach, hunting down petty criminals as a way to feel empowered and assert some sort of justice in the world. However, Walter describes himself in his early years as "soft" and "naïve," since he lets criminals live after he punishes them, indicating that he has only partially embraced his new identity as Rorschach. Walter's full transformation into Rorschach occurs when he discovers that a man kidnapped a six-year-old girl, cut her into pieces, and fed her to his dogs. When Rorschach is about to butcher this kidnapper and his dogs with a meat cleaver, he feels a moment of hesitation. But as he strikes and feels blood cover his chest, Rorschach recalls, "under [the **mask**], it was Kovacs who closed his eyes. It was Rorschach who opened them again," suggesting that he has fully embraced his new identity. Doing so allows him to commit violent acts that he would be incapable of as Walter Kovacs. Walter's use of his alter ego, Rorschach, suggests that one can use their constructed identity to feel powerful amid the world's chaos. Additionally, such an identity can enable people to do things—especially if they seem necessary—that they would otherwise be too afraid to do, such as retaliating

against a violent criminal.

However, Walter's struggle to maintain his sense of self, independent from Rorschach, suggests that such identities can consume a person and cause them to lose sight of their true self. Walter loses himself in Rorschach. As a free man, he rarely removes his mask; even the other Watchmen never see his face or know his true identity. When the police ambush and arrest Rorschach on a false murder charge, he spends weeks talking with the criminal psychiatrist Malcolm Long. Rorschach tells Malcolm that Rorschach is his true identity, and that Walter Kovacs is nothing more than the disguise he wears during the day. Although Malcolm believes that Rorschach is an "unhealthy fantasy identity," even he finds himself calling the man Rorschach, rather than Walter. Rorschach effectively consumes Walter Kovacs, eliminating his former self. This suggests that one's constructed identity may help them cope with fear or powerlessness, but at the cost of them losing sight of who they truly are.

It's only when Rorschach is about to die that he's ultimately forced to recognize his own limitations, and admit that he is only Walter Kovacs. When Rorschach realizes that Jon Osterman (Dr. Manhattan) is about to kill him to stop him from disrupting Adrian Veidt's plot, Rorschach pulls off his mask, tears streaming down his eyes. This signifies that he chooses to recognize his own limitations, to die as Walter Kovacs the man rather than Rorschach the hero, powerless to prevent the world's chaos. Walter's character arc ultimately demonstrates how although a constructed identity may help one to cope with fear, powerlessness, and a chaotic world, one ultimately cannot escape one's own limitations.



## NIHILISM AND MEANING

*Watchmen* takes a grim view of the modern world, depicting the sense of nihilism that arises from global atrocities and rapid technological change.

The world of the novel feels chaotic and godless. As a result, many of the Watchmen struggle to understand life and wonder whether any meaning exists in the universe at all. Although for many of the Watchmen, life feels nihilistic and absurd, Laurie (the second Silk Spectre) and Jon (Dr. Manhattan) argue that human life is a rare miracle, and thus should be cherished and enjoyed.

For many of the Watchmen, the horrors of the modern world and vastness of the universe make human life seem arbitrary, without meaning or value. Surrounded by the crime and filth of New York City's underclass, Rorschach (Walter Kovacs) believes that the world is godless and pointless: "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 is us. Only us." After Rorschach describes his life experiences and the horrific crimes he's discovered, even Rorschach's prison psychiatrist Malcolm

Long finds himself admitting, “We are alone. There is nothing else,” suggesting that no ulterior force gives meaning to human life. Similarly, after years of fighting amid the horrors of the Vietnam War, Edward Blake (the Comedian) states that life is nothing more than a sick “joke.” He comes to the conclusion that nothing matters since the world is so absurd and pointless—there is no god or greater purpose, and human life has no intrinsic value. This nihilistic belief fuels Blake’s ruthless behavior and disregard for any form of morality—such as when he murders his pregnant Vietnamese mistress, so as not to be inconvenienced by her—suggesting that such flagrant nihilism can lead to terrible behavior, unrestrained by any impulse to live virtuously or value other people’s lives. Although the superhuman Jon Osterman is less disturbed by the world’s horror, he travels the universe at will and understands nature at the atomic level, which gives him a similarly nihilistic view. While standing on Mars, staring out at the stars, he decides that compared to the vast complexity of the universe, “human life is brief and mundane.” Although Jon is supremely powerful, he does not want to even try saving humanity from World War III, because the species does not seem worth saving. In Jon’s view, human life is a small event on one small planet, unremarkable in light of the rest of the universe, and is thus meaningless and worthless.

Despite the meaninglessness of the universe, while speaking with Laurie on Mars, Jon realizes that human life is meaningful *because* it’s so rare and improbable—which makes it a “miracle,” a precious opportunity. When Laurie realizes that World War III is approaching, she asks Jon to intervene. She recognizes that human life seems horrific and unguided, but nonetheless asks, “Just the existence of life, isn’t that significant?” That is, the fact that human life exists at all should be enough reason to value it. Jon realizes that he actually agrees with Laurie. He states that life is a series of “thermodynamic miracles,” events so wildly improbable that they seem miraculous, whether they truly are or not. He states, “In each human coupling, a thousand million sperm vie for a single egg. Multiply those odds against countless generations of being alive; meeting; siring that precise son; that exact daughter...” Jon and Laurie thus realize that each human life is valuable because its existence is so improbable as to be miraculous. Jon argues that life is so abundant on Earth that people forget how rare it is in the universe. He states, “the world is so full of people, so crowded with these miracles that they become commonplace and we forget,” suggesting that humans grow so complacent, so settled into their routines that they lose perspective on how miraculous the existence of life is. When Laurie struggles with her own feelings of meaninglessness and nihilism, Jon comforts her: “Dry your eyes, for you are life, rarer than a quark and unpredictable beyond the dreams of Heisenberg.” Since each person’s existence is so improbably miraculous, life is a rare opportunity in which anything may happen, and it is thus worth living.

When Laurie sees millions of people die in New York City (as part of Adrian Veidt’s plot to avert World War III), she realizes that life is not only miraculously rare, but also fragile, and that one should take every opportunity to live while they can. After Veidt triggers his explosion—simulating an alien invasion and killing millions to convince the Americans and the Soviets to lay down their nuclear weapons—Jon and Laurie teleport into the city and see all the bodies strewn about. Laurie is heartbroken that all of these people lost their miraculous chance to do everyday things like “disagree or eat Indian food, or love each other,” suggesting that even mundane activities are valuable opportunities to experience and enjoy life. Although Laurie couldn’t do anything to stop millions of people from dying, she realizes that life is nonetheless miraculous. She says, “It’s sweet. Being alive is so damn sweet.” She tells her lover, Daniel (the second Nite Owl), “I want to see you and taste you and smell you because I can.” Laurie responds to death and suffering not by wallowing in nihilism, but by making the most of the opportunity she has to live, ultimately arguing that each person should cherish their life, love one another, and simply enjoy mundane things, regardless of whether or not there is any god or greater significance.

Through Laurie and Jon’s gradual realization of life’s rarity and preciousness, *Watchmen* argues that even if life seems to lack purpose or a higher power, every life is a fragile miracle, meaningful and valuable in its own right.



## AMERICAN CORRUPTION AND PATRIOTISM

Alan Moore sets *Watchmen*’s main storyline in 1985, though it frequently flashes back as early as the 1940s. Set in a fictionalized version of the real world, the story takes place in the context of 20th-century America’s defining moments, such as the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the Cold War, all instances in which the United States government began to show signs of its own corruption, hubris, and war-mongering. Though some events in the book happen slightly differently than they did historically, Moore’s depiction of the United States closely parallels reality, and thus it both sheds light on and criticizes the current state of the U.S. Though the U.S. and its government claim the moral high ground in the novel, Moore depicts the country as power-hungry and corrupt, suggesting that loyalty to such a government is despicable.

Moore depicts the American government of the novel as corrupt and hawkish, concerned more with its own power than the lives of its citizens, and this depiction implicitly critiques the real-life government as well. When the physicist Jon Osterman falls into a testing chamber and becomes a superhuman, the American government immediately uses him to gather power for itself. Although Jon’s superhuman intelligence could benefit all of humanity through new technology, the government’s first

impulse is to use him as a weapon to dominate its opponents. The government names him Dr. Manhattan to evoke the memory of the Manhattan Project, which developed the atomic bomb, signifying that Dr. Manhattan is the new ultimate weapon. Dr. Manhattan establishes American dominance, but this does not lead to peace. When the Russians offer to negotiate a peace treaty if America agrees not to use Dr. Manhattan as a weapon—thus leveling the playing field—the American government refuses, suggesting that the government cares more about maintaining dominance than establishing peace. The American government not only gathers power over its enemies, but also over its own people. At a party of high-ranking government figures, politicians laugh appreciatively when Edward Blake (the Comedian) implies that he was involved in the assassination of John F. Kennedy, as well as the recent assassination of two journalists, Woodward and Bernstein, who were about to uncover the Watergate scandal. Additionally, rather than be impeached for this scandal, President Nixon amends the Constitution and serves five consecutive terms. Such actions imply that the U.S. government uses underhanded means—even assassination—to maintain control and pursue its own objectives, over and against its own people.

Furthermore, Moore's damning depiction of the American government suggests that patriotism and loyalty to such a power are despicable, rather than noble. Although Blake is an attempted rapist and a murderer, he embodies the American spirit. His hero costume bears a star on one shoulder and stripes on another, evoking the image of the American flag. Hollis Mason (the original Nite Owl) writes in his memoir that the government grooms Blake into a "patriotic symbol." The fact that such a murderous, maniacal figure is heralded as the embodiment of American values further condemns the American government and suggests that allegiance to such a power signifies approval of violence, corruption, and war-mongering, rather than nobility or virtue. *Watchmen* argues that such conduct subverts the American dream itself. One night, Blake and Daniel Dreiberg (the second Nite Owl) set out to disperse protesters who are criticizing the government and its use of vigilantes. Blake gleefully shoots protesters with rubber bullets and tear gas canisters, badly injuring some. Daniel watches, disturbed, but does not stop Blake. When Daniel reflects on the violence and asks, "What happened to the American dream?" Blake replies, "It came true. You're looking at it." Blake's response suggests that American ideals of fairness, justice, and equal opportunity have been subverted by the government and its supporters by exercising power and controlling American citizens. The nobler ideal of the United States that might once have existed is now obsolete, so pledging loyalty to that ideal is misguided.

Although *Watchmen* takes place in a fictional universe, Alan Moore's critical depiction of the American government extends

to the real world, charging that it's become corrupt, war-mongering, and set on cementing its own power at the expense of all else.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### RORSCHACH'S MASK

Rorschach's mask symbolizes his view of ethics and morality, as well as his use of a constructed identity to hide his vulnerable true self, Walter Kovacs. Rorschach's mask is white with shifting black shapes on it, resembling a moving Rorschach blot test (a tool once used in psychology to assess a person's thoughts and emotions). The shapes are either completely white or completely black; there is no gray. This reflects Rorschach's view of reality, since he believes that the world divides clearly and easily into good and evil people; he leaves no room for moral ambiguity or gray areas. However, the fact that the shapes on his mask constantly move and morph symbolize how Rorschach's judgments of what is good and what is evil are inconsistent, constantly changing. He hates evil people, for instance, yet commits torture and murder and still sees himself as a good person. Rorschach's mask also represents his constructed identity as a whole, which he assumes as his true identity in order to gain a sense of control over the world. Rorschach calls his mask his "face" and remarks that he only feels like himself when he wears it. Although his costume and identity consist of trench coat, gloves, and a fedora as well, the thing that truly makes him Rorschach rather than Walter Kovacs is his mask.



### SMILEY-FACE BADGE

The Comedian's smiley-face badge symbolizes *Watchmen's* critique of traditional comic book heroes. In the first scene of the novel, when Edward Blake is assaulted and thrown through his own window, a drop of his blood smears across a yellow smiley-face badge on his robe. The happy yellow badge represents the popular notion of a comic book hero as someone who is undeniably righteous and who fights an opponent that is undeniably evil. Blake's blood smearing across the badge represents how *Watchmen* intentionally tarnishes the image of a perfect hero, depicting its own heroes as dynamic, deeply flawed characters and questioning whether they are really heroes at all. The image of the blood-smearing badge features prominently throughout the first two chapters, and even forms the novel's cover image. Daniel Dreiberg ultimately tosses the badge into Blake's grave, still bloody, signifying the end of the pure, faultless comic book

hero.



## CLOCKS

Clocks represent the ordered universe, meticulously governed by laws of physics. When Jon Osterman goes to Mars, he looks at the marvelously ordered universe and wonders if that means that someone designed it. He reinforces this question by creating his own clockwork castle out of Mars's sand. However, after reflecting on the horrors of human life, Jon decides that there can be no God, no designer. The universe is simply a "clock without a craftsman," suggesting that though it is meticulously ordered and governed by natural laws, there is no designer behind it. In a similar though slightly different fashion, when Jon helps Laurie realize that Edward Blake, the man she hates most in the world, is her father, Jon's clockwork castle shatters, symbolizing the way that Laurie's universe suddenly feels devoid of any order or meaning.



## PERFUME BOTTLE

In Chapter IX, the globe-shaped perfume bottle represents Laurie's understanding of her world and who she is. When Jon takes Laurie to Mars, the chapter opens with the image of a perfume bottle falling, foreshadowing how Laurie's understanding of herself is about to enter a freefall of its own. This image persists as Laurie revisits old memories. However, when Laurie realizes that Edward Blake is her father, the perfume bottle materializes in her hand. She instantly shatters it against the wall, symbolizing how her understanding of who she is and what she knows about the world (that she hates Blake more than anything) is suddenly shattered, wrecked. The shattering of Laurie's self-perception triggers the simultaneous shattering of Jon's **clockwork** castle, suggesting that her lost sense of self causes her to feel as if even the universe has come undone and lost any semblance of order.



## THE PIRATE COMIC

The pirate comic is a comic within the novel, which an unnamed, incidental character reads throughout the course of the main story. The pirate comic symbolizes how someone who initially seems the hero of a story may actually become a villain. The pirate comic parallels the major arcs of the main story of *Watchmen*, forming a microcosm of several key moments. In the comic, the unnamed narrator (the survivor) endures a pirate attack and washes up on an island, believing that the pirates will now sail for his hometown and slaughter his family as well. The survivor commits many despicable acts to beat the pirates there, only to mistakenly murder his own wife, believing her to be a pirate and himself a righteous avenger. The survivor believes he is on an urgent

mission to save his family, which drives him to gradually let go of his inhibitions and commits successively more grotesque acts. This reflects the way that Rorschach and especially Adrian Veidt allow the perceived urgency of their respective missions to drive them to worse and worse behaviors. Rorschach tortures, maims, and kills to track down his "mask-killer" and unearth what he believes to be a conspiracy. Veidt, believing he must avert World War III and human extinction, rationalizes murdering millions of people in New York. Although the novel avoids making a judgment on whether Veidt's actions are justified, the story's ending leaves the reader, like the survivor in the pirate comic, wondering if it was all worth it.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the DC Comics edition of *Watchmen* published in 1986.

### Chapter 1: At Midnight, All the Agents... Quotes

☞ 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."

**Related Characters:** Walter Kovacs (Rorschach) / The Doomsayer (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 9

### Explanation and Analysis

Rorschach's journal narration opens the story by reflecting on how much he despises humanity with its crimes and moral sins. This opening sets the tone of Rorschach's character and the story as whole, suggesting that it will be a cynical reflection on evil, justice, and human nature. Rorschach fantasizes that humanity will ask him to save them, suggesting that he possesses a powerful superiority complex and views himself as a hero. What's more, Rorschach fantasizes about leaving humanity to die, indicating that he wishes death on all the people he believes are morally repugnant, which seems to be most of the world. As the story unfolds, Rorschach reveals his rigid view of morality, and states that his highest ideal is punishing evil, unleashing merciless retribution on all who deserve it. His stated death wish for (seemingly) all of humanity is thus the natural end of this belief system. For someone who believes

that most people are evil and rotten, and that evil people should die as punishment for their sins, the end of the world can't come soon enough.

☝ This city is dying of rabies. Is the best I can do to wipe random flecks of foam from its lips? Never despair. Never surrender. I leave the human cockroaches to discuss their heroin and child pornography. I have business elsewhere with a better class of person.

**Related Characters:** Walter Kovacs (Rorschach) / The Doomsayer (speaker), Edward Blake (The Comedian)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 24

### Explanation and Analysis

While Rorschach hunts for Edward Blake's murderer, he stops at a bar called Happy Harry's to find information by torturing customers. Although Rorschach's strict moralism should theoretically forbid him from committing needless violence, it does not. However, Rorschach's statement reveals that he holds such a denigrating view of the urban lower class that he barely considers them human, referring to them as "human cockroaches" and spittle on a dying animal's lips—ironic, since Rorschach belongs to New York City's lower class as well. Thus, in Rorschach's mind, when he breaks a stranger's fingers in the bar, he is not committing an assault because he assumes the person he hurts is a lowlife criminal, hardly human at all. On top of Rorschach's dehumanization of the people around him, his sense that the city is diseased to the core—"dying of rabies"—reveals the limits of his moral stance. Because Rorschach doesn't believe in growth or redemption, he doesn't see any hope that the city might someday improve; instead, he's limited to just doling out punishments and dreaming of the day when it's all over.

☝ Meeting with Veidt left a bad taste in my mouth. He is pampered and decadent, betraying even his own shallow, liberal affectations. Possibly homosexual? Must remember to investigate further.

**Related Characters:** Walter Kovacs (Rorschach) / The Doomsayer (speaker), Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 27

### Explanation and Analysis

During and after Rorschach's meeting with Adrian Veidt, Rorschach barely masks his contempt for the vigilante-turned-businessman. Rorschach's accusation that Veidt is too "liberal," even "homosexual"—his intent to investigate Veidt's sexuality suggests he views homosexuality as a crime—shows that Rorschach and Veidt's are politically opposed to one another, with Rorschach representing the conservative right and Veidt representing the liberal left. This is later reinforced by the fact that Rorschach subscribes to *New Frontiersman*, a pointedly "right-wing" paper, while *Nova Express*, a "left-wing" paper, speaks positively of Adrian Veidt but criticizes other vigilantes. This politicized relationship between Rorschach and Veidt suggests that their differing ethical stances also align with their political outlooks: Rorschach's conservative stance supports his strict moralistic ethics, while Veidt's liberal values lead to his utilitarian ethics that accepts compromise for a greater good.

While political criticisms are not a main focus of the novel, it's worth noting that the author, Alan Moore, has advocated for gay rights throughout his life—even ending a successful comic strip when the newspaper running it criticized homosexuals—and has reflected on the subject several times in his work. This suggests, though not definitively, that Moore identifies more closely with Veidt's liberal line of thinking, rather than Rorschach's conservative, even homophobic line of thought.

☝ Because there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished. Even in the face of Armageddon I shall not compromise on this. But there are so many deserving of retribution... and there is so little time.

**Related Characters:** Walter Kovacs (Rorschach) / The Doomsayer (speaker), Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 32

### Explanation and Analysis

As Rorschach continues his investigation, he reflects on his position as someone who punishes evildoers. Once again, Rorschach's conviction that evil must be punished is ironic,

since much of society considers him, with his roguish and violent tendencies, to be a borderline-evil lunatic. More notable, however, is that here Rorschach clarifies the underlying purpose of his ethical stance. Rorschach's main goal is "retribution," suggesting that he sees punishing evil as a higher calling than actually doing good or helping society to grow. Most of the other costumed vigilantes, though flawed, ostensibly want to protect society, but not Rorschach. In Rorschach's view, the end of the world may even be a net good, since all evil people would be effectively "punished" at once. This differs starkly from Veidt's utilitarian ethics, which take on a more prominent role later in the story. Unlike Rorschach, Veidt rarely speaks of retribution and does not appear concerned with punishing wrongdoers. Rather, his sole focus is on protecting and benefiting as many people as he possibly can.

## Chapter 2: Absent Friends Quotes

☛ Osterman: You sound bitter. You're a strange man, Blake. You have a strange attitude to life and war.

Blake: Strange? Listen... Once you figure out what a joke everything is, being a comedian is the only thing makes sense.

Osterman: The charred villages, the boys with necklaces of human ears... these are part of the joke?

Blake: Hey... I never said it was a good joke. I'm just playin' along with the gag...

**Related Characters:** Edward Blake (The Comedian) , Jon Osterman (Dr. Manhattan) (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 55

### Explanation and Analysis

At Blake's funeral, Jon recalls when they fought in the Vietnam War together and thinks back on how completely amoral Blake seemed. As the Comedian, Blake embodies the most extreme form of nihilistic ethics in the story, serving to represent what someone may become if they don't find a way to see meaning in their own life and the lives of the people around them. Blake recognizes that the world is horrific and savage, that people prey on each other and only look out for themselves, which makes any quest for meaning futile in his eyes. Life seems the ultimate "joke" because everyone tries to find substance or purpose or some reason to live when there simply isn't any. Although other characters struggle with this same sense of nihilism

throughout the story, Blake is the only one who truly embraces it. His savage, ruthless behavior come from his belief that the rest of the world is savage and ruthless—if others are violently selfish, why shouldn't he be? However, the awful behavior that this ethical view allows Blake to undertake—attempted rape, numerous murders—implicitly condemns this full-throated embrace of nihilism, suggesting that people need to find some source of meaning or significance in order to avoid becoming similarly monstrous.

