

Dr. Manhattan's Penis: Traditions of Modesty and Morality in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*

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By G. Christopher Williams

ABSTRACT

Watchmen expresses its internal debate about the understanding of good and evil through its frequent vacillation between images of both costume and nudity. Ultimately, nudity in the comic comes to represent a transcendence of the conventional morality most often represented in superhero comic books. Moore's and Gibbons's story of the shedding of clothing declares the notion that a traditional knowledge of good and evil may be inconvenient when trying to build a utopia.

Keywords: *Watchmen*, nudity, morality, costumes, self-awareness, clothing, Dr. Manhattan

El pene del Dr. Manhattan: tradiciones de modestia y moralidad en *Watchmen* de Alan Moore y Dave Gibbons

RESUMEN

Watchmen expresa su debate interno sobre la comprensión del bien y del mal a través de su frecuente vacilación entre imágenes tanto de disfraces como de desnudez. En última instancia, la desnudez en el cómic llega a representar una transcendencia de la moralidad convencional representada con mayor frecuencia en los cómics de superhéroes. La historia de Moore y Gibbons sobre el despojo de la ropa declara la noción de que un conocimiento tra-

dicional del bien y del mal puede resultar inconveniente cuando se intenta construir una utopía.

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Palabras clave: *Watchmen*, desnudez, moralidad, disfraces, autoconciencia, vestimenta, Dr. Manhattan

曼哈顿博士的阴茎：阿兰·摩尔和戴夫·吉本斯联合打造的《守望者》中的谦虚和道德传统

摘要

《守望者》通过在服装图像和裸体图像之间的频繁摇摆来表达其对善恶理解的内部争论。最终，漫画中呈现的裸体代表了一种对超级英雄漫画书中最常见的传统道德的超越。摩尔和吉本斯关于脱衣的故事宣告了这样一个观念：在试图建立一个乌托邦时，传统的善恶知识可能会带来不便。

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关键词：《守望者》，裸体，道德，戏服，自我意识，服装，曼哈顿博士

INTRODUCTION

It may not seem immediately obvious that someone who lacks modesty may be essentially understood by society as something inhuman. However, the idea that a human that feels no shame when naked lacks some basic component of humanity is one that may be deeply seated in Western culture. This notion that will be shown to be influenced by the earliest stories in the Judeo-Christian tradition seems like one that was considered on some level by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons when developing the personality, appearance, and presentation of the character of Dr. Manhattan in the comic book series *Watchmen*, especially given the nakedness of that character and what it reflects about his nature. Indeed, this display in the comic book seems to provoke a discomfort, unease, and sense of shame that Moore and Gibbons may have intended, and that Zack Snyder also may have intuited was necessary to associate with the character in his own cinematic version of the story of the *Watchmen*. In both cases, Dr. Manhattan's nudity tells us much about who he is and what he is meant to represent, something inhuman, alien, and amoral. In other words, Dr. Manhattan may represent something more like humankind before its fall and exile from Eden, a creature so lacking in shame that it no longer possesses the knowledge of good and evil, a new kind of "fall" from the experience of morality to an "innocent state" of amorality.

In this regard, while Snyder's film so often closely adapts Moore and Gibbons work, from near duplication of comic book panels in some scenes to adherence to much of the original dialogue from the series, it does fail to represent the process of Dr. Manhattan's unique fall because Snyder doesn't represent the character's change in dress and costume over the course of his history in the same way that

Moore and Gibbons do. This failure is especially apparent in the section of the film in which Snyder adapts the fourth issue of the *Watchmen*, "Watchmaker," which concerns the origin and early development of Dr. Manhattan. In that issue, Moore and Gibbons go to great lengths to visually represent Manhattan discarding his humanity and his sense of good and evil through his slow shedding of his costume over the course of his early career. If one pages through this issue, one notes a kind of slow strip tease performed by Manhattan as his new persona evolves. Such moments are important to *Watchmen* because, as a comic so steeped in the traditions of the superhero, it is concerned with conveying much by exploring masks, unmaskings, dressing, and undressing in the lives of many of its costumed adventurers, not just Dr. Manhattan. *Watchmen* is a book concerned with how its characters are seen, and, thus, explores what they cover up and what they lay bare about their own self-knowledge and their own perception of morality by donning a costume or by shedding it, or put another way, *Watchmen* expresses its internal debate about the human understanding of good and evil through its frequent vacillation between images and discussions of both costume and nudity. Ultimately, in Moore and Gibbon's work, nudity comes to represent a transcendence of traditional morality and a shedding of the conventional morality most often represented in superhero comic books.

