

Watchmen comments

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 16 Sep 1999

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Alex David Groce — 16 Sep 1999, 12:38

Aha. My own classification (which I avoided giving in the original post to get a feel for whether anyone was interested) is that the difference between Severian and Veidt can be broken down into a few main categories.

(1) is probably (for me at least) the most emotionally relevant: Severian lacks Veidt's triumphant <glee> at the results of his actions. It is impossible to imagine Severian, as Veidt does, "mugging the camera" and shouting "I DID IT!" While Veidt does have concerns about the harm he's caused, he is usually able to dismiss them; Severian seems more genuinely disturbed by the destruction. Case in point: the people Severian personally kills in BOTNS have varying degrees of guilt. Some of them are probably less "deserving" of death than the Comedian. However, although Severian often takes a great degree of pride in his execution techniques or combat skill (much less the latter), he never seems to simply enjoy having triumphed over a personal enemy. In fact, Severian's "foes" fight for him in the end (Baldanders is the best case in point here--although Severian tries his best to kill him, one is fairly sure he'd be grieved if he did so). Veidt expresses an odd kind of respect for the Comedian, but it's clear from the images of the murder and from nuances like the NOVA EXPRESS interview that Veidt got a personal charge out of defeating the man in combat--there is a reason he didn't just shoot Blake. It's this personal glee, and Veidt's apparent (probably justified) hate of Nixon/Blake and the political machinery that, for me, lifts him from being wrong to being evil. He hates his enemies (while respecting them) and thinks that he, by contrast, really is perfect. It's impossible to imagine Severian giving "the Autarch's method" for becoming perfect or shilling action figures (in one sense, Rorschach is right to dismiss Veidt's depth, but wrong to underestimate his cleverness, in the first chapter.)

(2) Veidt, by virtue of faith in his own smartness, seems much more convinced that an end to not just the political tensions of the moment, but to fighting and war and all bad things, is right around the corner as a result of his cutting the Gordian knot. One has a feeling that at least part of the reason Veidt chose such a weird, lateral, (psychopathic) plan was precisely because it was something "only he could think of" and thus it must lead to, not utopia, but something sounding suspiciously like the Happy Good End Time of all the other 20th century efforts to "immanentize the eschaton." But we the readers have no reason to be certain that Veidt's faith is justified--the assumption that the possibility of nth- dimension Cthuluid horrors would unite mankind forever in peaceful unity (even if Veidt plans on nastily repeating the threat every now and then to remind everyone to be nice) isn't axiomatic. The subtext strongly implies that like Alexander, Veidt may have united the world briefly, but he has limits and may cause things to get <worse>. Severian, on the other hand, who has much more impressive reason to suspect that the path he's chosen is right (Master Ash's future, the Green Man, Tzad) and fairly clear indications that the Increate is "on his side" is still far from Veidt's hubris. Severian is aware that whatever is going on is not completely in his control, although he, in some ways, has more power behind him than Veidt does (for instance, Severian has some genuine knowledge of the future, while Veidt blocks the only access he has--Dr. Manhattan).

(3) The last point is that Veidt precipitates the crisis. Perhaps Veidt has done some amazing psychohistory by watching his TV screens and knows war is coming, no matter what (or, more likely, suspects that Dr. Manhattan is eventually going to go build his own worlds), but from what we see, the crisis (long, long planned, mind you--he hired people years before the present of WATCHMEN in order to give them cancer) is a direct result of Veidt running Jon off the planet. It looks suspiciously like Veidt is doing the equivalent of the Wodehouse story where Bertie Wooster pushes some kid into the lake so his friend can save the kid from drowning and impress a girl. Only Veidt is pushing the world to the brink of holocaust so he can "save" it. Besides the obvious usefulness to throwing Rorshach off the track, I think this same motivation is what pushes Veidt to hire the assassin to kill himself--he wants to show that he can't be killed. Severian certainly didn't cause the Old Sun to slowly die, and, as someone else said, seems to be chosen to save the world, rather than deciding that the world has to be saved, and he's the one to do it. Severian, I would argue, generally does the just thing (with lots of exceptions), and ends up accidentally saving the world. His means, in fact, seem to determine the ends--the implication is that had Severian chosen a ruthlessly goal-oriented approach to bringing the New Sun, he would have failed and only ended up another Typhon.

Veidt, on the other hand, subjugates his moral concerns, and the just action of the moment (and Veidt is clearly aware, as evidenced by his last question to Jon, that his actions have been unjust in this sense) to his goal of saving the world--but in the end, it seems that (A) he may have been the only reason it needed his brand of saving and (B) he may not have saved it after all. I suppose though, that in the end it boils down to a conviction that no just order can be built on, in Mandelstam's phrase "mounds of human heads." Rorshach, who is "crazy," seems to be the only Watchman who intuits that by the logic of story, at any rate, that the monstrosity of its foundation will pervert the resulting world.

You really have to hand it to Moore, though, for balancing things nicely-- given his politics, to make Rorshach as hero a very plausible interpretation of WATCHMEN really is brilliant. It shows that he, like Wolfe, is not a simplifier of human complexity. And although he's evil, at least Veidt's much closer to good than our friend Typhon. Typhon may or may not be a sadist, but I'm pretty sure he would never have asked Dr. Manhattan if he did the right thing (Veidt's most redeeming moment). It's easy to understand how one could see WATCHMEN as on Veidt's side.

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

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