☛ Dreiberg: [...] The country's disintegrating. What's happened to the American dream?

Blake: It came true. You're lookin' at it.

**Related Characters:** Edward Blake (The Comedian) , Daniel Dreiberg (the second Nite Owl) (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 60

### Explanation and Analysis

During Blake's funeral, Daniel remembers when they worked together as Watchmen, clearing anti-vigilante protesters out of the streets. Blake revels in hurting protesters, shooting tear gas canisters and rubber bullets at them. Blake's gleeful brutality is particularly disturbing since he is the embodiment of patriotism—his costume is decorated with a star and a stripe, evoking the American flag, and he is the government's favorite covert operative. Blake's association with the American government suggests the government is war-mongering and corrupt, happy to employ ruthless, morally detestable agents in service of its own gain. Blake's declaration that the American dream "came true" thus suggests that, with its corrupt government, America's national values have become deeply distorted. Where the American dream once meant that every person was entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," government power and control over its people have become the new American ideals. Although *Watchmen* is set in an alternate history of America, its events largely mirror actual history. Thus, any critique of the story's American government is by extension a critique of the actual American government as well.

☛ Yes, we were crazy, we were kinky, we were Nazis, all those things that people say. We were also doing something because we believed in it. We were attempting, through our personal efforts, to make our country a safer and better place to live in. Individually, on our separate patches of turf, we did too much good in our respective communities to be written off as mere aberration, whether social or sexual or psychological.

**Related Characters:** Hollis Mason (the original Nite Owl) (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 72

### Explanation and Analysis

Hollis Mason recounts in his memoir how all of the heroes had mixed motivations for dressing up in costumes and running around at night. Even so, he believes they meant well, and even did some good things, though Hollis later wonders if perhaps the world would be better off without heroes altogether. Hollis's admission that the vigilantes are not motivated by pure or noble ideas, but often by self-interested or bizarre impulses, creates a more humanized portrayal of heroes than was normally seen in comic books prior to *Watchmen*. Each of the Watchmen are deeply flawed and imperfect, and thus seem closer to actual people than cartoonish symbols of right and wrong. Rather than casting anyone as an obvious hero or villain, Moore depicts every one of the major characters as complex, dynamic individuals who usually believe they are doing the right thing. Hollis's belief that, individually, they all created a net positive impact suggests that the world is often shaped by such flawed figures. No person in history is perfect, but instead stumbles forward, doing their imperfect best.

## Chapter 4: Watchmaker Quotes

☛ They explain that the name [Dr. Manhattan] has been chosen for the ominous associations it will raise in America's enemies. They're shaping me into something gaudy and lethal... It's all getting out of my hands.

**Related Characters:** Jon Osterman (Dr. Manhattan) (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 122

### Explanation and Analysis

After leaving Earth for Mars, Jon revisits the days when he first became Dr. Manhattan after accidentally locking himself in a radiation testing chamber. After Jon is reborn as a blue superhuman, the American government immediately sets about establishing him as a weapon. Although Jon's superhuman presence and nearly limitless intelligence hold new potential for scientific discovery and progress that could benefit all of humanity, the American government's decision to claim him as a weapon suggests that it is obsessed with power, more interested in bullying other countries through military dominance than in actually helping people—even its own people. The name Dr. Manhattan is an obvious reference to the Manhattan Project, in which America developed its first atomic bomb. Naming Jon after the project suggests that Jon is America's new ultimate weapon, their new trump card to end all opposition, just as it used the atomic bombs in World War II to frighten the rest of the world into submission. Such a depiction of the American government is overwhelmingly critical and suggests that it does more to destabilize the world than to promote peace and security for all people.

☛ As I come to understand Vietnam and what it implies about the human condition, I also realizes that few humans will permit themselves such an understanding.

**Related Characters:** Jon Osterman (Dr. Manhattan) (speaker), Edward Blake (The Comedian)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 129

### Explanation and Analysis

While on Mars, Jon recalls his time in the Vietnam War, when he fights alongside Edward Blake and they win the war for America. Except for Edward Blake, Jon arguably struggles more with nihilism than any of the other Watchmen in the story. His brief time in Vietnam, where he sees the horror of what human beings can do to each other, suggests to him that there is something truly depraved about human nature. Jon's statement that few people allow themselves to recognize the true horror of life on Earth implies that most people shield themselves from the worst of it, from the news or from information that would cause them to feel truly nihilistic and defeated. That is, for most people life is an exercise in hiding from reality, refusing to look long and hard at the evil that exists around them and that must, by extension, exist in themselves as well. The

perspective that Jon expresses here contrasts sharply with the appreciation of human life that he develops later in the story.

☞ 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.

**Related Characters:** Jon Osterman (Dr. Manhattan) (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 138

### Explanation and Analysis

On Mars, Jon creates a glass clockwork castle out of sand and wonders whether the universe was made by someone or is merely a product of happenstance. He decides there cannot be a creator. Clocks and watches symbolize the ordered universe throughout the story, alluding to the fact that the universe seems carefully organized and operates according to irrefutable laws. All its components fit together precisely, like a clock. However, describing the universe as a clock implies that someone made it, presumably God or a god-like figure. Jon's feeling that there can be no maker, despite the meticulous order of nature, suggests that the horrors he saw in Vietnam and the nihilism that experience produced prevent Jon from being able to reckon with any sort of God or guiding figure—human behavior just seems too savage and chaotic. The idea that such evil could exist does not fit with the presence of a guiding figure, since such a figure would prevent humans from doing such terrible things to each other. This sense that the universe is orderly but has no one to organize it seems to be a paradox, but it ultimately sets Jon up to recognize that existence in any form is so improbable as to be miraculous; that life is essentially beautiful, though still godless.

☞ It is the oldest ironies that are still the most satisfying: man, when preparing for bloody war, will orate loudly and most eloquently in the name of peace.

**Related Characters:** Milton Glass (speaker), Jon Osterman (Dr. Manhattan)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 140

### Explanation and Analysis

In an article written about Dr. Manhattan's effect upon the world, Jon's former research associate Milton Glass states that humanity is a living paradox. His reflection that humans build weapons even while calling for peace is poignant, suggesting that humans suffer from an inability to trust each other. Humanity never achieves world peace because no nation is willing to actually lay down arms and become vulnerable as a show of good faith, since another nation may take the opportunity to dominate and exploit them. Such an act would not only require trust, but also an overriding of human self-interest, which thus far no nation seems capable of doing.

Glass's reflection particularly applies to the American government's use of Jon as their ultimate weapon. Although their possession of Jon disrupts the global balance of power—the Soviets even ask the U.S. to set him aside—the American government refuses to let go of their new weapon because doing so would be foregoing an opportunity to dominate their opponents—it would act against their self-interest. Regardless of whatever peace America may claim to want, they maintain their ultimate weapon, indicating that they do not actually want peace at all.

## Chapter 5: Fearful Symmetry Quotes

☞ My things were where I'd left them, waiting for me. Putting them on, I abandoned my disguise and became myself, free from fear or weakness or lust. My coat, my shoes, my spotless gloves. My face.

**Related Characters:** Walter Kovacs (Rorschach) / The Doomsayer (speaker), Sylvia Glick

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 162

### Explanation and Analysis

After spending the day dressed in his normal clothes, moving through the world as Walter Kovacs, Kovacs prepares for the evening by finding his vigilante costume and becoming Rorschach once again. Rorschach's feeling

that he lets go of his “disguise” by ceasing to be Walter Kovacs suggests that he views Rorschach as his primary identity, his true self. The fact that he calls his mask “my face” rather than a hood, a mask, or a piece of fabric confirms that he has completely reshaped his perception of himself. In his mind, Walter Kovacs, the regular man, only exists to keep Rorschach safe, to hide him during the day. However, Rorschach’s admission that he feels free, in his costume, from “fear or weakness or lust” suggests just the opposite: his constructed identity as Rorschach hides Walter Kovacs, his vulnerable true self. Later in the story, Rorschach reveals his own abusive and violent childhood, including his mixture of hatred and confused sexual desire toward his mother, Sylvia Glick—all things that Rorschach in costume is “free from.” This ultimately suggests that rather than Rorschach the vigilante being his true identity, his most authentic self, Rorschach the vigilante is rather the person that Walter Kovacs *wants* to be: someone unburdened by childhood trauma, fear of the world, or confused sexual repression.

## Chapter 6: The Abyss Gazes Also Quotes

☛ Black and white. Moving. Changing shape... But not mixing. No gray. Very, very beautiful.

**Related Characters:** Walter Kovacs (Rorschach) / The Doomsayer (speaker), Dr. Malcolm Long

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 188

### Explanation and Analysis

In prison, Rorschach tells the psychiatrist Malcolm Long about the material his mask is made of: two layers of white material, with a black liquid layer between, so that the black shapes flow around but never lose their pure color. Rorschach’s mask symbolizes his view of the world. The firm divide between colors symbolizes how, from his perspective, everyone and everything divides clearly into good and evil, with no middle ground or compromise; morality stays as black-and-white as his mask. However, the moving shapes of black suggests that Rorschach’s standards of what is good and what is evil constantly shift—they are inconsistent. For instance, he hunts muggers and robbers because he sees them as evil, but he himself tortures people for information and still sees himself as good. The fact that

Rorschach’s mask resembles a Rorschach blot test is further significant. Just as a Rorschach test challenges the viewer to interpret the ambiguous shapes they see, Rorschach the vigilante’s actions can be seen as good, evil, or somewhere in the middle, depending on the reader’s perception and personal inclinations.

☛ [The Comedian] understood man’s capacity for horrors and never quit. Saw the world’s black underbelly and never surrendered. Once a man has seen, he can never turn his back on it. Never pretend it doesn’t exist. No matter who orders him to look the other way. We do not do this thing because it is permitted. We do it because we are compelled.

**Related Characters:** Walter Kovacs (Rorschach) / The Doomsayer (speaker), Edward Blake (The Comedian) , Dr. Malcolm Long

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 193

### Explanation and Analysis

While Rorschach is in prison, he explains his view of the world to psychiatrist Malcolm Long. Notably, Rorschach feels the same nihilism that drives the Comedian to act terribly and selfishly, but he sees it as a motivation, rather than something to run from. Although most other characters cower from looking at the horrors of the world and do little to stop them, Rorschach finds his sense of purpose from enduring and punishing a horrific world. In this way, Rorschach paradoxically turns the world’s terrifying lack of meaning into his own sense of purpose—he subverts the nihilistic impulse by committing his life to counteracting evil. Rorschach’s ethical ideal is to punish evil and find justice through retribution, which effectively means that he tries to create his own sense of order from a disorderly world.

For Malcolm Long, this interaction with Rorschach is similarly ironic. Although Long intends to reform Rorschach, rehabilitating him into his true identity by convincing him the world is not so bad, Rorschach instead proves to Long that the world is horrific, and Long finds himself feeling the same unshakeable compulsion to do something about it.

●● 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.

**Related Characters:** Walter Kovacs (Rorschach) / The Doomsayer (speaker), Dr. Malcolm Long

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 199

### Explanation and Analysis

Dr. Long asks Rorschach to describe how he came to be this vigilante persona, so Rorschach tells him about killing a man who kidnapped and butchered a little girl and fed her to his dogs. This scene reveals Rorschach’s transformation, the moment when he stopped being Walter Kovacs and took Rorschach as his primary identity. Rorschach says that, as Kovacs, he strikes the dog, feels its blood spray against him. He closes his eyes and says “mother,” suggesting that he feels some level of hesitation and fear, perhaps even revulsion at the gruesome act he is committing. This suggests that as Kovacs, the mere human being, he does not have the willpower or stomach to truly punish evil people. His human sense of compassion restrains him. But Walter Kovacs opening his eyes as Rorschach suggests that this act transforms him, eliminating any sense of restraint or revulsion at killing an evil being—or a being who, like the dog, just happened to get caught up in something evil through no fault of its own. Although Rorschach has already hinted that his vigilante identity helps to shield him from fear and lust, this scene further suggests that his constructed identity gives him a new sense of power, the ability to remove any hesitation or inhibiting conscience, and allows him to do what he believes must be done.

●● 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.

**Related Characters:** Walter Kovacs (Rorschach) / The Doomsayer (speaker), Edward Blake (The Comedian) , Jon Osterman (Dr. Manhattan), Dr. Malcolm Long

**Page Number:** 204

### Explanation and Analysis

Rorschach ends his final meeting with Dr. Long by pronouncing that there is no God, no outside force

responsible for the world’s horrific nature—only human beings. Dr. Long leaves, horrified. Rorschach’s atheistic, nihilistic pronouncement mirrors both Jon’s and Blake’s similar statements, arguing that the world is too horrific for any guiding force to possibly exist. Notably, however, Rorschach’s pronouncement carries a certain element of personal responsibility. While both Blake and Jon recognize that humanity does terrible things, Rorschach calls that humanity “us,” implying that he views himself as one part of it, equally culpable for all of the crime and evil. This sense of personal ownership in the horrors that human beings commit appears to be what drives Rorschach to react “positively” to the world’s nihilism, to devote himself to creating order out of chaos by crusading against and punishing evil. Although both Rorschach’s ultimate goal and his methods are questionable, he undeniably derives more meaning from nihilism than any of the other characters—Jon runs from it, secluding himself on Mars, and Blake simply adds to the chaos by acting recklessly and selfishly, hurting others without reason.

## Chapter 7: A Brother to Dragons Quotes

●● Looking back, it all seems so... well, childish, I guess. Just a schoolkid’s fantasy that got out of hand. That’s, y’know, with hindsight... on reflection.

**Related Characters:** Daniel Dreiberg (the second Nite Owl) (speaker), Hollis Mason (the original Nite Owl), Laurie Juspezyk (the second Silk Spectre)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 216

### Explanation and Analysis

Dan and Laurie look at all of the inventions and vigilante gear in Dan’s basement. Laurie finds them all very impressive and exciting, but Dan thinks they’re childish. Dan’s sense that their days as costumed vigilantes were just fulfilling childhood fantasies echoes Hollis Mason’s charge that many of the original heroes were just doing it for the thrill. Together, these charges suggest that just because society may deem someone a hero does not mean that they operate out of pure or noble motives. On a broad level, this point critiques the superhero genre itself, especially comics like *Superman* (which Alan Moore himself worked on) that feature a flawless, righteous hero who acts altruistically for the good of society. By contrast, Daniel’s claim that gallivanting as hero is just fantasy fulfillment suggests that it

holds more benefit for the hero than for society. This admission, which Laurie agrees with, is particularly significant coming from Dan, since both he and Laurie will soon return to running around as costumed heroes purely to feel a sense of adventure again amidst their lonely, bland lives. Dan recognizes the self-interested futility of being a vigilante, but chooses to enjoy himself and do it anyway, which again highlights how flawed so-called heroes often are.

☝ It's this war, the feeling that it's unavoidable. It makes me feel so powerless. So impotent.

**Related Characters:** Daniel Dreiberg (the second Nite Owl) (speaker), Walter Kovacs (Rorschach) / The Doomsayer, Laurie Juspezyk (the second Silk Spectre)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 231

### Explanation and Analysis

After Dan tries to have sex with Laurie but discovers that he is impotent, he dreams that they both die in a nuclear blast. Laurie wakes up later that night and finds Dan standing in his basement, naked save for his Nite Owl goggles, and he admits his feelings of powerlessness against the chaotic world. Dan's sexual impotence parallels his feeling of personal impotence in the face of nuclear war. Where once humanity might have had simpler problems to solve, Dan's sense of powerlessness reflects how absurdly complicated the modern world is, and how this leaves individual people feeling smaller than they ever have. A war fought with swords can be addressed, endured, survived. But a war where a single nuclear blast can wipe out millions of people within a few seconds feels truly inescapable, an insurmountable problem. Feeling powerless, Dan puts on his Nite Owl goggles, implying that his vigilante suit allows him to feel the illusion of power and capability. Although he is no different with or without his costume, Dan's reliance on it to feel control suggests that his constructed identity helps him to shield himself from the realities of the modern world and his own limitations, much like Rorschach's constructed identity does for him.

## Chapter 9: The Darkness of Mere Being Quotes

☝☝ Juspezyk: Humanity is about to become extinct. Doesn't that bother you? All those dead people...

Osterman: All that pain and conflict done with? All that needless suffering over at last? No... No, that doesn't bother me. All those generations of struggle, what purpose did they ever achieve? All that effort, and what did it lead to?

**Related Characters:** Jon Osterman (Dr. Manhattan), Laurie Juspezyk (the second Silk Spectre) (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 290

### Explanation and Analysis

On Mars, Jon and Laurie debate whether human life has any meaning and whether Jon should return to Earth to save the world. Jon's answer to Laurie builds on his former reflections of nihilism and the meaningless of life. Particularly in light of the horrors that Jon has witnessed, in the Vietnam War for instance, human extinction would mean an end to suffering. Jon's lack of concern about "all that needless suffering" ending suggests that annihilation of the human race is its only path to peace, the only way to bring all of the pain to a stop. This opinion, though logically argued, is chilling. For Jon, this position represents the natural end of his nihilistic views, the unavoidable conclusion to his belief that humanity is horrific and that the universe exists on its own, without guidance or purpose. If humans create pain and suffering wherever they exist, perhaps it would be better if they did not exist at all.

☝☝ Osterman: Look at it—a volcano as large as Missouri, its summit fifteen miles high, piercing even the atmospheric blanket. Breathtaking.

Juspezyk: Breathtaking? Jon, what about the war? You've got to prevent it! Everyone will die...

Osterman: And the universe will not even notice.

**Related Characters:** Jon Osterman (Dr. Manhattan), Laurie Juspezyk (the second Silk Spectre) (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 298

### Explanation and Analysis

While Jon and Laurie debate on Mars, Jon tries to make Laurie recognize the Martian landscape's majesty, but Laurie refuses. Jon, in turn, refuses to recognize human extinction as a significant event. As a superhuman with nearly limitless intelligence, Jon is in an unusual position to understand and appreciate the complexity of the universe. As such, his suggestion that the universe will not be any different if the human race ceases to exist is less an attack or a judgment than an observation. Jon's statement suggests that, compared to the vastness of the universe and the forms and processes that occur throughout it, human life seems to be one unremarkable blip on one unremarkable planet. Jon's statement further implies that, although humanity thinks of itself as the center of the universe—and thus its own extinction as the end of all things—it is wrong to do so. The issues that people fret over are insignificant, unsubstantial, and not worth the anxiety that they cause. In Jon's eyes, compared with the full scope of the universe, humanity does not matter and perhaps needs to be taken less seriously. However, his continuing conversation with Laurie will soon complicate this view.

☝ Thermodynamic miracles...Events with odds against so astronomical they're effectively impossible, like oxygen spontaneously becoming gold. I long to observe such things. And yet in 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 precise daughter...

**Related Characters:** Jon Osterman (Dr. Manhattan) (speaker), Laurie Juspecky (the second Silk Spectre)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 306

### Explanation and Analysis

Just as Laurie finally breaks down and admits that her life has no purpose, no meaning whatsoever, Jon changes his mind and argues that each human life is a miracle simply because it exists against astronomical odds. Jon's realization that each life is a "thermodynamic miracle" suggests that every human life is not only wildly improbable, but also a rare opportunity, even a gift. Notably, this idea borrows from religious ideology without requiring a god figure, just as the phrase "thermodynamic miracles" mixes religious connotations with a rationalist, atheistic viewpoint. For Jon and Laurie (and the narrative as a whole), the idea that every human life is a miraculous occurrence answers the

nihilism that a horrific world tends to breed. Rather than spiraling off into depression or barbaric behavior, one can counter nihilism—without leaning on a higher power—by recognizing the exceedingly rare opportunity they have to live at all. This view also affirms Jon's previously stated belief that the universe is a "clock without a craftsman." The universe does indeed possess a staggering degree of organization, but this is not the mark of a god-like figure. Rather, the fact that anything exists at all is a miracle, a virtually impossible accident that defies astronomical odds. Just as rare gems are valuable simply for being rare, Jon indicates here that human life is also valuable and meaningful because of how rare it is.

## Chapter 11: Look on My Works, Ye Mighty...

### Quotes

☝ Dreiberg: ...And anyway, this is Adrian for God's sake. We know him. He never killed anybody, ever. Why would he want to destroy the world?

Kovacs: Insanity, perhaps?

Dreiberg: Ha. Well that's a tricky one... I mean, who's qualified to judge someone like that? This is the world's smartest man we're talking about here, so how can you tell? How can anyone tell if he's gone crazy?

**Related Characters:** Walter Kovacs (Rorschach) / The Doomsayer, Daniel Dreiberg (the second Nite Owl) (speaker), Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 349

### Explanation and Analysis

As Rorschach and Daniel travel to Veidt's fortress to confront him about his conspiracy, Daniel wonders why someone like Veidt would cause so much death and destruction. Daniel's inference that no one would know if the smartest man goes insane adds to the novel's general critique of superheroes: if someone is the smartest or strongest or fastest person in the world, superior to all other humans, no one can possibly hold them accountable for any failings. This lack of accountability is precisely what makes vigilantes—which superheroes are by definition, taking the law into their own hands—so dangerous. If the hero acts for the good of society, then it becomes an inspiring story. However, if that hero acts selfishly or misguidedly, then the hero instead becomes a villain.

