Discovering Trauma of Nazism and the Cold War in

*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*

*and Watchmen*

Supervisor:
Dr. Philippe Codde
Dr. Kate Macdonald
Dr. Martin Hellberg Olsson

Paper submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of “Master in de Taal- en Letterkunde: Engels-Spaans” by Nele Van Den Bossche

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Preface

I would not have been able to write this master thesis without the help of others. First of all, I would like to thank dr. Philippe Codde, my supervisor, for his guidance but also for allowing me to do things my way. He is also responsible for fueling my interest in trauma theory with his course “Postmemory and Postmodern: Third Generation Jewish American Trauma Narratives”. I would also like to thank my parents, who have helped me in every way they could. A special thanks goes to Jan Trenson, a friend whose technological skill and knowledge has solved many computer problems. The last person I would like to thank is Sammy, who has supported, guided and loved me throughout the making of this thesis. Thank you.
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Introduction

My interest in trauma theory was piqued when, during literature courses, a professor would briefly touch upon some aspects of trauma theory. Therefore, when the time to choose a subject for my bachelor paper came, I jumped on the opportunity to learn more about trauma theory. The novel I researched, Anita Desai’s Baumgartner’s Bombay, dealt with the Holocaust, a collective trauma that has held my attention for years. My understanding of trauma theory and the influence of the Holocaust on literature increased because of dr. Codde’s course “Postmemory and Postmodern: Third Generation Jewish American Trauma Narratives”. Through dr. Codde, I discovered Michael Chabon’s novel The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay.

I came across the second ‘novel’ that is discussed in this thesis by accident. Last year I was supposed to go to an AC/DC concert. We were headed to Antwerp when we heard the concert was cancelled. We then decided to go to the cinema, where we watched a superhero movie: Watchmen. I found out that the movie was an adaptation of a widely acclaimed graphic novel with the same title. The ‘comic’ made quite the impression on me. So after I had read Chabon’s novel, I decided I wanted to compare it to Watchmen in my master thesis.

Both works – although they use a different medium – explore traumatic events. In Kavalier & Clay the Holocaust constitutes the main collective trauma, whereas Watchmen deals with the aftermath of another major traumatic event of the Second World War: the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. When the Second World War led to the Cold War nuclear war became a constant threat, as did the possibility of mass destruction. In Watchmen this scenario becomes very realistic and only another traumatic event, that causes the death of millions of people, can stop it from happening.

In this thesis I have researched how these different traumata are expressed in both works. I discovered some similarities, which will be discussed in part IV. What immediately drew my attention is that in both novels, the characters turn to superheroes and comics to deal with their trauma. However, there are three other parts to this thesis. In the first part the theoretical framework for trauma theory is provided. The concept of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and its symptoms is discussed, as well as important notions such as LaCapra’s “acting out” and “working through”, Laub’s ideas on testimony, and the importance of the
construction of a narrative, along with the concepts of doubling and guilt. This theoretical introduction is based on the works of Caruth, Laub, LaCapra, Lifton, etc.

Part II is dedicated to the analysis of Watchmen. It begins with an introduction to the creators of the graphic novel, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, and is followed by a plot summary of the twelve-issue comic. The next section contains the analysis of the work, in which I apply the theory described in part I to the events of the comic. The traumatized characters are discussed individually. In addition to these individual traumata, I briefly discuss the collective traumatic events that have influenced the narrative.

Michael Chabon’s novel is analyzed in the third part. Again, this section begins with an introduction to Chabon and plot outline. However, since Kavalier & Clay has already been researched by Andreas Hooftman in his master thesis, I have focused on a select group of features of the novel, such as doubling, escapism and the golem.

The fourth and final part discusses the similarities between both works. The most important similarity is the characters’ reliance on superheroes and/or comics to deal with their trauma. This reliance is not only found in fictional characters but can also be found in real life, where superheroes are often used with a therapeutic function. Part IV is followed by the conclusion of this thesis.
Part I: Theoretical concepts of trauma.

1.1 Trauma and PTSD

Although the original meaning of the Greek word trauma refers to a wound, its use today has been amplified. This primary meaning is maintained in the medical use of trauma when referring to a “physical injury” (“Trauma,” def. 2). Nowadays, however, it also stands for a “deeply distressing or disturbing experience” or used as a mass noun an “emotional shock following a stressful event or a physical injury, which may lead to longtime neurosis” (“Trauma ,” def. 1).

An introduction to trauma theory should start with Sigmund Freud. His research on neurosis was fundamental to the development of trauma theory. After exploring hysteria as a form of neurosis and publishing Studies in Hysteria, “The Aetiology of Hysteria”, Freud began to research the “shell shock” many war veterans had developed during and after the First World War. The behavior these veterans presented, in particular their traumatic dreams, flashbacks, and their high suicide rates, defied Freud’s concept of the “pleasure principle”, which states that the essential point of human behavior is desire, the search for pleasure. He refers to this drive as “Eros”. As Caruth says: “The returning traumatic dream startles Freud because it cannot be understood in terms of any wish or unconscious meaning, but is, purely and inexplicably, the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits” (Caruth 5). In Beyond the Pleasure Principle Freud introduces the “death drive” or “Thanatos” in order to explain the veterans’ destructive behavior.

The war in Vietnam and the many traumatized veterans led to further investigation of trauma. In 1987 the term “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” or PTSD was introduced by the American Psychiatric Association in their Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM III). The original definition of PTSD was “a response to an event “outside of the range of usual human experience”. This definition was highly controversial and resulted in a new definition in DSM IV. According to Caruth the precise definition is still contested, but she offers a general description of PTSD as:

“a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the
experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event” (Caruth 4).

The diagnostic criteria for PTSD in DSM IV mentions the same symptoms accompanied by more detailed descriptions. The avoidance of stimuli or numbing, for example, can lead to a “markedly diminished interest in significant activities, a feeling of detachment or estrangement of others, restricted feeling of affect and sense of a foreshortened future”. The increased arousal to stimuli can be observed in concentration problems, sleeping difficulties, hypervigilance, aggressive behavior, etc. The nature and number of symptoms varies: trauma survivors may exhibit more, less, or different symptoms.

Caruth states that the pathology cannot be defined by the traumatic event itself. It lies in “the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it”. (4) The event does not register at the time, and the victim walks away “apparently unharmed”. Because the event has not been assimilated by the mind, the survivor experiences the effects, the symptoms of PTSD belatedly. Freud refers to the period between the traumatic event and the manifestation of the effects of the experience, the so-called “incubation period”, as a period of “latency” (qtd. in Caruth 7). According to Caruth this “latency” is inherent in the experience itself: the forgetting of the experience does not happen after the occurrence, but it is precisely because the forgetting takes place during the event that the experience is traumatic (8).

The traumatic event cannot be interpreted or assimilated by the mind because, as Dori Laub explains:

“The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of “normal” reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lend it a quality of “otherness,” a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside of the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery” (2:69).

Because these parameters the mind usually employs to assimilate experiences, such as time and causality, do not apply to the traumatic event, the event appears to have no beginning or ending, and therefore no closure. As a result the survivor is trapped in the event that continues
in the present (69). It is this lack of interpretation of the event that is responsible for the literality of the flashbacks and dreams: “the delay or incompletion in knowing, or even in seeing, an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely true to the event” (Caruth 5).

This literality, that characterizes the return of the event, seems paradoxical in relation to the numbing that occurs at the time of the event because the survivor is unable to register what happens completely. Caruth describes this paradox: “that in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness” (6). Numbing and the lack of registration lead, according to Laub, to a “collapse of witnessing”. When talking about the Holocaust, he calls it “an event without a witness”: “being inside the event” makes it impossible to be a witness to oneself, thus making it impossible to fully witness the event (3: 81-82).

1.2 LaCapra’s acting out versus working through

Dominick LaCapra tries to formulate two processes to deal with trauma. He distinguishes between “acting out” and “working through”. He describes “acting out” as “Erlebnis”, trauma as experience rather than “Erfahrung”. As Erlebnis trauma is a shock to the system and may be acted out or compulsively repeated in so-called traumatic memory. Erfahrung involves more viable articulations of experience allowing openings to possible futures” (117-118). The continuous re-experiencing of the traumatic event in its literality – or “acting out”- is the mind’s attempt at assimilating the traumatic event, an attempt to integrate what could not be integrated at the time of the experience.

“Working through” trauma implies working on those posttraumatic symptoms in order to integrate the traumatic event in the survivor’s life, thus reducing the compulsive repetition. (119). It does, however, not imply a total healing of the traumatic wounds, nor “the integration or transformation of past trauma into a seamless narrative memory and total meaning or knowledge”(121). Total knowledge of the traumatic event is not necessary. Moreover, LaCapra warns against conflating belated recognitions with teleology, against applying future knowledge onto the interpretation of the traumatic event (121).

1 “Erlebnis” and “Erfahrung” are terms LaCapra adopts from Walter Benjamin
The literality inherent in the flashbacks and memories and other processes of acting out, adds a sense of “fidelity” to trauma. There is a tendency to sacralize trauma, to turn the event into something sublime. Victims seem to view the process of working through as a betrayal of their traumatic past, as opposed to process of acting out, which stays absolutely true to the events. LaCapra believes that working through tends to counteract this tendency to sacrilize trauma and treat trauma as something sublime, a tendency he observes in Caruth and criticizes (119-121).

Nevertheless, it must be observed that LaCapra does not view acting out and working through as binaries, nor are they phases in a linear process (130). The objective is to move from Erlebnis to Erfahrung, and narration plays an important role in this movement (118). The importance of constructing a narrative will be discussed next.

Dominick LaCapra has introduced several important concepts regarding trauma. The very important notion of empathic unsettlement will be covered when talking about bearing witness, as will the concepts of virtual and vicarious experience.

1.3 Constructing a narrative

Constructing a narrative plays an important role in the movement from Erlebnis to Erfahrung. In their essay The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma, Van der Kolk and van der Hart explore the importance of the construction of a narrative when dealing with trauma. They discuss Pierre Janet’s contributions.

Janet distinguishes between narrative memory, habit memory, and traumatic memory. Habit memory is a trait humans share with animals. Narrative memory, however, is inherently human. It consists of mental constructs, and people use it to make sense of experience. Familiar and expectable situations are easily integrated into the existing cognitive schemes, whereas frightening or novel experiences are not assimilated with little effort. Van der Kolk and van der Hart describe traumatic memory in the following manner:

“Under extreme conditions, existing meaning schemes may be entirely unable to accommodate frightening experiences, which causes the memory of these experiences to be stored differently and not be available for retrieval under ordinary conditions: it becomes dissociated from conscious awareness and voluntary control” (2:160).
As a result of not having been integrated properly, these experiences may later appear through recollections or reenactments (160). Traumatic memory is inflexible and invariable, and because the patient does not address anybody, it is not a social activity. Narrative memory, however, does serve a social function and is adaptive to different circumstances. Furthermore, traumatic memory is triggered under circumstances reminiscent of the original traumatic event (163). The mechanism that produces the traumatic memory is what Janet called “restitutio ad integrum”: when one element, reminiscent of the traumatic event is evoked, it sets in motion all the other elements (qtd. in Van der Kolk and van der Hart 2:163).

Narrative is essential for human understanding. Mental experiences are organized by using symbolic and linguistic modes. When faced with a traumatic event, an event that cannot be interpreted by means of the existing cognitive schemes, people experience “speechless terror” (172). The memory cannot organize the event on a linguistic level, in words or symbols. Consequently it organizes the experience on a somatosensory or iconic level, in nightmares, flashbacks, etc. The construction of a narrative, the use of symbolic language is crucial – though not easy- for the integration of the traumatic experience, for the movement from traumatic memory to narrative memory (172-173).

Traumatic memory is invariable and it is perceived to be timeless because the parameters we use to understand reality such as time, space, causality, and sequence are rendered inadequate by the traumatic experience. Narrative is characterized precisely by these parameters: it is a linear sequence of events with a beginning and an end. Thus, by constructing a narrative the survivor is able to place the trauma in space and time. Nevertheless, survivors tend to have a reluctant attitude towards the transformation of trauma into narrative memory. Narrative memory could never have the precision, the literality that is an intrinsic feature of traumatic memory. It is this loss of precision that is viewed as betrayal of the trauma by the survivors. Van der Kolk and van der Hart wonder about this betrayal of trauma through narrative: “whether it is not a sacrilege of the traumatic experience to play with the reality of the past?” (qtd. in Caruth 154) In addition, this loss of precision is accompanied by what Caruth calls “the event’s incomprehensibility”(154). Traumatic events defy understanding: to try to integrate the trauma would betray the fact that the event cannot be understood.
The construction of a narrative puts the survivor in a difficult position. On the one hand survivors do not want to betray their trauma by talking about it, and their response to trauma is silence. On the other hand they feel a need to speak about it (154).

