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Watchmen Chapter 4 Analysis

Essay 2

In “Watchmen,” there are many unique chapters presented with very elaborate art styles and techniques. One chapter in particular is extremely unique, and stands out from the other chapters for both its presentation of dialogue as well as its unorganized flow in time. Chapter 4 is the personal backstory of Jon Osterman aka Dr. Manhattan. It describes Dr. Manhattan’s history, but it does so through his eyes. In his own words: “I can’t prevent the future. To me, it’s already happening.” As we read, we learn that Dr. Manhattan not only sees the universe in its present tense, but in its past and future tense as well. Most of the panels in Chapter 4 hold either little or no correlation to each other in terms of chronological ordering. As we go from one panel to the next, we can travel from the present time, to years in the past, months in the future, and back to the present again. The images themselves present little to no guidance on how the chapter should be read and interpreted; however, guidance is brought by Dr. Manhattan’s dialogue bubbles and thought blocks throughout the chapter.

Page 1 of Chapter 4 gives us a basic introduction into the mind of Dr. Manhattan. Most of the panels (excluding panel 4) show Dr. Manhattan in his isolation on Mars, staring at a photo of himself—as a human—and an unnamed woman at an amusement park. Dr. Manhattan’s thought blocks jump through time, and give us a description of a simple series of events through his own complex thought process. The average mind recalls events in the order of past to present; however, Dr. Manhattan recalls events in varying orders, and his mind is able to see the future as well. In the first three panels, he places himself with the photograph in the present, recalls the event in the picture from 26 years in the past, predicts himself dropping the picture exactly 12 seconds in the future, and brings himself back into the present. The rather unique idea about Dr. Manhattan’s recognition of tense is that regardless of what tense we or the things around him are in, he recognizes or acknowledges himself as being in the present tense. A clearer example of this is represented in panels 3-4 of page 1 as Dr. Manhattan says, “The photograph is in my hand. I found it in a derelict bar at Gila Flats test base, twenty-seven hours ago. It’s still there, twenty seven hours into the past, in its frame, in the darkened bar. I’m still there looking at it.” He doesn’t say that he was there, but that he *is* there, in the past. Regardless of the time, to him it is always the present: It’s 1945. I sit in a Brooklyn kitchen, fascinated by an arrangement of cogs on black velvet. I am sixteen years old. It is 1985. I am on Mars. I am fifty-six years old.”

Continuing through chapter 4, Dr. Manhattan explains his backstory, starting from the age of 16, when he was just Jon Osterman. He was a young man working in his father’s watch repair shop, though with the development of atomic weaponry, his father made him go to college to study atomic physics. This specific point in Jon’s life was extremely important, and arguably the turning point of his life. The moment Jon’s father tossed the cogs of his pocket watch off of the fire escape was the moment that Jon was placed on the path to becoming Dr. Manhattan. Jon then goes off to gain a PhD in Atomic Physics, and becomes a researcher at Gila Flats, where he undergoes an accident that changes his life forever. One day, while retrieving his girlfriend’s watch from his lab coat—which he leaves in the lab—he becomes trapped in a time-lock test vault, an event which meant certain death, and that his colleagues were helpless to prevent. The device activates, and Jon’s human form is seen disintegrating. This second iconic event, much like the first, is effectively presented by using exact dialogue as well as Dr. Manhattan’s own internal thoughts. His thoughts are coming to us from the present Dr. Manhattan on Mars, as he reflects on the event, while the dialogue comes from Jon Osterman and the other characters as they experience it. This moment is also highlighted by the panel images on page 7 as the event occurs by the use of contrasting colors, purple and green. In panels 3-9, Jon’s image is a bright green, as is the only window of the machine he is trapped inside. This image against the contrasting darker purples and pinks of the surrounding characters puts focus on Jon and helps to further emphasize the significance of what is happening to him.

Pages 16-19 focus primarily on Jon’s relationships with Janey and Laurie. At this point in Jon’s life, he has already become Dr. Manhattan, and has subsequently, stopped aging. His girlfriend Janey, however, is still growing older and older by the day, and Jon is losing his attraction towards her and becoming more interested in a young girl named Laurie. The art on these pages help the reader to recognize and understand Jon’s point of view through color. In these panels, Janey is represented with generally darker and duller color, emphasizing her increasing in age and decreasing in attractiveness. Laurie, however, is represented with brighter, and livelier colors, making her seem more vibrant and much more attractive. The different relationships are also represented by the use of selective imagery. The panels containing Jon and Janey generally show the two isolated from each other. They are rarely looking directly at each other, and Janey usually has some kind of unhappy facial expression. The panels containing Jon and Laurie are often showing some form of affection, and Laurie almost always has a smile spread across her face. These techniques make Laurie the more likeable and attractive character, and helps to make some justification to Jon’s attraction to her rather than Janey.

Jon’s image itself changes throughout the chapter. In the beginning of the chapter, Jon is 100% normal human. He looks relatively undistinguishable from the many other characters in Watchmen. After his accident, Jon’s form is noticeably different from other characters. First of all, he is blue; second of all, he is bald. At the beginning of his journey as Dr. Manhattan, Jon actually wears a full bodysuit as a costume; he is still fairly clinging onto his human persona. As the chapter continues, he begins to wear less and less clothing, symbolizing his detachment from his human identity of Jon Osterman, and fully embracing himself as Dr. Manhattan. By the end of the chapter, Dr. Manhattan is fully embraced and fully nude.

Watchmen uses many artistic techniques and strategies to effectively communicate the stories of the various characters within the book. Chapter 4’s focus on Dr. Manhattan takes advantage of his distinctive color and abilities to demonstrate many focuses through the use of coloring and a very unique chronology of events through Dr. Manhattan’s perspective. His unusual skin pigmentation and dimensional awareness allows for a method of presenting and reflecting on events which would otherwise be impossible or ineffective for any other characters in Watchmen.