Broadly speaking, this logic suggests that no single person in society should be so elevated above their peers in power, strength, or wealth that nobody else can monitor them. In human society, especially democracy, relying on collective decisions and oversight prevents one rogue lunatic from holding too much power, acting drastically, and hurting the whole. Groups of humans self-regulate by forcing the more extreme members to be accountable to other people. As Daniel observes, Adrian Veidt and most heroes in the superhero genre sidestep this group accountability, and thus have the chance to become extraordinarily dangerous—though of course, Veidt himself would still argue that he's acting in the best interests of the whole.

☞ Teleported to New York, my creature's death would trigger mechanisms within its massive brain, cloned from a human sensitive... the resultant psychic shockwave killing half the city.

**Related Characters:** Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias) (speaker), Walter Kovacs (Rorschach) / The Doomsayer, Daniel Dreiberg (the second Nite Owl)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 374

### Explanation and Analysis

When Daniel and Rorschach find Veidt in his fortress, Veidt explains his master plan to avert World War III by simulating an alien invasion and scaring the world powers into becoming allies. Veidt's plan is thoroughly utilitarian—he chooses to kill several million people to save the billions he believes would die in World War III. The entire plan rests on a massive ethical compromise. Even if it works and saves billions of people—the novel intentionally leaves this ambiguous—Veidt's plan strips personal agency from the millions who die. The dead do not get to choose whether they want to sacrifice themselves for the rest of humanity. Thus, the utilitarianism that Veidt embodies appears potentially effective, but extraordinarily callous in the process. Although Veidt bears the burden of having killed millions of people, he himself maintains his agency throughout his plan and never sacrifices his own life. This imbalance suggests that utilitarian ethics and especially utilitarian rule—since Veidt acts like a ruler, deciding the fate of everyone beneath him—place far too much power in a single person's hands. However, without Veidt's plan, humanity may have destroyed itself, leaving Veidt's actions as a complex, unsolvable ethical dilemma.

☞ 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, have brought about her poverty?

**Related Characters:** Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias) (speaker), Walter Kovacs (Rorschach) / The Doomsayer

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 389

### Explanation and Analysis

In a press interview, Veidt describes how he came to realize that fighting crime is morally ambiguous, lacking clear-cut definitions of right and wrong or good and evil. Veidt's argument not only suggests that fighting crime is nebulous and difficult, but that the modern world is far more complex than people like Rorschach, with concrete ideas about good and evil, recognize. Veidt indicates here that if the government can legally pass measures that enrich politicians and keep certain people poor, then arguably the government should be at least partially culpable for the theft that poor people commit to survive. Rorschach, in contrast, would simply say that the person who literally committed the theft should be punished. Veidt's criticism of a simple, moralistic view of crime indirectly criticizes the superhero genre as well, at least as it existed for much of Moore's career, with heroes who are always good fighting criminals who are unarguably evil. Veidt's argument, which parallels a major thematic argument of the entire story, implies that such ideas of good and evil, heroes and villains, are outdated and far too simple to match reality.

## Chapter 12: A Stronger Loving World Quotes

☞ Juspeczyk: Dan, all those people, they're dead. They can't disagree or eat Indian food, or love each other... Oh, it's sweet. Being alive is so damn sweet.

Dreiberg: Laurie? Wh-what do you want me to do?

Juspeczyk: I want you to love me. I want you to love me because we're not dead [...] I want to see you and taste you and smell you, just because I can.

**Related Characters:** Daniel Dreiberg (the second Nite Owl), Laurie Juspeczyk (the second Silk Spectre) (speaker), Jon Osterman (Dr. Manhattan)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 404

### Explanation and Analysis

After Laurie sees the carnage in New York City and realizes she is powerless to stop it, she holds Dan and tells him she wants to be with him simply because she is alive. Laurie's new appreciation for life builds directly on her conversation with Jon on Mars and the idea that life is meaningful because it is so rare, so improbable as to be miraculous. The millions of deaths in New York City further demonstrate that life is not only rare, but also incredibly fragile. Laurie's exclamation that "being alive is so damn sweet," suggests that in light of life's rarity and fragility, even the simplest actions like arguing, eating Indian food, or loving other people are valuable opportunities. Every banal action and boring day someone experiences is itself a miracle, an opportunity to simply exist, which everyone who dies prematurely does not have. In the novel's theme of nihilism and meaning, this view represents the final answer to what may otherwise seem a nihilistic existence within a horrifying world. That is, even without God, without a mission, without an obvious external purpose, human life is still meaningful for the simple fact that it exists at all.

●● Veidt: I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end.

Jon: "In the end"? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends.

**Related Characters:** Jon Osterman (Dr. Manhattan),

Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias) (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 409

### Explanation and Analysis

After Veidt executes his plan and averts World War III, Jon tells him that he is leaving Earth to create life on a new planet. As he leaves, Veidt asks Jon if he approves of what Veidt did, but Jon refuses to answer directly. Veidt's utilitarian solution for averting World War III operates on the belief that the ends justify the means, that as long as the most people possible were saved in the "end," than all the dead were worth sacrificing. However, Jon's statement that there is no such "end" rightly points out that history will not stop now that Veidt has averted one nuclear catastrophe. There is nothing to say that humanity, which appears bent on savagery and destruction, will not discover Veidt's plan or take up arms again in 50 or 100 years. This highlights a particularly large flaw in the utilitarian approach to ethics: the "end" that justifies horrific means will never be a permanent "end." Human history continues ever onward, societies change, people do good or evil things, and whatever outcome that the utilitarian sacrificed and compromised for will inevitably disappear. However, the fact remains that Veidt does appear to have saved Earth from its own destruction this particular time, which lends credence to his utilitarian ethics. As always, the question of whether Veidt "did the right thing" remains ambiguous and unsolvable—it's left up to the reader to decide.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1: AT MIDNIGHT, ALL THE AGENTS...

“Rorschach’s journal. October 12th, 1985.” While a man hoses a large pool of blood off of a city sidewalk, Rorschach reflects that this city and its criminals fear him. They could follow in the footsteps of good men like his father or President Truman, but instead they choose to live in filth and follow the Communists. Someday, it will be too late for all of them. They’ll ask Rorschach to save them then, but he’ll refuse.

Two detectives look through Edward Blake’s apartment, a man who was recently murdered when an intruder threw him through the window of his high-rise apartment. In a brief flashback, Blake wears a **smiley-face badge** as he’s thrown through the window. A drop of his blood splatters across it. One of the detectives suspects it was a simple breaking and entering job, but the other is skeptical. Photos of Blake show that he is huge, like a weightlifter, and covered in scars. In his apartment, there’s a picture of him shaking President Ford’s hand—it seems he was some sort of American “diplomat.”

The detectives decide to continue their investigation discreetly so that “masked avengers” don’t get involved. One of them remarks that the Keene Act of 1977 outlawed most vigilantes, but Rorschach is still out in the streets, acting on his own, and he’s crazy. As the two detectives make their way out of the building, a doomsayer stands in the street, holding a sign that says, “The end is nigh.”

When the street is empty, a man wearing a trench coat, fedora, and white **mask** with black shapeless blots appears—Rorschach. He shoots a grappling hook from the street up into Blake’s shattered window and climbs up the side of the building. He looks through Blake’s apartment, his dresser and drawers. When he reaches the closet, he finds a button on the wall that slides a false panel away, revealing a hero costume adorned with a star and stripe, several guns and knives, and a framed photo of a group of masked avengers.

*Rorschach’s antagonism towards criminals and the contrast he draws between the good men and the Communists establishes him as a politically right-leaning figure, committed to ideals like justice and patriotism. His fantasized refusal to save the world suggests that he is also vindictive and believes in retribution.*



*Blake’s smiley-face badge smeared with blood symbolizes the novel’s critique of comic book heroes. While heroes prior to Watchmen were most often depicted as virtuous, noble figures who always do the right thing and act for the good of society, Alan Moore depicts his heroes as deeply flawed people. The smear of blood on the smiley-face badge represents how the novel defaces popular notions of heroes, making them more dynamic as well as more grotesque.*



*The detectives’ wariness of the “masked avengers” suggests that society holds a low view of vigilante heroes, fearing them enough to outlaw them altogether. This implies that society has moved past viewing such vigilantes as heroes, reflecting the novel’s overall critique of the superhero concept.*



*Rorschach’s mask, which looks like a constantly changing Rorschach blot test, symbolizes his view of ethics and morality. Rorschach views the world as divided between good and bad people, with no gray area existing between, just like his mask. However, his mask’s black blots constantly change shape and dimension, reflecting how Rorschach’s own judgments of good and evil are inconsistent. Blake’s costume reveals that he is a hero, while the star and stripe motif suggests that he is an icon of American patriotism.*



Daniel Dreiberg, a middle-aged man, talks with Hollis Mason, an older man, in Hollis's home. They reminisce about their past days as heroes—they are both now retired. Hollis jokes that Daniel was the better Nite Owl of the two of them. Daniel says it's nearly midnight, so he should get going, but thanks Hollis for sharing a beer with him each week and catching up. He leaves and walks home through mostly empty streets. When he reaches his apartment, however, he sees a light on in the kitchen. Daniel enters and finds Rorschach in his kitchen, eating from a can of beans. Rorschach doesn't take his **mask** off to eat, only pulls it up over his mouth.

Daniel seems shocked and nervous to find Rorschach there. Rorschach tosses him Blake's blood-smeared **smiley-face badge** and tells him it belonged to the Comedian; someone threw him out his window. Daniel asks if they can talk in the basement, where they'll be less exposed. The two men descend into a large, dusty room full of equipment covered in sheets. Daniel asks if the Comedian's death might be a political assassination, since the government's had him overthrowing South American Marxists since 1977.

Rorschach thinks it's more likely that someone is killing "costumed heroes." He mentions that Hollis said some critical things about the Comedian in his book, but Daniel says he's wrong to think Hollis could be involved. Having warned Daniel, Rorschach starts to leave through a secret tunnel. Daniel says he misses the good old days, when they were partners. As he leaves, Rorschach snubs Daniel for quitting hero work. Daniel sits on a box, staring at the **smiley-face badge**. Next to him, a hero costume decorated like an owl hangs in an open locker.

"Rorschach's journal. October 13th, 1985." He sleeps through the day and sets off at night, reflecting on how much he hates the filthy people in this city. Rorschach wants information on the Comedian's death, so he goes to a bar called Happy Harry's. The bartender is terrified to see him and pleads with him not to kill anyone tonight. When a man makes a snide remark behind Rorschach's back, Rorschach grabs him and starts breaking his fingers one at a time, demanding information on Blake's murder. The other patrons are horrified but have no information. The lack of progress makes Rorschach "slightly depressed," so he leaves the "human cockroaches" alone to go visit a "better class of person."

*Daniel and Hollis's reminiscing about past days suggests that they are nostalgic for their lives as masked heroes. This foreshadows Daniel's eventual mid-life crisis and return to vigilante work and indicates that their heroism was at least partially motivated by their own personal and emotional gains. Rorschach's refusal to remove his mask, even to eat, suggests that he is very protective of, even dependent on, his vigilante alter ego.*



*Daniel's suggestion that the Comedian's death is politically motivated reveals that the government employs some heroes as covert operatives. This not only subverts the classic idea of a hero—since the hero is now a political tool, rather than someone fighting for the good of everyday people—but also suggests that the American government works around its own laws by utilizing some vigilantes, even while legally banning all of them.*



*Rorschach's suspicion of Hollis for criticizing the Comedian, an American patriot, suggests that Rorschach maintains strict loyalty to government and the notion of patriotism. Additionally, his disparaging of Daniel for retiring suggests that he sees their vigilante work as a duty, rather than the entertaining diversion that Hollis and Daniel speak of it as.*



*Rorschach's view of the people in the bar as "human cockroaches" suggests that he despises America's underclass, even while belonging to it himself. This reiterates Rorschach's characterization as a politically right-leaning figure, while also suggesting that he carries some amount of self-contempt. Although Rorschach often despises others for their lack of morality, his casual violence against people he considers beneath him, like the man whose fingers he breaks, demonstrates how inconsistent Rorschach's own morality is.*



Rorschach speaks with Adrian Veidt in Veidt's penthouse apartment. Veidt is surprised to hear of the Comedian's death but wonders if it could have been a political assassination. Rorschach thinks this unlikely, since no country would dare challenge America while they have Dr. Manhattan on their side. Veidt thinks the Comedian was "practically a Nazi," but Rorschach defends the Comedian's honor, arguing that he never retired, never cashed in on his reputation or sold action figures of himself like the ones Veidt has of himself strewn about his desk. Veidt defends himself, saying he chose to retire of his own will, two years before the police strike and Keene Act demanded it. Rorschach clearly despises Veidt and leaves, rappelling out of a high window.

"Rorschach's journal. October 13th, 1985. 8:30 p.m."  
Rorschach feels disgusted after meeting with Veidt and thinks he is "pampered," "liberal," and "shallow," perhaps a "homosexual." He mentally runs through a list of all the old heroes, all of whom are now retired (which Rorschach mentions with disgust), living in obscurity, or dead, except for two who live at the Rockefeller Military Research Center. Rorschach decides to visit them and warn them about the murder.

Rorschach finds Laurie Juspezyk and Dr. Manhattan in a large military facility. Laurie is a normal middle-aged woman, but Dr. Manhattan is blue-skinned, naked, and 30 feet tall. Laurie is not happy to see Rorschach and mentions that he's wanted by the police. Rorschach tells them of Edward Blake's murder, but Dr. Manhattan—shrinking down to human size—tells him that since he and the Comedian are the only heroes employed by the government, he was already informed. Laurie is not sad to hear that Blake died. She says the man was a monster who tried to rape her mother, as Hollis wrote in his book. Rorschach blows off the event as a patriot's "moral lapse," which infuriates Laurie. Dr. Manhattan, whom Laurie calls Jon, tells Rorschach he must leave, and teleports him outside into an empty field.

Back in the military station, the confrontation with Rorschach still bothers Laurie—she thinks Rorschach is "sick inside his mind." Jon is doing something with a complicated machine. Laurie tells Jon that she needs a night out and asks him if he'd mind if she asked Daniel Dreiberg out for a drink. Jon says he doesn't mind, since he is too preoccupied with his science experiments; he doesn't even look up. Laurie calls Daniel and arranges to go out with him later that night.

*Veidt's penthouse apartment and line of merchandise indicates that he is a wealthy businessman. His belief that the Comedian was "practically a Nazi" indicates that although Rorschach idolizes the Comedian as a true patriot, many people despise him. This not only suggests that the Comedian was a deeply flawed hero, but that many people find the American government and its operatives morally dubious. Watchmen's critical view of America also contrasts with classic American hero comics of its time—especially Superman—which more often took a patriotic stance.*



*Rorschach's antagonism towards Veidt's "liberal" sensibilities again characterizes him as a politically conservative, right-leaning figure. Additionally, Rorschach's distaste for Veidt foreshadows the eventual conflict between his and Veidt's ethical stances and approaches to saving the world.*



*Dr. Manhattan is the only true superhuman in the story, since all the other masked vigilantes are just regular humans wearing costumes. Dr. Manhattan's character and relationship to regular humans thus parallels popular hero comics, particularly Superman. Laurie's accusation that the Comedian tried to rape her mother further suggests that, though many regard him as a hero, he was a deeply flawed, even monstrous figure. Rorschach's disregard of the Comedian's "moral lapse" again shows the inconsistency of his moral code, since he is willing to overlook gross conduct as long as someone is properly patriotic.*



*Jon's disregard for Laurie, even though she is distressed, and his preoccupation with science suggest that he struggles to relate to mere human beings, since he has so little in common with them. This foreshadows his eventual decision to leave Earth altogether.*



“Rorschach’s journal. October 13th, 1985. 11:30 p.m.”

Rorschach walks the New York City streets, reflecting on how no one seems to care that the Comedian was murdered. Rorschach thinks war is coming and millions will die soon, and wonders if one man’s death means anything in the midst of it. He decides that it must—there are good people and evil people, and evil must be punished “even in the face of Armageddon.” There are so many who deserve punishment and so little time to deliver it.

Laurie and Daniel have dinner and drinks together. Laurie insists on paying for the meal, stating that if the government insists on her being a “kept woman” for their best weapon, they can afford to pay for dinner now and then. The pair leave and walk out to a rooftop garden, reminiscing about their old hero days. Laurie thinks that dressing up in costumes and running around was a stupid way to spend their youth, and that the Keene Act was the best thing for them. Daniel lightly agrees. They swap stories and laugh a bit, remarking that there seems to be less laughter around lately.

The next section is an excerpt from Hollis Mason’s *Under the Hood*. A fellow writer told Hollis to start his book with the saddest thing he remembers. Hollis states that his saddest memory is set to “The Ride of the Valkyries.” When he is a kid, after his family moves to New York from Montana, he and his dad work in an auto shop for a man named Moe Vernon. Moe is a jokester and loves opera music. One day, while Moe is wearing a pair of foam breasts to get a laugh from the postman, he receives a telegram from his wife that she’s stolen all his money and run off with one of Moe’s top employees. Moe bursts out of the office with his foam breasts, “Ride of the Valkyries” blaring from the stereo, and he announces his tragedy. All his employees laugh at the sight. That night, Moe kills himself.

Hollis describes how he graduates the police academy and becomes a cop when he is 23, in 1939. Compared to his country-boy sensibilities, New York seems desperately immoral. He thinks that his years spent dressing as an owl and fighting crime begin with his fascination with pulp adventure fiction and comic books, which clearly and conveniently define good and evil. They appeal to his childhood fantasies of rescuing beautiful women and having courageous adventures. When Hollis starts seeing stories in the newspapers about costumed crime fighters, they stir his romantic sensibilities and he decides he must become one.

*Rorschach’s contemplation on good and evil confirms that he sees morality in black and white terms—there is no ambiguity or nuance, in his mind. His feeling that evil must be punished no matter what suggests that his view of ethics places more value on justice and retribution than on actually helping people.*



*Laurie’s reminiscing reveals that she was a costumed hero once as well, though her feeling that it was a waste of youth suggests that she does not believe that the masked vigilantes ever achieved anything worthwhile. This further reiterates the idea that the heroes’ vigilante crusades are motivated more by personal benefit than by any true service to society.*



*Each chapter ends with a similar excerpt of a book, article, or piece of marketing material. While these pieces are tangential to the main story, they usually contain bits of backstory that flesh out the world and characters. Additionally, since Watchmen was initially published as 12 separate issues, the excerpts at the end of each chapter often contain foreshadowing hints of what is coming in future chapters. Hollis’s reflection on his saddest memory reinforces the tragic and absurd tone of the overall story.*



*Hollis becomes infatuated with the romanticism of costumed crime fighting, which again suggests that his role as a masked vigilante is as much motivated by personal emotional needs as it is by the desire to help society. Hollis’s suggestion that wearing costumes and fighting crime appeal to childhood fantasies also implies that the act of running around as a hero is itself rather childish.*



## CHAPTER 2: ABSENT FRIENDS

While Jon attends Edward Blake's funeral, Laurie visits her mother in a retirement home in California. Laurie and her mother, Sally Jupiter, are terse with each other. Sally seems saddened by Blake's death, which makes Laurie angry and confused because of what he did to her. Sally claims that one must let go of the past; after so many years, it doesn't seem like that big of a deal anymore. With Blake gone, Sally notes that there are only three of the original Minutemen left. Laurie is unconvinced, especially after what Jon told her that Blake did during the Vietnam War. Sally proudly shows Laurie a pornographic comic of herself that an old fan recently sent her. Laurie thinks it's disgusting, but Sally finds it flattering, and states that the older she gets, the better her opinion of the past becomes.

Sally flashes back to a publicity photo session with the Minutemen, decades before. After the group leaves, Sally stays behind to change clothes. Edward Blake, dressed as the Comedian, appears and tells her that, in her skimpy costume, she's practically asking for sex. Sally tries to push him off, but Blake punches and kicks her hard and tries to rape her, pinning her on the ground. Sally pleads with him to stop. A hero in a black hood with a noose around his neck, Hooded Justice, sees them and beats Blake up, threatening to break his neck. As Blake slinks away, Hooded Justice tells Sally, "For God's sake, cover yourself." In the present, Laurie is still disgusted by the porn comic of Sally. Sally counters that at least the government doesn't keep her around just to have sex with "the H-Bomb."

Adrian Veidt stands at Edward Blake's funeral. He flashes back to decades before, when Captain Metropolis holds a meeting to try to organize the current heroes into the Crimebusters, a follow-up to the Minutemen who disbanded in 1949. Captain Metropolis displays a map of the U.S. with various problems labeled, such as "drugs," "promiscuity," and "anti-war demos." Veidt, dressed in his own costume, supports Captain Metropolis's idea, but the Comedian says it's all a waste of time, just old men who want to dress up and fight bad guys again to feel important. The Comedian states that once "the nukes" start flying, there'll be nothing left to protect. To make his point, he takes a lighter and sets fire to the map. As the others disperse, Captain Metropolis exclaims that someone still has to "save the world."