1.4 Bearing witness

1.4.1 Testimony.

Although the construction of a narrative is very important for the survivor, the act of bearing witness is perhaps even more crucial because the survivor not only tells his story, he tells his story to somebody. Dori Laub talks about “the imperative to tell and to be heard” and states that “the survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive” (3:78). They need to know their stories because they are haunted by their past. However, words never seem adequate enough to capture the event that defies “thought, memory and speech” (78).

Despite the fact that the event could not be articulated at the time of its occurrence because the survivor was inside of the events, it is essential that the narrative is told and heard. The survivor needs his testimony to be heard, to be witnessed by the listener. This need for witnesses goes back to Laub’s claim that the Holocaust was an event without a witness. The outside world was unresponsive to the situation, and being inside the event made it impossible for one to “bear witness to oneself” (81-82). Since the event took place without a witness, the survivor needs a witness to his testimony. By bearing witness the survivor gains knowledge about the events that are projected onto “the blank screen” that is the listener (2:57). Because the listener is so important for the testimony, a bonding between narrator and listener is required, according to Laub: “Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other – in the position of one who hears” (70). The survivor needs to have a relationship of trust with the listener.

1.4.2 The task of the listener

The process of testimony – by method of association – is delicate. The narrator cannot give a fluent narrative, and it is the listener’s task not to interfere with what the narrator is trying to say. As such he must be “unobtrusive” and “nondirective”. However, at the same
time he must be “imminently present, active, in the lead”. (Laub 2:71). Even though the listener must guide the narrator to some extent, he must not direct the plot of the narrative. His task is to direct the associations, which help the development of the testimony. The listener must be capable of picking up on the cues the narrator is giving such as hesitations, redirections, silences, pauses, and slips of the tongue. He must be able to interpret these cues and guide the narrator in a certain way. When the narrative wavers, the listener must stimulate the narrator to continue to verbalize the trauma fragments and, by doing this, to dig deeper into the trauma. On other occasions, however, when these fragments might get out of hand, the interviewer must reign them in. Laub defines the interviewer’s task as follows:

“Where such circles of associations and reflections intersect, converge, a latent and forgotten memory might suddenly emerge – come back to life – establishing a further link in the testimonial chain. The listener must firmly be there to confirm it, assist in its full deliverance. He has to move quietly and decisively in bringing things together, yet not succumb to the temptation and the danger of a premature foreclosure, which might be reached, alternatively through a cognitive suppression, through an emotional catharsis, or through a crushed surrender to the ubiquity of silence” (72).

1.4.3 Bearing witness to testimony: empathic unsettlement and defenses

Because, ideally, the interviewer should be somebody the testifier trusts and has an intimate bond with, the trauma can have a great impact on the listener. The interviewer bears witness to the testimony of a survivor and thus becomes a secondary witness. He/she might suffer from secondary traumatization: he/she can experience some of the effects of trauma without having experienced the traumatic event. Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between virtual and vicarious experience of trauma as possibilities of secondary traumatization (125).

In the vicarious experience of trauma the secondary witness might identify with the victim to the extent that he/she believes to have undergone the traumatic events and consequently becomes a surrogate victim. In the virtual experience of trauma, LaCapra states, “one may imaginatively put oneself in the victim’s position while respecting the difference between self and other and recognizing that one cannot take the victim’s place or speak in the victim’s voice” (125). The vicarious experience of trauma is a less than preferable reaction to testimony and should be avoided, whereas the virtual experience is a “desirable or even necessary response” to trauma testimony (125). LaCapra has coined the term “empathic
unsettlement” for such virtual experiences of trauma. This desirable form of empathy does not involve unmediated identification and therefore respects the otherness of the victims. It implies an “empathic unsettlement in the face of traumatic limit events, their perpetrators, and their victims” and a form of identification that LaCapra calls “heteropathic identification”, which respects the boundaries between the self and the other (135). Because psychic trauma is highly personal secondary witnesses can never gain full understanding and knowledge of the trauma. Nevertheless, one might obtain some level of understanding through this desirable empathy, but one should keep in mind that the traumatic event defies understanding.

Bearing witness to a testimony about a traumatic event has an impact on the listener: he is confronted with questions he can no longer avoid such as the question of facing death, helplessness, etc. The narration of the traumatic events takes away the listener’s sense of safety. The listener experiences defensive feelings and uses listening defenses, so that he can carry out his task as an interviewer. Laub sums up six possible listening defenses. Firstly, the listener may experience “a sense of total paralysis”. A second listening defense is the feeling of outrage and of anger, which is directed at the narrator. A third possibility is a “sense of total withdrawal and numbness”. Listeners who employ the fourth listening defense may look upon the narrator with a feeling of awe and fear in order to maintain a distance and, by doing so, avoid the intimate bond the sharing of the story causes. Others may use “foreclosure through facts” and focus on factual details of the account so that they would not have to deal with the human experience of the narrative. The last listening defense Laub mentions is a hyperemotional response to the testimony, which causes the testifier to feel drowned in the “listener’s defensive affectivity” (72-73). These defenses resemble the symptoms trauma survivors experience. These symptoms are also generated by a traumatic experience, although a secondary traumatic experience. As a result, empathic unsettlement can lead to what can be called “secondary traumatization” (LaCapra 130).

1.5 The double

Overwhelming traumatic events have repercussions on the victim’s personality. Robert Jay Lifton thinks about trauma in terms of a theory of the self. He claims that a traumatized self is generated when a person undergoes extreme traumatic events. The events cause the sense of self to be changed, and a traumatized self is created. About this traumatized self Lifton states that “it’s not a totally new self, it’s what one brought into the trauma as
affected significantly and painfully, confusedly, but in a very primal way, by that trauma” (qtd. in Caruth 137). A form of doubling occurs in the trauma victim, and this traumatized self may present enormous differences compared to the person one was before, such as ethical contradictions. Lifton suggests that through this doubling perpetrators adapt to evil. The Nazi doctors, for example, needed a new self so that they would not feel guilty about their experiments or suffer a mental breakdown (qtd. in Caruth 137).

The creation of a new self is not restricted to perpetrators to deal with the ethical repercussion of their atrocities. Victims of traumatic events create a traumatized self in order to survive as well. Rape victims often experience “dissociation between mind and body, resulting in an out-of-body experience”: they think they were witnesses to someone else’s violation instead of being the victims of rape themselves (LaCapra 124). Furthermore, Lifton notes that Holocaust survivors in their testimonies often claim that they were “a different person in Auschwitz” (qtd. in Caruth 137). In order to work through trauma, survivors need to reintegrate this traumatized self.

1.6 Guilt.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust it was observed in the survivors’ testimonies that they felt shame and guilt as a result of their survival. They feel as if they should have intervened, done something more to save those that died in the camps. This phenomenon is referred to as “survivor’s guilt” is described by Bruno Bettelheim, a psychoanalyst who survived Dachau and Buchenwald:

“One cannot survive the concentration camp without feeling guilty that one was so incredibly lucky when millions perished, many of them in front of one’s eyes… In the camps one was forced, day after day, for years, to watch the destruction of others, feeling – against one’s better judgment – that one should have intervened, feeling guilty for not having done so, and, most of all, feeling guilty for having also felt glad that it was not oneself who perished” (qtd. in Leys 5).

This “survivor’s guilt” is not only frequently experienced by Holocaust survivors but also by other survivors of traumatic events that happen to more than one person at a time.

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2 In Watchmen we can observe these ethical contradictions in Walter Kovacs’ double Rorschach. In both The Amazing Adventure of Kavalier and Clay and Watchmen several characters create a new self, whether fictional or real.
Another form of guilt that needs discussing, is the feeling of guilt that rape victims often suffer from. Victims of rape are often blamed by others for what happened to them. In “victim blame” these people believe that the rape victim somehow provoked their perpetrator\(^3\). The victim’s ‘flirting’, provocative clothes, or simply being at the wrong place at the wrong time, would have caused the perpetrator to rape them. Not only does society and the perpetrator often blame the victim, the victim frequently feels responsible for being raped as well. This “self-blame” can be behavioral or characterological. In the former the victim feels that they should have acted differently: they should have worn less provocative clothes, they should not have flirted, they should have resisted more, etc\(^4\). Characterological self-blame, however, occurs when victims feel that an inherent quality of their personality is responsible for the rape. They believe they are a “bad person”, and therefore they deserved what happened to them (“unwanted sex” 879).

\(^3\) Victim blame can be observed in Rorschach’s view on Sally Jupiter’s attempted rape by the Comedian.
\(^4\) Sally Jupiter suffers from behavioral self-blame, as will be discussed later on.
Part II: *Watchmen*.

2.1 An introduction to Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons

The graphic novel *Watchmen* was written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons. The coloring was done by John Higgins. This introduction will start with a portrayal of Alan Moore and will continue with a discussion of Dave Gibbons.

2.1.1 Alan Moore

Alan Moore was born in 1953, in an English working-class town called Northampton, as the son to a brewery worker and a printer. The environment in which he grew up was defined by poverty. He started reading library books at the age of five and became an avid reader because in books “there could be anything in there. You knew that in the real world governed by the laws of reality, there were certain things that you were not going to see on your way to school every morning” (Khoury, 17). He did well in primary school, which was a working-class institution. He continued his education in a posh grammar school, where the other students were mostly middle-class. He realized then that he was at a disadvantage: the other kids had received a far better preparation for their education than he had. His scholarly career was ended prematurely when Moore was expelled from a conservative secondary school for dealing in acid. The principal made sure he was not welcomed by any other school and also told Moore’s potential employers not to hire him. As a result Moore was unemployed, with no job qualifications.

As a teenager, he became involved in the Hippie movement and experimented with drugs. He set up a poetry magazine titled Embryo with some friends from school. Because of this magazine he was introduced to the Northampton Art Lab. After he married his wife Phyllis, he worked an office job for a while. He soon gave up on this, though, and decided to make a living out of art. His first paid job as an artist consisted in illustrating in *NME*, a music magazine, where he drew the illustrations to *Roscoe Moscow* under the pseudonym Curt Vile. However, after a while he decided to focus on writing comics, instead of both writing and drawing them. He contributed to *Doctor Who Weekly* and *2000 AD*. He also worked for Marvel UK and *Warrior*. For the latter, Moore continued *V for Vendetta*.

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5 This biography is based on George Khoury’s *The Extraordinary Works of Alan Moore*, on Lance Parkin’s *The Pocket Essential: Alan Moore* and on the information found on Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Moore>
a dystopian comic about a fascist regime in Britain based on the Thatcher’s politics. His gained a lot of recognition in Britain with his works. As a result DC Comics hired him in 1983 to write Swamp Thing. Moore was also allowed to write stories for DC’s other superheroes: he wrote for the Green Lantern, Superman, and Batman. He helped DC Comics redefine the comic’s universe through Watchmen and The Killing Joke, a Batman comic.

Moore’s relationship with DC Comics had become strained, however, after disagreements about merchandising, creator’s rights, and royalties. Consequently Moore left DC Comics after completing V for Vendetta. He created independently for some time and set up his own comic company, called Mad Love Publishing, with his wife and their shared lover. Another of his greatest works was published in Taboo: in From Hell Moore fictionalized the Jack the Ripper murders.

This independent period was not very productive for Moore, though, and he began working with Image Comics, where he resumed writing superhero comics. He took control over the Supreme series and turned it into a critical and commercial success. Nevertheless, at Image Comics Moore faced problems with one of its co-founders, Rob Liefeld. After many disagreements and financial problems, Moore set up his own imprint, America’s Best Comics, under Wildstorm. When Wildstorm was sold to DC Comics, Moore was forced to work for a company he had never wanted to work for again. Under America’s Best Comics Moore has published, among others, The League of Extraordinary Gentleman, Tom Strong, Top 10, and Promethea. Dissatisfied with DC Comics, Alan Moore retired from mainstream comics once more in 2007 and started working independently again.

Moore’s personal life has been rather eccentric. With his first wife Phyllis he shared a lover, Deborah, until both women left him. He remarried in 2007 and he has collaborated with his second wife on several comics. Moore’s looks are also considered rather peculiar: he has grown a beard since his early adulthood and only wears black clothes. Apart from writing comic books, Moore has written a novel, Voice of the Fire, and intends to write a second one. In addition to this second novel, he has revealed plans for an underground magazine named Dodgem Logic. Aside from being a writer, Moore is also a musician, songwriter, and a known anarchist.
He has been one of the key figures in the history of comic books: the term comic book seems to be lacking to describe his work, and the phrase ‘graphic novel’ is used instead. Moore has received many awards for his work: he has won the Will Eisner Award for Best Writer nine times. He also won numerous Jack Kirby Awards, Eagle Awards, etc.

