Watchmen’s Rorschach

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Set in an alternate history, Watchmen tells the story of a group of retired crime fighters rendered redundant by a society in the midst of an ever-escalating Cold War. Adapted for the screen in 2009, it is arguably the most celebrated graphic novel of all time.

Watchmen’s chief protagonist is Walter Kovacs, the son of a cold, abusive mother, who did little to shield young Walter from her life as a prostitute. Author Alan Moore interweaves fact and fiction as the 1964 murder of New Yorker Kitty Genovese prompts Kovacs, disgusted at the apathy of the 38 witnesses that reportedly failed to intervene in the crime, to adopt his alter ego, Rorschach. Named after German psychoanalyst Hermann Rorschach, Watchmen’s antihero dons a distinctive mask that features moving, symmetrical patterns resembling the famous inkblot tests created by his namesake, reflecting his black and white view of a society that repulses him.

Consistent with the archetype of the masked vigilante, the character is reminiscent of, among others, Batman, Don Quixote, and Charles Bronson’s portrayal of Paul Kersey in the Death Wish series of films. Scarred by his past and motivated by a tenacious dedication to his moral crusade, Rorschach exacts violent retribution on the criminals he perceives as animals: ‘Men get arrested. Dogs get put down’.

When Edward ‘The Comedian’ Blake is murdered, the other members of the Watchmen, many of whom have abandoned their crime-fighting personas, dismiss Rorschach’s hypothesis that a ‘mask killer’, hell-bent on assassinating former heroes, is at large. Viewed by his former colleagues as a loose cannon, paranoid and out of touch, Rorschach’s characteristic implacable pursuit of the case uncovers disturbing evidence that an even greater conspiracy exists.

Rorschach’s tense consultations with forensic psychiatrist Dr Malcolm Long, shortly after he is framed and imprisoned for the murder of a former criminal kingpin, give the reader their first glimpse of the man behind the mask. Long, although well-meaning and adamant that he can rehabilitate his patient, is greatly disturbed by Kovacs’ justification for his actions and beliefs, eventually leading him to question his own principles and wreaking havoc on his private life.

The story climaxes in the Watchmen’s confrontation of the mask killer while the USA and the USSR teeter on the brink of nuclear war. As both the reader and each of the main characters are confronted with a challenging, thought-provoking ultimatum, Rorschach maintains his unwavering philosophy to the very last: ‘Never compromise. Not even in the face of Armageddon’.