*Sally's enjoyment of a pornographic comic of herself indicates that she misses her former role as an American sex symbol and the attention it brought her, even though men sexually objectified her. In a similar vein, Sally minimizes Blake's attempted rape of her and idealizes the past, suggesting that she, like Hollis and Daniel, misses their hero adventures. Laurie's reference to what Jon told her that Blake did during the war suggests that his grotesque behavior went beyond his attempted rape of Sally.*



*Sally's recollection of Blake's attempted rape confirms that he was a violent, predatory person, regardless of how Sally remembers him in the present. The Comedian justifies his attempt to rape Sally with the fact that she wears a skimpy costume, suggesting that her identity as a sex symbol (wrongly) encourages him to sexually objectify her. Even Hooded Justice, after rescuing Sally, spitefully tells her to cover herself, suggesting that he blames Sally's sexual presence, rather than the Comedian's lack of self-control. Sally's charge that the government only keeps Laurie around to sexually satisfy "the H-Bomb," meaning Jon, suggests that Laurie is just as objectified, though in a different way.*



*The Comedian's critique of Captain Metropolis's motivations further suggests that the masked vigilantes do not undertake their work to help society so much as to help themselves—in this case to feel important and relevant, even in old age. The map's labels list "drugs," "promiscuity," and "anti-war demos" as evils plaguing America, suggesting that Captain Metropolis, and perhaps the heroes altogether, want to preserve a conservative, patriotic, right-leaning vision of America, rather than allow left-leaning criticism of the government or sexual liberation.*



Jon stands at Blake's funeral and recalls the day that he and Blake were waiting to leave Vietnam, having won the Vietnam War. Jon thinks all the violence must have some significance in the end, but Blake thinks that all of life is one sick "joke," and he just plays along with it. He hates Vietnam and he's ready to leave. A pregnant Vietnamese woman arrives and tells Blake that she carries his child, so he must provide for them. When Blake tells her he's just going to abandon her, she hits him with a glass bottle, cutting his face. Blake shoots her in the head. Jon tells him he should not have done that, but Blake points out that Jon didn't even try to stop him.

Daniel Dreiberg stands at Blake's funeral. He recalls a day when he and Blake, in their vigilante costumes, tried to disperse a crowd of protesters. The police are on strike until the vigilantes get off the streets. Daniel pilots their floating airship while Blake gleefully shoots rubber bullets and tear gas canisters into the crowd. A protester calls Blake "a pig [and a] rapist." Blake insists that the vigilantes are "society's only protection," but Daniel questions who it is they're protecting society from. On the walls, people have spray painted, "Who watches the Watchmen?" As protesters disperse, Daniel wonders aloud, "What happened to the American dream?" Grinning and holding a shotgun, Blake tells him, "It came true. You're lookin' at it." At the funeral, Daniel throws Blake's **smiley-face pin** into his grave.

Rorschach follows an old man home from the funeral and attacks him in his home, pinning him to the ground. Rorschach identifies the man as Edgar Jacobi, also known as the villain Moloch, and demands to know if he had anything to do with the murder. Moloch claims he served his time and retired; he only went to the funeral because Blake visited him shortly before he died, drunk and terrified. Blake rambled about an island full of writers and scientists and artists, involved in some plot so horrific he couldn't find the joke in it, then left. Rorschach believes Moloch and lets him stand. However, earlier, Rorschach found illegal non-prescription drugs in the man's house. Moloch tells him they're just placebo pills—he has terminal cancer. Rorschach says they're still illegal and he'll report the crime later. He leaves.

*Blake's feeling that life is just a "joke" that he plays along with suggests that he is a nihilistic figure—he sees no meaning to the world or human endeavors, but simply makes his way through it as he pleases. His killing of his Vietnamese mistress reiterates this nihilistic view of the world. Although he fights for the American government, Blake seems beholden to no moral code—he is utterly and carelessly immoral. This not only condemns the American government for heralding such person as a patriot, but also critiques the idea of a "pure" hero in general.*



*Daniel's reservations about Blake's cavalier and aggressive attitude suggest that, over time, the masked vigilantes go from being society's presumed protectors to its potential oppressors. The slogan, "Who watches the Watchmen?" indicates that the general public shares this feeling and opposes any ruling power without accountability. This scene in particular critiques the vigilante aspect of every superhero story, since heroes always operate above the reach of law. Blake's statement that they are the new American Dream suggests that power and government control of its people have subverted the old American ideals of fairness and equity.*



*Moloch is the only typical villain named in the entire story, yet he never does anything in the story other than live quietly in his house, alone. By contrast, Rorschach, a presumed hero, breaks into the old man's home and attacks him. This contrast between each character's position as a hero or villain and their actual conduct toys with traditional, simple notions of good and evil, suggesting that the "good guys," the supposed heroes, may actually be worse than those society sets up as villains.*



“Rorschach’s journal. October 16th, 1985.” Rorschach sneers at pornographic billboards and prostitutes as he stalks the streets. He thinks about what Moloch told him and wonders if Dr. Manhattan is in danger somehow. Returning to Blake’s grave, Rorschach pays his respects alone, reflecting that heroes never die peacefully in bed. Either someone kills them, or they waste away, trying to hide from reality, but the future can’t be hidden from. Rorschach reflects that Blake understood the horror of the modern world and made himself a “parody” of it. Blake seems like the only person who truly understood the world, which was why he was so lonely.

Rorschach remembers a joke where a man sees his doctor and tells him he’s depressed and the world is horrible. His doctor tells him to go see Pagliacci the clown; he’ll cheer right up. However, the depressed man is Pagliacci himself.

Another excerpt from Hollis Mason’s *Under the Hood*: When Hollis decides he wants to be a caped crusader, he starts spending every evening training at the police gym, leading a friend to nickname him Nite Owl. He adopts the moniker as his hero name. By 1939, heroes have become a “fad,” so Nite Owl and others appear frequently in the newspapers. Within a year, there are eight of them. Looking back, Hollis finds their simple ideas about good and evil juvenile. He admits that their motivations for dressing up in costumes vary from person to person. Some are after money, for others it’s a sexual fetish, and some just want adventure. On their own, however, they were each doing some good. Hollis thinks that if they hadn’t formed the Minutemen, the heroes would’ve simply disappeared after a time and the world would be better off.

Hollis recalls that the Minutemen formed in 1939, when Captain Metropolis convinced Sally’s agent—and later, husband—Laurence Schexnayder to organize a publicity campaign. Given all of the heroes’ “extreme personalities,” problems are inevitable. Hollis thinks the worst of them is the Comedian, who tries to rape Sally in 1940. Schexnayder convinces her not press charges for the good of the group. In 1946, the public finds out that Silhouette, the Minutemen’s other female member, is a lesbian, and Schexnayder forces her out. In 1947, Sally quits being a hero to marry Schexnayder, and by 1949, there seem to be no interesting villains left to fight in America. They disband, but Hollis thinks, “The damage had already been done.”

*Rorschach holds the Comedian up as the model hero, despite the fact that he was nihilistic and incredibly corrupt. This not only highlights the moral inconsistency in Rorschach’s ethical stance—he deemed Moloch a criminal for having non-prescription drugs, but sees the Comedian as a hero, despite being a murderer and attempted rapist—but also suggests that Rorschach values intense cynicism, even nihilism about the state of the world.*



*Rorschach’s brief joke reflects his view that the modern world is increasingly horrific, depressing, and lonely, which in turn fuels his own sense of nihilism, explored later in the story.*



*Once again, Hollis’s inference that many of the first-generation heroes dressed in costumes and ran around at night for adventure, fetish, or money suggests that heroes’ motivations are not so pure and good as the public may want to believe. Despite this harsh criticism, Hollis carefully points out that the heroes did some good amidst the harm they caused. This passage reflects Watchmen’s treatment of its characters as a whole, depicting them as neither simple heroes or villains, but rather as deeply flawed, dynamic individuals who struggle to know how they should act in a complex world.*



*The Minutemen’s choice to minimize the Comedian’s attempted rape while exiling Silhouette for her sexual orientation suggests that the heroes cultivate a culturally conservative public image, reflecting the leanings of the culture at the time. This fixation on image makes their conduct both misogynistic and homophobic, focused more on the idea of heroism than the actual morality of their individual members. Hollis’s framing of the issues suggests that he recognizes the hypocrisy of their conduct towards their two female members.*



## CHAPTER 3: THE JUDGE OF ALL THE EARTH

On a city street corner, a news vendor mourns the state of the world and says that the U.S. should “nuke Russia and let God sort it out.” Next to him, a man sits reading a **comic** about a sailor whose ship and crew are destroyed by pirates. The news vendor talks to no one in particular about how news vendors see every front page—they’re the best-informed people in the world. The doomsayer with the sign declaring, “The end is nigh” asks the news vendor if he’s saved his copy of *New Frontiersman* for him. The news vendor gives it to him, and the doomsayer pays him to hold the next day’s copy when it comes in. In the pirate comic, the survivor washes the kelp off his ship’s figurehead, which washed up on the beach.

At their military facility, Jon and Laurie start to have sex. Laurie’s eyes are closed, but she realizes there are too many hands touching her face. When she looks up, there are two Jons in the bedroom with her, and another one doing a science experiment in the next room. Laurie is furious and leaves, but Jon does not understand what he did wrong. In an office elsewhere, an aging Janey Slater interviews with *Nova Express* and tells them about how bitter and hurt she was when Jon left her for 16-year-old Laurie. Jenny Slater smokes a cigarette and coughs often. She’s glad someone will tell her story and reveal what sort of person Jon is.

Laurie goes to Daniel’s house. A handyman is installing a new lock on Daniel’s door. Laurie tells Daniel about her fight with Jon and how he barely notices the people around him—even now, after she’s left him, he’s probably just getting dressed for his TV interview. She says she’s tired of being around “super-heroes.” Daniel is about to go have a beer with Hollis, so Laurie offers to walk with him there. The repairman warns them that they’re headed toward a bad neighborhood.

Jon Osterman teleports himself into the TV station for his interview. A producer talks Jon through which subjects to stay away from. The cameras roll and the interviewer tries to make small talk with Jon, but Jon does not understand how to banter. He speaks simply and directly. Doug Roth, a reporter for *Nova Express*, lists off many of Jon’s former associates, including Janey Slater and Moloch, who all have terminal cancer, and insinuates that their illness has some connection to him. This upsets Jon, and the producers end the interview. Reporters harass him, and Jon becomes so angry that he teleports everyone else in the TV studio out to the parking lot.

*The news vendor appears frequently throughout the story, commenting on world events and headlines. Since the majority of Watchmen’s characters are heroes, the news vendor reflects the feelings of the general population as events unfold. The pirate comic becomes an ongoing motif, eventually coming to parallel the way that several characters occupy roles that seem closer to villains than true heroes. The New Frontiersman newspaper also becomes an ongoing motif, representing a “right-wing” view of the world.*



*The story never lays out precisely what Jon can and cannot do as a superhuman, but it implies that he can do nearly anything he wants, such as duplicate himself. This establishes Jon as a god-like figure within the narrative. However, Jon’s inability to understand why Laurie is mad at him suggests that the consequence of such limitless power is that he struggles to relate to simple, limited human beings. Nova Express occupies the opposite role of New Frontiersman, representing a “left-wing” view of the world.*



*Laurie goes straight to Daniel after leaving Jon, suggesting that she already sees Daniel as an emotional support. Laurie’s accusation that Jon is barely aware of the human beings around him again suggests an all-powerful superhuman like Dr. Manhattan—or Superman—would struggle to maintain any attachment to the simple lives of mere humans.*



*Jon’s emotional reaction to Doug Roth’s questioning suggests that, for all his separation from humanity, he still feels some range of human emotions, including frustration and anger. Jon’s outburst indicates that ultimate power mixed with human emotions is a dangerous combination.*



On their walk through the streets, muggers with knives approach Laurie and Daniel. Laurie and Daniel beat them up. They catch their breath and laugh it off, then part ways. Laurie goes to find a hotel. Daniel goes into Hollis's house and finds him watching Jon's botched interview on TV. On the street corner, the news vendor looks at the new edition of *Nova Express*, which insinuates that Dr. Manhattan gives people terminal cancer. In the **pirate comic**, the survivor worries that the pirates will go to his home village and murder his family unless he can find a way to get there first and warn everybody.

When Jon returns to the facility where he lives, he finds an officer fixing a "quarantine" sign over his door. Jon tells the man to let Laurie and everyone else know that he's leaving, first to Arizona, then to Mars. The officer doesn't believe him, but Jon vanishes in front of him. In Arizona, Jon walks through the rubble of an old bar and finds a photo of a man standing next to a young Janey Slater. Jon takes it, walks out to a clearing, and teleports himself away.

On the street corner, the news vendor talks to the doomsayer about Dr. Manhattan's disappearance. They suspect the Communists are somehow to blame. In the **pirate comic**, the survivor digs a pit to bury all the dead bodies washed up on shore. He thinks of his wife and children and hopes someone buries them after the pirates find them.

At the military facility, Laurie watches as men in protective suits take their home apart. A government agent tells her that she'll need to be screened for cancer. He blames Laurie for Dr. Manhattan's leaving and doubts that he'll ever come back. Now that he's gone, the government won't support her financially any longer. The man thinks they're all in "big trouble." In Daniel's house, Rorschach breaks in to tell Daniel that Dr. Manhattan's gone too, and all the masked heroes should be worried.

On the street corner, the **pirate comic** ends with the pirate ship headed for the survivor's home and family. The story's lack of ending angers the man reading it and he gives it back to the news vendor. However, the news vendor is staring at a headline announcing that Russia just invaded the Middle East. He's so shaken by the news that he tells the man to keep the pirate comic for free. On Mars, Jon walks alone, carrying the photograph.

*Daniel and Laurie's ability to fight off armed muggers suggests that they are both still physically capable, despite their retirement. The charge that Dr. Manhattan causes cancer is fitting, since his name evokes the Manhattan Project, where American scientists first developed the atomic bomb, which leaks radiation and causes cancer. Furthermore, Jon exists as America's new ultimate weapon, much like the irradiated nuclear bomb used to be.*



*The "quarantine" sign suggests that even the government thinks of Jon as a possible threat, based purely on Nova Express's accusations. This suggests that public opinion is incredibly fickle, able to turn on a person overnight, even without evidence or proof of wrongdoing.*



*Although it's never explicitly stated, Watchmen setting in 1985 indicates that it takes place during the Cold War era. The doomsayer and the news vendor's fear of Communists typifies the American public's fear of Soviet aggression at the time.*



*The government agent's fear that they're all in "big trouble" without Dr. Manhattan implies that America's sense of security relies on it having the biggest weapon, so that every other country does not dare to challenge it—without that weapon, they are at risk. The government's immediate refusal to support Laurie over something that isn't her fault also shows how the U.S. frequently fails to prioritize its citizens' needs.*



*The fact that Russia invades the Middle East as soon as America no longer possess Dr. Manhattan, the ultimate weapon, reiterates the idea that America's peace and security is only sustained by it having the most devastating weapons and the capacity to dominate any other country.*



In a government building, President Nixon meets with his advisors, who claim that if Russia makes it to Pakistan, they'll likely try to capture Western Europe as well. They run a computer simulation of what will happen if Russia launches its nuclear arsenal. The simulation predicts that hundreds of millions will die, including everyone on America's east coast. The President decides they should wait a week before firing any missiles themselves.

In another excerpt from *Under the Hood*, Hollis recalls that the 1950s saw the decline of costumed heroes. The public stops being interested in their exploits—now that Schexnayder no longer runs publicity for them—and the government forces the majority of them to stand before a court and reveal themselves. The Comedian, with his government contacts, is the only one who thrives, becoming a sort of “patriotic symbol.” During the McCarthy Era, Hooded Justice disappears, though some believe he is a Communist who later turns up with a bullet in his head. There are no more costumed villains left, since they all retire or turn to more professional, business-oriented crimes. Without flashy villains to fight, the costumed heroes feel silly and unnecessary.

In the 1960s, Dr. Manhattan appears—the first true “super-hero,” who makes all the other heroes obsolete. Hollis thinks that Dr. Manhattan's existence changes the entire world, causing both fear and wonder that settle into a constant sense of unease. Ozymandias, with his “boundless and implacable intelligence,” seems almost superhuman as well. Hollis realizes that he and his generation of heroes are aging, so he decides to retire and find a real job to do. He opens an auto shop to be a mechanic like his father and feels content. A young man (Daniel Dreiberg) writes to him, asking if he can become the next Nite Owl, and Hollis agrees to it, passing on the identity and costume. Laurie, who is just coming of age, sounds as if she will take up the hero life as well. Once again, costumed heroes seem to be a new mainstay “of American life.”

## CHAPTER 4: WATCHMAKER

Jon sits on Mars, looking at the photograph he took from the bar. He experiences all moments in time simultaneously, and his mind skips between them. In 1945, Jon sits at his father's kitchen table in Brooklyn, trying to repair an old **watch**, intending to take up his father's trade. His father runs in with a newspaper and announces that the U.S. dropped an atomic bomb. Jon's father thinks this bomb is the future; the world no longer needs watchmakers like himself. Jon protests, but his father throws the gears, cogs, and watchmaker's tools out the window, into the street.

*The computer simulation establishes the stakes of a nuclear war: hundreds of millions of people would die within the first few days. With such catastrophic potential, America's brewing conflict with the Soviets seems nearly apocalyptic, and many characters refer to it as “Armageddon”—the end of the world.*



*The masked heroes' swift fall from grace not only demonstrates how fickle public opinion can be, but also suggests that the heroes are not critical for the safe operation of society. This further casts a damning light on each of their motivations as heroes—they wanted to be heroes more than society needed them to be, and once the novelty wears off, the heroes just seem frivolous. The accusation that Hooded Justice is a secret Communist exemplifies the sharp opposition between left-leaning and right-leaning politics in America during the McCarthy Era, when Communism was feared as a purely evil force.*



*Dr. Manhattan's character operates on several levels at once. As noted earlier, as the only true superhuman he occupies a god-like position among mortal humans. At the same time, the American government treats him as a weapon of mass destruction, and the fear and wonder that people feel toward him echoes the fear and wonder that news of the hydrogen bomb inspired in actual history (which Sally even compares Dr. Manhattan to). In both senses, Dr. Manhattan's presence allows the story to explore existential topics like the meaning of life and the frailty of human society.*



*Watches and clocks symbolize the carefully-ordered universe, with its complex laws of nature and physics, which gives the illusion of a watchmaker—presumably God—being in control of it. Jon's father throwing away the watchmaker's tools after reading about the atomic bomb thus symbolically suggests that the arrival of such a devastating technology upsets the careful balance and order of the universe.*



In 1948, Jon attends Princeton. In 1958, he graduates from Harvard with a Ph.D. in physics. He takes a job in a research facility in Arizona. A research assistant shows him around, walks him through the lab where they do tests with radiation looking for something called an “intrinsic field,” and shows him the local bar. In 1959, Jon meets Janey Slater in the bar. In 1963, they make love after an argument. In 1966, Janey cries and packs her suitcase. In 1959, they’re together at an amusement park. A man takes their photo and calls them young lovers. That evening, they share a hotel room. In 1966, Janey cries while trying to shut her suitcase. In 1985, Jon watches a meteor shower from Mars.

In 1959, a month after the amusement park and hotel, Jon accidentally locks himself in the radiation test chamber. The machine starts up for a scheduled test and the radiation evaporates Jon’s body. One month later, Janey sticks their photo together on the wall in the bar. One month after that, a floating human circulatory system appears briefly in the lab’s kitchen. Days later, a human skeleton with growing muscles appears next a fence, screams, and vanishes again. Two weeks later, when the researchers wonder if their lab is haunted, Jon materializes in the air in a flash of radiation, transformed into a man who is blue and naked and powerful.

At Christmas in 1959, Janey struggles to adjust to Jon’s new form. Jon takes her in his arms and tells her that he will always love her. He knows it’s a lie—he can hear her shouting at him in 1963 and leaving in 1966. In 1960, the government wants to make him into a weapon. They design him a costume, which he hates. The government names him Dr. Manhattan for its “threatening association.” Jon feels like he’s losing control of it all. Broadcasters announce, “The superman exists, and he’s American,” and show footage of Dr. Manhattan telepathically taking apart rifles and blowing up tanks. The world worries that this will disrupt the space and weapons race. Other costumed heroes seem skeptical of him.

In 1960, the newspapers label Dr. Manhattan a “crimefighter,” so he starts fighting crime and killing people. Jon notes, “The morality of my activities escapes me.” In 1961, Jon shakes President Kennedy’s hand. Two months later, Kennedy is assassinated. In 1962, Hollis Mason retires. He tells Jon he’ll become an automotive repairman—the world is changing fast, but cars should stay about the same. Jon tells Hollis that new electric cars are already being manufactured, since Jon can synthesize enough lithium to make them better than gas-powered engines. The news unsettles Hollis.