2.1.2 Dave Gibbons

Dave Gibbons is a British comic book artist, who was born in 1949. In addition to illustrating comic books, he is also a writer and letterer. He started his career in British comics at DC Thomson and IPC. Like Alan Moore he contributed to 2000 AD. Among the earlier works he has illustrated we find: Harlem Heroes, Dan Dare, Ro-Busters, Judge Dredd, etc. He later became the lead illustrator on Doctor Who Weekly for a period that lasted from the late seventies to the early eighties. During the latter decade he also worked for DC Comics, where he drew the illustrations for the Green Lantern. He was also the artist for For the Man Who Has Everything, the Superman comic Alan Moore wrote. His most known collaboration with Alan Moore, however, is Watchmen, which was both a critical and commercial success. During the nineties he wrote the World’s Finest, a miniserie, and drew Give me Liberty. He has illustrated numerous covers, among others, for Alan Moore’s Judgment Day miniseries.

Besides his work on graphic novels and comic books, Gibbons also provides background art for computer games and cover art for albums. He has been nominated for several awards. He won the Jack Kirby Award for multiple categories for Watchmen and received the Eagle Award for Favourite Letter.

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6 The editorial “History of the Graphic Novel” states that not only did Spiegelman’s Maus transform the comic book genre, it also transformed the language used to describe the form. Spiegelman preferred the term “co-mix” in order to refer to the hybridity of the work – the mixing of words and pictures to tell a story – instead of comic. However, the term “graphic novel” has been adopted instead of “co-mix”. There is no strict definition of what constitutes a graphic novel, and the term is often used subjectively to distinguish between comics and graphic novels.

7 This biography is based on the biography of Gibbons as found on Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dave_Gibbons> and the information found on his fan site: <http://davegibbonsfansite.com/cms/front_content.php?idcat=36>
2.2 Publication and critical reception

Watchmen was published in twelve installments in the course of 1986 and 1987. The first issue was both a critical and commercial success. Initially, only three installments had been completed, which caused delays in the publication process seeing as the later issues took more than a month each to complete. After all twelve issues had been published, they were collected in one book. Other editions were published afterwards. The miniseries was referred to as a graphic novel because it was associated with novels instead of comic books. Evidence of this association with novels can be found in the fact that Watchmen is the only graphic novel to appear on Time’s 2005 list of “ALL-TIME 100 Greatest Novels”.

Gibbons and Moore have both received numerous awards for their work on Watchmen. The Jack Kirby Award for Best Finite Series, New Series, and Best Writer/Artist (Single or Team) was given to Gibbons and Moore for Watchmen in 1987. They received other awards as well, but the most significant award might be the Hugo Award in the category Other Forms in 1988. This category was created specifically for Watchmen and was awarded that year only. The very popular graphic novel has also been adapted to the big screen: in 2009 Watchmen, directed by Zack Snyder, hit theaters.

2.3 Watchmen: plot outline

The story begins with a murder in New York City on October twelfth 1985: a man has been thrown out of his apartment, falling to his death on the pavement. The police investigate Edward Blake’s murder but find little to work with. When masked vigilante Rorschach finds a smiley badge in the pool of Blake’s blood he decides to investigate. He discovers that the murder victim was in fact another vigilante: the Comedian.

Rorschach then visits Dan Dreiberg, a former fellow vigilante named Nite Owl II. Because of the Comedian’s combat skills, it is highly unlikely that an ordinary burglar could kill him. Consequently, Rorschach immediately suspects a conspiracy against costumed heroes and tries to warn Dan. He then wants to investigate the homicide further, but Dan does not believe in Rorschach’s theory. It is revealed that Dan has quit the vigilante business, a fact that frustrates his former partner greatly.

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8 This section is based on the information found about Watchmen on Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watchmen>
Rorschach continues his investigation and also alerts Adrian Veidt, the retired vigilante Ozymandias, about the possibility of a mask-killer. Veidt also responds skeptical to this theory, believing that the Comedian made plenty of political enemies by working for the American government. Like Dan, Veidt retired from vigilantism but he also revealed his identity to the world. He used his superhero reputation to start a successful company, which sells – among other things – toys based on himself and other commodities. Rorschach reproaches Veidt for selling himself, for whoring himself out. He then sets out for the Rockefeller Military Research Center to warn two other ‘colleagues’: Laurie Juspeczyk – the former Silk Spectre II – and her boyfriend Dr. Manhattan. Laurie is a ‘normal’ human girl, despite her vigilante past, whereas Dr. Manhattan used to be a scientist but was changed into a blue being with superpowers and a vast knowledge as a result of a scientific accident. Like the Comedian, Dr. Manhattan works for the government. The Cold War is fully raging, and Dr. Manhattan is the essential weapon in the United States’ military tactics. His powers keep the Soviet Union from attacking the USA. Laurie and Jon Osterman – Dr. Manhattan’s true name – have already been informed of the Comedian’s death by the government. Laurie is not particularly upset by his death and reveals that many years ago Blake attempted to rape her mother, Sally Jupiter. Jon removes Rorschach of the premises with his powers because Rorschach’s reaction to this information distressed Laurie.

While Rorschach continues his search, Laurie renews her friendship with Dan after years of no contact. The first chapter ends with an excerpt from Under the Hood, the autobiography of Hollis Mason, the first Nite Owl.

The second installment shows us some significant parts of the Comedian’s past. Laurie visits her mother, and we are shown Blake’s violent attempted rape on Sally Jupiter, which was unsuccessful thanks to Hooded Justice’s intervention. Sally does not seem to hold a grudge against Blake for his actions, an attitude that puzzles and enrages Laurie.

Meanwhile, at Blake’s funeral, Veidt remembers the meeting of the Crimebusters, where Captain Metropolis tried to organize the vigilantes to fight the current social problems. The proposition was ridiculed by the Comedian, and the meeting was a failure. Jon is also lost in a memory about the Comedian, more particularly about an event that took place in Vietnam. During the victory celebrations, a pregnant Vietnamese woman confronts Blake and demands that he take responsibility for her and her unborn child. Blake refuses, and the enraged woman wounds his face, which causes him to kill her. Dr. Manhattan asked him to
stop but did not intervene. Dan remembers Blake’s violent, mad behavior during the police riots, where he shot a woman.

After the funeral Rorschach pays a visit to a mystery man who also attended Blake’s ceremony. The man turns out to be Edgar Jacobi or Moloch, one of Blake’s long-time enemies. Under coercion he confesses that the Comedian broke into his house shortly before his death. He had been rambling and crying for a reason Moloch does not know. The chapter ends with another excerpt from Under the Hood.

In chapter three Laurie leaves Jon because he cannot relate to her and is too preoccupied with his scientific research. While she pours her heart out to Dan, Jon has an interview on television. A journalist confronts Jon with ‘evidence’ that his radiation causes people in his direct environment to develop a very aggressive form of cancer. His ex-girlfriend, Janey Slater is one of the victims, but Moloch as well. Dr. Manhattan - overwhelmed by the news - breaks down and leaves for Arizona and later on for Mars. In the meantime, Laurie and Dan are nearly mugged but manage to take out their opponents. Upon her return to the research base, Laurie finds out that Jon has left and loses her job, leaving her homeless as well. The news of Dr. Manhattan’s departure further solidifies Rorschach’s conspiracy theory. Like the previous chapters, this one ends with an excerpt from Under the Hood.

In the next installment we find out more about Jon Osterman’s past while he reminisces on Mars. At his father’s insistence he pursues a career in science. In a research center in Arizona he meets Janey Slater, and they develop a relationship. One day, he enters the test chamber while it is programmed to initiate an experiment. He gets locked in and cannot be let out of the chamber due to safety precautions. His body is completely disintegrated. In the months that follow Jon tries to reassemble his body, a gradual reconstruction that is quite shocking to the witnesses. When finally he has completely put himself together again, he is a creature with astounding powers. He resumes his relationship with Janey, although things never return to their previous state. The American government employs him, dubbing him Dr. Manhattan. He fights crime and meets Laurie at a meeting of vigilantes. Meanwhile, the fact that he does not age puts a strain on his relationship with

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9 Manhattan is a reference to the Manhattan Project, a project that developed the atomic bomb during the Second World War.
Janey, who is growing older. The relationship ends because of his attraction to the much younger Laurie, whom he starts dating.

In 1977 the Keene Act is passed, stating that vigilantism is illegal. Those working for the government – Blake and Jon - are exempt from this law. The other vigilantes retire, with the exception of Rorschach, who refuses to compromise and continues to fight crime. After reminiscing about his past, Jon creates a glass construction on Mars. This installment contains an article on Dr. Manhattan and his superpowers.

In chapter five Rorschach visits Moloch once again to gather information, which Moloch cannot provide. Dan and Laurie also meet again, causing Dan to offer Laurie to stay at his home, since she is now homeless. Later on someone fails to kill Adrian Veidt, though the hit man does succeed in killing Veidt’s assistant. Before he can be interrogated the hit man dies due to a poison capsule. In Rorschach’s opinion the attempt on Adrian’s life is the umpteenth proof of a conspiracy against masked heroes. After receiving a note from Moloch, he goes to visit him once again. Upon his arrival, he finds Moloch’s corpse. Someone alerted the police of Rorschach’s presence – knowing that they wanted the vigilante for several murders – and set up a trap at Moloch’s home. After a fight the police manage to arrest Rorschach, and the man beneath the mask is revealed. The addition to this chapter is a chapter from the Treasure Island Treasury Of Comics on the author of Tales of the Black Freightner, the pirate comic book that is read by a boy during the story.

The sixth installment focuses on Rorschach’s stay in prison. Through his therapy sessions with dr. Malcolm Long, we gain insight in Rorschach’s past. Dr. Long uses the Rorschach blot tests. Initially, the psychiatrist addresses Rorschach as Walter Kovacs, his actual name, causing Rorschach to give insincere answers to the questions. Although the blots trigger flashbacks, Rorschach does not trust dr. Long enough to answer truthfully. As a child he was physically abused by his mother, who was a whore. His mother’s occupation caused him to be bullied by other kids, resulting in his first violent outburst, which led to one of the bullies to be partially blind. During one of the therapy sessions, ‘Walter’ talks about Rorschach. While working in the garment industry he came across a dress made of a peculiar fabric: the black blots moved on the white fabric. When nobody picked up the dress, he took it and manipulated the fabric. He later on read about a girl who had been raped, tortured, and

The Rorschach blot tests were the inspiration for Rorschach’s vigilante name considering his mask is made of white fabric with black blots that change shape.
murdered because nobody helped her, although they were aware of what was going on. Rorschach was convinced that the special dress belonged to this girl and used the dress’ fabric to create his mask, the face with which he would battle crime.

Rorschach’s imprisonment among inmates he himself put behind bars puts him in a dangerous predicament. When one inmate tries to kill him Rorschach throws hot cooking fat on the inmate’s face. Dr. Long becomes increasingly affected by his patient’s case and starts thinking of Walter Kovacs as Rorschach as well. Rorschach talks about his early vigilante days, when he was a soft version of Rorschach and allowed the criminals he fought to live. That attitude changed after a kidnapping case in 1975. Blaire Roche, a six-year-old girl was kidnapped, and Rorschach swore to find her. When he found her, the girl had been killed, butchered, and fed to her kidnapper’s dogs. This was the point of no return for Rorschach, and he killed the dogs and their owner in a extremely violent manner. Rorschach’s testimony unsettles Dr. Long to the extent that the psychiatrist feels the need to talk about it with his wife and guests. His story appalls them, and they all leave. A psychological report of Rorschach is added to end this installment.

In chapter seven we see the bond between Laurie and Dan grow stronger. Their vigilante past draws them closer to each other, culminating in a failed attempt to have sex. Later on, they decide to put on their costumes once more and head out in the Owl Ship, Dan’s vigilante mode of transport. They evacuate people from a burning tenement building and manage to have sex afterward. Dan decides they need to free Rorschach from prison, where his life is threatened by the other inmates. The added article to this chapter – *Blood from the Shoulder of Pallas* – is written by Daniel Dreiberg, who is an ornithologist, hence his vigilante owl costume.

Episode eight is centered around Halloween, when the dead come back to the realm of the living. Rorschach is threatened by old enemies in prison, while Dan receives a visit from a police inspector who is looking for Nite Owl II and Silk Spectre II. Dan decides they must liberate Rorschach, seeing as the inspector harbors suspicion about Dan’s secret identity. Their rescue is facilitated by a riot, which was started by Rorschach’s enemies, so that they could kill him. However, Rorschach kills them brutally and escapes with Laurie and Dan. When they return to Dan’s home a double of Jon waits for Laurie and asks her to join him on Mars to talk about the world’s destiny. Laurie is teleported by Jon, whereas Rorschach and Dan need to take flight because the police are about to apprehend them. Rorschach’s escape
from prison causes the people of New York to be enraged. Upon hearing he was saved by the Nite Owl, a small gang under the influence of drugs slaughters Hollis Mason, the first Nite Owl, mistaking him for Dan. A draft of *The New Frontiersman* – the right-wing newspaper – about the masked vigilantes and a missing author finishes this chapter.