The Problem of the Penis in Mainstream Publications

Likewise, when directing the cinematic adaptation of this work, Zack Snyder seems also to have recognized the importance of what Moore and Gibbons intended to communicate through the presentation of a most often nude superhero throughout their comic book series. Indeed, Snyder does not hesitate to include Dr. Manhattan's penis in a cinematic sub-genre not especially given to such graphic displays. Over the

years, the mainstream superhero comic and the stories that it has inspired in other media have so often been associated with juvenilia after all. When the comic book series *Watchmen* was released in 1986, for instance, most comics published by the big two publishers were still largely targeted towards children and certainly almost universally assumed by adults to be intended for that audience. Most of mainstream culture was not aware of the more adult comics produced in the independent and underground comic book movements. *Watchmen*, though, was a comic book that was sold as what was then referred to as a “direct sales only” title, a comic that could only be purchased at a comic book store, at a time when most, again, mainstream comics were purchased by children at grocery and convenience stores. Most of the public of the time would have been shocked to discover full frontal male nudity in a medium that they assumed was one intended only for children, and even most adult comic book readers were likely shocked to see the often particularly taboo image of a penis on their comic book page. After all, the era of the “Suggested for Mature Audiences” label would only be beginning in the mid to late 1980s. Moore’s work on *Swamp Thing* (1984–1987) and *Watchmen* (1986–1987) along with Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) became some of the precursors to more challenging, more adult themed DC comics like Moore’s own *The Killing Joke* (1988), Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman* (1989–1993), and Grant Morrison’s *Doom Patrol* (1989–1993).

In “Footnotes to Miller and Moore’: Monomyth and Transnationality in the 1986 Superhero Comics,” Fred Francis notes the significance of Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* and Moore’s *Watchmen* in particular in creating an environment in which specifically the superhero narrative could mature when he says, “The dominant opinion of the contemporary

American superhero narrative states that everything changed in 1986” (289). In this passage, Francis is describing other critics’ assertions about the history of superhero comics like those made by Geoff Klock in *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, that postulate that following the publication of *The Dark Knight* and *Watchmen* that “the contemporary superhero narrative might be viewed as a series of footnotes to Miller and Moore” (3). However, this shifting perspective on what a superhero narrative could be still has not necessarily been made evident to the popular culture at large. It would remain true that to the movie going public it would still be clearly unexpected for a superhero movie to include images of the male sex organ—even to an audience in 2009—but especially to those only familiar with superhero fare like the *Batman*, *X-Men*, and *Spider-Man* movies of the late 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. For the most part, those individuals would still be unfamiliar with the idea of a mature comic book series, and this supposition seems to be borne out by the large number of almost embarrassed blogs and articles in the press and on the internet that were written at the time of the movie’s release about the presence of Dr. Manhattan’s penis in the film. The sense of shame and discomfort that Western culture has about nakedness in general and, perhaps, the display of a naked penis in particular seems reflected in the unease reflected in the words and jokes of these journalists and bloggers.¹

TRADITIONS OF MODESTY IN WESTERN CULTURE

Some consideration of how nudity might or might not be connected to morality, especially in regard to shame and modesty, has been considered in a variety of anthropological studies. After having discussed some traditional Western cultural views on nudity and modesty in “The Deceit of Dress: Utopian Visions and the Arguments against Clothing,” Rich-

ard Martin initially claims that “[f]ew now imagine modesty to have been the baleful first cause of clothing that some thought, given that all cultures possess forms of clothing yet differing senses of the self, body, and modesty” (81). However, he also notes that clothing clearly does not exist for exclusively practical purposes in human culture, like providing “a mandate” for dress because of the human need for warmth. After all, as he says, “clothing exists in societies without such a mandate; tropically warm civilizations nonetheless choose to dress themselves.” Indeed, as Lars Allolio-Nacke points out in “Nudity and Clothing from the Perspective of Anthropological Studies,” dressing oneself is significant enough to most humans that many anthropologists consider it to be one of the more important markers of human culture in general: “The philosophical antithesis of being naked is clothing. Most of the authors who write about nudity use this distinction with reference to nature and culture. The naked body is nature; when the body is dressed, it reflects culture. Clothing is a feature unique to humans, since only humans have culture” (35). Another feature that distinguishes humanity from most animals is the capability of possessing self-awareness, which also might be considered when attempting to understand Allolio-Nacke’s observations about anthropology’s views on clothing and culture. However, it may also fly in the face of Martin’s assertion that few current thinkers factor modesty into the reasoning for why humans put on clothes.