*Ironically, the atom bomb changes the world particularly by changing the course of Jon’s life, setting him on a trajectory to become Dr. Manhattan and bring new advances to technology, as well as tilt the global balance of power in America’s favor. As a superhuman, Jon is able to view all moments in time at once, suggesting that humanity’s linear view of time is itself an illusion. Janey Slater crying and packing her suitcase suggests that their relationship ends, making way for his relationship with Laurie.*



*The procession from circular system to muscled skeleton to full body suggests that Jon is recreating himself. Jon dies and is reborn as a superhuman, able to transcend all of humanity’s natural limitations. Although the story has a markedly atheistic tone, Jon’s rebirth and transformation is its own form of reincarnation, a transition into a transcendent, god-like form that recalls the biblical story of Jesus Christ. This again positions Jon as a god-like figure in the story,, especially in the chapters that wrestle with meaning and nihilism.*



*Jon can see the end of any relationship before it even begins, yet he chooses to engage in such relationships anyway, suggesting that the value of such relationships is the journey through them, regardless of their eventual outcome. Although Jon’s existence has all manner of massive ramifications for society and technology, the American government immediately turns him into a weapon, suggesting that America is most concerned with its power to dominate and control its adversaries, rather than advancing humanity.*



*Jon’s sense that he has lost control and does not understand the morality of his actions suggests that the American government turns him into a weapon against his own will. Although he does not refuse to fight, neither is he inclined to. Jon’s news to Hollis that all cars will soon become electric reflects how, in the modern world, even things that seemed dependable and stable—like automotive repair—are rapidly changing.*



In 1963, Janey shouts at Jon when he tells her he knew that J.F.K. would die—she thinks he should've stopped it, but he claims he's unable. In 1966, Jon sees 16-year-old Laurie for the first time when Captain Metropolis tries to form the Crimebusters. Janey notices him staring at Laurie and hates him for it. Jon and Laurie start having an affair. Janey packs her bags and leaves. In 1969, Jon learns of his father's death. In 1970, he moves in with 20-year-old Laurie.

In 1971, President Nixon asks Jon to fight in the Vietnam War. Two months later, Jon meets the Comedian in Saigon. Blake seems entirely "amoral," perfect for the "the madness, the pointless butchery" of Vietnam. Blake seems to be one of the few people who understands the horror of the human condition, and he doesn't care at all. After Jon arrives, the Vietcong surrender within two months. In 1985, Jon stops looking at the stars and decides that he will create something for himself on Mars.

In 1975, President Nixon amends the constitution to allow himself to run for a third term. Ozymandias retires and reveals himself as the business magnate Adrian Veidt. Jon and Laurie meet with him and marvel at his genetically altered giant pet lynx, Bubastis. Veidt explains how Jon's appearance has heralded many advances in fields like genetics, transportation, and physics. In 1985, Jon sits on Mars and begins creating. In 1977, Jon and Laurie try to control a rioting mob that is protesting the existence of masked vigilantes. Jon teleports the hundreds of people back to their homes. A few die of heart attacks, but less than would have died in a riot.

In 1977, the Keene Act passes as an emergency bill, outlawing all vigilantes except for Dr. Manhattan and the Comedian, since they work directly for the government. Rorschach refuses to quit, but everyone else retires. In 1981, Jon and Laurie move into their new home in the Rockefeller Military Facility in New York City. The city is filled with electric cars and airships float overhead. In 1985, Rorschach tells them about Edward Blake's murder. Later that week, Laurie leaves Jon. Later that evening, people accuse him of giving dozens of people terminal cancer. Jon feels "tired" of Earth and its people, tired of their entanglements and fears. He takes the photograph from Arizona and leaves.

*Jon's interest in underage Laurie and the pain he puts Janey through with their affair suggests that, although he is now superhuman with limitless strength and intelligence, he is also still governed by human emotions and desires. This mixture of human emotion and limitless power makes Jon an exceptionally dangerous figure.*



*The story's alternate reality closely parallels American history but alters it by imagining how masked heroes and a superhuman would have changed events. Jon's observation that the Vietnam War was full of "madness, pointless butchery" seems to be an observation of the actual war, while America's victory in it (America lost, in reality) imagines how a super-weapon may have changed its outcome.*



*Although American victory in the Vietnam War could be perceived (by American readers) as a positive change wrought by the heroes, Nixon's rewriting of the constitution to remain in power is certainly a negative change. This suggests that more than being simply good or evil, the presence of vigilante heroes would be massively disruptive to human society, creating both positive and negative changes throughout. This contrasts with most superhero comics that came before Watchmen, where society looks largely the same as it does in reality and is structurally unaffected by the presence of superheroes.*



*The Keene Act outlaws all vigilantes except for the ones that the government wants to utilize itself. This creates a critical depiction of the American government, suggesting that it does not abide by the laws that it enforces against its people. Jon's feeling that he is "tired" of humanity suggests that unlike Superman, who feels connected to humanity, a superhuman would be more likely to disconnect from humanity since their own experience is now so different. Jon is not just powerful, but an entirely different sort of being.*



On Mars, Jon floats in the air and forms a glass **clockwork** palace from the sand out of pure will. He wonders if the shape of his creation was fated, predestined for all eternity, or if he himself created its shape. He considers all the events that brought him to this moment and decides that the universe has no creator. It is “a clock without a craftsman.”

*Once again, clocks symbolize the ordered universe, which gives the illusion of some sort of clockmaker or God, just as Jon’s clockwork palace exists because he created it. However, Jon’s realization is the opposite conclusion: despite the universe’s order, he believes at that there is no God or force giving it shape or meaning—it is merely a product of chance.*



In an excerpt from Milton Glass’s “Dr. Manhattan: Superpowers and the Superpowers,” Glass writes that the great paradox of the 20th century is that humanity calls for peace while preparing for war. When Dr. Manhattan appears, many newspapers quote Glass as saying, “the superman exists, and he’s American.” But what he actually says is, “God exists, and he’s American.” Dr. Manhattan seems the ultimate weapon, the ultimate deterrent to Soviet aggression. America’s new dominance has resulted in a temporary peace, where the West can do anything it wants. However, Glass believes that this will not endure. Even Dr. Manhattan cannot prevent a full-scale nuclear assault. If the Russians are pushed to their limit, Glass believes that “mutually assured destruction” is inevitable. Meanwhile, the rest of the world struggles to accept the existence of the superhuman.

*Glass’s view of America’s use of Dr. Manhattan suggests that America establishes peace not by forming treaties or cooperating with other nations, but by dominating them militarily to keep them fearful. This again depicts the American government as war-mongering and oppressive—opposed to peace, essentially—even though it claims to support liberty and democracy. Glass aptly declares Dr. Manhattan to be “God” rather than merely a superman, since the full range of his power and intelligence makes him seem utterly inhuman. This reinforces Dr. Manhattan’s dual position in the narrative as both a god figure and an ultimate weapon.*



## CHAPTER 5: FEARFUL SYMMETRY

In the middle of the night, Moloch hears someone in his house downstairs. He grabs a pistol and creeps down the stairs. Rorschach appears and disarms him, rebuking him for having an unlicensed handgun. Rorschach says that it’s suspicious that both Dr. Manhattan and the Comedian, Moloch’s old enemies, have recently disappeared, especially since Moloch was on the list of people Dr. Manhattan gave cancer to. Rorschach shoves Moloch, a frail old man, into the refrigerator and closes him inside. When Moloch screams that he knows nothing, Rorschach decides he sounds convincing enough and lets him out. He tells Moloch to reach him through his “maildrop” if he hears anything new.

*Once again, Rorschach, a presumed hero, batters a frail old man living quietly in his home just because he was once regarded as a villain (and again, the reader never finds out what Moloch actually did to be labeled a villain). Rorschach’s violence compared to Moloch’s passivity blurs the traditional lines between heroes and villains, cynically suggesting that those who see themselves as heroes—or even those whom society sees as heroes, like the Comedian—may actually be quite villainous in their conduct.*



Rorschach leaves, deciding that Moloch is only a pawn in someone else's plan to discredit Dr. Manhattan and kill the Comedian. Down the street, two detectives investigate a murder-suicide. A father, convinced nuclear war is upon them, stabbed both his children to death and then slit his own throat in front of their mother. On the street corner, the news vendor talks with a man about where to escape to if World War III begins, though it doesn't seem possible to escape at all. In the next issue of the **pirate comic**, the survivor determines he must build a raft and sail home before the pirates get there. The island's trees do not look buoyant enough, so he builds a wooden deck, but straps the dead corpses he's just buried to the underside, since they're bloated with gas like pontoons. He sets sail and, starving, catches and eats a live seagull.

Laurie meets with Daniel at a café. Now that Jon is gone and she can't live at the military facility, she has nowhere to stay. Daniel tells her she can live with him.

"Rorschach's journal. October 21st, 1985." Rorschach wakes to shouting outside. He folds his **mask** and slips it in his jacket. As he wanders outside, dressed as a normal person, he makes note of every small crime, like vandalism, and every suspicious thing he sees, like Laurie and Daniel Dreiberg leaving a café together, and makes mental notes to investigate them later. Rorschach sits in a diner, buys coffee, and watches his "maildrop," which is a public trashcan across the street. On the street corner, the news vendor theorizes that weapons manufacturers are about to make a fortune. In the **pirate comic**, the survivor contemplates his morality and stares down at the dead corpses keeping him afloat.

Elsewhere, Adrian Veidt and his assistant walk to a meeting with a toy manufacturer. A man with a gun approaches them and shoots, missing Veidt but killing his assistant. Veidt beats the assassin up and demands to know who sent him. He reaches his fingers into the man's mouth, shouting that he's trying to bite down on a poison capsule. The assassin dies by poison. Veidt tells an onlooker to call the toy manufacturer and cancel their line of Ozymandias toys, because Ozymandias doesn't have any enemies left to fight.

*The father's grotesque murder-suicide and the news vendor's feeling that no one can hide from World War III suggests that the sense of impending doom is fraying people's nerves, pulling society slowly apart. Meanwhile, the pirate comic's hero commits grotesque actions to survive and try to save his family, which foreshadows both Rorschach's own violent behavior in trying to uncover a criminal conspiracy, and, especially, the disturbing lengths that Adrian Veidt will go to to prevent World War III and nuclear apocalypse.*



*Though brief, this event marks the true beginning of Laurie and Daniel's relationship together and finalizes her break-up with Jon.*



*Rorschach's mental notes on every little crime suggest that he obsesses over order and justice. However, Rorschach's view of crime and punishment, good and evil, is notably angled towards small offenses. He wants to punish vandals, illicit lovers, or poor people selling drugs, yet he never questions what made those people do those things. That is, he lacks any understanding of the environment that causes people to commit those "crimes," and so he remains blind to much broader questions of morality and who, exactly, should be punished for society's ills. Additionally, the survivor's corpse raft symbolizes how even someone who feels like a hero may be held aloft by other people's deaths.*



*Veidt's feeling that he no longer has any traditional enemies to fight illuminates his transition from fighting common criminals to fighting systemic issues (which he later describes in more detail). Veidt's retirement from his life as Ozymandias appears directly influenced by the feeling that he no longer needs to fight individuals—the world has much greater problems, which require greater solutions than an individual crimefighter. This perspective is directly opposed to Rorschach's, who focuses on minor individual crimes while ignoring systemic issues.*



On the street corner, the news vendor says that today's headlines are horrific. A father butchered his children and someone tried to kill Adrian Veidt, the living "saint." The news vendor thinks that if people are trying to kill someone as good as Veidt, no one stands a chance of surviving. He surmises that it's always the things one doesn't see that kill them. In the **pirate comic**, the survivor dozes on his corpse raft and thinks about how regular people "exist upon the whim of murderers." He hears a distant splash and wonders if it could be a rescue boat. Instead, he sees two shark fins approaching.

"Rorschach's journal. October 21st, 1985." Veidt's attempted murder confirms Rorschach's suspicions about a "mask-killer" on the loose. He finds a note in his "maildrop" from Moloch claiming that he has "urgent information" and needs to see Rorschach that night. Rorschach fetches his costume and **mask** from an alleyway and puts them on, feeling that he becomes his true self in his ensemble, "free from fear or weakness or lust." With three hours before his meeting with Moloch, Rorschach finds a rapist and mugger to hunt. In Daniel's house, Laurie moves in and settles in a spare room. Daniel looks longingly at her before wishing her a good night.

In the **pirate comic**, the survivor endures a shark attack. The biggest shark is yellow and strange. It entangles itself in the raft. The survivor grabs a splintered log and stabs it through one of the shark's eyes. The shark swims, dragging the raft across the sea with it, until it dies, exhausted. Other sharks eat the human corpses, while the survivor sits on the yellow shark's floating corpse and uses it, tangled in rope and wood, as his new raft. He takes bites out of the shark and laughs at the irony.

On the street corner, the news vendor sells a copy of *Hustler* to a woman named Joey and they talk about Russia invading the Middle East. She asks him to hang a poster that says, "Gay Women Against Rape," on his newsstand and says it is her contribution to the world. In a police office, two detectives receive a tip over the phone—someone knows where they can find "raw shark." When the detectives realize what the caller means, they grab their jackets and rush out of the office.

*The news vendor says that Veidt is publicly revered as a "saint," which makes the eventual revelation that he engineers a massive attack all the more surprising. Once again, the contrast between Veidt's public persona and his actions suggests that society's heroes are often not what society believes them to be, and may be acting out of ulterior motives, hiding personal flaws, or covertly using methods that seem unconscionable.*



*Rorschach's feeling that he becomes his true self in his costume reveals that his vigilante identity is now his primary identity. Additionally, he feels "free from fear or weakness or lust" as Rorschach, suggesting that his constructed identity helps him to cope with life in the chaotic world, as well as the aspects of himself that he sees as immoral or despicable. That is, his identity becomes a defense mechanism, a way to hide from himself and the world around him—even at the expense of losing his true identity and emotional life.*



*The survivor's descent into madness and grotesque behavior—riding on a corpse raft, eating raw meat—while trying to save his family parallels how any of the masked vigilantes may descend into crazy, even reprehensible behavior while pursuing a noble goal. This is particularly evident in Rorschach's case, since his desire for order and justice lead him to be violent.*



*"Raw shark" is obviously a misconstrued version of the name "Rorschach," and the detectives' quick rush out of the office suggests that he is a highly valued police target. Ironically, although Rorschach idealizes order and justice, he works in opposition to the police, whom society tasks with maintaining order and justice.*



At the appointed time, Rorschach goes back to Moloch's house to visit him. He finds Moloch sitting upright in a chair in the dark, a bullet hole in his forehead. Outside, the police tell Rorschach that he's trapped and should surrender. Rorschach curses himself for walking into a trap. As the police break in, Rorschach uses an aerosol can to set fire to the house—and one of the officers—and runs upstairs. When they chase him, he shoots another in the chest with his grappling gun, impaling him. Trapped by fire and policemen, Rorschach jumps through an upper story window and crashes onto the street. Police surround him, beat him, and tear his **mask** off—he's the doomsayer who usually holds "The End is Nigh" sign. They drag him away, and someone says, "Everything balances."

An excerpt from "Treasure Island Treasury of Comics": After hero comics fall out of favor in the 1950s, comics about pirates become the medium's main attraction. The excerpt gives a summary of Max Shea's work as the author of the wildly popular pirate comic, "Tales of the Black Freighter." It mentions that Shea's legacy suddenly ends when he mysteriously disappears from his home. Although an investigation is underway, nobody knows where he is.

## CHAPTER 6: THE ABYSS GAZES ALSO

"From the notes of Dr. Malcolm Long. October 25th, 1985": Dr. Long, a psychiatrist, holds his first interview with Walter Kovacs, also known as Rorschach. Kovacs is difficult to work with, but this case could make Long famous if he succeeds. Long shows Kovacs a series of Rorschach blot tests and asks him what he sees. Rorschach looks at one, sees a dog with its skull split open, but tells Long that he sees a "pretty butterfly."

Long states that Kovacs was born in 1940 to Sylvia Glick. His father is unknown. Everyone in the prison, cops and criminals alike, hates Rorschach. Long hands Kovacs another blot test. Kovacs looks at it and recalls seeing his mother having sex with a stranger when he is a boy. When the stranger sees the boy, he gets uncomfortable and leaves without paying. Sylvia screams at young Walter and beats him, telling him that she wishes she'd had an abortion. Kovacs tells Long that the ink blot looks like a bunch of flowers. Satisfied, Long tells Kovacs that there's still hope for him, and leaves for the day.

*Once again, Rorschach attacks police and even potentially kills one by shooting him in the chest, suggesting that in spite of all his strict moralism, he does not hold himself to that same high standard—his ideas of good and evil are flexible, even though he believes them to be rigid. The revelation that Rorschach is the same doomsayer who apparently believes the end of the world is coming suggests that he believes in strict moralism even when the entire social order is about to crumble. This indicates that Rorschach sees morality, justice, and order, as ultimate ideals—the meaning of life, even—rather than just qualities which allow society to run smoothly and peacefully.*



*Once again, although the chapter-ending excerpts are secondary to the main story, they fill in backstory for minor characters. In this case, Max Shea's mysterious disappearance foreshadows his small role in the story several chapters later. The decline of hero comics also suggests that, in a world where masked vigilantes actually exist, the genre feels too close to reality and loses its exotic appeal.*



*Long's desire to become famous by treating Walter Kovacs suggests that he is just as self-interested as those vigilantes who do hero work for financial gain or hubris, even though he's supposed to be in a helping profession. This further suggests that such self-interest is not exclusive to masked vigilantes—it seems common to human beings.*



*Kovacs flatly lies to Malcolm Long, suppressing his own painful memories as they arise. This further hints that his vigilante identity as Rorschach helps Walter Kovacs hide from painful or confusing memories and try to establish order in the world around him, since his childhood appears to have been chaotic and abusive. Long's easy satisfaction and belief that he can rehabilitate Kovacs suggests that he possesses his own hubristic belief in his ability to save people.*



On Kovacs's way back to his cell, all the other inmates shout that they'll kill him soon. All the threats make Kovacs recall a time when two older boys trapped him in the street and called him a "whoreson." Ten-year-old Walter grabs a lit cigarette from one of the boys' mouths and jams it into his eye, partially blinding him. He jumps on the other boy and bites and rips at his face until adults pull him off.

Dr. Long writes notes in his study, late at night. After Walter attacked the boys, the government removed him from his mother and placed him in state custody. Away from Sylvia, Walter does well in school, though he's quiet and odd. When he is 16, he learns that someone murdered his mother and responds, "Good." Long's wife Gloria comes into his study and entices him away to the bedroom.

The next day, Dr. Long interviews Kovacs again. He calls him "Walter" and asks him to talk about Rorschach. Kovacs tells Long that he despises him for being "fat, wealthy" and believing that he knows what pain is, but he decides to tell Long about Rorschach anyway. When he is 16, Kovacs leaves the children's home and works in a garment factory. He comes across a custom dress made of two white layers of material with a black liquid layer in between, so that black shapes flow around—"black and white. Moving. [...] No gray." The client, Kitty Genovese, rejected the dress, so Kovacs takes it home with him and learns to handle the material. Eventually, he stashes it away.

Two years pass. One day, Kovacs reads in the newspaper that Kitty Genovese was raped, tortured, and murdered right in front of her apartment, within earshot of at least 40 people. No one did anything. Kovacs believes he understands what human beings truly are in that moment, so he takes out Kitty's dress and makes himself a "face" he can finally bear to look at: his **mask**. In prison, Dr. Long tries to convince Kovacs that not all people are rotten. Kovacs tells Long that Long isn't good, though he believes he is. He's spending all this time with Kovacs for his own fame, not to actually make anyone better; he just wants to know "what makes [Kovacs] sick." Kovacs promises Long he'll "find out" soon. Long tries to push the encounter out of his mind, but he's disturbed.

*The abuse and bullying Walter Kovacs suffers as a child suggests that his violent demeanor originates from his need to defend himself as a child. This makes Rorschach seem a tragic figure, despite his violence and unhinged behavior, rather than a purely predatory character.*



*Walter's success in state custody suggests that, without the traumas of his childhood, he may have grown up to be a regular, successful adult. However, his simple response to his mother's death suggests that he possesses deep-seated animosity towards her.*



*Walter's criticism of Dr. Long insinuates that Long does not truly understand the nature of emotional pain or the depravity of human beings. Long's naiveté echoes the naiveté of heroes like Captain Metropolis, who believe that fighting crime as is simple as stopping robbers, and that they can make society better just through hard work and courage. But this passage also highlights how Rorschach's own views are similarly simplistic. The material, which becomes Rorschach's mask, symbolizes his view of morality and ethics: everything is clearly divided into good and evil, and though those boundaries shift around, there is never any gray area; morality is black and white, without ambiguity or compromise.*



*Kitty Genovese's horrific death (which happened in real life) not only demonstrates humanity's capacity for savage behavior, but her neighbors' failure to do anything about it suggests that human beings are fundamentally selfish and passive creatures, lacking empathy for others. This forms Rorschach's grim view of humanity, which echoes the Comedian's nihilistic view as well. Kovacs's comment about making a face he can bear to look at suggests that he possesses a large amount of self-contempt, which his identity as Rorschach also helps him to hide from.*



Later, the deputy warden calls Long to tell him that Kovacs attacked an inmate in the cafeteria. The inmate was about to stab Kovacs, so Kovacs threw a pan of hot cooking grease into his face, giving the man “horrific” burns. Long finds himself thinking of the man as Rorschach, rather than Kovacs. Gloria finds Long in his study again. She tries to pull him away from work, but he’s too obsessed with Rorschach’s case. She leaves angrily, and Long realizes that Rorschach is drawing him into his own world.

