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**Punching Evil: Redemptive Violence
in Alan Moore's Watchmen**

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Abstract

This bachelor's thesis explores the theme of redemptive violence in Alan Moore's graphic novel *Watchmen*. The origins of the myth of redemptive violence in the Babylonian creation narrative as outlined by Paul Ricoeur in *The Symbolism of Evil* are examined, as are the effects of the myth itself, its ubiquitous presence, and its relationship with comic books described in the book *The Powers That Be* by Walter Wink. The thesis compares the myth with the narrative of *Watchmen*, and identifies its elements and distinct patterns in one of the comic book medium's most significant titles.

keywords: comics, redemptive violence, Watchmen, Alan Moore, Walter Wink

Abstrakt

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá tématem ospravedlnitelného násilí v grafickém románu Alana Moorea *Strážci*. Za pomoci díla Paula Ricoeura *Symbolika zla* ukazuje původ myšlenky konání násilí a zla za účelem dosažení dobra a nastolení řádu v babylonské tradici, s užitím knihy *The Powers That Be* od Waltera Winka pak ukazuje na přítomnost a vliv tohoto archetypu v současnosti s přihlédnutím právě ke komiksové tvorbě a nalézá jeho prvky v jednom z nejvýznamnějších titulů tohoto žánru.

klíčová slova: komiks, násilí, Watchmen, Strážci, Alan Moore, Walter Wink

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1 Introduction

Might makes right. Violence is the answer and woe to the conquered. The idea that having power legitimizes its use is ancient, and yet it survives. Not only that, it thrives and surrounds us to this day. Like heroes of old emerging victorious from their struggles against ancient evils do the heroes of today defeat their enemies, whether they be flesh and blood or just comic book villains. And in their victory born from violence, order and good rule supreme. The aim of this thesis is to explore this seemingly paradoxical idea of defeating evil through the application of even more evil and its relationship with the *Watchmen* comic book, and to identify the distinct patterns of this myth of redemptive violence in the critically acclaimed and complex graphic novel.

The theoretical part of the thesis (chapters 2 – 4) examines the phenomenon of redemptive violence and provides a brief outline of the *Watchmen* graphic novel and its themes. It describes the Babylonian creation myth of Enuma Elish, the original scenario of redemptive violence in which the god Marduk imposes order on the universe as he slays the deity Tiamat and fashions the world from her remains, and the implications of this brutal act perpetrated in the name of good as seen by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. The work of biblical scholar and political activist Walter Wink is then discussed in some detail as he builds upon the foundations laid by Ricoeur when introducing the term myth of redemptive violence, an idea closely following the Babylonian tradition in its acceptance of the use of violence for the greater good. The myth is shown to be present not only in various narratives throughout history but, more importantly, as an influential concept found in society and the highest levels of its power structures to this day. The thesis mentions the impact of this myth and how people come to be exposed to it at an early age, as well as the specific role of comic books in its perpetuation. An overview of the graphic novel *Watchmen* by writer Alan Moore and artists Dave Gibbons and John Higgins is then provided, showcasing its status as a key work in the evolution of the comic book medium and offering insight into some of its major themes, particularly the deconstruction of the superhero, as well as the rich symbolism and postmodern

features of the book. Also included are a short plot summary and a brief description of the setting of the graphic novel.

The second part of the thesis (chapter 5) is an analysis of the *Watchmen* comic book from the perspective of the myth of redemptive violence and the Babylonian creation myth. Echoing the phrase “who watches the watchmen,” a key theme of *Watchmen* is the idea of unchecked power, a potentially perfect environment for the patterns of redemptive violence to appear. This thesis attempts to identify these key elements of creation through destruction and the use of violence made acceptable by achieving seemingly good deeds in the traditionally violent narrative of a comic book both in the overarching plot of *Watchmen* as well as in some of its many constituent parts.

2 Marduk murdering

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And he had done so by slaughtering another deity. In what is a fairly major deviation from the very first passage of the Book of Genesis, the Babylonian creation myth of Enuma Elish lays foundation for the myth of redemptive violence, an idea that unlike the rest of the Babylonian story permeates society to this day.

According to French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, both the Babylonian and Judeo-Christian traditions share a central theme. Just like biblical texts, the Enuma Elish presents a central topic of “the final victory of order over chaos” (Ricoeur 175). The actions of a god lead to the pinnacle of order, the founding of the world. A deity strives to make the world logical and coherent, and whatever opposes this is uncontrollable, chaotic, and therefore evil. In the Enuma Elish, this is Tiamat, the goddess of the ocean and the embodiment of primordial chaos (Dalley 233).

In his work *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur discusses the problem of theodicy, the existence of evil in a universe where a presumably omnipotent and good god exists. The Babylonian version of the creation of the world, or rather its handling of the problem of evil, is shown as an example of defilement, one of three archetypal

myths explaining the persistent opposition to evil present in Western culture, the other two being sin and guilt. This defiling evil “infects by contact” (Ricoeur 29) and, unlike evil as described by Ricoeur in the later stages, is not inherent but external, physical. It is something that should be abhorred, Ricoeur goes as far as to call it a stain. Ultimately, there is only one way of opposing this evil and of getting rid of such a blemish – its removal (Ricoeur 46).

The Enuma Elish exhibits this pattern perfectly with Tiamat being the evil stain in question which then gets removed. The Babylonian creation myth pits her as the primordial deity and mother of gods against Marduk, a younger god who extracts from the other gods a promise of being acknowledged as their supreme ruler in exchange for his help in battling Tiamat. As Marduk himself puts it, “the decree of my lips shall never be revoked, never changed!” (Dalley 244). He emerges victorious, having pierced Tiamat's belly with an arrow and split her in half. Furthermore, her corpse is fashioned into the heavens and the earth, with such particularly gory details as rivers flowing from her pierced udder and eyes or her crotch supporting the sky (Dalley 257). This creative violence does not stop there, however, as even humankind comes into existence through bloodshed when Marduk kills Kingu, an ally of Tiamat, and from his blood mixed with clay shapes Man to serve gods.