The next installment covers the conversation Laurie and Jon have on Mars, which reveals a lot of Laurie’s past. The first childhood memory we are shown is about a fight between Sally Jupiter and Larry, her agent who is a Laurie’s ‘dad’. They argue about the Comedian because Sally was unable to remain angry at Blake – despite the attempted rape – and had sex with him. Laurie suspects Hooded Justice to be her father rather than Larry. In the following memory Laurie’s mother hosts a reunion for her fellow vigilantes. Hollis Mason refers to his autobiography Under the Hood, which Laurie has not read. In his book, he reveals Blake’s brutal attempted rape, something Sally wishes to remain hidden from Laurie. In the present Laurie tries to convince Jon to save the Earth, but he fails to see the value of life. The next thing Laurie remembers is a meeting with Blake. They talk briefly until Sally interrupts them angrily. At this moment in time Laurie is still unaware of the Comedian’s actions until her mother discloses the truth. The final memory shows a banquet where Laurie confronted Blake about his actions. He was stunned, claiming he only tried to violate her once. Jon impels her to face the truth, and Laurie realizes that Blake is her father. Jon believes Laurie’s existence is – like the existence of everyone else – a miracle. Therefore he decides to save the Earth. At the end of the installment an excerpt from Sally’s scrapbook is included.

Because of Dr. Manhattan’s departure from Earth, the United States have lost their greatest weapon against the Soviet Union. As a result Russia has attacked Afghanistan, and a nuclear war seems inevitable. Chapter ten shows how president Nixon holds off launching the bombs. Rorschach returns home to put on his costume, whereas Adrian Veidt heads for Karnak, his fortress on Antarctica. Dan and Rorschach continue their investigation, which leads them to Veidt’s office. Dan comes to the conclusion that Veidt is behind the entire scheme. The duo agrees to find Veidt and interrogate him. Before they travel to Antarctica, however, Rorschach mails his journal to *The New Frontiersman* so that the truth of the conspiracy would be known, even if he died. This journal, containing all Rorschach’s observations, is ignored by the journalists of the newspaper. Chapter ten’s addition consists of Veidt’s correspondence.
The eleventh episode shows Veidt’s fortress on Antarctica, where he awaits Rorschach and Dan’s arrival. He explains his vision of a united world to his servants before he kills them. Rorschach and Dan arrive but are unable to overpower Adrian, who then proceeds to reveal his plan. He intends to put an end to the hostilities of the Cold War by providing the United States and Russia with a common enemy. This enemy will be thought to have come from a different dimension. In order to achieve this goal, he had a monstrous creature designed by missing authors, artists, and scientists. The monster will be teleported to New York, exploding upon its arrival and killing millions of people as a result. However, his plan was accidentally discovered by the Comedian. Although he recognized the potential of the plan, the Comedian felt the need to talk about the conspiracy. He turned to Moloch, and consequently Veidt killed him. Veidt also admits that he gave cancer to Jon’s past associates so that Jon would leave the Earth out of guilt. He then planned the attempt on his own life to avoid suspicion from Rorschach. When Dan mocks his plan, Veidt states that he has already executed the plan, and images of an explosion are shown. An article about Adrian Veidt is included at the end of this episode.

The final installment shows the aftermath of the explosion in New York. When Jon and Laurie are at the site of the explosion, Laurie is overwhelmed by what she sees, whereas Jon tries to find out what caused him to predict the future inaccurately. This leads them to Antarctica. When Jon attempts to confront Adrian, he is lured into a trap: Veidt reconstructs the experiment that caused Jon to become Dr. Manhattan. An enraged Laurie tries to shoot Veidt but is unsuccessful. Jon, however, is able to put himself together once again and confronts Veidt. The vigilantes intend to reveal Veidt’s scheme to the world until they receive evidence of the peace the plan has brought. Consequently Jon, Laurie, and Dan agree to hide the truth. However, Rorschach, who refuses to compromise, is determined to disclose everything. Jon can’t persuade him otherwise and kills him. When he sees that Laurie is happy with Dan, Jon decides to leave the Earth. In his last conversation with Veidt, he implies that the future of Veidt’s unified world is not guaranteed.

After all these events, Laurie and Dan have assumed a new identity and visit Sally Jupiter. Laurie tells her mother she knows her father is the Comedian, and they part on good terms. The final image of the novel suggest that Rorschach’s journal might be read by a boy working for The New Frontiersman, thus potentially revealing the truth to the world.
2.4 Trauma in *Watchmen*

Most characters in *Watchmen* have lived through traumatic events or are confronted with traumatic events during the story. There are those who have suffered an individual trauma in the past, such as Rorschach and Jon, others who have become the victims of a massive trauma, leading to their deaths, which is the case for many secondary characters, such as the newspaper vendor, and some who have experienced both, such as Laurie and Jon. In what follows, the characters and their traumata will be analyzed individually.

2.4.1 The Comedian

The very first image of the graphic novel is one of trauma: the Comedian’s smiley badge has a bloodstain on it. The smiley face represents a person before a traumatic event, whereas the bloodstain refers to the traces the trauma leaves in a person. Not only does it refer to the Comedian’s death, which sets off the entire plot, it also announces that more traumatic events will occur. The Comedian had been working for the U.S. government for a long time, engaging in combat in Vietnam, Nicaragua, etc. He had developed a cynic, callous, amoral attitude towards war and violence. In chapter four his madness in Vietnam is described:

> “Blake is interesting. I have never met anyone so deliberately amoral. He suits the climate here: the madness, the pointless butchery…And 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” (19).

Blake has experienced the madness of war and acts amorally in return. This attitude is his defense mechanism in the face of all the violence and madness in the world. He is hardly affected by anything, except by the cold logic behind Veidt’s plan. In the end, the Comedian’s death is in accordance with his life: violent.

2.4.2 Jon Osterman or Dr. Manhattan.

Jon Osterman’s individual trauma consists of his disintegration during a scientific accident. The origin of his trauma lies within a collective trauma: the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. When his father, a watchmaker, read about this historical event, he was convinced that atomic science would be the most important discipline in the future. He refuses
to let his son follow into his footsteps – believing his trade is obsolete –, and Jon pursues a career in atomic physics which will ultimately lead to his disintegration. In the months that follow, Jon tries to reassemble his body, overwhelming the witnesses to the process. At first he appears like a creature with only a brain and nerves, the next time he has a circulatory system. The witnesses are frightened and horrified: a soldier vomits at the sight of a “partially muscled skeleton” (Moore 9, ch. 4). He may even have traumatized them: the image is so gruesome, its existence cannot be assimilated by the mind because the very existence of such a being defies their knowledge of the world. In November he finally has reconstructed his body and he materializes in his new body, a blue superhuman. The image of the costumed superman is enforced on him when he is recruited by the U.S. government.

2.4.2.1 Jon’s Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

The traumatic event Jon has lived through causes him to be detached. He has become estranged from other people, simply because he is no longer like other people. The trauma has reduced his range of feelings. He can no longer empathize with people and, although he has a vast amount of knowledge about the human race, he does not understand people. He is able to experience loving feelings, as can be seen in his relationships with Janey and Laurie, but he cannot form that human connection both women need. Throughout the graphic novel, Dr. Manhattan is a very rational being: we hardly see him experience feelings such as joy or fear. He does have emotions but they are so rarely observed. He feels love, confusion, guilt, etc. In chapter three, for example, during the interview where he is confronted with the evidence that his presence causes cancer: “It seems I’m incapable of cohabiting safely either emotionally or physically. Perhaps you’d best tell Ms. Juspeczyk and your superiors that I’m leaving” (Moore, 19, ch. 3). He decides to leave the Earth, escaping from the consequences of the traumatic event, from the people he cannot understand and who are endangered by his very presence, and from the guilt this brings about in him. He is horrified at the fact that what happened to him could bring about cancer in those around him.

Another feature of PTSD found in DSM-IV is the “diminished interest in significant activities”. In chapter three Jon has split himself so that he could make love to Laurie, while conducting some scientific experiment at the same time. His scientific research comes first, as opposed to his relationship. Furthermore, despite being the most important weapon of the United States, Jon does not care about ideology: the U.S.S.R. and the USA both mean nothing to him. Gradually he loses his link to humanity, and with that he loses his sense for morality. As the story progresses he starts to care less about the human race and life itself. This can
observed for the first time in the fact that he does not intervene, in spite of his powers, when the Comedian is about to kill the pregnant Vietnamese woman. Blake remarks on this in chapter two:

“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 give a damn about human beings. I’ve watched you….You’re driftin’ outta touch, doc. You’re turnin’ into a flake. God help us all” (15).

This careless attitude towards humanity is fully noticeable on Mars. When he has his conversation with Laurie he declares that, compared to the processes at work on Mars, “human life is brief and mundane” (17, ch. 9). He does not see a purpose to humanity’s existence, until Laurie finds out who her true father is. The fact that Laurie is the child born from such an unlikely union – between her mother and the man who tried to rape her – is a miracle to Jon. Consequently the entire human race is worth saving. Upon their return to Earth, they realize they are too late to stop the massacre from happening. Surrounded by the corpses, Jon is fascinated by the fact that his prediction of the future was incorrect. He wants to know the cause of the failure of his precognition and states:

“That’s unusual. I’d expected us to reappear on earth much earlier. The static interference I noticed earlier makes everything so unpredictable. Obviously, it wasn’t caused by a warhead detonation. What, then?...I’d almost forgotten the excitement of not knowing, the delights of uncertainty…” (7, ch. 12).

He is so engrossed in this mystery that he fails to notice that Laurie is completely overwhelmed by the scene. He does not appear to be affected by the scene of death.

When Jon is convinced that Adrian’s plan will bring an end to the hostilities between the United States and Russia, he decides to withdraw from Earth. Laurie’s relationship with Dan has severed Jon’s last connection to humanity because she was “his only link, my only concern with the world” (8, ch. 9).

2.4.2.2 Jon’s trauma and time.

The concept of time plays a very important role in Jon’s trauma. His father was a watchmaker who considered his trade to be obsolete because of Einstein’s theory of relativity in which time is not an absolute concept. At his father’s instigation he studies atomic physics.
During his research a time-lock prevents him from getting out of the test vault, thus causing his disintegration. The reason he went into the test vault was a watch he had repaired for Janey. Time was therefore a crucial factor in the traumatic event Jon underwent.

The two major traumatic events in Jon’s life are symbolically announced by images of time. On the one hand, Jon’s father throws out the components of the watch Jon is trying to repair. With this action Jon’s disintegration is announced. After the accident Jon can see the future. His entire perception of time is altered. The cogs of the watch that are falling also represent Jon’s lengthy process of reassembling himself, a process he describes as “just a question of reassembling the components in the correct sequence” while an image of cogs is shown (9, ch. 4). On the other hand, there are the clocks, which feature at the end of each chapter. Starting at eleven to twelve, the clock-hand moves one minute per chapter, ending at twelve o’clock. These clocks are a reference to the Doomsday Clock, which – according to the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists – “conveys how close humanity is to catastrophic destruction – the figurative midnight – and monitors the means humankind could use to obliterate itself”. During the Cold War this clock depicted the threat of Mutual Assured Destruction, where both nations would destroy each other as a result of the arms race. The clocks in Watchmen therefore foreshadows the impending cataclysm, although it is not in the form the people were expecting. As the story progresses everybody expects a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union, however, nobody could have anticipated what Adrian Veidt did.

Trauma victims often experience flashbacks of the traumatic event they have experienced. The past intrudes on the present, in all its literality and causes temporal confusion in the survivor. In Jon this temporal confusion is augmented by his ability to see the future. While he is on Mars, thinking about his life, past, present, and future occur at the same time: “In twelve seconds time, I drop the photograph to the sand at my feet, walking away. It’s already lying there, twelve seconds into the future. Ten seconds now….It’s October, 1985. I’m on Mars. It’s July, 1959. I’m in New Jersey, at the Palisades Amusement Park. Four seconds. Three” (1, ch. 4). Furthermore, Jon does not age, he is standing still. Despite all his powers and his precognition, Jon does not try to alter the future. He feels powerless: “I’m standing on a fire escape in 1945, reaching out to stop my father, take the cogs and flywheels from him, piece them all together again…But it’s too late, always has been, always will be too late” (28, ch. 4). However, when he does decide to change the future, he is unable to prevent the massacre. Jon’s attempt to save the world and to reveal Veidt’s plan causes the traumatic
event of his disintegration to be repeated. However, the second experience does not have the same effect on Jon, who has been numb since the original traumatic event.

2.4.2.3 Dr. Manhattan, Jon Osterman’s double

Jon considers Osterman to be his human self before the accident, whereas Dr. Manhattan is the Jon who was created during and after the traumatic event: “Restructuring myself after the subtraction of my intrinsic field was the first trick I learned. It didn’t kill Osterman… Did you think it would kill me?” (18, ch. 11). Dr. Manhattan is Osterman’s double: detached, analytical, unaffected by new traumatic events. He is a superhuman who does not care about humanity. In addition to this new self, Jon can split himself and still function perfectly. He claims he has not changed, but his new body has caused his personality to change drastically. He never attempts to work through his trauma. He does not try to reintegrate his traumatized self nor does he try to bear witness in order to work through his trauma. He fully embraces his new self and leaves planet Earth and humanity behind.