In the next meeting, Kovacs continues his story. In the beginning, he states he was just Kovacs in a costume, pretending to be Rorschach. He was too merciful towards criminals initially: he “let them live.” He remarks that all of his “friends” in costumes were soft like that. Kovacs commits no truly violent crimes before 1975. He works with Nite Owl in 1965, until Nite Owl eventually quits. The Comedian is the only one who stays active as a vigilante, who sees all of the horror of the world and keeps on fighting. Kovacs respects him for it. Kovacs states that men like them do their work because the state of the world “compel[s]” them to.

“From the notes of Dr. Malcolm Long. October 27th, 1985”: Kovacs says he felt like he had to become Rorschach, but he doesn’t identify what it was that compelled him. Long thinks that Rorschach is overreacting to events in his childhood. That evening, Gloria tries to make amends for the other night, and invites friends over for dinner tomorrow. Long falls asleep early.

As Malcolm Long’s notes continue the next day, Kovacs reveals everything to Long. Long gives Kovacs the blot test from their first interview. This time, Kovacs tells him he sees a dead dog, whose skull he split in half. In 1975, a six-year-old girl gets kidnapped by a man who mistakenly thinks that she has a rich father. Kovacs decides to investigate it himself for “personal reasons.” He starts searching for information in bars, breaking fingers, and unnecessarily hospitalizes 14 people. He finally gets a clue, an address, and follows it to an unused dress shop. He enters and spots two German shepherds fighting over a bloody bone in the backyard.

*Long’s urge to refer to Kovacs as Rorschach suggests that even other people consider Rorschach to be Kovacs’s primary identity. This suggests that, far more than any of the other vigilantes, Kovacs completely gives himself over to his constructed identity. Gloria’s anger at her husband suggests she does not want him to value his work more than he values her, but his response shows that he’s already being affected by Rorschach’s dark and troubling view of the world.*



*Kovacs idolizes the Comedian despite his blatantly immoral behavior, which suggests that despite Kovacs’s strict moralism, he values the capacity to see the world for the horrific place that it is even more. Kovacs’s claim that men like them are “compelled” to work as vigilantes suggests that anyone willing to see the world for what it truly is cannot help but take matters into their own hands. However, this claim also seems a way for Kovacs to avoid some amount of responsibility for his actions.*



*Long’s inference that Kovacs overreacts to his traumatic childhood implies that he believes the world is not truly so horrible as Kovacs believes it to be, and his violent behavior and vigilante actions are thus not justified. Rather, Long thinks, they are the symptoms of some psychological fault. The novel doesn’t come to a clear conclusion on this point; it leaves it up to the reader to decide whether Rorschach is reacting rationally or irrationally to the world he’s experienced.*



*Kovacs’s “personal reasons” for wanting to rescue the kidnapped girl suggest that his own abusive childhood makes him particularly sensitive to the mistreatment of children. For Kovacs, this sensitivity represents a rare level of empathy for other people, demonstrating that he still has a heart and feels emotional attachments to other people—in fact, it seems that the strength of this empathy may actually be what motivates his frightening and violent behavior. The bloody bone hints at the kidnapped girl’s fate.*



Kovacs enters the dress shop. He finds a piece of fabric in the furnace that looks like it came from a little girl's clothing. A large cutting block, recently used, sits against the wall beneath a row of hanging knives. Looking again at the dogs fighting over the bone, Kovacs grabs a meat cleaver, goes out to the yard, and butchers the dogs. He recalls that, beneath his **mask**, Kovacs closes his eyes as the blood splatters his chest, and Rorschach "open[s] them." The kidnapper is out drinking, so Rorschach leaves and returns after dark.

When the kidnapper returns, Rorschach ambushes him and handcuffs him to the furnace. The man claims he's innocent, but also mentions the little girl without Rorschach mentioning her first. Rorschach sets a hacksaw next to the handcuffed man, but he tells him he won't have time to cut through the handcuffs. The man understands and wails. Rorschach pours kerosene all over the room, sets it on fire, then steps out of the house. He watches it burn for over an hour. No one escapes. As he stands in the firelight, Rorschach feels "cleansed." He knows that the world is "rudderless," that there is no God to give it meaning. All the evil in this "morally blank world" comes from human hands, and as Rorschach, he can leave his own mark on it as well. Disturbed, Dr. Long leaves the interview.

"From the notes of Dr. Malcolm Long. October 28th, 1985": Long walks home, bothered by news of war in the Middle East and a man shouting racial slurs at him on the street. When he gets home, Gloria reminds him that friends are visiting for dinner. During dinner, one of the friends asks about Long's work with Rorschach, if he's learned about any "kinky" or exciting crimes. Long tells him flatly about the girl who was kidnapped, sliced up, and fed to dogs. Gloria leaves, upset. The friends are horrified and make an excuse to leave.

Malcolm Long sits on his bed and stares at a Rorschach blot. He tries to see it as a tree, but it looks more like a dead cat he once found, with maggots eating its stomach away. Worse yet, it looks like "meaningless blackness." Long thinks, "We are alone. There is nothing else."

*The bone, cutting block, and knives imply that the kidnapper cut the little girl up and fed her to his dogs, reinforcing Kovacs's belief that the world is utterly horrific. Kovacs's statement that he closes his eyes and opens them as Rorschach suggests that this is his moment of personal transformation, of claiming Rorschach as his primary identity so that he can separate himself from his conscience and enact gruesome retribution.*



*The man's mention of the little girl without Rorschach mentioning her clearly indicates that he is guilty. Rorschach's advice that the man won't have time to saw through the handcuffs before burning to death implies that he will only survive by sawing off his own arm. Rorschach's action thus creates a balanced sense of retribution: the kidnapper who cut a little girl to pieces can only live by cutting his own body to pieces as well. This gruesome solution demonstrates both the underlying logic of Rorschach's actions and the cruelty inherent in that logic; he believes in perfect justice, but that justice very often creates more agony. Rorschach's statement that the world is "rudderless" suggests that he feels the same nihilism as the Comedian and Jon Osterman.*



*Malcom and Gloria's dinner guest's hope to hear about a "kinky" crime suggests that most people live in a state of unreality; they do not recognize the horror of the world and thus fetishize pain and criminality. When Long tells the man the truth, everyone but him leaves the room, indicating that most people cannot cope with such horrors, at least not without the aid of a constructed identity like Rorschach's.*



*Although Dr. Long tried to convince Rorschach that the world was not a terrible place, his new sense of nihilism suggests that Rorschach has instead brought Long around to his own dark view of the world—simply by telling the truth of his own experiences.*



A New York City Police Department report summarizes Rorschach's arrest and the apparent murder of Edgar Jacobi, also known as Moloch. It states that several officers were injured during his arrest; the one who was shot by the grappling gun is in critical condition. A New York State Psychiatric Hospital report summarizes Rorschach's early life with his abusive mother, Sylvia Glick, and how he excelled at literature and religious education after leaving her custody. Two documents that Rorschach wrote as a child talk about his missing father, whom he believes is a good patriot like President Truman, and a dream about his mother having sex with a stranger, which leaves Rorschach feeling "dirty" and confused.

*The police report illuminates several details about Rorschach's character. His interest in religious education suggests that his strict moralism originates in religious teachings, even though Rorschach no longer observes any religion or believes in God. His belief that his absent father is a patriot suggests that he holds his father up as an imaginary role model to emulate, in much the same way that he idolizes the Comedian later. Likewise, his dream about his mother and confused feelings suggest that he is sexually repressed, which was also suggested previously when he noted that his mask helps him escape feelings like lust.*

## CHAPTER 7: A BROTHER TO DRAGONS

Laurie explores Daniel's basement and finds the airship he flew as Nite Owl; its interior lights are turned on. She climbs into the cockpit and looks for a cigarette lighter on the dashboard. When she hits a button, a flamethrower engages on the front of the airship and lights Daniel's basement on fire. Daniel hears her screaming from upstairs and briefly recalls Rorschach's warnings about a "mask-killer." He sprints down to the basement, realizes Laurie is okay, and helps her put out the fire. Laurie apologizes profusely, but Daniel isn't angry, only relieved.

*The lights on in Daniel's airship suggest that he has recently been working on it, despite having retired as a vigilante years ago. Both the airship and its flamethrower are technological marvels, suggesting that Daniel is an engineer and an inventor. Although Daniel claims to disbelieve Rorschach's "mask-killer conspiracy," Daniel's fear for Laurie indicates that some part of him finds it plausible. Taken together, these details all point to the possibility that Daniel might wish to act as a vigilante again sometime soon.*



They look at all of the technological vigilante equipment in Dan's basement together. He thinks it all seems like childhood "fantasy" now. Laurie thinks that she wasn't even living out her own fantasy, just her mother's. They climb up to the airship and Dan holds Laurie's hands for a few seconds after helping her aboard, until she asks him to let go. Laurie pokes around while Dan checks all the onboard systems and explains how the airship has no corners or edges, so it's invisible to radar.

*Dan and Laurie's claims that their vigilante years felt like fulfilling some sort of fantasy again suggest that many of the masked heroes are motivated less by commitment to societal good than they are by personal power fantasies or, in Laurie's case, familial expectations. This again depicts the heroes as less pure and noble than the image they present to the public.*



Laurie states she ought to stop smoking, since it nearly killed her, but it's hard to give up an addiction when she feels so restless. Dan states he had to give up his own addictive habit of running around in a costume. He used to get "cravings" for the romance of it, but the loss of it doesn't bother him anymore. However, Dan still has a hard time getting rid of all his old gear. They climb down from the airship, which he reveals is named Archie, short for Merlin's owl Archimedes. Dan tells Laurie that when he first started out, he was "rich" and "bored" and it all felt exciting. But after a while, he realized the Comedian was right: the costumes and the antics are just "flash and thunder" and don't really change the world. For some people, like Rorschach, the costumes made them insane.

*Dan's assessment of vigilante work as an addiction further suggests that many of the heroes are only in it for the rush, rather than some noble desire to protect society. Although such self-interests do not completely negate any good things the masked vigilantes may have done, they do demonstrate how personal desires taint otherwise-noble ambitions. This furthers the novel's depiction of heroes as three-dimensional characters, rather than typically perfect superheroes. The Watchmen, are dynamic and flawed, like real people.*



Dan and Laurie keep looking through his old stuff, since she seems interested and eager. He shows her his night vision goggles and turns out the lights. As they start to go back upstairs, Dan asks Laurie if she misses Jon. She says that she ought to, but she was already “lonely” when she lived with him; life doesn’t feel any different without him. Dan says that he’s been lonely too and almost puts his arm around Laurie, but he stops at the last second. They go upstairs to have coffee and watch the news. Dan mentions that he thinks Rorschach’s alleged murder of Moloch seems odd, since one bullet to the head is not as dramatic as Rorschach normally is.

On the news, the anchor talks about Rorschach’s arrest—his landlady claims that he often sexually propositioned her—and the Soviet incursion into Pakistan. Laurie wishes she could just run away like Jon did. Dan takes his glasses off to clean them and Laurie tells him he looks “ravishing” without them. She kisses him. They start to have sex on the couch, while Ozymandias performs a gymnastic routine on TV. However, Dan embarrassedly realizes he’s impotent. Laurie tells him not to worry about it; they have plenty of time. They go to bed together and fall asleep.

Dan dreams that he and Laurie stand naked outside, kissing each other, while a nuclear explosion lights up behind them and incinerates them both. Dan wakes up in the middle of the night and crawls out of bed. He looks out at the city through his window, then goes down to the basement. He puts on his Nite Owl goggles, though he is naked otherwise. Laurie wakes and finds him in the basement. Though he feels foolish, he tells her about his dream and says that between the war and the “mask-killer conspiracy,” he feels so “powerless,” so “impotent” to face the world.

Laurie tells Dan they should go out tonight and be heroes again. They both get dressed in their costumes, climb into the airship, and fly out into the city under a smokescreen. Dan feels his confidence return as he flies. They spot an apartment building on fire, so they fly the ship down and start spraying the building with water. Laurie extends a ramp into the building and lets all the people from the building into the airship. They fly them to safety. Dan feels confident, in control.

*Dan and Laurie both feel lonely and bored in their regular lives, which primes them for having their own mid-life crises and engaging in reckless behavior. Dan’s statement that Rorschach possesses a dramatic streak suggests that even someone as moralistic as Rorschach still enjoys the thrill and romance of being a costumed vigilante. However, Dan’s feeling that something is off about Rorschach’s arrest indicates that he begins to suspect a conspiracy as well.*



*Daniel’s sexual impotence parallels his feeling of powerlessness about events transpiring around the world, particularly the rising tensions between the Americans and the Russians and the threat of nuclear war. Dan’s impotence also contrasts with Ozymandias’s physical prowess on the TV, while his personal powerlessness contrasts with Adrian Veidt’s secret plan, already in motion, to avert World War III.*



*Again, Dan’s sexual impotence parallels his sense of being powerless to stop the world from falling into ruin. The fact that Dan reaches for his Nite Owl goggles in the midst of feeling impotent suggests that his constructed identity as Nite Owl used to give him a sense of power and capability, allowing him to face the world and believe that he can change it.*



*The return of Dan’s confidence suggests that wearing his costume and taking even small actions helps him to face the world. As with Rorschach, this suggests that people use constructed identities to help them cope with a world that is complex, horrifying, and possesses problems far too large for any single person to fix. In this case, that sense of constructed confidence proves quite valuable; Dan may not be able to save the world, but he does genuinely make it better by saving several people’s lives.*



After they leave the survivors safely on the ground, Dan and Laurie fly back into the clouds, laughing about what they've just done. They start kissing and have sex on the floor of the airship while it flies through the night. As they lie together, Laurie asks Dan if he feels better now. He tells her he does; he feels powerful again, ready to take on the world. However, he thinks they have "an obligation to [their] fraternity." He thinks they should break Rorschach out of jail.

"Blood from the Shoulder of Pallas" by Daniel Dreiberg: In an article written for an ornithological journal, Daniel says that owl enthusiasts can sometimes become so engaged with the scientific minutiae of how the birds function that they lose their sense of grandeur and mysticism. He recounts how he once became so preoccupied with the fine biology of an owl that he forgot the magic of it, the powerful presence that made the Greeks revere owls and incorporate them into their mythology.

## CHAPTER 8: OLD GHOSTS

Hollis, in New York, calls Sally in California and tells her that he saw Nite Owl and Silk Spectre on the news together, so Daniel and Laurie must be together now. Sally and Hollis reminisce about the old days for a while, then Hollis hangs up. On the street corner, the news vendor worries about the state of the world and the oncoming Russian invasion and thinks about how strange it is that Rorschach used to be one of his regular customers. In the **pirate comic**, the survivor floats on his raft of dead bodies and imagines pirates cutting his wife apart with their cutlasses. He begins to go insane.

In Dan's basement, Laurie frets about actually breaking Rorschach out of jail; she thinks it's an insane idea. Dan makes preparations and insists that they have to do it. Laurie obviously didn't get cancer from Jon, the Comedian was murdered, and it seems Rorschach was framed; it all feels like a massive conspiracy, as if someone is trying to "trigger Armageddon." Dan thinks they should contact Ozymandias, but not until after they break Rorschach loose, just in case he tries to stop them.

In prison, a short man named Big Figure and two goons visit Rorschach's cell. They want to kill him but can't reach him, since he's locked inside. Big Figure tells Rorschach that he's going to have his revenge soon. He's been waiting for this chance for 20 years.

*Just as Dan's sexual impotence mirrored his feeling of personal powerlessness, his returned sexual ability reflects his feeling of restored confidence and vigor. Dan's role as a vigilante appears to have as much benefit for him as it has for society, again suggesting that some heroes may be motivated more by what they get from their work, rather than what they give to others.*



*Daniel's belief that romance and mysticism are as valuable as technical knowledge echoes his return to vigilante work, in which he finds a sense of romantic adventure—even though he earlier admitted that it's all childish, "flash and thunder," and does not actually accomplish much.*



*The pirate comic's survivor's fantasy about his wife and children's deaths demonstrates how one's imagination, though only a fantasy, can drive them to take real action or even to insanity. The survivor's imagining pirates killing his family parallels the news vendor's worries about Russian invasion, since both may happen eventually, and would be terrible, but have not actually happened yet.*



*Despite Laurie's willingness to have an adventure with Daniel, her hesitation to actually break Rorschach out of jail suggests that she does not want to truly return to the vigilante lifestyle. That is, Laurie enjoys the occasional thrill of it, but the chaos and danger that such a life brings outweighs any personal enjoyment or sense of adventure in the long-term. Dan's idea that someone is trying to "trigger Armageddon" foreshadows Adrian Veidt's plot, which is indeed designed to do exactly that—though not in the way that Dan is imagining.*



*Big Figure's quest for vengeance suggests that Rorschach has made many enemies in the criminal underworld. The fact that Big Figure waited for his chance for 20 years also indicates that Rorschach has been effective in getting some criminals arrested and off the streets.*



At Dan's house, one of the detectives who arrested Rorschach visits while Laurie is taking a shower. He introduces himself as Steven Fine and chats with Dan, insinuating several connections between him, Rorschach, and the vigilantes who saved people from the fire earlier that week. The detective says that no one's bothered by heroes rescuing a few people from a fire, but if they make any more appearances, society will return to the "spirit of '77." When the detective leaves, Dan tells Laurie that the government is on to them. They have to break Rorschach out within the next day.

*The detective's mention of "the spirit of '77" suggests that society will regain its antipathy toward costumed vigilantes and be ready to take action against them, since '77 is the year that the Keene Act outlawing most vigilantes was passed. Although the heroes view themselves as protectors of society, such a spirit suggests that society feels safer without masked vigilantes running around and taking things into their own hands. Daniel's return to life as Nite Owl thus defies society's wishes, even if he did successfully save some people's lives.*



In the *New Frontiersman* office, Mr. Godfrey, the manager, and his young employee Seymour are pasting a new issue of the paper together. Mr. Godfrey tells Seymour to get a filler piece from the "crank file," which is filled with racist op-eds and trashy articles. Godfrey is thrilled by all the chaos in the news, since it makes for a good newspaper issue. Elsewhere, on an unnamed island, an artist named Ms. Manish draws a large picture of a giant squid-like monster, telling Mr. Shea that she is doing a study of the "facial assembly." The man references some sort of creature being refrigerated and hauled away on a ship. In Dan's basement, he and Laurie climb aboard Archie, dressed in their costumes.

*Godfrey, as the head of a right-wing newspaper, occupies an opposite position to Doug Roth, head of Nova Express, which is a left-wing newspaper. Godfrey's delight in the awful headlines and his "crank file" of racy, but terrible articles suggests that right-wing media is more interested in sensationalism than in real journalism. Ms. Manish painting on the island recalls the Comedian's statement to Moloch that he found an island filled with scientists and artists, hinting at a conspiracy. It's also notable that the Mr. Shea referenced here seems to be Max Shea, the author of the pirate comic, who was previously said to have disappeared mysteriously.*



Elsewhere, Hollis Mason carves a jack-o-lantern while listening to the news talk about a feud between *New Frontiersman* and *Nova Express*. On the street corner, the news vendor chats with a crowd of men. A newspaper headline announces that Rorschach caused a prison riot that left 5 people dead. In the **pirate comic**, the survivor starts to speak with the corpses keeping his raft afloat.

*Once again, Rorschach's actions either directly or indirectly cause multiple deaths. While this foreshadows his escape, it also suggests that Rorschach's presence creates more death and disruption than order and justice, despite his lofty ideals.*



On Halloween night, Big Figure returns with more inmates to cut through Rorschach's cell bars and kill him. Rorschach antagonizes the men outside his cell until one of them, a heavy-set man, reaches through to grab him. Rorschach traps his arms, tying them to the bars with his coat, so that the man's body blocks the lock they need to cut. Big Figure orders his other men to kill the fat one, so one of them slits the man's throat. Another man cuts through the door with a wired plasma torch and runs towards Rorschach, torch in hand. Rorschach climbs onto his wall-mounted bunk and spills water on the floor, causing the torch's current to electrocute the second man to death.

*Big Figure casually orders the execution of his own henchman, demonstrating that he is a ruthless individual. Rorschach's handling of a situation where he is both trapped and outnumbered suggests that, despite his odd behavior and disheveled appearance, he is very intelligent and thinks tactically. This reveals how Rorschach has survived so long, even though both organized criminals and the police wanted him dead or incapacitated, and again suggests that if he'd had a different upbringing, he could have contributed a lot to society through less violent means.*



Dan and Laurie fly their airship over the prison and see that a riot has started below. Laurie is nervous, but Dan emits a sonic screech from the ship, which incapacitates the rioting prisoners and wardens. Laurie and Dan jump out of the airship and go wandering through the prison. Dan feels like Rorschach has been trying to reach out to him lately, almost like he wants to be “friends.” They find Rorschach in a darkened hallway, walking calmly along. He barely reacts to their appearance and stops to use the bathroom. However, he says he is glad to see Daniel back in costume. Laurie thinks all of this is a mistake and wishes that Jon were with them. They make their way to the roof of the prison, climb in the airship, and leave.

Laurie, Daniel, and Rorschach return to Daniel’s house. Laurie seems rattled. She goes into the living room and is startled to find Jon sitting on the couch. Jon says he knew that she wanted to speak with him, so they’re going to Mars to have a conversation where Laurie will “try to convince [him] to save the world.” This plan bothers Dan, but Laurie thinks it’s the right thing to do, so she goes with Jon. They teleport away. The police, led by detective Steven Fine, arrive outside of Dan’s house and start breaking through the door. Dan and Rorschach get into the airship and fly away.