This is in stark contrast with the creation myth in Genesis or the nature of the world in the Bible in general. There, God creates a good universe without evil, which only appears later as the result of the original sin, a later decision by Adam and Eve. This leads to a much more complex situation when evil is concerned, since violence emerges as a “problem requiring solution” whereas in the Enuma Elish, it is “no problem, but simply a primordial fact” (Wink 44). It is then clear how the Babylonian myth and Judeo-Christian sensibilities differ and why Ricoeur condemns the actions of Marduk. The Enuma Elish first presents a myth where creation has been achieved through destruction, chaos has been overcome by more chaos, as a god establishes order from violence by violence (Ricoeur 179).

3 Redemptive violence

The violent origins of the universe as described in the Babylonian creation myth as well as Ricoeur's interpretation of its evil nature have been expanded on by biblical scholar and theologian Walter Wink in his book *The Powers That Be*. Also a political activist and a proponent of nonviolent resistance, Wink is particularly interested in the application of power and the justification of this process by the titular powers that be, that is, not merely the individual people in positions of power, but also (or rather) the seemingly intangible institutions and their overarching network he calls the “domination system” and which sustains itself by violence and the idea that violence itself can be redemptive, and offers a Christian, spiritual perspective and alternative (Wink 11).

In *The Powers That Be* Wink uses the term “myth of redemptive violence” to describe the idea opposed by Ricoeur that through evil or destruction, good or order can be established (Ricoeur 180), and further elaborates on its presence in modern societies and particularly how embedded it has become in their power structures throughout history. Indeed, he calls the variations of the myth of redemptive violence “some of the oldest continuously repeated stories in the world” which have become enshrined in Western culture (Wink 42), and shows that their consequences reach far beyond the scope of a mere literary or narrative trope.

Wink states that not only does the myth of redemptive violence mean the belief that violence saves, wars bring peace and might makes right, but that it also covers the almost institutionalized approach to these beliefs. Violence simply “appears to be the nature of things. It's what works. It seems inevitable, the last and, often, the first resort in conflicts. If a god is what you turn to when all else fails, violence certainly functions as a god” (Wink 42). In fact, Wink goes as far as to call the myth of redemptive violence “the real myth of the modern world” and says that it, not Judaism, Christianity or Islam, “is the dominant religion in our society today” and only echoes Ricoeur's words: “In short, the myth of redemptive violence is the story of the victory of order over chaos by means of violence” (Wink 48).

This belief has significantly manifested itself at the highest levels of human endeavor, even contributing to international conflict by fostering the notion that the survival of the nation is the highest good and by extension, those with the power to ensure this good are awarded every right to do as they please. Of course, such a concept is by no means a new idea, particularly in the realm of politics, as even Socrates had to face arguments for what basically equals to “might makes right” in *The Republic* when arguing with Thrasymachus (Plato 338). However, the current form of the myth in the West was born from the Cold War (Wink 57) and it drastically altered the development of democracy in the world, since by accepting the tenets of redemptive violence, the state is provided with a sort of a divine decree to employ violence against its enemies. This in turn fuels militarism, unrest and conflict, something easily seen to this day.

Of more interest to this thesis than the geopolitical ramifications of applied violence is Wink's approach to the myth at lower levels of our societies, particularly in entertainment and media. Wink writes that he first started to realize the ubiquitous existence of the redeeming effects of violence in children's cartoons. There, he saw the endless pattern of an indestructible hero clashing with an equally indestructible villain and always emerging victorious despite appearing to be hopelessly doomed and suffering grievously, only to repeat the pattern in the next episode (Wink 43).

What happens to the viewer during this process, Wink explains, is fairly simple. Children, in order to think of themselves as good, identify with the hero, and project onto the villain their own negative traits. However, the cartoons inevitably see the villain initially prevail and gain the upper hand, as illustrated by the example of Popeye being beaten by Bluto until, at the very last moment, a can of spinach invigorates the sailor who then proceeds to beat up the bad guy and rescue Olive Oyl (Wink 44). Wink writes that this segment of a show where evil appears to be victorious enables children to enjoy their own evil and indulge their own violent self, but in the end, as the hero of the story inevitably overcomes evil, it allows the young viewers to reassert control, to repress their inner negative tendencies and

ultimately “reestablish a sense of goodness without coming to any insight about their own inner evil” (Wink 49).

Even the medium of the comic book is no stranger to the status quo mentioned in the previous paragraph. The same repetitive pattern which sees the Road Runner face off with Wile E. Coyote again and again despite the latter being blown up to smithereens by A.C.M.E. explosives countless times has defeated death itself on the pages of comics as well. The obviously problematic nature of a major character dying has given rise to the concept of the comic book death (Fingerroth 34), a death which seldom, if ever, is permanent, and as such can happen to even Superman himself without harming the sales or alienating the audience.

Cartoons are, unsurprisingly, not the sole cause of Wink's concern. Comic books are seen as a sort of a natural development of the problem, since children are entirely capable of outgrowing the notion of acceptable violence (Wink 49). But, in what Wink calls a “modern tragedy,” just as they ought to be transcending it by growing older, they are subjected to a “sophisticated barrage of unmitigated violence so explicit and sexually sadistic that it can't be shown on television” or in simpler terms, comic books. And while he acknowledges that not all comics can be described as such, Wink does assign them a key role in sustaining the violent myth as he mentions “entire stores devoted to the promulgation of a paranoid view of reality, where violence is the only protection” (Wink 55).

This negative effect is often further emphasized by a fairly common plot development in comics when an everyman, or even a failed individual, is transformed by an accident into a monstrous or unnatural being such as Spider-Man or The Hulk, leading Wink to note that “it is almost as if people no longer believe that heroes of sterling character can be produced by our society” and that good can only “transpire by a freak of technology” (Wink 44). As if that were not enough, pursuit of order albeit by violent means sometimes leads to the sadistic enjoyment of evil and even the myth of redemptive violence gives way to actual enjoyment of violence. The goal is no longer the “salvation” by eliminating the stain of evil and chaos with violence as outlined by Ricoeur (173), but the act of using violence itself

since it is “an aphrodisiac, an addictive high” and is “no longer the means to a higher good, namely order” but it simply “becomes the end” (Wink 56).