To understand the significance of self-awareness to the desire to clothe oneself, one should consider some of the prior reasoning surrounding the purposes of the cultural practice of wearing clothing. For instance, Allolio-Nacke suggests that there were five reasons that nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropologists traditionally gave to explain why humans insist on clothing themselves, all of which he says fall

within the categories of physical, social, moral, esthetic-social, and magic/apotropaic reasons. However, he then explains that currently “[t]he moral and sexual reasons are the preferred explanations for why humans made clothes,” citing several contemporary anthropologists, like Hans Peter Durrer and Jean-Claude Bologne, who note that “shame belongs to the essence of human nature” and that “shame is linked to social status” (37). To feel shame requires self-awareness and is clearly linked to a sense of modesty when discussing a human’s awareness of his or her own body. While different cultures have different senses of modesty surrounding the body, as Martin suggests, it is still highly unusual for a culture to not develop clothing that at least covers what that culture might consider sexually taboo areas of the body, especially the genitals. Allolio-Nacke notes the near universality of covering the primary sex organs and points out that a sense of modesty even extends to cultures that allow for exposure of the penis and the vagina: “There are [...] indigenous peoples who do not wear anything. They also feel ashamed, but they did not necessarily develop clothes to cover their genitals; rather, they developed social rules that prohibited looking directly at the genitals” (40). As noted earlier, this sense of shame about the body attested to by the aforementioned anthropologists is, of course, one that is embedded deeply in Western culture and the Judeo-Christian tradition in particular.

TRADITIONS OF MODESTY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO MORALITY IN WESTERN CULTURE

The expressions of this idea emerge in this tradition in the earliest chapters of the Bible following Adam and Eve’s first act of disobedience towards God, the eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In fact, the first consequence of this action concerns nudity and the desire

to cover it: “Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves” (Gen. 3:7). This moment, so crucial to describing this religious tradition’s understanding of the nature of evil, sin, and disobedience, immediately connects the notion of morality itself to the body through the experience of shame. When Adam and Eve’s eyes are opened to an understanding of good and evil, as the name of the tree makes explicit, they are not meant to merely understand the problem of disobedience rationally, but to feel it directly through their newly awakened self-awareness about their bodies. Thus, while hiding himself after his first sinful act when Adam responds to God’s question, “Where are you?” (Gen 3:9), Adam makes it immediately clear how he understands his sense of shame about his actions through his own desire to hide his body from the eyes of God: “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid” (Gen 3:10). For whatever reason—be it as a result of being shaped within this cultural understanding of shame, disobedience, and the body or because “shame belongs to the essence of humanity”—to most Westerners, the idea of feeling discomfort about being naked is a familiar one. Indeed, the idea of being naked without shame, as Adam and Eve were before their exile from Eden, is an alien one, even an alienating one. Martin actually comments on this idea himself when he says, “The Old Testament associates nakedness with poverty, destitution, and exposure” (79). Thus, feeling a lack of concern for one’s nakedness seems unnatural because of the idea of the impossibility of a human lacking any sense of modesty or shame at all. It also seems alien to humans to feel a lack of concern for the shame provoked by how others may view the body in such a vulnerable and even destitute state.

THESE TRADITIONS IN WATCHMEN THE COMIC BOOK

Moore and Gibbons introduce some of this discussion in the first issue of *Watchmen* with the introduction of Dr. Manhattan in the main portion of the issue itself and through the textual background feature that comes at the end of the issue, a supposed excerpt of the first few chapters of Hollis Mason's memoir about his time as the superhero Nite Owl that is entitled *Under the Hood*. Dr. Manhattan's introduction to the reader involves a scene concerning the vigilante Rorschach and Manhattan's girlfriend Laurie Juspecky, formerly the superhero known as the Silk Spectre. In the first panel in which Manhattan appears in the series, he is represented as a blue giant towering above the two normally sized humans (28). While his penis does not appear in this scene because of the angles that he is drawn from, he is completely nude, which is a fact that is not acknowledged in any way by the other two characters. Assumedly, both are familiar with Jon's frequent decision to remain undressed. The reader, though, likely may find Jon's casual indifference to talking with Rorschach and working in his laboratory while in a state of undress to suggest an inherent strangeness to Dr. Manhattan. Indeed, Jon's disinterest in the seemingly banal (to Manhattan's way of thinking) suggestions by Rorschach about a killer who may be hunting Jon and Laurie and who killed a former associate of theirs also reflects the alien and strangely insouciant nature of Dr. Manhattan. This insouciance about a matter that most humans might feel some concern for, this threat to himself and someone he loves as well as the death of a former colleague, seems bizarre and unnatural: "A live body and a dead body contain the same number of particles. Structurally there's no difference. Life and death are unquantifiable abstracts. Why should I be concerned?" (29). His casual ability to dismiss Rorschach by teleporting him

away mid-sentence further punctuates this point (30). Thus, through the accompanying image of the nude Dr. Manhattan alongside this discussion, Moore and Gibbons introduce us to his character's nudity as a signal of his detachment from the human condition.