On the street corner, the news vendor and his friends talk about the reappearance of costumed vigilantes and imagine what it would feel like to be caught in an atomic blast. A gang of young adults force their way into Hollis Mason’s house. He thinks they are trick-or-treaters at first, but they beat him to death and flee. Younger kids in costumes discover his body when they arrive, looking for candy. In the **pirate comic**, the survivor jumps into the water to drown himself, but he doesn’t sink. He realizes that he has made it to land, reaching his destination at last.

The next section is an excerpt from an article called, “Honor is like the hawk: sometimes it must go hooded” by Hector Godfrey, published in *New Frontiersman*. Godfrey accuses Doug Roth, head of *Nova Express*, of being a Communist agent and un-American, since he criticizes masked vigilantes and started the questions about Dr. Manhattan’s cancer-causing effects. Godfrey harkens back to a more patriotic age and suggests that the masked vigilantes are a continuation of the tradition started by the Ku Klux Klan, who did some bad things but were essentially trying to preserve American culture and prevent it from being “mongrelized.” He calls on the government to investigate *Nova Express* as traitors.

*Dan’s feeling that Rorschach has been trying to make friends, but does not know how, again humanizes Rorschach and makes him a tragic figure, rather than simply terrifying or disturbing. This humanization of Rorschach reinforces the idea that the vigilante heroes are dynamic, complex individuals, rather than simply being good or evil. Laurie’s wish for Jon suggests that she misses his stability (or perhaps just his raw power), even though she is less lonely with Daniel than she was with him.*



*Jon’s decision to fetch Laurie so she can convince him to come back to Earth suggests that Jon still feels some attachment to humanity, however faint. Meanwhile, Laurie’s willingness to go with Jon to Mars indicates that she doubts her choice to leave him and become a vigilante again with Daniel, showing how both characters feel conflicted about what their roles in the chaotic world should be.*



*Hollis’s sudden and brutal death appears needless and has no role in the greater story arc. Rather, it is an act of nihilistic violence, a symptom of society breaking down as World War III looms on the horizon, and it’s also a piece of evidence for Rorschach’s belief in the world’s pointless misery. The pirate comic’s survivor’s attempt at suicide further reflects the nihilism taking hold of society, as it seems that everyone might soon die by atomic blast, while his survival foreshadows humanity’s ultimate survival.*



*Godfrey relates the heroes’ vigilante justice to the Ku Klux Klan, which he sees as a mark of nobility but which the reader will undoubtedly see as a negative connotation. This again condemns the idea of masked vigilantes carrying out their own justice outside the law, while adding to the novel’s negative characterization of right-wing media. However, it’s notable that Doug Roth isn’t blameless either, since the questions about Dr. Manhattan were indeed baseless rumors. This excerpt highlights how hard it is to trust any media in a polarized world.*



A back page article states that the police investigation into **pirate comic** writer Max Shea's disappearance has been called off. Of note, several other creative professionals have also mysteriously disappeared, including the artist Hira Manish, the architect Norman Leith, and science fiction author James Trafford March. Additionally, the head of recently deceased psychic Robert Deschaines appears to have been stolen from his corpse before his family had time to bury him.

*Once again, the articles at the end of each chapter serve to fill in Watchmen's world or provide foreshadowing hints at what is to come, particularly since each chapter was originally issued on a monthly basis. The disappearances of several artists as well as a psychic's head provide clues to the nature of Adrian Veidt's ultimate plot.*



## CHAPTER 9: THE DARKNESS OF MERE BEING

A globe-shaped **perfume bottle** falls through the air. Laurie and Jon teleport from Daniel's living room to a hillside on Mars. Laurie can't breathe its atmosphere and collapses, nearly suffocating before Jon remembers that he needs to give her an aura of oxygen to breathe. Laurie sputters furiously at Jon as she catches her breath. She starts to shout at him until she notices the large glass **clockwork** castle he created sitting in front of them. As they walk inside, Jon tells Laurie that they are there to "debate earth's destiny."

*In this chapter, the falling perfume bottle symbolizes Laurie's understanding of the world, which is about to be sent into a freefall. Jon forgets that Laurie needs air to breathe, indicating that he still has trouble connecting with mere humans or recognizing their physical needs. This in turn reflects Jon's ignorance of Laurie's emotional needs as well.*



Jon claims to know how the conversation ends. His non-linear perception of time aggravates Laurie, but she follows him inside the castle. He tells her they are all "puppets," but he's the only "puppet who can see the strings." To Jon, there is no past or future. He asks Laurie to describe her earliest memory. She remembers holding a "snowstorm ball" with a small castle inside and listening to her parents fight in the next room, near divorce. Laurence knows that Sally had an affair, and that Laurie isn't his daughter. When Laurence and Sally find Laurie listening to them, she's so startled that she drops the snowstorm ball.

*Once again, Jon's power to see all moments in time at once suggests that time is non-linear, but humans are only able to perceive it as a linear string of events. However, his statement that he is only a "puppet who can see the strings" highlights the fact that he cannot alter the past or the future, only observe it. That is, Jon is bound by fate, and presumably everyone else is as well. The castle in the "snowstorm ball" forms a parallel image to the glass castle that Jon and Laurie now stand in.*



Jon tells Laurie that she was his "only connection" to Earth, so when she left him, he left the planet. He now feels more connection to Mars than to Earth. He wants to show Laurie around, but she refuses to be teleported again, so he lifts the glass castle into the sky and they go flying across the landscape. Laurie asks Jon if the end of the world, all that death, would bother him. He replies that an end to human suffering and struggle, which never goes anywhere, wouldn't bother him at all.

*Jon's view that the end of humanity would simply be the end of pain and struggle reflects a deeply nihilistic outlook on life, suggesting that he sees no value to human life because it does not seem to go anywhere. People live, struggle, and die, and thus have no existential meaning or significance in Jon's eyes.*



Laurie recalls being 13 years old and seeing Sally with a gathering of first-generation vigilantes. Laurie overhears them wondering if all of their crime fighting actually achieved anything. Hollis asks Laurie if she's read his new book yet, but Sally implies that there is something in it that Laurie should not read yet. Byron Lewis (Mothman) arrives, but he's old, shaky, and clearly confused. He drops his glass on the floor. Laurie wonders if that's the life she's meant to look forward to. Back on Mars, Laurie admits that life seems futile, but it exists, which must give it some value.

As they look at Mars's vast and dramatic landscape, Jon asks Laurie if she thinks it would look better with an oil pipeline running through it. Jon thinks Mars's "chaotic terrain" is superior to what human life would have made of it, though Laurie thinks her life is plenty chaotic. She recalls being 16 years old at the Crimebusters meeting. After Jon leaves the meeting, she meets the Comedian and vaguely flirts with him. Soon, Sally storms up and takes Laurie away, though Laurie doesn't understand what is so bad about the Comedian. As they drive away, Laurie thinks that Edward Blake looks sad and alone. She feels sorry for him. Sally and Laurie drive a few blocks, then stop. Sally tells Laurie everything about her life, about Blake, and about her own fears.

Laurie asks Jon if human pain and experience mean more to him than rocks in the sand. Jon answers "no." He can see the atomic structure of every object and the vastness of the universe, which makes humanity seem "brief and mundane." Laurie wants to end the conversation, but Jon says the conversation will end with her in tears. After that, he will return to Earth and see many dead bodies, but some "static" obscures his view of the rest of the future. Eventually, he will kill someone in the snow, but he does not know who. As they fly over Mars, Jon tries to make Laurie appreciate the landscapes, but she refuses. He asks Laurie if the human heart has the same triumphant "peaks" and devastating "chasms" that the landscape does. She thinks that the human heart has such "chasms" when it feels pain.

Laurie recalls a banquet in 1973 with various heads of state. Everyone shakes Edward Blake's hand. He jokes about some murdered reporters, Woodward and Bernstein, and casually implies that he was behind the J.F.K. assassination. Laurie is drunk and furious. She's read Hollis Mason's book and knows what Blake did, and she hates him. Laurie approaches Blake, throws her drink in his face, accuses him of raping her mother, and shouts until Jon arrives and teleports her away. Laurie doesn't know why she's retelling this story to Jon on Mars. She tells him to land the castle, and they set down.

*Laurie's series of non-linear recollections of events in her life parallels Jon's series of reflections when he first arrived on Mars. This suggests that Laurie will gain some new perspective through this experience, just as Jon did when he realized that there is no God and no reason for living. Byron Lewis, apparently caught in the throes of dementia, exemplifies the pointlessness of life, since all one has to look forward to in old age is their mind and body slowly unraveling.*



*Jon's rhetorical question about an oil pipeline on Mars's landscape suggests that human presence ruins natural beauty, rather than enhances it. Laurie's opinion that Blake looks sad and alone foreshadows her true connection with him, which will give Laurie a sense of empathy for both him and her own mother. Just as Rorschach is humanized by his empathy for hurt children, Blake's rare look of loneliness and vulnerability humanizes him as well, depicting him as a deeply flawed but also wounded person, rather than just a monster.*



*Jon's statement that, compared to atomic structures, human life seems bland and unremarkable seems morbid, but it also highlights how vast and complex natural science is. Even with all of humanity's history and technology and accumulated knowledge, none of it comes close to rivaling the complexity of atomic physics. However, Laurie's refusal to cede his point suggests that she still finds human experience and human pain to be more meaningful than all the complexity in the world. This scene suggests that the human heart is just as dramatic as Mars's landscape, though in different ways.*



*Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein are the real-life Washington Post reporters who uncovered the Watergate Scandal, which ended Nixon's presidency. The Comedian's joke suggests that he quashed the Watergate investigation and murdered John F. Kennedy, and making these jokes to government officials implies that the Comedian really did these things on behalf of the corrupt American government.*



Laurie wants Jon to send her back to Earth to die with everyone else. She notes that she isn't crying like Jon said she would, so maybe he's wrong about everything. However, Jon tells Laurie that she intentionally does not understand the events threaded through her life, as if she believes herself "too delicate" to handle the truth. Laurie realizes the connections between all the scenes she's recalled with Jon: Edward Blake is her father. Laurie screams "no." A globe-shaped **perfume bottle** appears in her hand and she hurls it at the wall. When it shatters, the whole **clockwork** castle shatters around them as well and falls to rubble, leaving Jon and Laurie standing on the Mars sand.

Laurie cries that her life is nothing more than a stupid "joke." Jon tells that he does not think her life is meaningless, which confuses Laurie. He says she's changed his mind. Jon states that life is a series of "thermodynamic miracles," events so improbable that they seem miraculous, like oxygen turning into gold. For every person who exists, hundreds of billions of sperm cells died, but only one fertilized a human egg and formed a being. Every person on earth is a miracle; they just forget it, since life on Earth seems so commonplace. From the perspective of another planet, Jon sees things clearly again. He tells Laurie to dry her eyes and take solace in the fact that she is a living miracle, "rarer than a quark." They will "go home."

Various clippings from Sally's scrapbook reveal snippets of her life: A letter from a TV producer states that they want to turn what would have been a super-hero movie about her into an adult film. Captain Metropolis writes her a letter suggesting that they team up and begin forming the Minutemen. Laurence Schexnayder proposes marriage through a letter, calling it a "viable partnership proposition." An interview transcript reveals that Sally doesn't hold hard feelings against Blake, and that she believes Laurie will someday thank her for pushing her into the hero life.

## CHAPTER 10: TWO RIDERS WERE APPROACHING

In a bunker, an aging President Nixon arrives with the nuclear football handcuffed to his wrist. Officers announce that tanks are gathering in East Germany. A CIA officer presses Nixon to make the first strike, but he resolves to be patient and wait.

Again, the perfume bottle symbolizes Laurie's understanding of her world, while clocks, and thus the clockwork castle, represent order in the universe. When Laurie finds out that Edward Blake, the man she hates most in the world, is her father, it wrecks her world—symbolized by the shattered perfume bottle—and crumbles any sense she has of the universe having order, meaning, and significance—symbolized by the collapsed castle.



Although the novel takes an atheistic view of the world—as represented by Rorschach's belief that the world is "rudderless" and Jon's belief that the universe is a clock without a clockmaker—Jon argues that life does not need to feel nihilistic and pointless, even without God. Human life is so improbable as to be miraculous, even within the immovable laws of physics, and thus a rare opportunity, a gift. Jon's view allows for the presence of miracles without any divine being or contradiction of science.



Although Sally is not as thoroughly explored as most of the other central characters, these pieces from her scrapbook reveal several notable details: the TV producer's letter suggests that publicists and media agents goaded Sally into becoming a sex icon; Laurence's offer of a "viable partnership proposition" suggests that their marriage was devoid of romance; her comment about Laurie thanking her implies that Sally believes she is doing the best thing for her daughter, even though Laurie hates it.



The nuclear football is a remote system for the U.S. president to launch a nuclear attack, so this scene indicates that America is considering launching its nuclear weapons.



After hiding underwater in the airship, Daniel (dressed as Nite Owl) and Rorschach decide what to do next, beginning with obtaining Rorschach's spare costume. Rorschach says they need to go back to the "underworld" and find information—World War III is less than a week away. Rorschach breaks into his old apartment and retrieves a suit from below the floorboards. His landlady opens the door, terrified to see him again. Rorschach wants to punish her for slandering his name, but sees that her kids are with her, tears streaming down their faces, and chooses to just leave instead.

Adrian Veidt lands at his base in Antarctica, met by Bubastis the lynx and his private staff. He asks if the "delivery" went smoothly, and his staff assures him that it did. After donning his Ozymandias costume, he seats himself in front of a wall of TV screens, each playing different news stations and changing to new ones at random. Veidt calls it "information in its most concentrated form." He notes that everyone is obsessed with the prospect of war, which always carries a sexual undercurrent. He orders his staff to invest money in erotic films for the short term and maternity goods and baby supplies for the long term.

Rorschach and Daniel spend the day underwater in the airship, waiting for dark. Daniel runs computer scans, looking for patterns or clues. Rorschach is restless. They quarrel over whether everything is still tied to the mask-killer conspiracy, or if that's a diversion to conceal something bigger. Frustrated, Daniel tells Rorschach that he's difficult to get along with. Rorschach apologizes and offers a handshake, telling Daniel that he is a good friend to him. Daniel shakes his hand and seems touched. Night falls. The airship rises out of the ocean.

In the **pirate comic**, the survivor wades ashore, figuring he is less than 20 miles from his home. However, he knows that by now, his family must have been "slaughtered." All that is left for him is revenge. Over a dune, he spies the town moneylender riding with his wife and imagines that the moneylender is a traitor, working with the pirates. As the man and woman ride down the beach, they scream—they've found the survivor's corpse raft. The survivor takes a stone and rushes toward them, caving in the moneylender's skull with one blow. The stone slips from his hand, so he strangles the moneylender's wife. She fights hard and it takes the survivor a long time to kill her.

*Once again, Rorschach shows an unusual level of empathy when children are involved, suggesting that he does have some level of human compassion and sensitivity. The fact that Rorschach decides to forego retribution after the landlady slanders his personal honor suggests that his desire to protect hurt children, like he himself once was, even overpowers his moralistic desire for justice and retribution.*



*Although Veidt publicly retired from his role as Ozymandias, he dons the uniform in private, suggesting that he still secretly carries on his vigilante work or at least uses the identity to guide his work in business. Veidt's mention of the "delivery" hints at the conspiracy currently underway. His wall of screens and his ability to process information suggest not only that he is brilliant, but that he makes his fortune and does his vigilante work by interpreting social trends and strategizing wide-view, long-term solutions.*



*Daniel's earlier sense that Rorschach is trying to make friends proves prescient. Although Rorschach carries the demeanor of a lone rogue individual, his offered handshake and apology suggests that even he recognizes his need for other people and social relationships. This again progressively humanizes Rorschach, depicting him as a dynamic (though conflicted) individual.*



*The survivor commits two awful murders while intending to do good, even believing that he is enacting just retribution—despite the fact that he has no evidence these two people did anything wrong. The survivor's descent from heroism to villainy demonstrates how easily one can commit great evils, even while believing that they are doing good. The pirate comic's arc foreshadows Adrian Veidt's dicey ethical conflict as his plot unfolds over the next chapters, implicitly raising the question of whether Veidt is a great hero or a great villain.*



On the street corner, the news vendor states that everyone can feel the world's about to end. They're skittish. Evangelists approach him and ask to buy a gazette, then offer him some religious literature. He angrily shoos them away. In the **pirate comic**, the survivor finds that killing is easy when death feels near. He ties the woman upright in her horse's saddle, figuring that if two figures rode out of the pirate-occupied village, his enemies would expect two figures to ride back in. Soon, he will have his vengeance.

Rorschach and Daniel visit Happy Harry's bar and find a man, Roy Chess, who delivered the envelope with instructions for Veidt's attempted assassination. Rorschach tortures him by crushing a glass into his hand until Chess says that everyone involved, all guys who work for Pyramid Delivery Company, have been getting killed off and he thinks he'll be next. Meanwhile, a gang member tells Daniel that some other gangsters murdered Hollis Mason. Daniel becomes enraged and threatens to kill everyone in the neighborhood, but Rorschach convinces him to leave before doing anything rash. As Daniel calls the ship down, Rorschach tries to comfort him by saying that if they find the "mask-killer," Daniel can avenge Hollis's death.

On a massive ocean liner, people drink and celebrate. Max Shea and Hira Manish fumble around in the dark below deck. They believe that all their work has been for some sort of movie production involving a human brain. Max looks for a light switch, but he pulls back a tarp to reveal a time bomb. The ship explodes and sinks into the ocean with all of its passengers.

Rorschach and Daniel visit Pyramid Delivery Company's office, since the company seems tied to the attempt on Veidt's life. The office is abandoned, but they find lots of Egyptian memorabilia on the walls and a chart tracking the rising nuclear threat around the world. Apparently someone has plans to destroy the world, but they cannot figure who. Daniel finds a computer terminal and guesses "RAMESES" as the password. He tries "RAMESES II" and the terminal unlocks, saying "Hello, Adrian." With horror, Daniel realizes that Adrian Veidt is behind everything—Rameses II is the Egyptian name for Ozymandias. They leave to find Veidt, taking a stack of papers from a desk.

"Rorschach's journal. November 1st, 1985." Rorschach and Daniel are going to try to track down Veidt in his lair. Veidt is the most dangerous enemy Rorschach can imagine, and he does not expect to survive the encounter. Rorschach thanks his reader for their support and announces that he has no regrets. He "lived life, free from compromises." He signs off and puts his journal into a city mailbox.

*The pirate comic's survivor's observation that killing is easy when death seems near suggests that a desperate person—whether due to their own imminent doom or the end of the world—is capable of committing terrible acts they would not otherwise be able to stomach. This observation again foreshadows Adrian Veidt's ethically questionable plot, which will soon be revealed to the reader.*



*Although Daniel has always been a relatively gentle character, the stress of impending war and news of his friend Hollis's random, meaningless death pushes him to threaten great violence. This demonstrates how even someone who believes they are a hero can slide into anger, wrath, and nihilistic violence. Rorschach's attempt to comfort Daniel again suggests he is making the effort to reach out, form human attachment, and consider the needs of others, perhaps for the first time.*



*Shea and Manish's murder, along with everyone else aboard the ship, suggests that someone wants to keep them quiet. Whatever work they were part of apparently requires utmost secrecy to work, even at the cost of hundreds of lives.*



*Adrian Veidt's role as the mastermind of a criminal conspiracy embodies the novel's complex ethical dilemma and its critique of traditional heroes. Where most comic books until Watchmen's publication—including many that Moore worked on, such as Batman and Superman—focused on traditional, pure heroes fighting clearly evil villains, Veidt occupies an ambiguous role as either the world's greatest hero or the world's greatest villain, depending on the reader's interpretation.*



*Rorschach's pride in living a life "free from compromises" embodies his ethical stance. Within his strict moralist view of the world, staying true to one's morals at all times is the highest virtue, higher than empathy, nuance, or any greater good.*



On the street corner, the news vendor gripes about the end of the world, particularly since no one except the masked heroes asked for this fight. He sees Joey, who says that her girlfriend, Aline, is angry with her and they're settling things tonight. In the **pirate comic**, the survivor and the dead woman ride down the street, under the gaze of what he thinks is a pirate sentry, but what is really only a scarecrow. Once past the "sentry," he rides furiously toward his home, toward "vengeance."

Elsewhere, a postman delivers Rorschach's journal to the *New Frontiersman* office, but Seymour just puts it in the "crank file."

Rorschach and Daniel fly the airship to Antarctica, where Veidt's fortress lies. They try to come in low, but the cold air freezes the airship's engines and they crash-land in the snow. Unhurt, they unload their hover bikes and keep making their way towards Veidt's lair. Veidt watches them approach on his screens.

A series of clippings and pamphlets shows an overview of Adrian Veidt's various merchandizing schemes. In a letter to a toy manufacturer, he proposes changing out super-villain action figures for characterized terrorists. In a letter to a perfume manufacturer, Veidt states that they should change their perfume branding from "Nostalgia" to "Millennium": while "Nostalgia" is comforting in times of "upheaval," eventually the world will settle back into peace and begin looking towards the promise of the future, rather than the safety of the past. An informational brochure outlines Veidt's wellness programs, including his belief that anyone can become as remarkable as he is with the right discipline and training regimen.