While the above passages proving the effect of the myth of redemptive violence might seem rather alarming, and examining the role of violence in society is far beyond the scope of the thesis, it is perhaps important to note that being exposed to simulated violence from an early age might not necessarily equal becoming a violent person later in life. A 2010 study published in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* has found no relationship between violent television programming (or video games) and their consumers committing actual violence (Ferguson). However, the lack of any direct violent action caused by such influence on children and young adults in the long term does not disprove the presence of the myth in media. Indeed, the system of mythical violence as described by Wink does not seem to require masses of active agents, but instead calls for passive acceptance in order to perpetuate itself.

Although singled out by Wink, cartoons and comics are obviously not the only culprits in propagating the myth of redemptive violence. Its influence on politics or foreign policy has already been mentioned, but it also appears in all manner of activities ranging from sports to movies as well as in various social groups such as the religious right or militia groups, ultimately permeating society to the extent that “what appears so innocuous in cartoons is, in fact, the mythic underpinnings of our violent society” (Wink 49).

And since even “the gods themselves are violent” (Wink 45), can that come as such a surprise? After all, the implications of the Enuma Elish creation myth are clear. Unlike the Book of Genesis, humankind is not the originator of evil, it has merely adopted it from the gods. The very origin of humans is violence, Marduk created Man from the blood of a murdered god, as Wink writes, “we are the outcome of a deicide” and as such seemingly incapable of peaceful coexistence and order must be imposed on us. The myth of redemptive violence dictates that “unquestioning obedience is the highest virtue, and order the highest religious value” (Wink 47) – and in perfect Babylonian tradition, these lofty goals are

achieved through the use of violence. Surely Wink's conclusion that such a sorry state of affairs must be refused ought to be commonplace, and yet as shown above the presence of the myth of redemptive violence does not appear to be on the wane, on the contrary, it seems nigh impossible to escape. Despite – or is it because? – being “the simplest, laziest, most exciting, uncomplicated, irrational, and primitive depiction of evil the world has ever known” (Wink 53).

4 Watchmen

Watchmen is a graphic novel written by Alan Moore with art and coloring by Dave Gibbons and John Higgins. First published as a limited series between 1986 and 1987, it was released in book format later in 1987. Depicting a superhero story set in an alternate version of the eighties, it follows the investigation of the murder of a costumed hero which leads to uncovering a dangerous conspiracy against the backdrop of the Cold War in imminent danger of going hot.

Praised for its rich symbolism, postmodernist structure and a wide variety of themes, most notably the deconstruction of the superhero, the book appears in *Time* magazine's List of the 100 Best Novels and has been lauded as a coming of age moment for comics (Thomson 101) or as the work which marked a major change of the superhero genre as it moved from simple fantasy to actual literature (Klock 25). The title refers to the phrase “Who watches the watchmen?” and the question of who controls those in positions of power manifests itself, often directly, as a major theme throughout the book (Klock 62), and presents a topic of some importance in the superhero genre, considering the common comic book theme of a group of people putting their extraordinary abilities to use in often extralegal ways.

The graphic novel opens in New York in 1985 with the murder of The Comedian, a crimefighter turned government agent. Rorschach, a violent vigilante who has continued operating illegally after a superhero ban was enacted in the United States, investigates and comes to the conclusion that someone is killing former superheroes. As he warns his now retired partners, it is revealed that Adrian

Veidt, once a masked ally of Rorschach's known as Ozymandias but now a successful businessman who has capitalized on his fame as a superhero, plans to avert the imminent danger of a war between the United States and the Soviet Union by mounting an attack on New York, forcing the two superpowers to abandon their differences in the face of a common enemy. In order to do so, he manipulates public opinion against Doctor Manhattan, the only being with actual superpowers and a potential United States trump card in any nuclear exchange with the Soviets as well as a major obstacle to his plan, and forces him to abandon the world. Although former masked heroes attempt to stop him, Ozymandias is successful in the destruction of New York, and the book ends as the two countries begin peace talks – but peace at what cost, and for how long?

As alluded to in the brief synopsis, the crimefighters in the world of *Watchmen* lack any actual superpowers and are simply masked vigilantes, in some cases aging and unfit. While not an original concept, as both “individuals with fantastic powers” as well as “people who are just plain brave, crazy or lucky” are easily considered to be superheroes in comic books (Fingeroth 16), it is nonetheless a fairly uncommon approach in the genre. The sole exception to this is the nearly omnipotent Doctor Manhattan, who helped the United States win the Vietnam War and now acts as a nuclear deterrent in the cold conflict and arms race with the Soviet Union. This comes at a cost of losing some of his humanity, as the accident which granted him superpowers also left him in a constant state of perceiving the past, present and future all at once, a device often used for narrative purposes in the novel. Other heroes (or villains) are mere mortals, albeit often in peak physical and mental condition or access to state of the art technology, and their less than mythical status is only further underlined as their unregistered crimefighting activities have been outlawed a few years prior to the story of *Watchmen*.

This idea of devaluing one of the “basic superhero conventions” (Klock 63) by placing masked heroes who are, in a way, ordinary people, in a realistic world, is one of the main themes of the book. While their penchant for masked justice sets them apart from other men and women, the heroes of *Watchmen* do face the very

ordinary problems of interpersonal relations, struggle with their own morality and even sexuality. As Moore put it, “What we wanted to do was show all of these people, warts and all. Show that even the worst of them had something going for them, and even the best of them had their flaws” (Eno).

This is evident in one of the very first scenes of the book, where Dan Dreiberg and Hollis Mason, the current and former real identities of the costumed hero Nite Owl, respectively, reminisce about Hollis' adventures. “There I was in the supermarket buying dog food, I turn the corner of the aisle and bump into the Screaming Skull! [...] I put him away a dozen times in the forties, but he reformed an' turned to Jesus since then. Married, got two kids. We traded addresses. Nice guy,” says the retired Hollis (chapter 1, p. 9). Only a few pages into what might outwardly appear as just another superhero story, the notion of the fight between good and evil is shattered as its consequences are portrayed in an unquestionably unheroic and casual manner almost as if talking about a long forgotten classmate rather than a hero and his nemesis. Not every example of deconstructing the superhero myth is as wholesome as a former champion of justice meeting an old villain under friendly circumstances, however, as one of the key plot elements of the book is the attempted rape of Sally Jupiter, the former vigilante Silk Spectre and mother of one of the superheroines in the book, by her masked colleague Edward Blake, known as The Comedian (chapter 2, p. 6).