By contrast to this introduction of the idea of a lack of modesty representing separation from the human condition, the chapters from Hollis Mason's *Under the Hood* that close this first issue also signal a concern that the book has for exploring a sense of self awareness of shame that is essential to recognizing the human condition. Moore accomplishes communicating this idea through a story that contains descriptions of images associated with lewd behavior and lewd and comical dress and undress. In the first chapter of *Under the Hood*, Mason explains that in order to get an "audience's sympathies on your side," that a writer needs to tell a sad and tragic story to preface his own tale. Mason does so by telling the story of the owner of an auto repair shop, Moe Vernon, who Mason's father worked for when Mason was a kid. Vernon was an opera fan, and one day as a practical joke when Mason and his father were in the shop, Vernon donned a pair of enormous false breasts and remained in his office to surprise whoever brought him the morning mail. While he waited, he listened to a recording of "Ride of the Valkyries." When Moe read the mail, though, he found a letter explaining that his wife was running off with one of his employees, Fred Motz. This revelation leads to the nub of the story, a moment of both comedy and tragedy as Vernon's lewd and silly outfit, a joke based on the shameful qualities of the naked body, seemingly inappropriately coexists with the tragic and melodramatic music surrounding Vernon's own actually tragic situation:

Framed in the doorway with tears in his

eyes and the crumpled letter in his hand, Moe stood dramatically with all eyes turned towards him. He was still wearing the set of artificial breasts. Almost inaudible above the rising strains of Wagner swelling behind him, he spoke, with so much hurt and outrage and offended dignity fighting for possession of his voice that the end result was almost toneless.

“Fred Motz has had carnal knowledge of my wife Beatrice for the past two years.”

And everybody started laughing. (37)

In this moment, the sorrow of the pain that a man can feel when tragedy befalls him is paralleled with the “evil” of the self-knowledge signaled by an awareness of the shamefulness of the body. The men’s laughter at the humanity and banality of Vernon’s appearance and situation leads to an acknowledgment of the human condition, to know and to understand evil and to have to feel the tragedy of its effects. Indeed, Mason’s final conclusion to the story leads to a sense of self-knowledge about his own relationship to good and evil: “And although I’ve never worn a set of false bosoms in my life, I’ve stood there dressed in something just as strange with tears in my eyes while people died laughing” (38). Here Moore ties dressing up in a costume to the awareness of the horrors of evil and the silliness and shamefulness of the human condition, a condition that requires covering up with silly attire or laughter the very real pain of suffering that results from the evils of the world. It is as if Moore suggests through Mason’s memoir that once Mason becomes aware of evil in the world (as he does through his occupation as a policeman prior to his career as a superhero), his desire to quell it comes with

the initial reaction to hide himself, to hide his own identity behind a costume and a mask.

By contrast, by the time of the *Watchmen's* present story line, which is, of course, set in the 1980s, Jon has given up clothing altogether alongside his sense of the value of human beings themselves. These ideas are represented in a panel in the third issue that depicts Jon sitting on a bed in his room holding and looking at one of Laurie's bras in an almost uncomprehending way. This image of Jon's stupefaction is accompanied by an observation from Laurie, who is speaking to Dan Dreiberg about Jon's mental state: "[Y]ou don't know what it's like ... the way he looks at things, like he can't remember what they are and doesn't particularly care ..." (85). She follows this statement by drawing a conclusion about what this state of mind means about his lack of connection to the reality of other human beings, to himself, and, perhaps also, how those things imply his lack of understanding of the value of humanity, since people don't seem "real" to him. As Laurie says: "This world, the real world, to him it's like walking through mist, and all the people are like shadows ..." It is ironic that it is a bra, which in Western culture partially serves as an instrument of modesty, that Jon fails to seem able to comprehend the purpose of, which then signals this idea of his lack of understanding of people visually. Also, appropriately, this discussion that once again confronts the idea of a lack of awareness of the importance of the meaning of human life is accompanied by a series of panels that depict Jon himself getting dressed. Laurie and Dan's conversation coincides with this sequence, running parallel with it and further comments on the nature of wearing the appropriate clothing under the correct circumstances. Laurie, for example, apologizes for possibly ruining Dan's evening by barging in on him, saying, "Dan, I'm sorry. I've turned up in hysterics when you were

