

Watchmen Study Questions

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

- *Ozymandias*, Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1792-1822

General Questions

Keep track of these questions as you read, and be prepared to discuss them. Your answers may evolve as you read through the text.

1. Discuss each of the following characters' personalities and values. How would you describe each character's philosophy of life? As you read, find quotes like those below that express fundamental insights into these characters' motivations. Three examples have been provided.

Rorschach: "Soon there will be war. Millions will burn. Millions will perish in sickness and misery. Why does one death matter against so many? Because there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished. Even in the face of Armageddon I shall not compromise in this. But there are so many deserving of retribution...and there is so little time."

Nite Owl (Hollis Mason): "I suppose that the simple fact of spending the first twelve years of my life living in my grandfather's proximity had indelibly stamped a certain set of moral values and conditions upon me. I was never so extreme in my beliefs concerning God, the family, and the flag as my father's father was, but if I look at myself today I can see basic notions of decency that were passed down direct from him to me."

"I like the idea of adventure, and I feel bad unless I'm doing good...what it comes down to for me is that I dressed up like an owl and fought crime because it was fun and because it needed doing and because I goddam felt like it."

Dr. Manhattan (Jon Osterman): “A live body and a dead body contain the same number of *particles*. Structurally, there’s no discernible *difference*. Life and death are unquantifiable *abstracts*. Why *should* I be concerned?”

The Comedian (Edward Blake)

Nite Owl (Dan Dreiberg)

Ozymandias (Adrian Veidt)

2. How are the Comedian’s name and smiley face badge ironic?
3. Discuss the meaning of Rorschach’s constantly shifting mask.
4. What is the Keene Act, and how has it affected the lives of costumed vigilantes like the Minutemen?

Chapter I: “At Midnight, All the Agents...”

5. What is the main plot point in Chapter 1? What is Rorschach’s theory about what happened?
6. What basic information do we learn about the following characters in this chapter?
 - Rorschach
 - Dan Dreiberg (the second Nite Owl)
 - The Comedian
 - Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias)
 - Dr. Manhattan (Jon Osterman)
7. What do these characters seem to think of each other?
8. What is the status of these and other living “superheroes” at this point in the story? Why?
9. What narrative purposes are served by the excerpt from Hollis Mason’s autobiography, *Under the Hood*? Discuss the multiple meanings of the title.

Chapter II: “Absent Friends”

10. What do we learn in this chapter about Sally’s personality and values? What is her relationship with Laurie like?
11. What happened many years ago between Sally (Laurie’s mother, the Silk Spectre) and Edward Blake (the Comedian) that Laurie still holds a grudge about? How does Sally herself feel?
12. At the first meeting of the Crimebusters, what disagreement do the Comedian and Ozymandias have?
13. In the story, the United States wins the Vietnam War because of the presence of Dr. Manhattan. What further insight does the conversation between the Comedian and Dr. Manhattan at the end of the Vietnam War provide about the Comedian’s values? How did the Comedian get the scar on his face?
14. What does the Vietnam flashback show us about Dr. Manhattan’s values? Do you think he was always this way, and if not, why has he changed? Why does the Comedian say “God help us all” as he walks away from Dr. Manhattan?
15. In the riot scene, someone has spraypainted “Who watches the Watchmen?” on a wall. What is the reason for the riots, and what does that sentence mean?

16. The former supervillain Moloch tells Rorschach about the Comedian's recent visit to him. What do you think is the significance of the Comedian's words and actions? Does it have anything to do with his death?
17. Discuss the meaning of Rorschach's joke about Pagliacci.
18. What psychological insights does the next excerpt from *Under the Hood* provide about costumed vigilantes? Why were the Minutemen unable to stay together?