Moore himself stated that heroes possessing developed and varied personalities rather than being one dimensional skills for good was one of his aims when writing the book, as this allows for a more complex reading of the story. In *Watchmen*, several ways of seeing the world are presented, some radically opposed to each other, and the readers are left to “make a moral decision for once in their miserable lives,” unlike in earlier comic books where authors would just “cram regurgitated morals down their throat. But heroes don't work that way anymore” (Eno). Gibbons agrees with this sentiment, going even further and suggesting that the plot of the *Watchmen* as opposed to its characters “is of no great consequence” and “isn't the most interesting thing about *Watchmen*” (Salisbury 82).

Aside from this deconstruction of the superhero, another prominent feature of the book is its symbolism. Moore cites American author William S. Burroughs as a major influence when creating *Watchmen* particularly with regard to his use of repeating symbols (Eno). The most prominent symbol in the book is a yellow smiley face, originally a button worn by the government-sponsored vigilante The Comedian. It features on the cover of several editions of the graphic novel, becoming a sort of a trademark of the book as well as at times being fused with the image of the doomsday clock (Salisbury 80), another major symbol in the book, as it slowly ticks away over the course of the story to midnight – meaning nuclear armageddon. Moore himself was surprised at the sheer amount of symbolism present in *Watchmen*, saying that “There are things that turned up in there by accident... the little plugs on the spark hydrants, if you turn them upside down, you discover a little smiley face,” and that “*Watchmen* was designed to be read four or five times [...] But there’s stuff in there Dave [Gibbons] had put in that even I only noticed on the sixth or seventh read” (Eno). Efforts were made by Gibbons to give *Watchmen* a different feeling to its predecessors, using a nine panel grid and various techniques in order for the art to have a more dramatic, almost cinematic effect, and to give the graphic novel a distinct look (Salisbury 77), something well demonstrated in Fearful Symmetry, the fifth chapter of *Watchmen*, whose first half is mirrored in the second in terms of layout but also, to a degree, content.

Watchmen also contains several examples of metafiction or intertextuality, features one expects to find in what has been recognized a postmodern work (Thomson 111), the chief of which is the story within a story, or rather a comics within a comics, *Tales of The Black Freighter*. With real superheroes existing in the world of *Watchmen*, comic books instead portray other source material, in this case, pirates. It tells a story a doomed pirate whose fate foreshadows the actions of one of the main characters of *Watchmen*, Ozymandias. *Tales of The Black Freighter* in its comics form is interwoven seamlessly into the rest of the book, while at the same time all chapters bar the last one are accompanied by various in-universe letters, newspaper articles or even medical reports, the most prominent of these texts being

the autobiography of a former superhero *Under the Hood*. Its excerpts appear from the very start of the graphic novel (chapter 1, p. 27) and provide much of the backstory otherwise not shown in *Watchmen*. Chapter names provide examples of intertextuality as Moore uses quotes or parts thereof from various sources as titles, which are then repeated, this time in full and attributed to their author, at the end of every chapter, framing it as well as echoing its theme or content. Notable examples include Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ozymandias* in the penultimate chapter *Look on My Works, Ye Mighty...* (chapter 11, p. 28) where the proud Ozymandias manages to destroy New York with uncertain consequences, or a quote by Albert Einstein in which he professes that had he known the impact of atomic power on the world, he would have become a watchmaker (chapter 4, p. 28) in *Watchmaker*, a chapter focused on Doctor Manhattan, originally a young man interested in repairing clocks but forced by his father to take up science in the wake of the atomic bombings of Japan, a decision that later leads to his transformation into the nuclear powered superhero. Among other quotes used this way a biblical passage also appears (chapter 7, p. 28), as do the lyrics of Bob Dylan (chapter 1, p. 26).

5 How it all comes together

5.1 Vigilantism and violence

A key element of both *Watchmen* and the myth of redemptive violence is the idea of vigilantism, of an individual taking the law into his own hands or indeed going above and beyond the law in meting out perceived justice, almost invariably through the use of violence. The word vigilante comes from the Latin word for watch, as in to keep watch, and the costumed superhero does indeed seem to watch out for the common man. And yet, as asked by the question alluded to in the title of the book itself, who in turn watches the watchmen as they dispense what they claim to be righteous punishment, and who gave them the power to do so?

Ordinarily, a reader of comics would be quick to trust the superhero, as the genre teaches us “to believe our liberty is more likely to be protected by heroes,

who are above and beyond the state, than by the bureaucrats who comprise it” (Spanakos 37). After all, how could Superman ever not have the best interests of humankind at heart. Even the dark and brooding Batman who operates above the law refuses to kill even the worst villain he encounters, he does not abuse his abundant power to become the judge, jury or executioner, and in the end acts like an impressive delivery boy for justice, leaving villains bound and bruised, but alive for their peers to try them. Not so in *Watchmen*, a book which through its deconstruction of the ideal of the superhero offers a less lofty view of these usually stalwarts champions “in order to ask us if we would not in fact be better off without heroes” (Thomson 109), and by problematizing the phenomenon of individuals wielding extraordinary powers it is the perfect title to explore the phenomenon of vigilantism and its ties with the myth of redemptive violence.