2.4.3 Sally Jupiter’s rape trauma.

The traumatic event that Sally Jupiter underwent was the attempted rape by the Comedian. The event is shown through a flashback, triggered by the picture Sally is holding. On the day of the attempted rape, the Minutemen, the first group of vigilantes, had their picture taken. After the photo session, Sally announces she needs to change out of her costume, and the other vigilantes leave. Blake, however, returns and tries to rape her, beating her severely in the process. He claims she wanted him, referring to her announcing her need to change clothes and the provocative costume she wears. When Hooded Justice intervenes Blake blames Sally. Even Hooded Justice blames her when he says: “And, for God’s sake, cover yourself” (8, ch. 2). Rorschach also thinks Sally is the one to blame for the incident and refers to Blake’s actions as “moral lapses” (21, ch. 1). Rorschach’s victim blame stems from his childhood: because his mother was a whore he has developed a strong dislike of women who exploit their sex appeal.

Not only do some of the vigilantes hold Sally responsible for the assault, she blames herself as well. In the interview added at the end of chapter nine, it becomes clear that Sally suffers from behavioral self-blame: “Look, I don’t bear any grudges….You know, rape is rape and there’s no excuse for it, absolutely none, but for me, I felt…I felt like I’d contributed in some way. Is that misplaced guilt?...I really felt that, that I was somehow to blame for...for
letting myself be his victim not in a physical sense, but…” (ch.9). Sally blames herself: her entire vigilante persona, the Silk Spectre, is based on sex appeal, therefore she must have provoked him somehow.

Even though Sally had consensual sex with Blake – resulting in the conception of Laurie – Sally is still traumatized by the event: “Things like that don’t ever get settled. Not completely…” (16, ch. 9). When she sees her daughter talking to Blake, everything comes back to her, and she needs to talk to Laurie about the events so that her daughter would never experience the same thing. Sally bears witness with her daughter as the listener. After Blake’s death she claims that the traumatic event is not important anymore. Nevertheless, it is only after Laurie finds out the truth about her father, that Sally is able to fully work through her trauma: she kisses Blake’s picture while she is crying.

2.4.4 Laurie: a traumatized witness.

Although she has not had a great childhood, Laurie does not experience any traumatic event until the end of the story. She becomes severely traumatized by what she witnesses as she arrives at the scene of death in New York, after Veidt’s monster has exploded. The question of her real father, however, always constitutes a major issue in her life. When Jon asks her questions about the value of human life, a set of memories about her childhood, her mother, and the Comedian emerge. His questions send her back into the past, causing her to retrieve the necessary information. She had believed Hooded Justice to be her real father until Jon’s questions force her to acknowledge the truth: “I think you’re avoiding something” (23, ch. 9). Laurie denies this, but then all those crucial memories flow together, bringing about the truth and causing her to break down.

Nevertheless, this realization is not a traumatic event for Laurie. The scene in New York, with all the corpses and the alien monster, traumatizes her. Although the extent of the trauma cannot be fully known yet, seeing as the novel ends soon after the event, we can discern some effects of the traumatic event. The explosion of the monstrous creature itself is shown indirectly: the final page of chapter eleven shows the reaction of the people of New York at the apparition of the creature, after which we see Bernhard and Bernie run to each other to be disintegrated. The final panel shows nothing but white. However, when we look at chapter twelve, the bodies of these people are not disintegrated. Moore and Gibbons established a connection between Dr. Manhattan’s accident and the explosion in New York.
The first six pages of chapter twelve all show the site of destruction Laurie beholds. She immediately starts crying: she is completely overwhelmed. Her view on the world is completely destroyed: “I mean, wh-who’s safe? How can anyone protect themselves against a world where this happens? I…” (8, ch. 12). Laurie does no longer feel safe in the world, she wants to escape from the scene. She begs Jon to take her away from the site but also to “take it way”, to take the image of death and the traumatic experience away from her (8, ch. 12).

Her next reaction is one of extreme anger: when she finds out that Veidt is responsible for both the massacre in New York and Jon’s second disintegration she tries to kill him. She is unsuccessful, though, and when she realizes Veidt’s plan to bring peace to the world has succeeded she decides to agree to keep everything a secret. She does feel horrified at not being allowed to bear witness: “Not tell anyone?” (20, ch. 12). Dan is the only person she can talk to, but he himself – like the rest of the world – has become traumatized by the images he has seen on television. The events defy their understanding:

Laurie. I’m screwed up already. I learned stuff on Mars and then New York… Dead everybody was just…dead.

Dan. I…I still can’t imagine. This whole thing, we’re just, I dunno…out of our depth.

Laurie. But…there were people, just stepped out the gunga diner. That pink and yellow rice, it was all spilled, and… I keep wanting to cry, but my throat, it’s not big enough. I… (21-22, ch. 12).

Laurie cannot find the right words or the right reaction to deal with an event that exceeds her understanding.

Laurie also suffers from survivor’s guilt: she feels guilty because she was unable to convince Jon in time to prevent the cataclysm from happening. However, she also feels guilty because she cannot bear witness, she cannot reveal the truth about the event, something she feels she owes to those who have died. As a result she needs Dan to love her because they are alive, she wants to feel worthy to be alive. This objective, as well as her recent realization about her father, causes her to reconnect with her mother.

Laurie and Dan are traumatized by what happened. They have to create a new identity because they are thought to have died in New York. This new identity is supposed to help them go on with their lives. After the traumatic event, the couple creates a double: this time, however, they choose to be a regular people instead of superheroes.
2.4.5 Rorschach

The last traumatized character from *Watchmen* – perhaps the most traumatized character – that will be analyzed is Rorschach or Walter Kovacs. His hypervigilance – though other characters consider it to be paranoia – leads him to investigate the Comedian’s death, an investigation that ultimately brings about his death.

From the very beginning Rorschach’s bleak world view is presented through his journal entries. His research generates a conspiracy theory from early on. He decides to warn the vigilantes he knows, starting with Dan Dreiberg, the only person he ever thought of as a friend. This conversation immediately reveals his most dominant characteristic: he does not compromise, he does not quit (unlike the other vigilantes). This persistence is a result of his trauma.

Walter Kovacs – or Rorschach – has suffered through more than one traumatic event. Through the interviews with his psychiatrist, Dr. Long, his past is laid bare. His mother was a whore, who physically and mentally abused him. Another important event was the brutal murder of Kitty Genovese, which made him become a vigilante. What really changed Walter in Rorschach, though, was the case of Blaire Roche, a little girl who was raped, killed, and fed to the killer’s dogs.

2.4.5.1 Rorschach’s Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.

As a result of the events mentioned above, Rorschach suffers from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. In what follows the symptoms of his PTSD will be discussed.

Through his reaction to Dr. Long’s Rorschach inkblot test\(^1\), we find out that Rorschach suffers from PTSD: the inkblots trigger flashbacks about his childhood and the Blair Roche case. Van der Kolk and van der Hart have used these inkblot tests for trauma victims and have observed that they cause “an unmodified reliving of traumatic episodes”\(^2\). The ‘butterfly’ inkblot, triggers the image of the dog’s head split in half, whereas the other inkblot causes a flashback of his mother and one of her clients having sex. When he was caught watching, his mother hurt him. Another flashback is provoked by the other inmates in prison, and he remembers being bullied as a child, leading to his first act of violence: he burned out another boy’s eye.

\(^1\) “The Rorschach test consists of a series of 10 inkblots or formless shapes in which one half is the mirror image of the other…. The subject is asked to say what the blot resembles. The abnormal personality is likely to perceive gruesome or horrific images in the blots, and this may be indicative of serious conflicts which are still unresolved. The normal personality sees more tranquil images” (McKenna 36).
Apart from flashbacks, Rorschach has also had dreams about his trauma. In the report about Rorschach at the end of chapter 6 we find a transcription of one of the nightmares of a thirteen-year-old Walter and a drawing he made about the dream:

“When I got nearer, I saw they weren’t dancing at all, they were squashed together like Siamese twins, joined at the face and chest and stomach. They didn’t have any face, you could only see their ears, two on either side of the head facing towards each other…. They were coming towards me, and then I woke up. I had feelings when I woke up. Dirty feelings, thoughts and stuff. The dream it sort of upset me, physically. I couldn’t help it. I feel bad just talking about it” (Moore ch. 6).

This dream about the sex between his mother and her client upsets Walter but it also arouses him sexually. He is horrified at these feelings. His mother’s occupation affects his life: he refrains from interacting with women, probably to avoid experiencing the emotions he felt after that dream again, or to avoid recollections of his childhood. This report also reveals that Walter response to the traumatic events was silence: he refused to talk about his trauma. As a result he is still haunted by his childhood trauma, which can be observed in his avoidance of all things of a sexual nature: “Out in street, inspected defaced building: silhouette picture in doorway, man and woman, possibly indulging in sexual foreplay. Didn’t like it. Makes doorway look haunted” (11, ch. 5).

In the same report, in a summary of his psychological history, Walter’s contempt for his mother is mentioned: upon hearing that she had been murdered, he feels glad that she is dead. His loathing of women – especially women who use their bodies and their sex appeal, such as Sally Jupiter or Laurie – increases as he grows older. It is his mother’s promiscuous lifestyle that causes him to blame Sally for Blake’s attempt at raping her. His revulsion towards whores is shown again when he confronts his landlady, who had claimed that Rorschach had propositioned her. However, when the prostitute reveals that her children do not know their mother’s profession, Rorschach identifies with one of the boys and decides to be merciful.

Due to the traumatic events in his past, Rorschach has become estranged from most people: he lives on the margins of society and interacts with few people. Before the Keene Act was passed, he could still relate to some of the vigilantes he worked with, but when the Keene Act forces most vigilantes to quit, Rorschach feels betrayed by them. He refuses to retire, becoming even more marginalized: he now not only lives on the margins of society, he
is also an oddity within the group of vigilantes. Despite his estrangement from the other vigilantes, he does try to revive his friendship with Dan, only to betrayed again by Dan’s willingness to cover up the truth about the events in New York.

Another symptom of his PTSD is the fact that his range of emotions has become restricted. Rorschach does not love anybody, although he does seek Dan’s friendship. He represses sexual feelings as a result of his mother’s lifestyle and the traumatic childhood it caused. In general, Rorschach displays few emotions: without his mask his face is usually emotionless. During his stay in prison, he is not intimidated by all the threats he receives. Even when some inmates attempt to kill him, he remains calm and prepares for the violence. Violence has become such an important aspect of his life, that it does not frighten him anymore. He does not shy away from using violence either: the traumatic events have caused him to become desensitized to violence.

One of the few emotions Rorschach does display is determination: in his quest for justice he is unrelenting. His vigilantism is his way of acting out: his response to violence and immorality is violence. He does it because he is “compelled” (16, ch. 6). Before the Blaire Roche case, he was merciful towards criminals. He only became the determined, ruthless Rorschach after he had found out what happened to the girl. He feels guilty for not having been able to save Blaire, therefore he is obsessed with bringing criminals to justice. Dan tries to explain Rorschach’s behavior to Laurie: “I mean, all this stuff, this horror and madness, he attracts it. It’s his world. This is where he lives, in this sordid, violent twilight zone…under this shadow” (18, ch. 8). Rorschach is haunted by what happened to Blaire and therefore he is acting out. He seeks comfort in revenge, something that Dan, for example, does not understand.

His obsession with justice and his hypervigilance compel him to investigate the Comedian’s death. Hypervigilance, according to the DSM IV, is one of the possible symptoms of PTSD. Rorschach is constantly on his guard: he is always prepared for attack, because he knows that, in this world, nobody is safe. He has learned that life is not fair: it is arbitrary, random. His arrest leads him to the conclusion that he “must be more careful in the future”, despite all the precautions he has already taken (5, ch. 10). The death of the Comedian has him on high alert: this hypervigilance leads to sleeping problems, which result in concentration problems. Both are symptoms of PTSD and they are increased by Rorschach’s suspicion that another traumatic event might occur. Although Rorschach’s
hypervigilance is initially perceived to be paranoia by the other characters, it must be noted that Rorschach was correct about the conspiracy.

2.4.5.2 Rorschach as Walter Kovacs’ traumatized self

The dual identity is one of the main features of most superheroes: their alter egos operate wearing a costume or a mask, whereas their everyday persona look like everyone else. Walter Kovacs vigilante persona Rorschach, however, is more than an alter ego: it is his traumatized self, his double.

In the early years of his vigilantism, Rorschach was simply the secret identity of Walter Kovacs. In his sessions with Dr. Long, Rorschach reveals that the reason for becoming a vigilante was the cruel murder of Kitty Genovese. She had ordered a special dress at the shop where Walter was working at the time but did not want it. After he learned of her awful death two years later, he decided to use the special fabric of the dress to make a mask and become a vigilante: “I knew what people were, then, behind all the evasions, all the self-deception. Ashamed for humanity, I went home. I took the remains of her unwanted dress and made a face that I could bear to look at in the mirror” (10, ch. 6). He felt ashamed of what happened in society and wanted to make a difference by fighting crime as a masked vigilante. The fabric of Kitty’s dress – black blots which changed shape on a white background – became his mask, and the blots of said mask were probably the inspiration for his alter ego’s name: Rorschach.

