

Study Guide

Watchmen



Feature movies are a medium, an art and a business. Each of these elements plays a role. As a medium, movies represent ideas through the codes and conventions of sound and moving image. As art, they make personal and cultural statements to their audiences. As businesses, they create work for their creators and profits for their investors.

This guide, which extends the ideas presented in the *Watchmen* episode of *Watchmen*, may be used by teachers as they support their students, by parents who want to discuss the movie with their children, or by serious viewers who want to think beyond the screen.

Plot Synopsis: In an alternate 1985, the US has won the war in Viet Nam. Richard Nixon is president. A group of costumed superheroes has been banned from its vigilante activities by Federal law and forced to pursue alternative careers. The Comedian, who has become a government agent, is murdered. Ozymandias, who has parlayed his celebrity into a fortune through action figures, fashion and perfumes, barely escapes an attempted murder. Rorschach, who has defied the ban and continued crime fighting, sets out to discover why his former colleague was killed and to warn the others that they might be next.

A. Music

Some very recognizable music is used in *Watchmen*. *Unforgettable*, a classic Nat King Cole song, plays as the Comedian fights a masked attacker. Bob Dylan's *The Times They Are A-Changin'* plays as viewers see a panoply of historic moments, including the Comedian shooting JFK from the grassy knoll. Simon and Garfunkel's *The Sounds of Silence* plays as the Comedian is buried in a rainy cemetery. Leonard Cohen sings *Hallelujah* when Dan and Laurie make love in the Owl Ship. Jimi Hendrix' version of Bob Dylan's *All Along the Watchtower* plays as Dr. Manhattan's clockwork crystal palace grows on Mars. My Chemical Romance's version of Bob Dylan's *Desolation Row* plays during the prison riot.

Unforgettable is a well-known love song, yet it is played as two men try to kill one another in ultra-violent hand-to-hand combat.

What might be the effect on viewers of the contrast between the moods of the song and the violent action?

Some of the fight is presented in slow motion. Does the song make the fight seem like a romantic dance?

Does the song suggest that the Comedian will be unforgettable, or ironically suggest that he will be forgotten?

The Comedian says, "My life is just one big joke." Does *Unforgettable* provide a context that builds on that notion of life as a joke?

How do the other well-known Jimi songs influence the viewers' experience of the events that they accompany?

Why do you think the director chose three songs by the same artist (Bob Dylan) rather than other songwriters?

Why do you think the director chose only one of Dylan's versions of his songs, and selected cover versions of the other two?

Consider the use of these other artists' songs in the movie:
 Janis Joplin's version of Kris Kristofferson's *Me & Bobby McGee*
 KC & The Sunshine Band's *I'm Your Boogie Man*
 Billie Holiday's *You're My Thrill*
 The Philip Glass Ensemble's *Pruit Igoe & Prophecies*
 Budapest Symphony Orchestra's *Ride of the Valkyries*

B. Cinematography

The graphic novel version of *Watchmen* contains some very deliberate visual elements. The graphic artists chose to present the story on 3-panel by 3-panel pages, occasionally combining panels vertically or horizontally for special purposes. They also rejected the standard graphic novel primary colour palette and used secondary colours, specifically purple, green and orange.

Zack Snyder decided to restrict the camera movement to mirror the graphic novel panels. He set the camera, then let the action play out within the frame. One exception occurred when the camera panned from the mortally-wounded JFK to the Comedian holding a rifle. What is the effect of the pan in this scene? Why was it necessary for the movie to establish a real-time connection between JFK and the Joker?

Where else do you notice exceptions to Snyder's intention of letting the action play out in a fixed frame?

Darkness is also a recurring idea in *Watchmen*, and the story is very dark, or nihilistic. Most present-day scenes occur at night, and often in the rain.

How do these scenes support the feelings and themes of the movie?

C. Set Design

The graphic novel version of *Watchmen* contains some very deliberate visual elements. The graphic artists rejected the standard primary colour graphic novel palette and used secondary colours, specifically purple, green and orange.

How did the set designer use the secondary colour palette to support the unhappiness expressed by many of the characters?

D. Sound and Music

At the end of *Watchmen*, Rorschach has refused to compromise his morality, Dr. Manhattan has abandoned Earth, and Ozymandias is profiting from the re-building of New York. Some critics have said that *Watchmen* provides an opportunity for viewers to re-examine super heroism and the super hero film genre. They suggest that the movie uses the thoughts and actions of the heroes to critique the notion of heroism, responsibility and morality.

Watchmen appears at a time when viewers have had continuing opportunities to enjoy the on-screen adventures of Superman, Batman, Iron Man, and Spider Man, and more adventures will appear, specifically Batman's adventures as the villain who killed Harvey Dent in *The Dark Knight*.

Consider the statements and actions of each of *Watchmen's* heroes. Place the heroes on a scale from one to one hundred, where one represents amorality, or someone who is without morals, and one hundred represents complete morality, or a person whose moral compass is consistent and pure. The heroes are Laurie Jupiter/Silk Spectre II, Dr. Manhattan/Jon Osterman, Adrian Veidt/Ozymandias, Walter Kovacs/Rorschach, Edward Blake/The Comedian and Dan Dreiberger/Nite Owl.