probably about to dress for going out.” Dan responds to this apologetic statement by explaining, “Listen, I just wish you’d drop in more often. As for tonight, I’m calling on Hollis ... and he doesn’t care how people dress.” This final statement “and he doesn’t care how people dress,” specifically appears in a panel in which Jon dresses, buttoning up his pants while telekinetically lifting his other clothing, shirt, vest, suit coat, and socks, up in the air around him as he goes through the motion of putting on clothes. Obviously, there is an intended irony in the juxtaposition of this phrase with this image, since Jon, like Hollis (although for different reasons) also “doesn’t care how people dress.” Jon wouldn’t be dressing at all at this moment except that he will be giving an interview on television, and as Laurie observes in an earlier issue when Jon is attending the funeral of the Comedian that despite his indifference towards clothing that for the sake of others’ sense of propriety being dressed is a state that he endures in such moments: “Jon had to go. Protocol. They made him put clothes on and everything” (43). In other words, Jon is just hanging on to his humanity, quite literally by a thread. Going through the motion of putting on his “threads” is the only indication that he may be concerning himself with human culture and the reasons that it exists in this context, to reduce the embarrassment and shame of nakedness. At that, this concern still only exists because they “made him,” though. However, as Yen-Lian Liu notes in “The Masculine Masquerade of Superheroes in *Watchmen*,” “Dr. Manhattan’s supernatural power [...] renders him visibly distinct from all the other men, and, unlike Superman, he does not need any costume to demonstrate that” (60). However, as Liu further acknowledges, Manhattan’s eventual embrace of full nudity indicates that this “distinction also hinders him from building proper relationships with other human beings.” Once again, it becomes

clear that Manhattan's relationship to clothing represents his relationship to human culture and community.

Again, this idea makes sense when looking at the history of Jon's growing detachment from humanity as represented by Moore and Gibbons decision to present that history in parallel to Jon's discarding of his clothing and costume. Indeed, perhaps the most telling scene about Jon's loss of a sense of morality as it relates to the value of human life features Jon at least a decade after the accident that turned him into Dr. Manhattan. This scene occurs at the end of the Vietnam war, a war that has been won by the United States because of the deployment of superheroes like the Comedian, aka Edward Blake, but more especially because of the deployment of Dr. Manhattan to aid in that victory. Standing in a bar, the Comedian and Dr. Manhattan look on as the South Vietnamese celebrate their victory on what Jon refers to as "V.V.N. Night," or Victory in Vietnam Day (55). As noted, this is a moment that occurs much later in Dr. Manhattan's career as a superhero. He wears only a small black piece of clothing that covers his genitals in this scene, his "uniform" for the entirety of his time fighting in this conflict. As Blake drinks and Jon ponders the amount of carnage and suffering that occurred as a result of the war, a pregnant woman enters the bar and confronts the Comedian about her pregnancy, a pregnancy for which he is responsible. Blake blows the woman off, intimating that he is leaving soon and doesn't care what state she is in. The woman then attacks him with a broken bottle, scarring him badly and leading to him drawing his gun on her as blood streams down his face. When he does, Manhattan protests, "Blake, don't ..." (56). However, the panel on the next page that follows this directive depicts a fairly passive Dr. Manhattan who only manages to weakly raise a hand in protest as Blake fires. Manhattan then completes his sentence "... do it" (57). This

image of Dr. Manhattan barely putting an effort in to try to stop Blake might seem to contradict Jon's appearance a couple of panels later in which the most often inexpressive Manhattan actually looks angry as he complains to his colleague, "Blake, she was pregnant. You gunned her down" (57). However, as his brief outerwear and lack of modesty in wearing it in public suggest, Manhattan's own self-awareness and his own sense of how little he truly cares about the Comedian's actions here is minimal at best, as Blake himself explains:

Yeah. Yeah. That's right. Pregnant Woman.
Gunned her down. Bang. And you know
what?

You watched me.

You coulda changed the gun into steam or
the bullets into mercury or the bottle into
snowflakes! You coulda teleported either of
us to Goddamn Australia ... but you didn't
lift a finger!

You don't really care about human beings,
I've watched you.

[...]

You're driftin' outta touch, Doc.

Once again, Jon's near nudity signals an apathy towards humans for whom, "a live body and a dead body contain the same number of particles" because it signals a lack of awareness of good and evil themselves due to his Adamic ignorance of these concepts in his present form.

Moore and Gibbons continue to contrast Manhattan's strange indifference to his body with Mason's autobiographi-

cal *Under the Hood* feature at the end of the first few issues of the *Watchmen*, in which Mason displays a different sensibility about self-awareness and modesty than Manhattan's. In the third part of *Under the Hood*, Mason begins his discussion of his first years fighting crime as Nite Owl through a description of his own self-awareness about his appearance: "From the moment that I decided somewhere deep inside myself that I wanted to try my hand at being a costumed adventurer, to the moment I first stepped out into the night with a mask on my face and the wind on my bare legs, took about three months. Three months of self-doubt and self-ridicule" (71). In an era in which adult men did not wear shorts in public, the late 1930s and 1940s—little boys might, but not an adult man—Mason is clearly aware that wearing what would essentially be assumed to be athletic wear or swimming attire in public makes him a ridiculous figure. However, so too does the idea of fighting crime in such an unorthodox manner. The unitard that bares Mason's legs to the night air and that Mason wears as Nite Owl resembles something like the costume worn by Robin the Boy Wonder in the 1940s *Batman* comics, a costume whose bottom is so often described as looking more like underwear than outerwear. No wonder Mason feels "self-doubt" in such immodest clothing. He further acknowledges the unusual qualities of baring oneself to the world, saying, "Dressing up in a costume takes a very extreme personality" (73). Basically, he seems to note here that being so outwardly outlandish requires an abnormal perspective on the world in general. As Fredrich Welzein notes about super heroic costuming in "Masque-*ulinities*: Changing Dress as a Display of Masculinity in the Superhero Genre": "The changing of clothes signifies a step outside the realms of normality" (245). In Matthew Joseph Wolf-Meyer's "Batman and Robin in the Nude, or Class and Its Exceptions," Wolf-Meyer similarly notes that "The costume, as a mark of difference,