Rorschach explains to Dr. Long that he “wasn’t Rorschach then” but “Kovacs pretending to be Rorschach” (14, ch. 6). This original Rorschach was milder towards criminals: he was less violent and did not kill anyone. He could still relate to the other costumed vigilantes back then. The moderate Rorschach was changed drastically because of the Blaire Roche kidnap case. When he is confronted with the evidence of what had been done to the girl, he decides to slaughter her killer’s dogs. In this moment he creates a new self in order to deal with the situation: “Shock of impact ran along my arm. Jet of warmth spattered on chest, like hot faucet. It was Kovacs who said “mother” then, muffled under latex. It was Kovacs who closed his eyes. It was Rorschach who opened them again” (21, ch. 6). The new Rorschach was unforgiving: he killed Blaire’s murderer brutally. Rorschach refers to this incident as his rebirth. His new self was uncompromising. It is this traumatized double of Walter that we see in the graphic novel. Rorschach was never reintegrated into Walter’s doubled self: he still needs his traumatized self to cope with the ruthless world, he
needs it in his pursuit of justice. In order to deal with all the things he witnesses and the traumatic events that have happened to him, he needs a strong double. His masked face is not just an alter ego of a vigilante anymore, it has become his true self. He loathes the original Rorschach, he is no longer that person. As a result he refers to his mask as his true face: “No! My face! Give it back!” (28, ch. 5).

At the end of the novel, it is clear that Rorschach is still acting out: his traumatized self has not been reintegrated by Walter. Rorschach’s true face is still his mask, and this mask shows he is still very much possessed by his trauma: the blots imitate Laurie and Dan’s sexual act, thus referring to his mother and his traumatic childhood. Rorschach’s refusal to compromise and his need for justice and truth indicate that his masked, traumatized self still functions as the stronger double, who acts in crisis situations. This Rorschach prefers death, whereas the milder Rorschach, the Walter Kovacs pretending to be Rorschach would have compromised.

2.4.5.3 Working through?

The act of bearing witness and the construction of a narrative are considered to be very important in the process of working through trauma. Nevertheless, Rorschach’s testimony and his narrative might be precarious.

The first problem that occurs when Rorschach bears witness is that the interviews between him and Dr. Long are obligatory, in light of his upcoming trial. Consequently Rorschach is not willing to cooperate: although Rorschach’s past intrudes when he sees Dr. Long’s inkblots, he refuses to answer truthfully. Initially, Dr. Long fails to see that Rorschach is mocking him. The second obstacle to Rorschach’s testimony is that he does not trust his interviewer. He realizes that Dr. Long only wants to be his psychiatrist in order to gain academic recognition for his research on Rorschach’s case. This lack of trust between the interviewer and the narrator – which is crucial for the act of bearing witness – is what complicates the testimony. The bonding between the listener and the narrator is further compromised by the psychiatrist’s insistence on calling Rorschach Walter. It is only when Dr. Malcolm addresses Rorschach by his vigilante name, his ‘true’ name, that the latter starts to cooperate. Rorschach recounts Blaire Roche’s kidnap case: he had promised her parents to return her safely but, upon his arrival, he found out that she had been already been murdered. Her clothes had been burnt, and her body had been cut to pieces to be fed to the murderer’s dogs. This was Rorschach’s breaking point. He narrates how he killed the man responsible for
the girl’s death. Although Rorschach tries to create a narrative in this interview, he does not try to work through his trauma: he only wants to give Dr. Long the answers he is looking for, to shock him.

As we have seen in theoretical framework, the listener’s task is very important. As LaCapra has said the experience of bearing witness to testimony should be virtual: the listener should be able to put himself imaginatively in the victim’s position, without identifying with the victim. In their first sessions, Dr. Long is not willing to put himself in Rorschach’s position: he wants to solve Rorschach’s case and aspires to convince his patient of the goodness of humanity and the world. However, gradually he becomes more involved in Rorschach’s case. In his notes he starts to confuse Rorschach and Walter, an indication that he is affected by his patient. In their final interview, Dr. Malcolm tries to put himself in Rorschach’s position. As a result, empathic unsettlement takes place. Dr. Long is horrified at the testimony. He feels the need to talk about it himself but he does not find empathic listeners: his wife and their guests leave. Dr. Malcolm’s previous positive conception of the world is shattered and he resigns. He no longer is unaffected by what happens in the world and tries to help others instead of remaining uninvolved. He dies in the explosion in New York.

Another problematic notion is that of Rorschach’s journal as an attempt to construct a narrative. In his journal Rorschach does not try to recount the traumatic events of his past in a way that allows the trauma to be represented in the language and in the absence of language: in the pauses and the silences. His journal is a written account of his perception of the world and of his investigation of the murder of the Comedian. However, at the end of the story, his journal becomes a testimony: he writes down the truth about Veidt’s conspiracy and about his death. He knows he probably will not survive the confrontation with Veidt and needs his story to be known:

“This last entry. Will shortly mail journal to only people can trust…. If reading this now, whether I am alive or dead, you will know truth: whatever precise nature of this conspiracy, Adrian Veidt responsible. Have done best to make this legible. Believe it paints a disturbing picture…. For my own part, regret nothing. Have lived life, free from compromise and step into the shadow now without complaint” (Moore 22, ch.10).
Rorschach’s journal, which is the testimony to his own death and the death of millions of people in New York, lands in the hands of a young man at *The New Frontiersman*. Initially, the journal is dismissed. However, the final panel of *Watchmen* suggest that the boy might read Rorschach’s narrative, thus listening to Rorschach’s testimony and revealing the truth.

Has Rorschach worked through his trauma in the end? No, he is still acting out. His traumatized self, Rorschach is still dealing with the situation. Walter Kovacs’ double is not reintegrated by the doubled self. This can be observed in his refusal to compromise about the truth of the explosion in New York, even if lying would bring peace. At the end of the novel, he still displays posttraumatic symptoms, for example, when he sees Laurie and Dan have sex. Their position reminds him of his mother and her client, causing his mask to form a blot that imitates their form. Rorschach has not been able to try to work through his trauma: his sessions with Dr. Malcolm were ended before any progress could be made, and he is not allowed to bear witness about the bloodbath in New York. Seeing as he cannot reveal the truth about the conspiracy, he chooses death: he takes off his mask, and Dr. Manhattan kills him.

2.4.6 Tales of the Black Freighter

There is an abundance of narratives in *Watchmen*. The fictional pirate comic *Tales of the Black Freighter* presents another narrative of trauma within the graphic novel. One of the recurring secondary characters in *Watchmen*, Bernie, is seen reading the installments of this pirate comic. The protagonist of the comic, ‘the Sea Captain’ wakes up among the bodies of his fellow crewmembers after his ship has been attacked by the Black Freighter: “For my part, I begged that they should take my eyes, thus sparing me further horrors. Unheeded, I stood in the surf and wept, unable to bear my circumstance. Eventually, tears ceased. My misfortunes were small: I was alive and I knew that life had no worse news to offer me”. The Sea Captain’s survival leaves him traumatized, but this is only the beginning of his suffering. He needs to escape his forsaken island so he can warn the people of his hometown of the coming of the Black Freighter, the ship that will bring death and destruction. He builds a raft, made of wood and the corpses of his shipmates, to go home. His journey on this raft causes him to lose his sanity gradually: his life is threatened again and again by thirst, hunger, and a shark. His insanity is displayed in the fact that he kills innocent people, believing they are participants in the conspiracy of the Black Freighter. He believes his hometown has already fallen prey to the dark ship, and that his family has already been killed. He sets out for revenge but kills his
wife instead of avenging her. Horrified at his actions, he leaves and climbs on board of the Black Freighter to become a member of the wretched ship’s crew.

The Tales of the Black Freighter acts as a story within the story that reflects what is happening in the main narrative. By juxtaposing both narratives, the similarities between both become clear. Although Adrian Veidt cannot be called a survivor, the Sea Captain’s story is Veidt’s story as well: in his attempt to stop a massacre from happening, he uses his own crewmembers bodies. Veidt killed his fellow vigilantes, used them for his greater good, killing a lot of innocent people in the process.

2.4.7 Historical trauma

Apart from the individual traumata some of the characters of Watchmen have sustained, a lot of references to large historical traumatic events are made. In light of the constant threat of a nuclear war during the Cold War, references to the atomic bomb in Hiroshima are quite frequent. A recurrent image is that of what Dr. Long calls the Hiroshima lovers: “On seventh avenue, someone had sprayed silhouette figures onto the wall. It reminded me of the people disintegrated at Hiroshima, leaving only their indelible shadows” (16, ch. 6). The growing threat of an open war between Russia and the United States creates a lot of anxiety in a lot of the characters. Dan Dreiberg, for example, has a dream, in which he is kissing Laurie, until a nuclear explosion kills them. The image of their disintegrated bodies and their stance are much like the Hiroshima lovers. This fear becomes a reality at the end of chapter eleven, where we see Bernie and Bernhard run to each other: they embrace and are killed by the explosion. The image is reminiscent of the Hiroshima lovers. The historical trauma of Hiroshima is repeated in the massacre of New York.

The explosion at the end of the novel is not the only trauma to be linked to Hiroshima, Dr. Manhattan’s accident also reminds us of the dropping of the atomic bomb. His career choice was a direct consequence of this historical event. Furthermore, because of his new powers he is thought to be “a man to end wars”, like the atomic bomb was supposed to be “the Weapon To End Wars” (I-II, ch.4).

12 The silhouettes or the “Hiroshima Lovers” have different meanings, depending on the eye of the beholder: Rorschach sees a couple engaged in foreplay, which causes him to feel haunted, whereas Dr. Long is reminded of Hiroshima. In both cases they are references to trauma, either individual or collective.
In chapter twelve, in the aftermath of the bloodshed in New York, a lot of traumata come together in the panels. Not only do we see the image of the Hiroshima lovers, Moore and Gibbons also connect the Holocaust to the massacre: the panel on the second page of the chapter shows “Krystalnacht” on a advertising board\textsuperscript{13}. The reference to the Night of the Broken Glass is not a coincidence: the scene in which all the windows in the panel have been destroyed, combined with the corpses and the advertising board, alludes to the Holocaust. In addition to this, we also see the smiley badge smudged with blood, which makes allusion to the death of the Comedian, which leads to further trauma among the vigilantes, but also indicates that the carefree world view has been defiled by Veidt’s bloodbath to save the world. The parallel between the atomic bomb and the explosion in New York is drawn again when Laurie, traumatized by the scene of death she has witnessed, is teleported by John: their stance is similar to the Hiroshima lovers, who are painted on the wall directly behind them. Like the Japanese people after the atomic bomb, the inhabitants of New York – and the rest of the world – are traumatized by the event. The effects of this trauma are already observed in Laurie, but Moore and Gibbons also indicate that a lot of survivors struggle with the aftermath of the calamity: a newspaper states that “NY survivors reveal nightmares under hypnosis” (31, ch. 12). This suggests that the survivors of this event will struggle with PTSD.

The final image of the graphic novel, the t-shirt with the smiley face which has a ketchup stain on it, suggests a better world, despite the collective trauma that stains it. However, this might change if Rorschach’s journal, his testimony of the event, is read. Everything is possible.

\textsuperscript{13} What Was Kristallnacht? describes Kristallnacht as “a nationwide, state-sponsored pogrom (a spree of violence directed against Jews) conducted throughout Germany and Austria…the evening and night of November 9 through the following afternoon…. The pogrom's name comes from the German word for beveled plate glass (Kristallglas) and refers to the broken shop windows of the Jewish stores, hence Kristallnacht, or Night of the Broken Glass.”
Part III: *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*

3.1 An introduction to Michael Chabon

Michael Chabon – whose parents were of Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian descent – was born in 1963, in Washington D.C. He grew up in the suburbs of Columbia, Maryland. After his parents’ divorce, he was raised by his mother, who, meanwhile, attended law school. As a result divorce, single-parenthood, and problematic father figures became recurring themes in his work.

During his childhood, Chabon avidly collected DC and Marvel comic books. His passion for comic books was ‘inherited’ from his father and his grandfather. Through his job, his grandfather was able to obtain a lot of free comics, which he brought home for his son. This tradition was then passed on to the next generation, when Chabon’s father bought his son comic books to read. Initially, Chabon preferred the idealistic DC universe with its clear-cut distinctions between good and evil. As he grew older, he started to favor the ambiguity and fallibility of the Marvel superheroes. At the age of ten, he tried, unsuccessfully, to set up a comic book club. In high school, however, his interest in comics diminished, and music became his new passion.