Chapter III: "The Judge of All the Earth"

19. What purpose(s) do you think the story about the news vendor and the kid reading the comic book serves? How does the line "I could not love her as she had loved me" serve as a transition into the next section?
20. Why do you think Laurie decides to leave Jon?
21. What happens during Jon's interview, and what is its significance for the story? Why do you think Jon goes to Mars, and what can you infer about his thoughts and feelings from his behavior during this chapter? What is Rorschach's reaction to the situation?
22. What political event happens in the wake of Jon's departure from Earth, and what is its significance? What does the news vendor's reaction tell us about how the public perceives the situation? What reaction do you think the author intends us to have to the ensuing discussion about military strategy? What effect does the author achieve by juxtaposing images of Mars with this discussion?
23. According to this chapter's excerpt from *Under the Hood*, how did Dr. Manhattan's arrival affect the world?

Chapter IV: "Watchmaker"

24. How does Jon become Dr. Manhattan?
25. What else does this chapter tell us about Jon's impact on the world as Dr. Manhattan? (Include Milton Glass's analysis at the end of the chapter in your discussion.)
26. Describe the narrative structure of the chapter. Why do you think Moore chose to tell this part of the story this way?
27. Why does Jon do nothing to prevent disastrous events that he knows are going to happen? What does this suggest about the story's view of time and causality? How does the metaphor of a watchmaker fit into this view of the world?
28. What effect does Jon's immense power seem to have on him over time? Why do you think he decides to build the clockwork structure at the end of the chapter?
29. Do you agree with Jon's assessment of the Comedian?

Blake is interesting. I have never met anyone so deliberately amoral. He suits the climate here: the madness, the pointless butchery...As I come to understand Vietnam and what it implies about the human condition, I also realize that few humans will permit themselves such an understanding. Blake's different. He understands perfectly...and he doesn't care.

Chapter V: “Fearful Symmetry”

30. What is Rorschach’s reaction to seeing Dan and Laurie together, and what does this show about him?
31. What do you think the silhouette graffiti painted by the gang members is intended to suggest?
32. What do these quotes suggest about how Rorschach thinks of himself?

First, peeled off face, folded it, hid inside jacket. Without my face, nobody knows. Nobody knows who I am.

Putting [my things] on, I abandoned my disguise and became myself.

This relentless world: There is only one sane response to it.

What do you think this “sane response” is, according to Rorschach?

33. What seems to be happening to the narrator of the “comic within a comic” story?
34. What examples of “fearful symmetry” do you see in this chapter?

Chapter VI: “The Abyss Gazes Also”

35. What initial impression of Rorschach does Dr. Long have, and what signs suggest that this impression is deeply mistaken?
36. What is Rorschach’s opinion of Dr. Long, and what does he base his judgment on?
37. Who was Kitty Genovese, and what significance do her rape and murder have for Rorschach? What additional insights does the chapter give us into the evolution of Rorschach’s identity? Consider the flashbacks to his earlier life, as well as these quotes:

Once a man has seen, he can never turn his back on it. Never pretend it doesn’t exist.

We do not do this thing because it is permitted. We do it because we have to. We do it because we are compelled.

In Rorschach’s own estimation, when and why did he truly become Rorschach—what discovery did he make on that day?

38. Based on the information in this chapter, how would you interpret the meaning of Rorschach’s blot test mask?
39. How is the looming threat of a nuclear holocaust connected to the developments and themes of this chapter?
40. Interpret the quote from the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche at the end of the chapter and discuss its connection to this chapter.

Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster, and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.



Silhouette of a victim of the atomic bomb blast at Hiroshima

Chapter VII: “A Brother to Dragons”

41. Discuss the important developments that take place in this chapter.
42. What more is revealed about Dan’s character and his motivations in this chapter? What do we learn about Nite Owl’s equipment and abilities?
43. Throughout the novel, things going on in the background of the scene are often important to the development of plot or theme. What examples of this authorial technique can you find in this chapter?