separates the wearer from the culture at large" (192). However, some of the conventions of polite society would be transformed during the latter part of Mason's career, causing heretofore "abnormal" attitudes to become more common in American culture. Along with such change, though, came the arrival on the scene of Dr. Manhattan himself and an even stranger, more remote perspective on shame about the body. Note, for example, that Mason describes Manhattan's emergence as a superhero alongside changes in the culture concerning clothing: "The '60s, along with the mini-skirt and the Beatles, brought one thing to the world that was significant above all others—its name was Dr. Manhattan" (107). The mini skirt obviously showed the culture's changing attitudes about modesty and shame, an appropriate cultural parallel to a being who would magnify this attitudinal shift much more so and in a much stranger and, perhaps, even inhuman way.

DIFFERENCES IN THE PRESENTATION OF THESE TRADITIONS IN THE COMIC AND THE FILM

However, Moore and Gibbons don't treat this shift in attitude by the culture at large in a sudden or superficial way when describing the psychological development of Dr. Manhattan. As mentioned earlier, the fourth issue of the comic tells the history of how the man, Jon Osterman, would be transformed into the being known as Dr. Manhattan. This history is presented differently in terms of Manhattan's relationship to clothing in that issue than it is in Zack Snyder's cinematic vision of that portion of the story. In that issue of *Watchmen*, following the accident that disintegrates Osterman, portions of Osterman's body, first his brain and ganglia, then his circulatory system, and then his muscled skeleton begin appearing around the Gila Flats military base where he worked as a research scientist (119). These same scenes and the one that

follows it, when the completely reconstituted naked body of Dr. Manhattan reappears levitating in the base's cafeteria, all appear in Snyder's film as well (120). However, in the comic when Moore and Gibbons depict the taping of a television news feature that the government plans on using to introduce Dr. Manhattan to the public, Jon appears dressed in a plain, dark purple costume that basically covers him from head to toe. The outfit includes long sleeves, a belt, boots, and a helmet. The helmet is decorated with stripes and the interlocked oval-like shapes of the symbol commonly associated with the atomic structure. The cameraman asks, "How do you like your new costume? Pretty slick, huh?" to which Jon responds "I don't like it—especially this helmet. What's this symbol for?" (122). In other words, while the government is already attempting to get Jon into an appropriate costume for the public, Jon is already beginning to not see the purpose in defining his identity through his outward appearance in any way that is culturally familiar or acceptable to others. Indeed, he immediately discards that part of the costume, the helmet, before drawing a symbol of his own on his head. He burns a circle onto his forehead with a large dot at the circle's apex and another large dot at its center, saying "If I'm to have a symbol, it shall be one I respect." A scene somewhat like this one appears in the film. However, John appears wearing no shirt in this scene (and presumably only the black underwear-looking garment that he also wears in every one of the rest of similar scenes that represent his past in Snyder's film). In other words, Moore and Gibbons show us how Manhattan's shedding of outward culturally recognizable symbols and outward signs of propriety are part of a process in this being's history, not a sudden occurrence as Snyder's version of the story visually indicates. This indicates an evolution of Manhattan's indifference to humanity, not a sudden shift

away from his culture and community. This process takes time and the scenes in the comic show this idea more clearly.

A number of scenes that feature Manhattan at different points in his career during the 1960s in the comic are duplicated in the film, but the difference between these scenes drawn by Gibbons or filmed by Snyder are largely notable for the difference in what Manhattan wears. Two scenes in the comic book in which Manhattan appears at home with his girlfriend at that time, Janey Slater, show Manhattan in an undershirt and slacks (121) and then in a robe (123). However, also in the comic, Manhattan appears in other scenes in which he is in public, attending a charity event and fighting a group of mafiosos at a restaurant, in the full purple costume (sans helmet) from earlier (124). He also wears what appears to be a three-piece suit while shaking the president's hand in a later panel. In all of these scenes in the movie, Manhattan only wears his black undergarment, as if he has suddenly emerged as a superhero with his lack of shame and concern for others already on full display, his alien nature separating him from humanity already apparent to himself and to others. In the comic, though, these scenes initially suggest a fairly normal and human approach to clothing. He wears full dress in public situations and adopts a more comfortable slightly undressed state when in an intimate setting. However, it is telling that his first appearance with Janey is in pants and an undershirt, but that the next such scene of Manhattan in such a private setting already shows Jon in a greater state of undress, wearing the robe only. He is already progressing towards an indifference to the amount of clothing he wears. He exhibits this tendency first with someone who will be less offended by such less than modest displays, a girlfriend. However, his lack of concern for making people comfortable that are less familiar to him than a lover will grow over the course of the comic book's pages.