Regardless of intentions, vigilantism shows “a profound distrust of democratic institutions. It bypasses constitutional guarantees of legal procedure in arrest, or the tenet that a person is to be regarded as innocent until proven guilty” (Wink 44). This anti-democratic sentiment can be seen as an extension of the ideas of authority and its legitimacy as outlined by Max Weber. The renowned German sociologist argues that in modern societies, legitimate authority is derived not from individual charisma or tradition as it used to be in the past, but from a consensus based on rational, neutral decisions codified in legislation (Weber 77). That power stems not from the individual but the whole is the cornerstone of democratic governments worldwide, and the parallel between this theory and the relationship of the individualistic actions of superheroes and the powers that be in comic books is clear. Although the citizens of the United States re-electing Richard Nixon in the *Watchmen* universe might appear amusing to some readers, the value of this act lies not only in social or political commentary, but rather in the juxtaposition of a democratic election and the actions of self appointed guardians of peace. This contrast is particularly highlighted when discussing the topic of violence in relation to vigilantism. In modern societies as described above, the state is said to possess “the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force” (Weber 78). It is not simply

the use of violence that is monopolized this way, but specifically its legitimate use. Many individuals or organizations engage in violent acts or have the potential for using violence to further their aims, but, by common agreement, only the state has the legitimate authority to do so, something clearly incompatible with the idea of superheroes acting independently and outside the law.

This tension is present throughout Alan Moore's graphic novel and, as a central theme of the book, it is explored in some detail. Hooded heroes do have the power to act, but their legitimacy is questioned and shattered. Following the rise of vigilante activities as well as their use of violent methods, a police strike leads to massive protests and riots by disgruntled citizens unhappy with the actions of masked heroes (chapter 2, p. 17). Hoping to quickly deal with the unrest, the Keene Act is passed, dictating that heroes must either cease their costumed brand of justice, or become agents for the United States government. While several retire and some agree to work for the government or simply continue to do so, the vigilante Rorschach refuses to back down even when the institutions supported by the people he ought to protect make their express wishes to the contrary known, leaving the corpse of a multiple rapist in front of a police headquarters with a note saying "never!" (chapter 4, p. 23).

The Keene Act and its causes and effects can also be seen a clear indication of the collective consciousness becoming aware of the myth of redemptive violence. Riots and mayhem coupled with their display of unhappiness notwithstanding, the fact remains that in *Watchmen*, ordinary citizens stand up at least in part against the vicious cycle of violence perpetuated by agents over which they have no control and whose actions would forgo due process with simply the presumably good end justifying their evil means, matters that go against the basic principles of modern society as described by Weber and quite possibly as felt by the average reader of the graphic novel both at the time of its publication in 1987 as well as more than a quarter of a century later.

However, despite this awareness, the in-universe solutions to the illegitimate use of violence by masked avengers in *Watchmen* are ultimately still rooted deep in

the mythical archetype. As outlined by Wink and discussed earlier in the thesis (section 3), the myth is perpetuated at the highest levels and its might makes right approach manifests itself in international politics, giving the government a justification to use “violence to cleanse the world of enemies of the state” (Wink 57). It is then obvious that the submission of heroes to the Keene Act perhaps solves the issue of vigilantism, but in terms of the myth of redemptive violence, it merely moves the problem off the streets and into politics, in what could easily be described as not exactly a worthwhile exchange as far as the world is concerned. As Doctor Manhattan puts it, “they can hardly outlaw me when their country's defense rests in my hands” (chapter 4, p. 23). This reference to his importance as a part of the United States arsenal in the Cold War, which among other things made an American victory in Vietnam possible in a few short weeks, shows that the idea of the potential use of violence to achieve what would be called a favorable outcome remains. The Comedian is the other government sanctioned hero, both before and after the law comes into effect, and just like with Manhattan, providing legitimacy to his actions ultimately changes very little as far as the widespread acceptance of achieving good through evil is concerned. The Comedian is a rapist and a murderer and yet “after his handling of the Iranian hostage situation, even his harshest critics fall silent” (chapter 4, p. 23). Yes, someone does watch the watchmen, and the American citizens have rejected the myth in the form of masked vigilantes taking justice into their own hands, but they are still all too content when the vigilantes are given a badge.

What, then, of those heroes who refused to be registered? Rorschach would appear to be the worst culprit and the best case for a world without heroes, as his black and white view of morality, inability to compromise and general psychopathic behavior are in stark contrast with the more reserved demeanor of his peers. He is in fact the only costumed crimefighter to go underground and continue his crusade in spite of the superhero ban, fully embodying the archetypal thought used to excuse or justify violent vigilantism that it is “better to mete out instant, summary justice than risk the red tape and delays and bumbling of the courts” (Wink 44). This

disdain is not an extreme protest against the current state of affairs, either. As he refuses the Keene Act, Rorschach leaves a corpse of a criminal for the police to find, an act which “betrays the profound distrust of democratic institutions” (Wink 44) as it shows the almost pathological nature of superheroes in relation to legitimate authority. The message is simple, it was Rorschach who caught the criminal, not the powerless state, it was Rorschach who punished the man, because the ruling powers cannot be trusted to judge and sentence him, and finally, for Rorschach, it is not the constituent or temporary parts of the state, but state itself as an institution that is useless and flawed permanently (Spanakos 38). Will the next criminal be handed over alive should a new police commissioner, mayor or president be elected? Rorschach's message found on the criminal is clear: “Never!”

And yet it is not the deranged Rorschach who channels the myth of redemptive violence the most. It could be argued that his actions are often too severe to be good or redeeming even in the warped sense of the myth, this primacy belongs to the distinguished and sophisticated Ozymandias with his plan to sacrifice millions in order to achieve peace. In fact, it is Rorschach who turns out to be the only character actively opposing his mad plan to destroy New York. Others are shocked but in the end quick to agree on the need for secrecy necessary for the plan to succeed and the threat of a nuclear war to be averted, accepting the tenets of redemptive violence that the end justifies the means. Not so Rorschach, the poster boy for the worst qualities of vigilantism for whom violence is a standard *modus operandi*. “Not even in the face of Armageddon. Never compromise,” (chapter 12, p. 20) he utters when Ozymandias presents the heroes with the checkmate situation where exposing his evil would lead to undoing the peace. There is more than a hint of hypocrisy in Rorschach's actions at the end of the book and throughout his vigilante career. He is not above using coercion and physical violence himself, but when Ozymandias applies the same principle on a much larger scale, he calls it evil and claims that “evil must be punished. People must be told” (chapter 12, p. 23). When Rorschach meets his end as Doctor Manhattan stops him from revealing the truth about Ozymandias and the attack on New York, the myth makes its presence

known once again. “You know I can't let you do that,” says Manhattan. “Of course. Must protect Veidt's new Utopia. One more body amongst foundations makes little difference. Well? What are you waiting for? Do it. Do it!” Rorschach yells as Manhattan kills him. Indeed, what is one more corpse when compared to a good as great as saving the world?

