Who Watches the Watchmen?

What makes a hero a hero?  Most of the characters in Alan Moore’s Watchmen think they are acting with humanity’s best interest in mind, yet who is to decide what is right and what is wrong?  Many would argue that a hero is someone who acts selflessly for others even if it means putting themselves at risk, but I believe there is more to it than that.  Though all the Watchmen have had their moments of heroism, it isn’t those moments that define them as being heroes so much as it is the uncompromising practice them in everyday life. Ultimately according to John Campbell, “A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself” and no one portrays this definition more than Rorschach.  In order to truly distinguish a hero in a world full of masked men we must first look at where the characters lie in the balance between moral obligation and moral justification.  Through characters who are defined by their environment such as The Comedian, Ozymandias, and Rorschach, we gain insight into where the line is drawn between a hero and a villain.

The Comedian is a good character to analyze first because he is the least heroic and ironically saddest character in Watchmen.  Donning his uniform with colors matching the American flag, he is a character driven by his own sense of justice and his perception of the American Dream- the problem being that he has an extremely cynical perception of what the American Dream is.  The Comedian believes humans to be savage by nature and the idea of civilization to be a joke, seeing through morality as a social charade.  “Once you figure out what a joke everything is, being the comedian’s the only thing [that] makes sense… I never said it was a good joke!  I’m just playin’ along with the gag.” (CH. 2, 13)  Through his actions Eddie is a manifestation of the evils that come with power and war and the frivolousness of trying to change it.  What makes The Comedian especially memorable is his ability to commit such immoral acts without second consideration while still being acknowledged as a hero for his assistance in the war.  Eddie’s apartment is adorned with pictures of him shaking hands with President Ford and medals of valor hanging on his walls yet, at the end of his life, scars cover his face and his blood covers the very streets he was supposed to protect. Eddie is a true representation of the all American anti-hero, representing the best and worst of the 20th century and the hypocrisy of an era filled with war-heroes from an immoral war.  It isn’t until he discovers Adrian’s true plan that he comes to terms with the horrors he has committed and is unable to cope with life’s final punchline.

          Ozzymandius is an important character to look at next as throughout the novel he is actively striving to be a hero.  Adrian is especially notable because he is feels some sort of moral obligation to save the world while others merely survive in it.  Overall Adrian wants to save the world, but first he believes he must destroy it.  The most controversial aspect about Ozymandias is that he truly believes he is acting with moral justice even though it means taking the lives of millions of people.  Ozymandias believes that in order to achieve something for the greater good there are sacrifices that must be made, however, he does not make a selfless sacrifice.  Instead, by sacrificing the lives of millions of innocent people, his self-justified act of heroism has had villainous implications.  He didn’t want to just save the world, he wanted to be **the** one to save it- a selfish act with no regard for those he is supposed to protect.  A hero is someone who doesn’t leave others behind, even if it means taking a treacherous path.  A hero is a hero because they will risk themselves without expectation of a reward or title, they do it because it is the right thing to do.  Just as with the man in “The Tales of the Black Freighter”, Adrian has distorted his own sense of reality to the point where he is led by blind ambition to no longer regard the laws and natural rights of Men.  Overall Ozymandias isn’t a hero but rather a false one because he relies on deception to gain his power.  Although Adrian was already an accomplished man, he knew that in order for his plan to truly succeed he must trick the world into a state of peace.  By achieving his goal through deceit however, Adrian only superficially accomplished a temporary respite from war.  Not only is his “utopia” based on a lie, but it came at the price of millions of lives, something that won’t be forgotten.  Adrian must lie to others about the hired assassin attempt on himself and to himself about the fate of his servants in order to justify his actions.  Adrian not only separates himself from his humanity but in conjunction elevates himself above the hierarchy of men.  His desire to be great like Alexander or Ramses II blinds him until he becomes disillusioned into believing that he alone is worthy to make judgments beyond a human capacity over the fate of mankind solely for his personal goals.  Although the argument is there that his intentions are overall morally sound, Adrian has effectively transcended his own humanity as Ozymandias and placed himself in the seat among the gods. Adrian lacks what other gods possess, however, and that is a comprehension of eternity; his peace may be a temporary victory but it cannot last forever.  It is as Doctor Manhattan said, “Nothing ends, Adrian.  Nothing ever ends”.

          Rorschach is debated widely as falling somewhere in between a hero and a lunatic because of his harsh complexity, yet he consistently acts out of moral justice.  As with many comic book heroes of today, Rorschach’s origin is admirable if not a bit disturbing.  When he is a child he bears witness to evils that he cannot forget, eventually shaping his perception of humanity into that of two equal and opposite combating sides, good and evil.  Rorschach represents justice in its purest form: unbiased with unfaltering immunity from public corruption and opinion.  Where Ozymandias is wealthy, established, and respected, Rorschach is poor, homeless, and feared.  He acts with uncompromising decisiveness not because he feels morally obligated to such as Adrian, but because he is emotionally compelled to do so, and simply cannot exist unless he takes action.  Another interesting quality of Rorschach is his attempt to simplify a world of grays into black and white terms. By putting on the mask, Rorschach attempts to disassociate himself from typical social boundaries and achieve justice outside the law, but ultimately fails to completely rid himself of sympathy for others.  This is exemplified specifically in Chapter 3 when Rorschach decides to allow Moloch to keep his medication and in Chapter 6 when he is searching for Kitty Genovese.  As Rorschach burns down the house of the Genovese’s killer he looks to the sky through smoke and flame and sees no god, only the consequences of human action.  He understands that it isn’t a god who watches over us, it is only ourselves. Despite his harsh methods, Rorschach stands for not only absolute morality but the basic rights of ordinary humans.  He roams the streets and attempts to warn his old associates of a pending danger in the name of what is just while expecting nothing in return.  Rorschach has accepted that there will always be evils in the world, but he also understands that although he is flawed he has the capability to help someone, and there is something to be admired in that.

          When we look at characters like The Comedian, Ozymandias, and Rorschach we see three very distinct personalities that are consumed by their alter-egos. The Comedian is a bitter, out-of-date “hero” turned government crony who is eventually left broken and hopeless to die alone on the street. Ozymandias is an almighty usurper, blinded by his ambition to transform the world and guide it forward based on personally justified lies and deceit. Rorschach however is uncompromising to any ulterior motives save for his own moral code up until his last breath. Unlike the first two characters, Rorschach acts selflessly in defense of those who are too weak or unable to defend themselves, and it is his ability to do this “Even in the face of Armageddon” that defines him as a hero.