Chapter VIII: “Old Ghosts”

44. How does the way Rorschach deals with Big Figure and his henchmen demonstrate the qualities that make him so formidable?
45. How does Detective Steven Fine figure out Nite Owl’s identity?
46. Why does Dan want to break Rorschach out of prison?
47. What significance does the phrase “the spirit of ‘77” have in this chapter?
48. Why do the gang members kill Hollis? What is ironic about the weapon used to kill him?
49. Interpret the meaning of this chapter’s title. In what ways is the chapter connected to the concept of ghosts? Discuss some specific references (direct and indirect) to ghosts in the chapter.

Chapter IX: “The Darkness of Mere Being”

50. What happens to Laurie when Jon teleports her to Mars, and what does this emphasize about Jon?
51. What does Jon mean when he says, “We’re all puppets, Laurie. I’m just a puppet who can see the strings”?
52. Discuss the significance of Laurie’s earliest memory—along with other memories presented in this chapter, what realization does it lead Laurie to? What meaning do you think that realization has for her? What symbolic significance does the snow globe have?
53. Why does Jon no longer care about Earth and the fate of humanity? What arguments does he make in his debate with Laurie, and how does she respond?
54. What changes Jon’s mind about saving humanity? Explain the realization he has about the significance of human life. Discuss the symbolic meaning of Laurie’s destruction of his clockwork structure.
55. Discuss the symbolic significance of the special crater seen near the end of the chapter (which is based on an actual crater photographed on Mars).
56. Discuss your interpretation of C.G. Jung’s quote at the end of the chapter and explain how it relates to the events in the chapter.

Chapter X: “Two Riders Were Approaching...”

57. What do we learn from the scene with President Nixon at the beginning of the chapter?
58. What different approaches and theories do Daniel and Rorschach have? What evidence are they working with? What clues point to Adrian’s role in the events of the story? (Some are discussed by Daniel and Rorschach; others are clues that readers can identify, including visual clues.)

59. Why do you think Rorschach decides to leave without punishing his landlord, who told lies about him to the press?
60. What happens to the artists, writers, and other people leaving the island, and why?
61. What is the significance of Rorschach's journal? Why does he mail it to the offices of The New Frontiersman?
62. What does the shipwreck survivor do in this chapter, and why? How is it significant that he mistakes a scarecrow for a pirate sentry?
63. Based on the scene in Karnak early in the chapter and the documents at the end of the chapter, what kind of future does Adrian seem to be preparing for?

Chapter XI: "Look on My Works, Ye Mighty..."

64. According to Adrian, what does the Antarctic landscape symbolize in connection with Daniel and Rorschach's current situation? What does Adrian do before their arrival at Karnak, and why? What does he suggest in this chapter are the driving forces and desires behind his life? What is the goal of his secret plan, and how will his plan achieve that goal?
65. Interpret the meaning of the pirate story's ending. How does it relate to the larger story? How do the subplots involving minor characters in New York City relate to the larger story?
66. Discuss the meaning of Shelley's poem in connection with the story.

Chapter XII: "A Stronger Loving World"

67. In what ways does Adrian try to neutralize the threat to his plans posed by Jon? What is effective, and what isn't?
68. In what ways do Adrian's actions appear to have created the possibility of a better world?
69. Discuss the reactions of the various other characters to Adrian's actions. How would you try to handle the situation?
70. What point is Jon making when he tells Adrian that "nothing ever ends"? How might this be related to Shelley's poem?
71. Why do you think Laurie chooses to forgive her mother?
72. Discuss the significance of this quote from the *Outer Limits* episode "The Architects of Fear," as well as the quote from John Cale at the end of the chapter:

Scarecrows and magic and other fatal fears do not bring people closer together. There is no magic substitute for soft caring and hard work, for self-respect and mutual love. If we can learn this from the mistake these frightened men made, then their mistake will not have been merely grotesque, it would at least have been a lesson. A lesson, at last, to be learned.

It would be a stronger world, a stronger loving world, to die in.

73. What clues about the changes that have taken place in the world do the last few pages contain (e.g., the name of the restaurant where Seymour buys lunch)? What final threat to Adrian's plan does the ending suggest?