

The theme of trauma and emotional distance in the watchmen essay sample

[Experience](#), [Memories](#)



The time period in which the graphic novel *The Watchmen* is set is the mid 1980's. The group of vigilantes called the Watchmen have been banned from continuing to work fighting crime. Although they were previously respected and had great power, they have come to be viewed with fear and hatred. New York has fallen into disrepair and crime is rampant due to a nuclear cold war between the United States and Russia. Rorschach, one of the Watchmen, begins to unlawfully investigate the murder of Edward Blake who worked for the Government under the codename the Comedian. None of Rorschach's former Watchmen colleagues are worried about the murder. Dr. Manhattan is the only one of the Watchmen to have true superhero abilities and had been part of the U. S. defense program but like the others, was forced to retire. Although he had once been committed to saving others and helping the U. S. protect itself against foreign originated destruction, as the book goes on he becomes increasingly unconnected to other people until he makes the decision to exile himself to Mars. One of the former Watchmen decides to play a practical joke on the world in an effort to stop the devastation by convincing the people that there has been an alien invasion. Though many die, the nuclear war is prevented. This book has a number of unique themes that characterize the plot throughout. One of the clearest themes is the examination of trauma both on a personal level and a national level. The author uses imagery, plot, time, viewpoint, illustration and other mechanisms specific to the graphic novel to present a picture of the times and what lead up to them to represent a common theme of trauma leading to emotional distance which consistently underlies both the main plot and the subplot.

According to Scott McCleod in *Understanding Comics*, the clock is an icon, or image is commonly recognized to refer to a person, place, thing, or concept. These are used to communicate a message or provide information without the need to use narrative. Most individuals are familiar with the concept of a clock ticking down representing running out of time. When the time is up you have to turn in your test, finished or not, give the answer to a question or lose your turn, or suffer the consequences of a bomb that wasn't disarmed in time.

In chapter 4, Moore shows Dr. Manhattan, a former lab scientist, accidentally becoming locked in a vault. Co-workers return and they cannot let him out because the time lock has been engaged and shows the time until a deadly extraction experiment begins. The reader feels the anxiety of the character and co-workers and they try to think of a way to free the trapped scientist although they know it is hopeless. Dr. Manhattan prepares to die and disintegrates in a bright flash when the clock clicks down to zero.

Although the reader doesn't see the clock ticking down, the sense of urgency in the characters provides the sense of time running out. The reader doesn't have to see every progression of the minute hand of the clock to understand that time is short for the character. McCleod calls this ability of readers to fill in the blanks between the panels, closure. Closure is the process used to simulate time and movement in a static sequence of images. Thus, though the reader doesn't see every step until Dr. Manhattan disintegrates nor read every comment assumed to be made by the characters in such a situation they still sense the growing anxiety that would be felt under those circumstances in the real world by plugging in the necessary emotions,

comments, and time elements that are missing. Ultimately this successfully conveys the theme of trauma through images and words evoking common experiences and understanding in the reader.

Another major means the author uses to convey the theme of trauma and resulting emotional distance is through the use of the plot device and plot points. The method of plot development in the graphic novel also serves to communicate the symptoms of trauma in particular, intrusive memories or thoughts. It does this by through the fragmented way the storyline is presented through jumps in time and space from one frame to the next. This fragmentation approximates the memories of someone who has experienced trauma as their memory processes are not smooth but reoccur with only some feature to suggest the event. Reference is made again, to nuclear war and the impending destruction of the world to keep the impending disaster in the readers mind.

The development of the plot includes repeated reference to personal and national traumatic events. In chapter 2 the characters attend the Comedian's funeral. They each share personal memories of the Comedian but when such memories are usually poignant these memories each tell the story of a traumatic occurrence. For example, Dr. Manhattan's memory is of a Vietnam woman who confronts the Comedian about their unborn child on the last day of the Vietnam War. The Comedian brutally guns her down though she is carrying his child and Dr. Manhattan watches stoically without any attempt to intervene.

In chapter 4, when Dr. Manhattan reappears as a superhero he is presented as distant, cold and aloof. He no longer appears to experience much emotion

or attachment to those around him despite their attempts to engage him. The ultimate plot point representing the theme of trauma and isolation is in the climax when Rorschach plans a prank, knowing it will result in the death of many people, yet still considers it a joke with the resulting millions of death being a worthwhile sacrifice to save the rest. He doesn't try to consider alternatives as he is not seemingly attached to humankind in a way that would warrant such consideration. This mirrors the common symptom of distancing in trauma victims.

Works Cited

Moore, Alan, and Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen*. New York: Warner Books, 1987. Print.