Ozymandias is guilty of the murder of millions, and Rorschach is a schizophrenic sadist with little regard for human life or due process, but even the less violent heroes in *Watchmen* are not entirely innocent when it comes to the notion of accepting violence. Their careers as self appointed keepers of peace aside, at one point, Nite Owl and Silk Spectre, now in their civilian identities due to the Keene Act, reminisce about their masked past and they recollect a criminal calling himself Captain Carnage, a masochist who would only dress up as a supervillain to get beaten up, and Silk Spectre wonders whatever happened to him. “He pulled it on Rorschach and Rorschach dropped him down an elevator shaft,” is the answer (chapter 1, p. 26). Much laughter ensues, suggesting that violence is not abhorrent, it is something to laugh at just like children's cartoons, it is acceptable. The duo also shows disregard for law not only when they violate the Keene Act and resume vigilante activities, but also when they break Rorschach out of prison after he is arrested (chapter 8, p. 20). While respectively an admittedly humorous anecdote and a much less violent act than some of Rorschach's activities, it does once again show that these heroes do not temper willingly being above the law by also being above petty emotions, and that they are not all that different from the ordinary men or women who they would protect and above whom they would be elevated, except perhaps for possessing a more profound distrust of the state so typical of vigilante behavior as discussed earlier.

Finally, let us examine Wink's quotes on the nature of heroes. Not only does the myth of redemptive violence surface in the actions of masked crimefighters as outlined in the previous paragraphs, but one aspect of its continued existence in cartoons or comic books is that heroic deeds have become a realm almost inaccessible to the everyman and that “goodness can transpire only by a freak of

technology” (Wink 44) as shown by a wide variety of paragons of justice found in comics who have only taken up arms in the struggle against evil after such an accident provided them with superpowers.

A cursory glance could suggest that *Watchmen* might be guilty of this phenomenon with Doctor Manhattan indeed having extraordinary abilities obtained as a result of an experiment gone wrong (chapter 4, p. 22), but this transformation does not follow the traditional pattern. Instead of becoming a hero who, albeit perhaps not human anymore, retains his humanity, a strong moral compass and fights on behalf of humankind and for its protection, Manhattan grows more and more distant from humanity and lets himself become an uncaring tool of the government rather than a force for good. “The morality of my actions escapes me,” (chapter 4, p. 14) he notes as he obliterates a criminal while following the instructions of the Pentagon and adds fighting crime to his government sanctioned activities. Even the origins of his name are not at all heroic, as it has been chosen “for the ominous associations it will raise in America's enemies” (chapter 4, p. 12). The concept of a hero emerging after a freak accident is thus averted, however, the myth of redemptive violence nonetheless makes an appearance in connection with the character of Doctor Manhattan, or rather with some of the most pervasive themes of the book, the one-upmanship, jingoism, and us-versus-them mentality of the Cold War, a conflict in which Manhattan plays an important part due to his powers, and also a struggle whose real world counterpart has been labelled as the birthplace of the redemptive violence permeating our society to this day (Wink 57). “Superman exists, and he's American,” a news anchor excitedly announces after the existence of Doctor Manhattan is made public (chapter 4, p. 13), following the militaristic and nationalistic sentiments based on the myth of redemptive violence that “there can be no other gods before the nation” (Wink 56). A superhero exists, and he fights for us, not the enemy.

However, Doctor Manhattan is the only case of superpowers existing in the world of *Watchmen*. All other instances of crimefighters in the graphic novel are sometimes gifted but ultimately mortal individuals who don masks and battle crime

without the use of almost divine powers and, at least to a certain degree, with a semblance of realism. In this way *Watchmen* subverts the notion that heroes are often the result of a radioactive accident, but at the same time it might appear to heed Wink's other complaint that "it is almost as if people no longer believe that heroes of sterling character can be produced by our society" (Wink 44). However, as with the atomically accidental birth of Doctor Manhattan, the deconstruction of traditional themes of the superhero genre in *Watchmen* once again rejects the seemingly obvious and superficial explanation, only for the myth of redemptive violence to manifest itself elsewhere. Because while it is true that the vigilantes in *Watchmen* do not possess nuclear fuelled or magical abilities, and as such one could easily consider them to be produced by our society, individuals of sterling character they are most certainly not.

5.2 Gods and aliens

The myth of redemptive violence is not only reflected in the characters and plots of *Watchmen*, but at times manifests its Babylonian iteration in almost literal ways in what is a rather surprising parallel between an ancient text and a 20th century comic book. One such occurrence is the death of a monstrous creature and the ushering in of a new world in both works.

While never wholly described in the *Enuma Elish*, the goddess Tiamat is nevertheless said to possess both a tail and an udder in addition to more anthropomorphic features. She is not only the embodiment of primordial chaos and evil, but becomes a mother to venomous serpents, terrible dragons, fish-men, scorpion-men, rabid dogs and other assorted vile creatures she spawns in countless numbers her struggle against Marduk (Dalley 237). This has led to her being depicted as a monster herself.

It then perhaps comes as no surprise that even in the world of *Watchmen*, it is a monster whose death signals a new age. Under the guidance of Ozymandias, an abhorrent creature is created as the result of collaboration between artists and

scientists, giving life to the nightmarish visions of the former through the use of cloning and genetic manipulation by the latter in order to shape a believable alien invader used to kill millions in an attack on New York. “Hitler said people swallow lies easily, provided they're big enough,” says Ozymandias in response to other heroes' doubts about the outlandish nature of his plan (chapter 11, p. 26). He is proven right as the destructive demise of this comic book Tiamat does scare the world into change and mirrors the Enuma Elish in that the world is, in a way, created anew, now without the United States and the Soviet Union pointing missiles at each other. “No one will doubt this Earth has met a force so dreadful it must be repelled, all former enmities aside,” explains the triumphant Ozymandias (chapter 12, p. 10).