Chabon spent one year at Carnegie Mellon University, until he transferred to the University of Pittsburg, where the author Chuck Kinder became his friend. After his graduation he went to UC Irvine for a master’s program in creative writing under MacDonald Harris and Oakley Hall. After he graduated from Irvine, he married Lollie Groth, a poet, and he won a short-story contest and finished his master’s thesis, a novel entitled *The Mysteries of Pittsburg*. It was never Chabon’s intention to publish this novel, but his professor MacDonal Harris sent it to an agent behind his back. The agent launched Chabon, and *The Mysteries of Pittsburg* was a success.

Chabon then started working on his next novel, *Fountain City*. However, as the project continued, the novel grew until it collapsed. Instead he decided to publish *A Model World*, a set of short stories. Chabon then used the experience of writing *Fountain City* as an inspiration for his second novel: *Wonder Boys*. The novel and its movie adaptation both earned critical acclaim.

14 The information on Chabon’s life was found on Nate Raymond’s website *The Amazing Website of Kavalier & Clay*: <http://www.sugarbombs.com/kavalier/>
15 The novel also earned him a large readership among the gay community because it dealt with homosexuality. Furthermore, the novel has been adapted to a movie, which came out in 2008.
Besides its effects on his career, the writing of Fountain City also had repercussions for his marriage to Groth: in 1991 the couple ended their marriage. He proposed to his new love, Ayelet Waldman, after knowing her for three weeks; a year later they were married. They have four children. His wife has published six novels herself, and Chabon has admitted that the professional relationship between Rosa and Sammy in Kavalier & Clay is quite similar to the one between him and his wife.

After Wonder Boys, Chabon – and some literary critics – felt that he should break away from his previous novels. As a result Chabon started working on his most ambitious project: The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay. The novel was published in 2000, after five years of writing, and was a critical success: it was nominated for various awards and won several of them, among which the Pulitzer Price.

His next endeavor, a children’s novel called Summerland, is often compared to Harry Potter because Chabon adds an American twist to the fantasy world. In addition to this novel, he also edited McSweeney’s Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales and its sequel. In 2004 he published a detective novella about the Holocaust called The Final Solution. In this novel, as well as in his next – The Yiddish Policemen’s Union – mystery is used as a metaphor to refer to things that cannot be explained, such as the Holocaust. The latter novel received a lot of critical acclaim; it was on the New York Times Best Seller List for weeks and will be adapted for the big screen by the Coen Brothers.

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay has caused many comic book companies to ask Chabon to allow them to make a comic book spin-off based on the novel, or to write it himself. In 2004 Michael Chabon Presents: The Amazing Adventures of the Escapist was published. It contains stories by various comic book creators and uses several comic book characters from Kavalier & Clay, such as the Escapist and Luna Moth. The stories each deal with a different era of the comic book. After The Amazing Adventures of the Escapist was cancelled, a new comic was made: The Escapists. In 2006, the first issue of the six-part mini-series – with the art of Steve Rolston and Jason Alexander – was published. The series tells the story of two indie comic creators who set out to re-launch the comics about the Escapist. In addition, Michael Chabon published his first comic book, JSA: All-Stars #7, in 2003. The comic about Mr. Terrific was drawn by Michael Lark.

Kavalier & Clay has not only inspired spin-off comic books, there were also plans for a movie adaptation of the novel. The condensing of the voluminous novel to movie script
presented the first challenge for Chabon\textsuperscript{16}. The script received mixed reactions, and it seems unlikely that the movie will be shot soon: although there have been rumors, there are no official confirmations about the actors\textsuperscript{17}.

### 3.2 The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay: plot summary

A discussion of Chabon’s novel \textit{The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay} needs to be introduced by a summary of the novel’s plot. However, readers who are very familiar with the novel may proceed to the next section.

The novel’s title characters, Josef Kavalier and Sammy Clay, meet in October, 1939, in the Clay’s apartment in New York. Josef has fled from Prague, his hometown, because the country is occupied by the Germans. Josef’s family suffers – like the other Jewish inhabitants of Prague – under the Nazi reign. Josef’s first attempt to flee his occupied country legally fails, and he finds himself back in Prague. Joe does not alert his family of his unsuccessful departure. Instead he turns to his mentor in the art of escapistry, Bernard Kornblum. Kornblum helps Josef to escape, while saving the Golem of Prague at the same time. The Jewish Council needed to make their Golem save from the Germans, seeing as they believed it could be brought to life to protect the Jewish people. As a result, Josef and the Golem are smuggled out of Prague: Josef is locked inside the Golem’s coffin, lying on the Jewish statue. After a long journey Josef arrives at the his aunt’s house in New York.

Josef then needs a job, and his cousin Sammy helps him: once he has observed Josef’s artistic talent, he suggests that they work together on comic books, a business which at that particular moment is experiencing its Golden Age. The duo manages to convince Sammy’s boss at Empire Novelty Company, Inc., Sheldon Anapol, by promising a superhero who will be as successful as Superman. Their brainstorming results in the creative birth of the Escapist.

The Escapist combines the both boys’ personal concerns. On the one hand it shows Sammy’s issues: his legs are weak because he suffered from polio as a child, and his problems with his father, a strong man in the circus, who has left his family. As a result the Escapist’s alter ego, Tom Mayflower, has limp until he is given the golden key by his uncle.

\textsuperscript{16} Chabon has made several attempts at writing scripts for movies and TV-shows: he wrote the screenplay for \textit{Spider-Man 2}, which came out in 2004, and \textit{John Carter of Mars}, which is set to be released in 2012.

\textsuperscript{17} Natalie Portman was rumored for the role Rosa Saks, Tobey Maguire would be Sammy Clay, and Jude Law was pursued to play Joe Kavalier. The director would have been Sydney Pollack. However, other actors were reported by later rumors as well.
An ordinary, weak boy becomes a hero. On the other hand the Escapist shows Josef’s fascination with escapistry, a skill he learned from Kornblum. Josef’s journey in the Golem’s company inspires them to add certain Jewish characteristics to their hero: like the Golem, the Escapist will free the world from oppression. The main villain in the duo’s comics is Adolf Hitler and the Axis of Evil. However, because the United States are not at war with Germany yet, Joe and Sammy refer to the enemy by using unsubtle pseudonyms. The boys and their team deliver a successful comic book to Anapol, and Amazing Midget Radio Comics is developed.

The Escapist’s comics are a hit, and while Anapol earns a lot of money, the duo becomes more bold in their comics: the Escapist fights an open war on Hitler’s Germany, which ends with the defeat of the Nazis and the liberation of Europe. Through the Escapist’s adventures, Joe tries to make the American readers aware of the situation in Europe, so that the United States would intervene in Europe. The comics also help Joe in dealing with the situation his parents are in: the Escapist can help his parents, whereas Joe is helpless.

As the comics grow bolder, so does Joe’s behavior. He intends to join the Canadian RAF, after receiving the news that his father died from pneumonia in the ghetto of Prague, but changes his mind. He returns to New York and takes out his frustration on the German immigrants instead: he tries to pick a fight with them and consequently gets injured on several occasions. He even breaks into the office of the Aryan American League, a German organization. Its founder Carl Ebling is secretly a fan of the Escapist, but after a confrontation with Joe, in which he gets beaten up, he becomes the Escapist’s arch nemesis: the Saboteur. Ebling loses his sense of reality: he believes he is truly the Saboteur. He causes a panic at the Empire Comics office, after having claimed to have planted a bomb there, and tries to kill Joe during a bar mitzvah.

The success of the Escapist comics affects Sammy and Joe’s personal lives as well: at the parties they attend they meet artists, intellectuals, but most importantly, Joe meets Rosa Luxemburg Saks, years after their first brief encounter. As his girlfriend, Rosa will introduce Joe to Hermann Hoffman, who works at the Transatlantic Rescue Agency. This organization’s major concern is to evacuate as many Jewish children from the European countries that are occupied by Nazi Germany. Hoffman will try to save Joe’s little brother, Thomas, and bring him to America on their ship, the Ark of Myriam. Joe decides to dedicate all the money he has made as a comic book artist to this organization in order to save as many kids as he can. The
amount of money he donates to this cause increases when the two creators of the Escapist decide they want a pay raise. They come to realize their boss takes advantage of their talents and does not allow them to share in the profits. When it becomes clear that they will not receive any money from the radio and cinema adaptations of their creation, they decide to create a new character, Luna Moth. This sexy heroine will prove to be very lucrative, and this gives the boys leverage in their negotiations for a pay raise. Anapol concedes on the condition they stop fighting the Nazis in their comics. Joe is the first to agree: the Escapist’s fictional battle against the Germans leaves him dissatisfied, and with the additional money he can save more children.

The Escapist becomes even more lucrative, and Joe save a lot of money for the Ark of Myriam, whereas Sammy lives a more luxurious life. When Orson Welles’ Citizen Kane hits theaters, it leaves a big impression on Joe. Joe starts experimenting with his comic illustrations, drawing lessons from the movie, and thus innovating the comic book. Meanwhile, his dissatisfaction with the battle against the Axis of Evil culminates, and Joe decides to abandon violence in his comics.

Joe is not the only one who falls in love in this period: Sammy discovers his homosexuality and falls in love with Tracy Bacon, who portrays the Escapist in the radio version of the comic books. Their romance is ended abruptly, when there is a police raid at a gay party they attend. Sammy is forced to perform fellatio on and is penetrated by one of the policemen so that he would not be arrested. As a result he refuses to elope to Los Angeles with Tracy and denies his homosexual nature. After Joe’s departure, he marries Rosa, so that her son would have a father, but he is never happy.

Joe’s life as he knew it is also changed drastically: he finds out that the Ark of Myriam, carrying his brother Thomas on board, has been torpedoed, consequently killing his brother. Joe’s initial response is to try to commit suicide through an act of escapistry at a bar mitzvah. When this attempt is unsuccessful he decides to join the Army, since the United States have entered the Second World War at this point. Joe hopes to kill some Germans to avenge Thomas. However, his military service is not what he thought it would be: he is stationed on Antarctica as a radioman, with no chance of engaging in combat. Most of his company dies as a result of carbon monoxide poisoning, which forces him to survive with only a dog, Oyster, and a pilot, Shannenhause. The following winter “drove them mad” (Chabon, 457): there is little contact between the two men, they are surrounded by corpses of
dogs and their fellow soldiers, they see little of the outside world, and information about the
world is rare. During this winter, Joe finally reads the letters Rosa had sent him. He discovers
that Rosa has married his cousin, and that they have a son, Thomas, whom Joe realizes is his
son. Tracy Bacon is said to have died as a member of the US Air Force.

When Joe finds out that there is a German base on Antarctica, Jotunheim, the two
soldiers decide to attack. Shannenhouse has fixed his airplane, using the skins of the dead
dogs. They even have to kill their last dog, Oyster, which brings Joe a lot of grief. When they
are ready to attack Jotunheim, Shannenhouse’s appendix bursts, resulting in his death. When
Joe arrives outside of the German base, he is incapable of killing its only inhabitant, a
geologist. Nevertheless, the German interprets Joe’s behavior incorrectly and shoots him in
his shoulder, which causes Joe to kill the man by accident. He then drags the man to the base,
thinking he is wounded but alive. The realization that the man had already been dead breaks
Joe’s heart. He then stays at the base for two weeks, with old canned food and morphine at his
disposal, before he is saved by a Navy ship. At the army base on Guantanamo he then
receives medical and psychological treatment.

Joe’s escape from Antarctica is followed by a gap of seven years. Rosa and Sammy
are still active in the comic book industry, though the times have changed, and the genre is no
longer as successful as before. The comic book genre has become less popular as a result of
dr. Wertham and Senator Kefauver’s attacks: the comics are said to corrupt the innocent
minds of children. Although Sammy has tried to write a novel, he has become a pulp writer.
He keeps working on comic books because, like Rosa, he needs the escape they present from
his unsatisfying marriage.

Their lives are rattled when word reaches them of a person calling himself the Escapist
threatens to jump of the Empire State Building. It is Joe, who has been seeing his son Tommy
in secret. After his escape from Antarctica, Joe has been hiding in an office of the Empire
State Building. He has been living and working there ever since he found out that his mother
had died in a concentration camp. He spent years in isolation to work on his most important
project: an enormous comic book – although it is “too dark for a comic book” (Chabon 576) –
with the Golem as the protagonist. Joe does try to jump of the building, while wearing the
Escapist’s costume, but his legs are attached to rubber bands to break the fall. He survives this
dangerous jump because he falls on a platform before he can fall all the way down. After his
jump, Joe is reunited with Sammy and the love of his life, Rosa.
At the end of the novel, Joe has moved in with the Clay family. However, Sammy leaves when a trial about the corrupting influences of comic books on innocent children reveals his homosexuality to the public. The revelation brings back memories of Tracy and the feelings he had buried, and Sammy decides to go to Los Angeles instead of working with Joe on Empire Comics. The comic business has changed, and the superhero has lost its popularity. As a result Anapol kills the Escapist and sells his business to Joe, who has finished his project about the Golem. Joe and Rosa rekindle their relationship and tell their son – who suspected Sammy was not his real father – the truth. Despite their attempts to talk Sammy out of leaving, he leaves at night, leaving a card of Kavalier & Clay behind.
3.3 Trauma in Kavalier & Clay

The protagonists of Chabon’s novel have all experienced their share of life’s hardships. Joe is without a doubt the most traumatized character. He has experienced the beginning of the Nazi occupation in Prague and had to leave his family behind to escape. The escape itself in a small coffin on top of a clay statue must have been overwhelming as well. He experiences great loss because of the war: not only does he lose his entire family, he is also directly affected by the war during his stay on Antarctica, where he is confronted with the deaths of his fellow soldiers, witnesses Shannenhouse’s death, and accidentally kills the only other human being remaining on the continent: his enemy. This confrontation with death, under such isolated circumstances, must have been traumatic.