In fact, the next two sequences in issue four that move Jon's history forward in time continue to feature his steady discarding of portions of his uniform. When Jon appears in 1964 at the failed first meeting of the newest generation of crime fighters, he wears a black costume that consists only of a unitard, the top of which has a deep V-shaped neckline and no sleeves, the bottom of which bares his legs entirely, like underwear briefs. This costume very much resembles the one that Nite Owl was embarrassed by when his career as a crime fighter was in its infancy. Manhattan exhibits no sense of shame, though. Additionally, he wears no shoes indoors, a particularly striking no-no in Western culture generally, especially in an organized meeting of the sort that he is participating in in this scene. By contrast, in the film and in this same scene, Snyder once again represents Manhattan only wearing his black undergarment. However, Dr. Manhattan's thoughts in this scene in the comic clearly reveal that Moore and Gibbons are interested in demonstrating Manhattan's changing attitudes about the conventionality of dress in human culture through a more gradual process, since he thinks to himself: "It's 1962. I'm informing the Pentagon that I'll no longer be wearing the whole of my costume" (127). Indeed, the comment that follows this one in the same panel suggests his own sense of how his attitudes differ from the people around him, specifically from his peers, other superheroes who always hide themselves fully: "It's 1966. I'm in a room of people wearing disguises." In the middle of the 1960s, Moore and Gibbons clearly seem to indicate that Dr. Manhattan was less concerned with how others see him, discarding seemingly necessary portions of his clothing according to the rules of propriety of the time period (once again, bare legs, an undershirt, and no shoes would still remain extremely unorthodox for an adult male in public in the America of the mid 1960s)

while his fellow heroes hide their appearances in what Manhattan describes not as costumes, but as “disguises.”

Dr. Manhattan emerges almost fully undisguised in Moore’s and Gibbons’s work as Manhattan’s origin story moves ahead in time to his experiences in Vietnam. Like Snyder’s common depiction of Manhattan throughout his own version of this origin story, Dr. Manhattan appears only in his black undergarment in this scene in the comic. Unlike Snyder’s version, though, this is the first time in this part of the story of *Watchmen* in which Jon appears this way, as if Jon’s newest choice of attire is related to his actions in the Vietnam conflict. Indeed, the first panel in which Manhattan appears in this fourth issue, he is once again presented to the viewer as a gigantic figure towering far above the enemy soldiers who flee from him and even the friendly helicopters that fly near him, towering just as he did in the first panel introducing him in the comic book series. Once again, such a contrast in stature suggests a distance between himself and humanity in both cases. Additionally, he appears to be simply pointing a finger in this panel and causing an explosion of some magnitude to erupt on the ground before him. In short, he looks anything but human in his enlarged form and in his state of near nudity. That Jon appears godlike at this moment generates an almost holy aspect to Dr. Manhattan, differentiating him from both these “puny humans” and the human condition itself.

As the theologian R. C. Sproul points out in a lecture given on “The Meaning of Holiness,” “the primary meaning of the word [holy] is ‘separate,’ or, if you will, theological apartheid. That which is holy is that which is *other*—that which is different from something else” [emphasis added]. Jon explains the response that his enemies have to him in terms of the kind of holy terror that his appearance and powers evoke in them:

“Often, they ask to surrender themselves personally to me, their terror of me balanced by an almost religious awe. I am reminded of how the Japanese were reported to have viewed the atomic bomb, after Hiroshima” (130). In other words, Jon in his full power and exhibiting complete indifference towards human concerns does not appear like a human soldier, but instead not only as a potential god, but as a force of nature. After all, a force itself is innocent of concerns about good and evil. A tsunami destroys a coastal city. An atomic bomb disintegrates stone and flesh. Neither one concern themselves with the moral quality or consequences of their actions in the world. As noted earlier, nudity is a symbol for the idea of being morally ignorant in the Judeo-Christian tradition, as the story of Adam and Eve attests to. In fact, these musings by Jon about the responses of the soldiers to his power are immediately followed by a memory of the moment in which the Comedian murdered the mother of his child while Manhattan stood by: “It’s June, V.V. N. Night, and the Comedian is sliding a gun from its holster, blood streaming from his lacerated face.” This significant moment of Jon’s own recognition of his lack of moral concern for human life once again is being punctuated by the revelation of Jon’s final decision to wear next to nothing anymore when serving in his role as a superhero. His nudity and his lack of a personal sense of morality are most clearly wed in this moment when he emerges as something alien and inhuman, a force in the universe, rather than someone capable of judging his own actions. Ironically, at this moment he has regained the innocence of Eden.