Which heroes were easy to place?

Which ones were difficult to place? Why?

Did you find the heroes spanned the entire range of morality, or are they skewed more to one end or the other?

Are they spread equally across the range, or are they crowded together?

What might the heroes' statements and actions, and your placement of them on the range, tell viewers about the trials and tribulations of heroism?

How might the characters' experiences discourage people from becoming a super hero?

How might *Watchmen* cause viewers to re-think their responses to the actions and morality of Superman, Batman and the other superheroes?

Might Jonathan and Christopher Nolan's decision to make Batman an intentional villain at the end of *The Dark Knight* have been influenced by *Watchmen*?

E. A Spectre of Humanity

Watchmen is not just an exploration of heroism. It also examines questions of humanity, sexuality and humane behaviour.

1. Humanity

At the beginning of the story, Jon and Laurie are lovers. Their relationship crashes, however, when Laurie leaves Jon and moves in with Dan.

If Rorschach is *Watchmen*'s repository of morality, is Laurie its repository of humanity?

Consider each character's personal relationships.

What is the role of companionship in their lives?

Why does Jon lose the only human connection he has in life?

What might viewers learn from his experiences?

How does Dan change when he and Laurie get together?

How does his relationship with Laurie affect his heroism?

2. Sexuality

There are several references to sexuality in *Watchmen*. Walter's mother sells herself for sex. The Comedian tries to rape Silk Spectre I, and murders a woman he has impregnated. Laurie and Jon have failed sex. Laurie and Dan have on-screen sex.

What meanings might viewers make about the roles and significance of sex in people's lives?

As is done in many movies, Laurie and Dan's sex could have been suggested in an after-sex conversation. Why is it important that Laurie and Dan have on-screen sex?

3. Humane Behaviour

Humane behaviour is behaviour that exemplifies kindness and compassion.

Rorschach is a terse man who seems to specialize in finger-breaking. The Comedian, who seems to delight in violent acts and cigars, says, 'My life is just one big joke.' Ozymandias claims to be following Alexander the Great's example in saving humanity from itself. Dr. Manhattan goes along with Ozymandias' plan. Nite Owl and Silk Spectre II break Rorschach out of prison, then take him to Antarctica.

Which of these characters is behaving humanely and which are behaving inhumanely?

What might viewers learn about humane behaviour?

F. Dr. Manhattan: Representing a transmogrified man

Dr. Manhattan is the only Watchman who is a true superhero. The others have human talents and needs, but Dr. Manhattan has been set apart from them by a lab accident that has replaced his body with a mass of energy. As such, he can teleport himself and others anywhere. He can levitate and manipulate objects with his mind. He can disintegrate people and objects at will. The accident seems to have destroyed elements of his humanity as well as his corporeal body and viewers discover that he struggles to maintain his connection with humanity. He finds that he no longer cares for what happens to humanity, even though he knows he is partly responsible for the problems.

The character of Dr. Manhattan was created by motion capture, a process that was previously used in *Polar Express* and *Happy Feet*. Motion capture, or mocap, involves placing light-emitting diodes all over an actor's body. As the actor moves, multiple cameras capture the diodes' movements and record them in a computer database, creating a mathematical description of the actor's actions. The mathematical records can then be used to create an image, called a wire frame, of an animated character. In the case of *Polar Express*, this process allowed Tom Hanks to portray several of the story's animated characters, because different skins could be rendered onto the wire frames. In the case of *Happy Feet*, the process allowed human dancers to become animated penguins.

In *Watchmen*, mocap allowed the human-scale Billy Crudup to become a gigantic blue man in the jungles of Viet Nam or a human-sized blue man on Mars. In both cases, the process kept the character's movements natural and believable.

How did the costume designer help viewers understand that Dr. Manhattan was very different from the other characters?

The designer gave the nuclear scientist, an academic working at a desk job, the body of a muscle builder. Is that credible? Is it appropriate? Why might viewers expect to see Dr. Manhattan with a buff body and be disappointed by someone with an unmuscled body?

We see Dr. Manhattan in full frontal nudity. Male nudity is rare in feature movies. Do you think the fact that Dr. Manhattan is a giant blue man might make it easier for viewers to watch him?

Why do you think none of the other male characters were shown nude? (E.g., Dan might have been shown nude when in the Owl Ship with Laurie.)

Dr. Manhattan wore a cover over his genitals in some scenes, but not in all scenes.

Is it important that he sometimes be seen nude? What might his nudity symbolize?

G. Rorschach's Mask

Rorschach appears to have gotten his name from his mask or to have manifested his name in his mask. The shapes on his mask, which is a Rorschach-looking blot, shifts continually as he walks and talks. The animators tried to mirror Rorschach's moods with the changing blots, using them as other actors use facial expressions to signal their moods.

Do you think viewers will understand and appreciate the shifting blots on Rorschach's face?

Did you find that the shifting blots helped you understand his character?

Did the blots help you sympathize with his character?

Did you find them useful, intriguing or distracting?

For more information on Watchmen, visit watchmenmovie.warnerbros.com

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