The actions of the proud hero mirror those of Marduk as his act of terrible violence puts an end to the original chaos and dangers of the Cold War, just as the Babylonian deity conquered the primordial chaos and gave order to the universe. But, unlike Marduk, Ozymandias has not faced a deadly enemy, instead creating his own monster to slaughter, and as such even if the end result of the creature's death is the same, he cannot take up the mantle of the chief god and his involvement must remain secret. To that end, in what could be described as a further extension of the theme of violence, the creators of the monster are killed, their deaths seemingly justified by the need to ensure their silence so as not to disturb the new world, “killed by killers who killed each other, a lethal pyramid” (chapter 12, p. 10) that leaves only its architect Ozymandias standing.

Similar to the topic of the death of a monster as outlined in the previous paragraphs, another link between *Watchmen* and the Enuma Elish can be found in the character of Doctor Manhattan whose connection to the ancient text is twofold. First, he appears to have a divine Babylonian counterpart in Kingu, the god from whose blood Mankind was created. Second, his unique nature and extraordinary powers can be seen as chaotic and thus as an integral part of the basic archetypal tenet of the supremacy of order over chaos established by Marduk in the Babylonian text.

In *Watchmen*, there is no better example of disorder than Doctor Manhattan. Being no longer human, his very nature upsets the natural order. An entire chapter narrated by Manhattan is devoted to the portrayal of his perception of time (chapter 4). He is atemporal, his own past, present and future are all one for him. The reader, accustomed to the human concept of time as well as possibly the notion that comic books clearly divided into panels follow a fairly rigid structure, is confronted with a chaotic mixture of images and memories from many points of Manhattan's existence. The accident which created Manhattan many years ago is shown to be happening to him at the same time as he experiences the present, as is every single event that has or will come to pass. The obvious pitfalls of an almost all-knowing character present in any story are prevented by tachyon radiation, a plot device which makes it impossible for Manhattan to see too far into the future and which could be the result of an impending massive nuclear exchange, but turns out to be a ruse by Ozymandias hoping to obscure his plan from Manhattan (chapter 12, p. 8). Furthermore, prescience does not grant him omnipotence. "I can't prevent the future, to me, it's already happening," he remarks when asked why did he not prevent the assassination of John F. Kennedy (chapter 4, p. 16).

It is easy to see how godlike an entity such as Doctor Manhattan must seem. Indeed, when remembering Manhattan's presentation to the public, a former colleague of his states that "one sentence was repeated [on television] over and over again: 'The superman exists and he's American.' I never said that. [...] What I said was 'God exists and he's American'" (chapter 4, p. 31). The ideas of Manhattan as chaos as well as a god instrumental in the making of Man are then joined in *Watchmen* in the culmination of his story arc. Just as order must be made triumphant over disorder and just as Marduk killed Kingu, so does Ozymandias try to destroy Manhattan in hopes of removing the greatest threat to his plan and in an attempt at getting the world rid of Manhattan's ultimately destabilizing influence. Unlike Marduk, he fails in this undertaking, but the deity is nonetheless defeated and thus the supremacy of order over the chaos is affirmed. Realizing his detachment from humanity and seeing that Ozymandias was apparently successful

in saving the world although at a terrible cost, Manhattan leaves Earth behind. “Human affairs cannot be my concern. I’m leaving this galaxy for one less complicated,” he says of his own future (chapter 12, p. 27).

While far less violent and not ending in the death of a deity, the exile of Manhattan does echo the Enuma Elish myth where the god Kingu was slaughtered and his blood was used to create Man. With the figurative death of Doctor Manhattan, humankind is re-created in very much the same way the world was remade with the death of the alien monster. And with his departure also disappears the single most potent element of chaos in *Watchmen*. As Manhattan is removed, order rules supreme and humankind can flourish without his disturbing presence.

5.3 “Look on my works...”

Ultimately, the story of *Watchmen* is that of the myth of redemptive violence. The hero Ozymandias unleashes terrible violence on the world precisely in order to destroy the threat of an even worse savagery of a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. By saving the world, order is victorious over chaos, and his actions are excused. Or are they?

Ozymandias, quite possibly even more so than the world around him, is trapped in the myth of redemptive violence. To him, the end does justify the means. After all, the potential destruction following further escalation of the Cold War would far outweigh the loss of mere millions in the attack on New York. But this murderous mathematics is a symptom of being afflicted by the myth. To such individuals who subscribe to the redeeming effects of violence, “nonviolence must appear suicidal” (Wink 127). To Ozymandias, a man of incredible means and intellect, there was simply no other way for the looming threat to be averted than through the use of violence. This was not a cold, unfeeling calculation. It was an earnest effort at saving the planet. “My new world demands less obvious heroism, making your schoolboy heroics redundant. What have they achieved? Failing to prevent Earth’s salvation is your only triumph,” Ozymandias tells his stunned comrades when they

realize they are too late to prevent his plan from coming to fruition (chapter 12, p. 17). Had the other heroes stopped Ozymandias, they would have saved New York. Yet they would have sentenced billions to death, at least in the mind of Ozymandias. To him, the uncertainty of the Cold War represents the primordial chaos against which Marduk fought, a deadly evil which must be extinguished no matter the cost and which, in the end, is conquered. In front of countless television screens showing the death and destruction in New York and at the same time reporting the suspension of hostilities between the world's two superpowers, Ozymandias stands triumphant. "I did it! [...] I saved Earth from Hell, next, I'll help her towards Utopia," he declares at the sight of his dreadful success (chapter 12, p. 19).

The Cold War of *Watchmen* is not the real world conflict that began to peter out in the late eighties. It is a clear and present danger made worse by the destabilizing presence of Doctor Manhattan. Knowing this, who would dare and stop Ozymandias? Those costumed vigilantes who tried to do so come to the same conclusion. "Jesus, he was right. All we did was fail to stop him saving Earth," says Silk Spectre. "We're damned if we stay quiet, Earth's damned if we don't," adds Nite Owl (chapter 12, p. 20). Even the detached Doctor Manhattan understands the logic behind the decision, "without condoning or condemning" (chapter 12, p. 27). Rorschach provides the only dissenting voice, and his fate has already been described in section 5.1. Despite being the most violent and deranged of all the vigilantes in *Watchmen*, he is the only one unwilling to compromise, clearly stating that evil must be punished.