## CHAPTER 11: LOOK ON MY WORKS, YE MIGHTY...

In his Antarctic fortress, Adrian Veidt voice-records a complex observation about changing perceptions and technological development. He watches Rorschach and Daniel ride toward him on his wall of screens. Daniel wonders why someone like Veidt—who never killed a single person—should want to destroy the world. Rorschach thinks it must be "insanity." Veidt walks with Bubastis, saying that he has something to resolve before the heroes arrive. He grabs a microphone and calls his staff to meet with him in his glass vivarium for celebratory drinks.

*The pirate comic's survivor misconstrues a scarecrow as a pirate sentry, foreshadowing his tragic misunderstanding of the whole situation. This foreshadowing also applies to Rorschach and Daniel's pursuit of Adrian Veidt, since they will soon discover that they misunderstood Veidt's intentions all along.*



*Veidt watches Rorschach and Daniel approach, suggesting that he knew they'd come for him. This further establishes Veidt as an all-knowing mastermind, even though he is technically as human as anyone else, which further blurs the lines between regular people and superheroes.*



*Once again, this series of clippings contains nothing essential to the story, but rather fleshes out Veidt's character. His request that his toy enemies be terrorists rather than super-villains suggests that he wants to move away from his identity as a costumed hero, and simply be seen as person who works for the good of all. Rebranding his perfume to something future-oriented shows that, contrary to predictions of an apocalyptic war, Veidt believes that earth and humanity have a bright and peaceful future ahead of them—and that he intends to profit from it.*



*Veidt's voice-recording demonstrates his considerable intellect and insight into human behavior. Especially combined with Daniel's inability to understand why someone like Adrian Veidt should want to destroy the world, it suggests that there is a deeper and more complex conspiracy at hand than anyone realizes.*



On the street corner, the news vendor complains about young people partying before the world ends. Joey's girlfriend Aline arrives, looking for her, but the news vendor hasn't seen her. He tells Aline to let Joey know that the new issue of *Hustler* will be in soon. Aline runs away, upset. In the **pirate comic**, the survivor rushes into his home and bludgeons the pirate he finds sleeping on the floor. It lets out a high scream. He looks up to see his own children, staring at him, terrified. He looks down and sees his wife lying beneath him, limp. The pirates never came. The survivor realizes what he's done and runs away, out the door and down the road, feeling as if he's lost all sanity.

*Hustler* is a pornographic magazine, so it upsets Aline that her partner buys it. The pirate comic's survivor makes a horrific mistake and murders his own wife, believing that he is taking righteous vengeance on the pirates. His tragedy again foreshadows Veidt's own ethical dilemma—particularly Veidt's uncertainty after the conspiracy is completed—of whether he has committed the greatest good or gone insane and committed the worst possible evil. It's also notable that in the survivor's case, the danger was only ever in his head, which casts doubt on the entire prospect of the war and suggests that human thought is really what creates even such enormous conflicts.



Veidt, dressed as Ozymandias, meets with his staff in the vivarium. He tells them about his childhood, how he was born to average parents. He is "exceptionally bright" from the beginning, though he does not know why. Veidt's parents die when he is 17, leaving him an inheritance. However, Veidt idolizes Alexander of Macedonia, who nearly united the entire world, and wants to measure his own success against Alexander's. He gives away his inheritance and travels to Turkey to follow Alexander's footsteps. On the street corner, Joey and Aline fight. Aline is angry at Joey for looking at *Hustler*. Joey says she wishes she were "straight" and she wishes she were "dead." In the **pirate comic**, the survivor reaches the ocean.

Veidt's idolization of Alexander the Great, who nearly united the world by conquering many nations and killing countless people, foreshadows that Veidt will also make the exchange of many human lives for a unified, peaceful world. Veidt thus embodies utilitarian ethics, in that he believes that the ends justify the means and that one should pursue the greatest good for the greatest number of people, even through sacrifice and moral compromise.



In his glass-walled vivarium, Veidt continues to recall his trek across the Middle East, through Egypt where Alexander was dubbed Rameses II, and finally to Alexander's resting place. Veidt feels disappointed that Alexander failed in his mission to unite the world. On his last night in Egypt, he takes some hashish and has an epiphany—he will become the next Alexander and bring his principles to the modern world. He takes the Greek name for Rameses II (Ozymandias) and sets out on his quest to defeat all of man's evils and create a unified world. He thanks his staff for helping him in that journey. His staff sit on a bench, unresponsive. Veidt presses a button on a console and the walls of the vivarium slide down, exposing them all to the Antarctic winds. He leaves, and the vivarium and Veidt's staff are quickly buried by snow and ice.

Veidt kills his staff as a way to cover his tracks, which implies that he also killed all of the people on the boat with Max Shea and Hira Manish. Even before his plan is complete, Veidt murders hundreds of people, mostly of whom supported him and his work. But according to his utilitarian philosophy, uniting the world is worth these costs, just as Alexander the Great considered wiping out numerous armies the worthwhile cost of uniting the world in his day. Veidt's trading of some people's lives for the sake of others makes him an ethically questionable figure, far from the typical idea of a hero or a villain.



On the street corner, Gloria Long asks the news vendor if he's seen her husband. They talk briefly, but she spots Malcolm down the street and goes to him. In the **pirate comic**, the survivor hears an angry mob pursuing him. The pirate freighter floats in the sea in front of him, and he realizes that it was not preparing to strike his hometown, but rather waiting for him. With no life left on land, he swims desperately out to the ship to join its crew.

The pirate comic's narrator ultimately becomes a villain, confirmed by the angry mob of villagers who pursue him into the sea and drive him to become a pirate himself. Again, this foreshadows Veidt's eventual position as neither a clear hero nor a clear villain, but an ethically ambiguous figure who some may find monstrous just the same.



Rorschach and Daniel find the entrance to Veidt's vivarium and use it to enter his fortress. Daniel expresses some hesitation about killing Veidt, since he always seemed like a gentle guy. Rorschach says that they must, and he will do it if Daniel doesn't feel able. They spot Veidt in his dining room and attack him from behind, but Veidt easily subdues them. Rorschach continues unsuccessfully trying to attack, but Daniel demands to know Veidt's plot.

While fending off Rorschach, Veidt explains that as a hero, he quickly realized that not all injustice is perpetrated by villains. In the 1950s, he discovers that the Comedian is hunting for Hooded Justice on behalf of the government and suspects that the Comedian may have killed him. He also knows that the Comedian is in Dallas with Nixon on the day that J.F.K is shot. Kennedy was about to give a speech declaring that the U.S. is the "watchmen on the walls of world freedom." Veidt realizes that all of their vigilante adventuring is pointless; they are just fighting the "symptoms" rather than the "disease." When the Comedian talks about nuclear war at the Crimebusters meeting in 1966, Veidt realizes he is completely right, but refuses to share his darkly comedic cynicism about the world.

On the street corner, Gloria finds Malcolm and tells him that she wants him back. She misses him. In the background, Joey pushes Aline down and starts kicking her on the ground. Gloria sees Malcolm looking at them and tells him that if he goes to help instead of staying with her, she'll leave him forever. Malcolm tells her he's sorry, but he can't run from the world's problems.

In Veidt's fortress, Adrian continues to recall his journey. After the Crimebusters meeting, Veidt studies the world and sees the inevitability of nuclear disaster. The East and the West are bound for mutual suicide. They spend all their money on weapons, so their people suffer and the environment burns. Jon's appearance accelerates this process by bringing advances in technology. The only way to stop it is for someone to exercise "brute power" and commit to an awful, but effective solution. Veidt figures that by the end of the 1970s, the world will be near catastrophe, so he spends the next decade building his fortune and amassing wealth, in order to prevent the end of the world.

*Rorschach's conviction that Veidt must die, regardless of his motivations, demonstrates his strictly moralistic view of ethics. Rorschach and Veidt thus represent two opposing ethical stances pitted against each other. Veidt embodies utilitarianism and ethical ambiguity, while Rorschach embodies rigid moralism.*



*Veidt's story confirms that the Comedian murdered people on behalf of the American government, reinforcing the point that it is a corrupt institution. Furthermore, Veidt's realization that stopping petty crimes makes no real difference critiques the popular notion of comic book heroes as righteous role models who stop muggings and rescue people from burning buildings. Veidt's claim that the masked vigilantes only fight the "symptoms" and not the "disease" points to the fact that such heroes do not tackle the root causes of poverty, crime, and evil in the world—things that Rorschach in particular has always ignored in his quest to stop individual injustices.*



*Although Rorschach criticizes Dr. Long for believing that he is a good person and can help the world, Gloria's insistence that he simply block the world out does not seem like a better alternative. Malcolm's decision to help where he can, such as stopping Joey from beating up Aline, seems the only reasonable alternative, even though it costs him his wife.*



*Once again, Veidt's view that someone must exercise "brute power" and have the gall to take horrific action for the greater good represents a utilitarian view of ethics. However, with Veidt's understanding that the warring powers on earth will inevitably kill themselves and everyone else, such a utilitarian view seems to be the only one that can make a difference. Rorschach, by contrast, stays true to his morals and refuses to compromise, but he doesn't have any answer for how to prevent a nuclear war.*



The **pirate comic** ends when the pirate crew lowers a rope to the survivor. The news vendor says that people ought to connect with each other more. He asks the man reading the comic what his name is and is pleased to find that they're both named Bernard. The other man doesn't care, though. He notices Joey beating up Aline, with Malcolm intervening, just as Detective Steven Fine arrives as well.

Veidt continues revealing his plan. He knows he needs to get rid of Jon, so his company, Dimensional Developments, hires several of Jon's past associates and secretly gives them cancer. Veidt buys an island and begins working on teleportation and genetic research. The Comedian discovers the island by accident and figures out his plot, so Veidt breaks into his apartment and kills him. Veidt believes that an "intractable" problem like nuclear war requires an unconventional solution. With a cadre of artists, scientists, and writers, Veidt builds a monstrous creature to convince national governments that they are being invaded by aliens, to scare them into cooperating with each other instead of fighting.

With Jon and the Comedian neutralized, Veidt needed Rorschach taken care of as well to stop him from meddling. He frames Rorschach, then hires an assassin to try to murder Veidt himself, thus placing himself beyond suspicion. Veidt explains that except for Jon's power, teleportation has never been achieved without the object exploding on arrival, which suits his purposes. When he teleports his "alien" into New York City, it will trigger a "psychic shockwave" that will kill half the city. Daniel tells Veidt that they will stop his plan, but Veidt tells him it already happened, 35 minutes ago. In New York City, an explosion flashes.

In an article from 1975 called "After the Masquerade," Doug Roth interviews Adrian Veidt in his base in Antarctica. Veidt expresses his belief that anyone can be heroic with the right attitude, and explains how morally ambiguous crime fighting actually is—for instance, a woman steals food for her starving children while politicians legally create her poverty, so who should be punished? People in the U.S. government engineer plots to kill people in other countries. Everything is complex and vague. They speak about the nuclear crisis and humanity's race towards extinction. Roth finds Veidt disturbingly likable for someone who seems so far above the rest of the world.

*The man reading the comic blows off the news vendor's attempt to form a connection between them, suggesting that even when someone wants to invest in the world around them, people tend to isolate themselves and be hostile towards others.*



*Veidt's conspiracy turns out to be the connecting thread through a staggering number of seemingly random events, confirming his role as a mastermind. Although Veidt's ethical justification is left up to the reader, he nonetheless occupies the antagonist's role in the story, since he is behind every negative and confusing event that happens to the other Watchmen. His plan to save Earth looks disturbingly like an elaborate terrorist attack, using fear to drive various governments into cooperating.*



*Veidt's plan kills millions of people, yet ostensibly saves the rest of the world. This makes him the most extreme utilitarian and raises the dubious question of whether he is Earth's savior or its worst criminal. The novel pointedly leaves Veidt's role ambiguous, letting the reader decide whether they agree with Veidt's or Rorschach's ethical approach—whether it is better to kill some to save the world, or to die with the world, but with one's principles intact.*



*Both Veidt's actions and his beliefs stated in this interview suggest that the idea of a hero fighting crime is pleasant, but too simple to actually be effective; the world does not adhere to black-and-white standards of morality, and each crime is connected to evil actions (perhaps even legal ones) committed by other people. Although Veidt's utilitarianism may seem callous, even horrific, it stems from wider, well-informed view of the world and how it works, making Rorschach's narrow moralism appear shallow and inadequate by contrast.*

## CHAPTER 12: A STRONGER LOVING WORLD

New York City is strewn with corpses and dead bodies. Massive tentacles rope through streets and buildings, connected to a huge, dead, squid-like monster. Jon and Laurie teleport into the middle of the carnage and see all of the corpses. Jon theorizes on the science of it, guessing that someone is generating “tachyons,” which inhibit his ability to know the future. Laurie reflects on how sad it is that so many people died while simply living their lives, buying Indian food or walking around. Jon senses that the tachyons are coming from Antarctica, and Laurie just wants to leave the city, so they teleport away.

In Veidt’s base, Daniel says he doesn’t believe that Veidt actually carried out his plan. Veidt insists that he did and jokes that he can even catch bullets. Rorschach believes Veidt and asks him to send Bubastis away so they can fight to the death. Veidt ignores Rorschach and explains to Daniel that the monster’s brain was the key. He found a psychic named Robert Deschaines, whose brain amplified and projected thought waves. His scientists then cloned the psychic’s brain and loaded it with images and descriptions of alien worlds created by Max Shea and Hira Manish. When the creature teleported into New York, those not killed by the blast had their brains flooded with visions of an alien world. On one of his screens, Veidt sees that Jon and Laurie have arrived.

Jon realizes that Veidt has been using tachyons to disrupt Jon’s ability to see the future. He walks into Veidt’s fortress, passing Rorschach, but feels “drugged” and confused by the tachyon swirl. Veidt hides, but Jon sees Bubastis standing in some sort of machine labeled “intrinsic field subtractor,” and approaches the cat. Hiding behind a wall, Veidt activates the machine and disintegrates both Jon and Bubastis. Laurie appears and shoots a handgun at Veidt, but he leaps backward and catches the bullet in his palm, spurting blood from his hand but otherwise unharmed. The action stuns Laurie, and Veidt kicks her aside.

Veidt stands and begins to announce his victory, but Jon’s massive arm smashes through the wall. Jon announces that he can reconstruct himself at will, just as Dr. Manhattan reformed after the original Jon Osterman was disintegrated. Jon announces that he will crush Veidt, but Veidt turns his wall of TV screens to the news. Most of the news reporters are grappling with the horror of the attack, but several report that the U.S. and the Soviets are both laying down their arms and declaring an immediate truce.

*Tachyons are a theoretical type of particle that moves faster than light, though they’ve never been proven to exist. Laurie’s sadness over the fact that these people no longer get to simply live their lives refers back to her prior conversation with Jon, where they decided that human life was a miracle in itself. For Laurie, a simple act like eating Indian food becomes a brief but poignant symbol for enjoying one’s daily, mundane life.*



*Daniel and Rorschach’s differing responses to Veidt’s revelation typifies their differing demeanors. Daniel’s response is plain denial, reflecting how he avoids or runs from evil or problems he cannot handle. Rorschach’s response is to fight Veidt, to enact retribution for what Rorschach sees as an evil—even though punishing Veidt will not do anything to avert his plan or save people. However, Veidt utterly ignores Rorschach’s demand for a duel, suggesting that he views Rorschach’s strict moralism as a futile pursuit.*



*Although Veidt is only human like the other vigilantes aside from Jon, his ability to catch Laurie’s bullet ambiguously hints that he may somehow have become more than human. However, the blood from his hand indicates that he is not invincible, just highly unusual. Killing his beloved Bubastis again reflects Veidt’s utilitarianism, since he sacrifices his prized pet to kill Jon and stop him from disrupting his ultimate plan.*



*Jon’s ability to resurrect himself again establishes him as the only god-figure within the story. However, Veidt sits in the messianic role, sacrificing his personal morality and the lives of millions of people to (in his eyes) save the world. The news reports that America and the Soviets are laying down arms indicate that Veidt’s plan, however objectionable, has worked.*



Veidt raises his arms in the air and declares, “I did it.” He announces that he fulfilled Rameses’s ambitions and will move on to helping human society rebuild. Laurie says they must bring him to justice, but Veidt explains that if they reveal his plot, everyone will know there is no alien threat, the world will return to war, and those millions will have died for nothing. Veidt asks everyone else to accept the “compromise” for the good of humanity. This horrifies Jon, Laurie, and Daniel, but they accept that Veidt is right. However, Rorschach refuses to compromise, “even in the face of Armageddon.” Rorschach leaves, intent on revealing Veidt’s plan to the world despite everyone else’s objections. Veidt tells Daniel and Laurie to make themselves “at home.” Jon disappears.

Daniel and Laurie walk to a quiet, luxurious indoor pool in Veidt’s fortress. Laurie feels confused after what she learned on Mars and all the carnage in New York. Dan worries about whether Jon cares that he and Laurie are together. Laurie tells him it doesn’t matter. They have the opportunity to live and argue and eat Indian food and love each other. Life is “so damn sweet” and they should love each other, because they are alive and they can. They kiss.

Jon confronts Rorschach as he walks through the snow, back to the airship to return to America. Jon tells Rorschach he cannot allow him to reveal Veidt’s actions. Rorschach understands why Jon feels this way and tells him to go ahead and kill him. He pulls off his **mask**, revealing Walter Kovac’s face, tears streaming from his eyes. Jon points his arm out and makes Walter explode.

Jon walks back into the fortress, past Laurie and Dan sleeping naked together by the pool, and up to where Adrian sits, meditating. Veidt justifies his actions and hopes Jon will help him build a new utopia on earth, but Jon states that he would like to create life himself on a new planet. As Jon begins to leave, Veidt asks him if he “did the right thing” since it all “worked out in the end.” Jon tells him, “Nothing ever ends,” and disappears.

*Rorschach’s intention to reveal Veidt’s plan and bring him to justice rises from his absolute refusal to compromise his morals and insistence that evil must always be punished. This scenario tests the limits of Rorschach’s moralistic view of ethics, since remaining true to his morals means shattering the new world peace that Veidt sacrificed millions of lives to achieve. Rorschach’s unwillingness to compromise suggests that he ultimately places his own moral fortitude over the wellbeing of everyone on Earth, which seems paradoxically to go against the moralistic ethos he expresses.*



*Laurie’s conviction that she and Daniel should live their lives and enjoy themselves—because they can and the dead cannot—suggests that a simple appreciation of life, without searching for grander meaning, is the antidote to nihilism. That is, one should enjoy the life they have to live simply because they have the chance to live it.*



*Rorschach’s decision to remove his mask signifies that he accepts his own limitations and chooses to die as his true self, as Walter Kovacs. Although Rorschach gave him the ability to operate in a chaotic world, his inability to bring Veidt to justice shows Kovacs that the constructed identity has its natural limitations as well.*



*Veidt’s questions to Jon suggest that some part of him is uncertain about whether he made the right choice. Jon’s statement that there is no “end” implies that Veidt may have established peace for now, but there is no way to know whether that peace will last. This highlights a flaw of a utilitarian ethical stance as well, since one may take despicable actions to achieve a noble result, but the future is never certain—one cannot know that the results of their actions will not be undone, as Rorschach nearly undid the results of Veidt’s actions.*



At Christmas, Dan and Laurie visit Sally in California. They've both changed their appearances and taken the aliases Sam and Linda Hollis. They briefly exchange gifts and Laurie tells her mother that she knows the Comedian was her father. Sally breaks down and apologizes, but Laurie forgives her and tells her that life is strange and unpredictable. As they leave, Dan and Laurie chat about taking up their hero identities again, but Laurie wants to wear a leather mask and carry a gun. Alone in her home, Sally kisses a framed photo of the Comedian and sobs.

In the *New Frontiersman* office, Seymour and Godfrey work on another issue. Godfrey is bitter that the U.S. and Russia are on good terms and that Russian language is seeping into American culture. Their new issue needs a filler piece, so Godfrey tells Seymour to pick whatever he wants from the "crank file." Seymour's hand hovers over a pile of articles and pamphlets, amongst which is Rorschach's journal.

*Laurie's willingness to forgive Sally and accept that the Comedian is her father suggests that the devastation she saw, and the realization that life is a rare miracle, helps her recognize that anything can happen, and people should be valued regardless. Sally's kiss on the Comedian's photo suggests that she secretly still loves him after all these years, despite what he did to her.*



*Watchmen's ending is intentionally ambiguous, leaving the possibility open that Rorschach's journal will be discovered, Veidt's plan will be revealed, and the new world peace will fall apart. This leaves the ethical dilemma of Veidt's plan as open-ended as possible, urging the reader to wrestle with the quandary and decide for themselves whether or not his actions were morally correct.*





## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Homstad, Levi. "Watchmen." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 30 Jan 2020. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Homstad, Levi. "Watchmen." LitCharts LLC, January 30, 2020. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/watchmen>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Watchmen* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

### MLA

Moore, Alan. *Watchmen*. DC Comics. 1986.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Moore, Alan. *Watchmen*. New York: DC Comics. 1986.