CONCLUSION

In the end, *Watchmen*, a story told within the tradition of the superhero genre, a genre that is, of course, often seen as a moralistic one, ends with its characters, the colorful, seem-

ingly hyper-moralistic figures of comic book fiction, seemingly siding with the amoral pragmatism of Ozymandias and in doing so, perhaps, instead with the amoral ignorance of Dr. Manhattan. When confronted with the knowledge that Adrian Veidt, formerly the hero known as Ozymandias, has set the groundwork for world peace by murdering millions, Nite Owl, Silk Spectre, and Dr. Manhattan agree to compromise by covering up Veidt's "evil" doings in order to preserve that potential for peace. Only Rorschach, by refusing to go along with that cover up, exhibits a commitment to a more traditional sense of a moral order, as Nite Owl's and Rorschach's final words to each other attest to:

Nite Owl: "Rorschach, wait! Where are you going? This is too big to be hard assed about! We have to compromise ..."

Rorschach: "No. Not even in the face of Armageddon. Never compromise." (402)

Rorschach desires to preserve a moral order because he, unlike Jon, exists in the very human state of being aware of his own fragility and vulnerability in the universe, which in turn contributes to his sense of knowing what is right and what is terribly wrong. He feels that a positive practical outcome to the situation must be considered morally outrageous because he is committed to the notion of a set of rules and an order that exist outside of material reality, rules that need to be preserved because they serve as markers for and a way of understanding the human condition. Veidt, however, suggests a compromising attitude towards human action and its relation to morality: "I know I've struggled across the backs of murdered innocents to save humanity ... but someone had to take the weight of that necessary crime" (409). He follows this statement by appealing to Manhattan's very different

way of seeing the world from his fellows: "I'd hoped you'd understand, unlike Rorschach ..." To which Jon responds by describing his own state of being now, separate and aloof from being human: "[Y]es, I understand, without condoning or condemning. Human affairs cannot be my concern." This statement, of course, clearly acknowledges his disconnection from human values defined by a moral system that he no longer feels a concern for.

David A. Pizarro and Roy Baumeister observe in "Superhero Comics as Moral Pornography" that "the [...] superhero comic is a form of 'moral pornography'—built to satisfy our moralistic urges" (20) because "[i]n tales of superhero versus supervillain, moral good and moral bad are always the actions of easily identifiable moral agents with unambiguous intentions and actions" (19-20). Thus, in this moment, *Watchmen* becomes fully divorced from the moralistic conventions of the superhero story, conventions adopted originally seemingly for the sake of the majority of its traditional audience, the "morally innocent": children themselves. In their past Marvel and DC Comics had largely presented, described, and imbued in that audience an understanding of the knowledge of good and evil in broad, clear strokes tied to a clear sense of conscience. However, by divorcing the decision making of their universe's heroes from the sense of shame that within the Western tradition of morality is so deeply connected to such a notion of conscience, Moore and Gibbons present a more pragmatic, more utilitarian, and more sociological understanding of morality and how to improve society. The emblem of modesty and the civilizing elements of clothing exist to hide shame, and overdressed superheroes with their emblems and other trappings of moral messaging evaporate in this new context of the superhero story. Ozymandias and Manhattan have taken on a notion of a morality tied to a ra-

tionalistic concern for the greater good that has moved away from the intuited understanding of morality through the framework of personal guilt and shame. Thus, Moore's and Gibbons's story of the shedding of clothing (and, as a result, the shedding of the knowledge of morality) declares the notion that a knowledge of good and evil may be inconvenient when trying to rebuild Utopia from the remains of a broken world. In Eden, there are no villains and there are no heroes.

NOTES

- 1 For examples of the "unease" felt by journalists in 2009 about Dr. Manhattan's penis, one need look no further than articles like Alan B. Orange's "Watchmen's Zack Snyder Reveals the Truth about Dr. Manhattan's Enormous Manpower!" in which the author which says, "Today, during a first look sneak peak at footage from the film, Manhattan's origins were presented in full, and one amazing fact can't be over looked. The big blue guy is hung in illuminated lengths of greatness. Let's just say that Tommy Lee and John Holmes combined couldn't challenge this guy to a saber duel." Similarly in "Superjunk: Watchmen Goes Full Frontal," Ben Walters declares that "[g]ay guys who geek out for superheroes are about to get an eye-ful." Finally, on a web site called *The Beat: The Blog of Comics Culture*, Heidi McDonald's article "Breaking News: Movie Dr. Manhattan Hung Like a Horse," is actually accompanied by an image of a large blue condom.

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