Ozymandias might not share the same black and white morality, but he is well aware of the evil he has committed. He is not without remorse as far as his plan is concerned, confessing that he has made himself feel every death he has caused, and saying that he is keenly aware that he has struggled "across the backs of murdered innocents to save humanity," yet at the same time he says that "someone had to take the weight of that awful, necessary crime" (chapter 12, p. 27) and indeed, his first emotion is not that of sadness which only comes later, but elation and joy at his success. His utilitarian act and its denouement provide a clear answer as to the

presence of the archetype of redemptive violence in *Watchmen*. Ozymandias talks of salvation, a necessary crime. He has come to this conclusion after much deliberation and the consequences rationalize his scheme. And there can be little doubt that Ozymandias is initially successful, as the reports from around the world confirm.

Are we then to believe that the myth of redemptive violence conquers all, and that no price is too high as long as the good gained from it is greater? Ozymandias would have the reader believe so, and for good reason. After all, the other costumed heroes have agreed to keep silent, and the only vigilante to refuse to take part in this conspiracy is killed. But the only thing preventing the world from learning the terrible truth of the newly found peace is this secrecy. If the role of Ozymandias in orchestrating this charade were ever to come to light, his precarious peace would be rejected and destroyed. Still, Ozymandias can rest safe – that is, until the very last panel of *Watchmen*.

In it, an editor of a right-wing newspaper is seen reaching into a pile of mail to use in an upcoming issue, as peace between the two superpowers has now made its usual content of conservative and anti-communist rhetoric scarce. Near the top of that pile lies Rorschach's journal (chapter 12, p. 32). Containing the results of his investigation and sent to the newspaper shortly before the final confrontation with Ozymandias, the document threatens to bring down all the would-be savior has worked for. Not even the worst application of violence, murder, has made it possible for Ozymandias to bring order to chaos for good.

In the end, the very nature of violence has betrayed Ozymandias for one simple reason. “Violence can never stop violence because its very success leads others to imitate it. Ironically, violence is most dangerous when it succeeds” (Wink 134). Only if Rorschach's findings are not made public and his former allies remain silent will Ozymandias have been successful, and even then only if success is measured by the ratio of lives saved to lives sacrificed. The only scenario in which this would be a desirable outcome is one where the myth of redemptive violence is readily accepted or where the fate of the world would be of little concern to the people living in it. Neither is a comfortable proposition. But fact that violence begets

violence is inescapable. The new world Ozymandias has created is too brittle and frail, and despite feeling pride at his success, doubts eat away at him as well. “I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end,” Ozymandias asks Doctor Manhattan. “In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian, nothing ever ends,” comes the ominous answer (chapter 12, p. 27). The implication is clear. The cycle remains unbroken, and whatever reprieve Ozymandias has earned for the world will only be temporary. Ozymandias has engineered mighty works, but they stand on feet of clay. In time, nothing will remain. And yet, if he is exposed, the world might not remain either.

6 Conclusion

As has been shown, the *Watchmen* graphic novel is no stranger to the idea of redemptive violence. From clear albeit somewhat secondary parallels with the original Babylonian creation myth to vigilante superheroes with all too human failings, the myth appears in various forms, with the most prominent example provided by the haughty Ozymandias as he takes the idea of saving the world to the extreme. Incidentally, what Ozymandias has done in a way echoes the actions of Moore himself when creating *Watchmen*. Adding a further layer to the already complex work, the writer and the character are alike in that they both “must destroy, then reconstruct, in order to in order to build a unity which would survive [them]” (Klock 75), no matter whether it is a better world created through violence or a graphic novel obliterating the foundations of superhero comics.

The image of superheroes is shattered, their behavior questioned and exposed. The actions of the likes of Rorschach are not in direct opposition with those of bright colored cape wearing heroes, they are simply an extension of these existing patterns and methods used by more traditional masked avengers, albeit much more brutal. Both are firmly rooted in the archetypal violence as they act outside the law through questionable means, the only noticeable differences being just how deep in it they have sunk and how much those around them – or the reader – are aware of it.

The myth appears both rather overtly, as is expected of the genre, in the common themes of masked crimefighters and their actions, as well as in more intricate ways, something only made possible by Moore's deconstruction of the superhero. In this, the world of *Watchmen* is perhaps too much like our own with its permeating presence of the myth of redemptive violence. Stripped of the glamour and glory of single-mindedly good supermen, the true dangers of redemptive violence are revealed. It is not the hood or mask that we should be worried about, but the person wearing them and their human nature all too easily corrupted by power. In the end it is not Doctor Manhattan with his godlike abilities, nor Rorschach, crazy, determined and capable of everything, but the sophisticated Adrian Veidt who is the prime mover of *Watchmen*.

Above all else it is he and his hubris which propels the plot forward towards its violent conclusion, it is he who then tries to provide an eloquent justification for killing millions, it is he who is the myth of redemptive violence personified. And it is he who, out of all the names in the world, and in a book filled with intertextuality and symbolism, chose the name Ozymandias, the Greek name of Ramesses II, Egyptian pharaoh whose time is long gone, builder of pyramids which now lie half ruined in the sand, and, of course, the name of a poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley. The message to the readers of *Watchmen* appears to be clear. His legacy will not last. Violence was not the solution. Ozymandias will not have his utopia. But is such an outcome preferable?

Both Wink and Ricoeur reject redemptive violence or its origins in their works. However, in the words of the hero Nite Owl, when faced with either the death of millions or risking the very real possibility of a nuclear holocaust, "How can humans make decisions like this?" (chapter 12, p. 20). There is a third way, rejecting either option, giving up, but it does not seem to offer an elegant solution to the problem either.

As *Watchmen* shows, the myth of redemptive violence is often easy to condemn. But when it is not, it is an impossible ethical conundrum.

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