



All the World is a Farce: A Close Study of the Death of The Comedian in Alan Moore's Watchmen

KEYWORDS

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In Alan Moore (words) and Dave Gibbons' (illustration) *Watchmen* we are faced with a bloody and violent sequence. In chapters one and two, the death of The Comedian is portrayed. In chapter one, we view the death from the point of view of a disinterested police investigator, whereas in the second chapter Rorschach, through the texts in the panels, muses over The Comedian's murder. In the first chapter we are introduced to the bare facts of the murder, which include pieces of evidence and a reconstruction of the crime. However, in the second chapter, we come to see the various facets of The Comedian's life and all the while, the panels and Rorschach's words keep hinting at the same point - our world is nothing but a farce. Moore, through his characters, claims that the real world is filled with horror and dread. The world we see around us is only an illusion, a mask, which keeps us from discovering the truth. By making us aware of this deception, *Watchmen* also makes us aware of true identity of the world. This paper will attempt to explain Moore's vision for the *Twentieth Century* as a farce and how the death of The Comedian illustrates his claims.

The Comedian as a Reflection of Society

Comic books have, for a long time, served as a creative medium through which one could comment and critique modern society. The modern trends of commercialisation of relationships and isolation has been touched upon by several great artists, such as Will Eisner in his story, *A Contract with God*. In the story, the narrator explains that the protagonist's daughter should not have died "Because Firmme Hersh had a contract with God!" (Eisner, 28). Such a business-like approach to subjects of emotional and personal value is also seen in the character of The Comedian. The Comedian is unlike any super-hero one may have come across. He borders on the villainous, because he depicts little to no remorse when inflicting violence upon the innocent. Yet, he is a masked adventurer who has saved lives and has been honoured by the government and society alike. Due to this unique dichotomy of character, The Comedian becomes the ideal vessel through which Moore unravels the farcical nature of our society.

The first panel of the page 27 shows us the bruised face of The Comedian, as he is slammed into a window or mirror. Through the text at the top of the panel, Rorschach informs us that Blake (The Comedian) had seen the "cracks in society" (Moore & Gibbons 27), which means that Blake had understood the true nature of the world. As a matter of fact, Blake had taken the alias of The Comedian, because he understood the joke, that the world was damaged beyond repair and that all of their efforts were futile. This ideology of The Comedian becomes more relevant when we come to see Ozymandias' near-psychotic attempt to unite the world by almost wiping out an entire

city. However, in the final panels of the graphic novel, we realise that the imminent discovery of Rorschach's journal would undermine all of Ozymandias' elaborate plans. Moore merges text and image in this panel to create an immersive effect. While we read about the "cracks" (27) in the text, we see the glass crack as Blake collides with it. We are looking at this panel from the assailant's point-of-view. The hands of the assailant become the hands of the reader, as he uses a character in the comic book (namely, Blake) to crack open the farcical mask of society. The comic book page enters us and forces us to see past the façade of the world.

As the true nature of the world is being revealed, we see that Blake's personality is also laid bare before us. The panels on page 27 alternate between the past and the present. It is as if his entire life is flashing before his eyes. In the second panel of the first row, Rorschach tells us that Blake had chosen "to become a reflection, a parody" (Moore & Gibbons, 27) of the twentieth century. Thus we can take the panels depicting different facets of Blake's personality as a commentary on the nature of the world. In the second panel of the first row, we see a woman slashing Blake's face with a broken bottle. If in the first panel of the first row the reader cracks open the mask which hides society, then in the second panel of the first row the façade is completely ripped apart. As the woman cuts open Blake's face, we come to know how cruel and ruthless this world truly is. This panel is a flashback of an incident where Blake refuses to take care of the woman he had impregnated. In a fit of rage, the woman attacks Blake. In the next instance, Blake shoots her dead. The horrific nature of the twentieth century spills out, just like the blood from Blake's face. Moore claims that in the twentieth century, man no longer cared about his fellow creatures. Mankind has been consumed by selfishness and violence and there seems to be no way out of it. Rorschach becomes Moore's mouthpiece when he says that "little men in masks" (27) were trying to hold the world together. There is a sense of futility in these words. Blake had understood this futility, and he reflected it with the identity of The Comedian - a man who smiles and seems like a saviour, but is capable of horrific deeds.

The Breaking of the Illusion

In his book *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, Charles Hatfield has said that comics (especially the underground comix of the 1970's and 1980's) have been extremely instrumental in breaking the false illusions that permeate throughout society. He writes, Often the comic book parodies were deliberately freighted with broader social concerns, turning spoofs into vehicles for cultural argument. For instance the cover to *Wimmen's Comix* No. 1 (1972), by Editor Patricia Moodian, distorts a clichéd sce-

nario from romance comic books: a jilted woman looking enviously at a glamorous couple in a clinch, contrasting their picture-perfect features with her own comically exaggerated ugliness.

Moore uses the comic book's long history of being "vehicles of cultural argument" (Hatfield, 12) to reveal the true face of our modern society. There is an iconic image in page 27 that keeps recurring in the panels and further reinstates Moore's assertion about the farcical nature of the world. This image is the yellow 'smiley-face' badge that Blake wears. This badge represents The Comedian, and thus becomes the symbol of the farce which Moore talks about. In the comic book page, this badge is absent only in two panels, and in both of these panels, the reality of the Twentieth Century has broken forth. In the second panel of the first row, as the woman attacks Blake, we do not see the badge. As told earlier, this panel attempts to completely do away with the farce before us. In the third panel of the second row, we find that Blake has broken down and is weeping miserably. There is a cross above him, and it seems as if Blake is desperately asking for help or begging for forgiveness. In this scene too, we do not see the badge. This is because in this panel, the truth about the world finally overpowers Blake and the façade crumbles before him. The badge is there in the only panel of the third row but now, for the first time in the page, it has detached itself from Blake. Thus, as the assailant hurls Blake, the reflection or parody of the twentieth century, to his death, he also removes the mask which hides the world. Moore wants to express the idea that only through destruction can the omnipresent farcical façade be broken, an idea that he carries forward in his other acclaimed graphic novel, *V for Vendetta*.

Conclusion

For a page that talks about the farcical nature of the world and all the violence that spawns underneath its mask, the panels and rows of page 27 are surprisingly well-ordered. A strict three-by-three structure is maintained, with the last row consisting of one long panel. This structure further portrays the illusion of society. This is somewhat similar to the Apollonian and Dionysian characteristics portrayed in Greek tragedies. Made popular by Nietzsche in his book *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Apollonian and the Dionysian (derived from the Greek gods Apollo and Dionysus) refers to the elements of order and chaos respectively. While from the outside everything looks to be in order, unmentionable horrors take place on the inside. In the world of *Watchmen* the false Apollonian stability (Ozymandias' new world) is used to hide the underlying Dionysian upheaval (the genocide in New York). Alan Moore's claims are justified as the comic book page explains, through its narrative, its images and even its structure, that the world is a farce. But Moore wants us to break out of it. Thus, in the final panel, the hands of the assailant become the hands of the reader, as he breaks the window hiding the real world and finally comes to know the truth.

Reference

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