Sammy’s homosexuality causes him to be traumatized to some extent as well: after the police raid, he is blackmailed into performing fellatio and is penetrated on one of the federal agents so that he would let him go. This is not a consensual act, it is rape. It changes Sammy drastically:

“The bitter taste of Agent Wyche’s semen was in Sammy’s mouth, along with the putrid sweet flavor of his own rectum, and he would always remember the feeling of doom in his heart, a sense that he had turned some irrevocable corner and would shortly come face-to-face with a dark and certain fate….Afterward, Sammy would often wonder what might have become of him, what alley or ditch his broken and violated body might have ended up in, if his mother…” (Chabon 415).

This violation of his body causes Sammy to go back into the closet: he denies his homosexual nature by marrying Rosa and leaving Tracy. After the event, Sammy does not want to be touched by Tracy and he does not want to face such pain and shame again because of his homosexuality.

3.3.1 Escapism

In his master thesis Discovering Trauma in Michael Chabon’s The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay Andreas Hooftman thoroughly analyzes the way in which the characters in Chabon’s novel are traumatized. Among other things, he explains how Joe, Sammy, Rosa, and even Tommy try to cope with their lives through escapism. Joe avoids his trauma by drawing the Escapist comic books, Sammy and Rosa deal with loveless marriage
through their pulp stories, and even Tommy has created an alter ego the Bug to escape his ordinary life.

Joe’s escapism can be observed in his passion for escapistry and his comic book art. He has had lessons in the art of escapistry, and because of these lessons and his mentor Kornblum, he manages to escape nazi-occupied Prague. The Escapist is Joe’s method of escaping reality. Bernard Kornblum observed, while training Joe, that the boy’s urge to escape has psychological roots:

“He didn’t tell them what he now privately believed: that Josef was one of those unfortunate boys who become escape artists not to prove the superior machinery of their bodies against outlandish contrivances and the laws of physics, but for dangerously metaphorical reasons. Such men feel imprisoned by invisible chains – walled in, sewn up in layers of batting. For them, the final feat of autoliberation was all too foreseeable” (37).

This quote already foreshadows that Joe escapes, flees from his problems instead of confronting them. Kornblum also remarks that Joe should worry about what he is “escaping from” instead of what he is “escaping to” (37). Joe’s initial response to life’s problems is always avoidance: he flees to the comic universe so he would not have to deal with the consequences of his family’s predicament in Prague, he tries to commit suicide when he finds out his brother has been killed, he leaves Rosa and Sammy to fight in the war instead of mourning and dealing with his brother’s death.

In their comic books, Sammy and Joe have created an escape to deal with their issues: Joe’s feeling powerless in the face of the Nazi regime in Czechoslovakia is combined with Sammy’s father issues and his negative self-image. The Escapist provides Joe with a means to deal with his feeling of disempowerment: his superhero can intervene in Europe, can free the oppressed, he does not have to watch helplessly from the sidelines. However, Joe becomes increasingly frustrated with the United States’ inaction towards Hitler’s actions and his own impotence in helping his family. He gives up fighting the Germans in his comics and focuses on real life, where he can help Jewish kids by evacuating them.
3.3.2 Doubling in *Kavalier & Clay*

The comic books and pulp fiction provide the characters an escape from real life, but they also give a more optimistic, hopeful version than their reality. They create fictional characters to deal with their issues. Andreas Hooftman describes the novel’s protagonist escapism in fictional alter egos as:

“In the creation of fictional characters which are clearly endowed with character traits of their own, we can discern the process of doubling as described by Lifton and already mentioned in 1.9. Joe, Sammy, Rosa and Tommy all hide behind characters that are stronger than them, and that are able to handle the events they themselves cannot. Although they do not actually create a new self, the creation [of] their fictional alter egos obviously helps them live life in a more satisfying way” (Hooftman 54).

The fictional alter egos are the protagonists’ doubles, their coping mechanism to deal with their issues. The Escapist is Sammy’s double: in the background story of the superhero’s alter ego, Tom Mayflower, we find a lot of elements from Sammy’s life. When Tom is handed a magic key his limp disappears, and he is a superhero instead of an ordinary boy. This resemblance to Sammy’s life, and how he would want it to be, is mentioned by Davy O’Dowd, one of artists that works on the Escapist: “Wishful figments. You know, like it’s all what some little kid wishes he could do. Like for you, hey, you don’t want to have a gimpy leg no more. So, boom, you give your guy a magic key and he can walk” (Chabon 145).

The Escapist and escapistry are closely linked to Joe as well: the superhero is based on Joe’s experience in the art of escapistry. The Escapist shows Joe’s desire to escape his problems, however, in the comics the superhero deals with the problems by escaping from awful situations. The Escapist empowers Joe. One of the central problems of trauma is the feeling of disempowerment a victim experiences during and after traumatic events. Joe is literally helpless: he cannot help his family because he is in New York, and they are stuck in Prague, where escape is no longer possible. He tries to evacuate his brother but cannot help him because of the shipwreck. The Escapist, on the other hand, can help the victims of the war: he fights and defeats the Germans, he frees the oppressed and brings peace and justice. The Escapist, a true superhero, is powerful: he always manages to overcome obstacles and he knows how to act, even in the face of death. In real life, Joe has given up the fight in his comics by the time the United States decide to enter the Second World War.
When the two boys create the Escapist, Chabon describes their character as a golem. Joe’s inspiration for his superhero was “a stolid golem in a Phrygian cap” (119). From the beginning the golem – which will be the protagonist of the narrative that will help Joe work through his trauma – is an important aspect of Joe’s art. The golem is Joe’s double. In order to understand the importance of this Jewish myth in Joe’s life and art, an introduction to the golem must be made.

3.3.2.1 The Golem of Prague

The legend of the Golem is essentially a legend about creation. It is a myth about man – a Jewish rabbi or another Jewish person – fabricating a powerful being out of dirt or clay, thus defying God’s power of creation.

The golem’s creation is similar to mankind’s creation in Jewish and Christian tradition. In A Treasury of Jewish Folklore, Nathan Ausubel quotes the Talmud to describe the similarities between Adam and the golem: “How was Adam created? In the first hour his dust was collected; in the second his form was created; in the third he became a shapeless mass (golem); in the fourth his members were joined; in the fifth his apertures opened: in the sixth he received his soul; in the seventh he stood up on his feet….” (qtd. in Ausubel 603). The golem, a shapeless matter with no life force, is created in a manner similar of mankind. However, the main difference between the two creations is that the golem does not have a soul, a gift that only God can bestow on his creations, and therefore the golem cannot speak.

There are several stories about golems and their different creators. Nevertheless, the Golem of Prague is probably the best known version. This golem is said to have been made by Rabbi Yehuda Loew, who – when confronted with an enemy of the Jews – was told by God to “Create a Golem out of clay who will destroy all the enemies of Israel” (Ausubel 607). The rabbi, his disciple, and his son-in-law molded the golem in the image of a man out of clay. By reciting incantations, the Golem came to life¹⁸, and he was named Joseph, after Joseph Shida, who had been half-man and half-demon and had protected the Jews from many trouble (608). The golem, who was mute, was to serve the Jewish community and protect it

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¹⁸ However, other versions of the creation of the Golem say that it came to life “by inscribing emet somewhere on its body, however, it can only be destroyed by removing the first aleph, the first letter, which transforms the word emet (truth) to met which means “death” or “dead”; or by writing the secret name of God (Shem-Hamoforesh) on paper and insert it into the ear, or an amulet (Koven, 218). In Kavalier & Clay Tommy says that “Rabbi Judah Ben Beelzebub scratched the word ‘truth’ into his forehead and he came to life” (542).
from the blood accusations their enemies were raising against them. The golem managed to reveal a conspiracy against the Jews, and no false accusations were made. When it became clear that the Jewish people were safe and that the golem was no longer needed, the rabbi told him to go sleep in the attic of the synagogue, the Altneuschul. The rabbi, his disciple, and his son-in-law then reversed the ritual that had brought the golem to life so that he would die. When the ritual was finished, the golem was merely a statue of clay. Afterwards, the rabbi claimed the golem had left Prague and he forbade the Jewish community to go up in the synagogue attic. The golem would rise again when the Messiah came or when new threats against the Jewish people arise.

In this version the golem is a protector of the Jewish people against anti-Semiticism, a being that helps the Jews when they think that God’s inaction shows he has abandoned his people: “So in its despair, the folk-mind, fed by the sickly cabalistic dreams and myths current at the time, created the magical figure of the golem to protect the Jews’ puny weakness with his enormous physical strength, to discover by means of his supernatural powers the plotters against their peace and thus foil their wicked plans” (605).

In other versions, however, the golem is a monster rather than a protector: the longer the creature lives, the more its power increases. The golem becomes a destructive force: it kills people and animals, and destroys houses. The golem cannot be controlled by its creator and must therefore be put to rest or killed (Koven 219). These stories demonstrate the hubris of creating other beings, a task that belongs to God. Only God can give statues of clay a soul, without a soul the golem, and therefore mankind, is a monster (220).

In The Recipe for Life Michael Chabon discusses the importance of the golem in The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay and in his writing in general. He compares the making of a golem, a miniature replica of man, to the writing of novels: both are mirrors of the world. Both rely on language – enchantments – for the creation of these worlds. What matters to Chabon is not so much the similarities between the two processes, but rather the consequences these processes might have. The writing of literature, like the creation of a golem, is a risky endeavor: it can help the creator but it can also turn against the author.
3.3.2.2 The golem as Joe’s double

The golem is essential in Joe’s process of working through his trauma: he bases the Escapist on the golem. However, at this point in time, the Escapist is a means of avoiding the bitter reality. Joe draws “wishful figments” not reality to deal with the helplessness he feels. What Joe does is a practice that can often be observed in children who draw pictures of traumatic scenes: they draw superheroes – or other strong beings that can help them – to change the predicament they are in\(^{19}\). Joe draws a superhero in Europe, to help his family while he cannot. The drawing of such superheroes can be healing for children, but for Joe it is not. It helps him avoid reality for a while but, as time goes by, he feels more and more powerless. Initially he believes that his art can make a difference: he can show the world what atrocities are happening in Europe, and these revelations might cause the world to intervene. Nevertheless, the Escapist cannot bring such freedom, and therefore Joe decides to use him merely as a means for money, so that he can save as many children as possible. When he finds out that this project has failed as well, resulting in his brother’s death, he becomes suicidal and vengeful.

The golem appears again when Joe writes his long graphic novel, *The Golem*. The creation of the ‘comic’ should be interpreted as Joe’s construction of a narrative in order to work through his trauma. Through *The Golem*, Joe reintegrates his traumatized self, his double, the golem. There are several similarities between Joe and the mythical creature made out of clay. The golem of Prague is said to have been named Joseph, which happens to be Joe’s name as well. Both are Jews who have lived in Prague and they are both evacuated in the golem’s coffin so that they would be safe. Joe refers to the golem as “his other brother”, who has survived the war and has haunted him (608). One of the most important characteristics Joe shares with the golem is his lack of speech. Although Joe has the ability to speak, he chooses to remain silent: he does not talk about his problems, he prefers to run away from them.

The drawing of his enormous ‘comic book’ is Joe’s way of constructing a narrative to integrate the golem, his traumatized self. The golem, the Jewish symbol that is supposed to help the Jewish community when it is threatened, is used to help Joe work through Joe’s traumatic past that is caused by the Holocaust. Andreas Hooftman writes that: “It is a tale of

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\(^{19}\) The practice of drawing a superhero who intervenes in the traumatic event is discusses in Catherine Ford Sori and Larna L. Heckner’s *The Therapist’s Notebook for Children and Adolescents: Homework, Handouts, and Activities for Use in Psychotherapy* (2003), among others.
redemption: the protagonist, Josef Golem, sacrifices himself to save the community that had put all its hopes onto this one creature” (59). Through *The Golem* Joe can look at his experience differently, the transformation allows him to work through his trauma:

“But it seemed to Joe that none of these – Faustian hubris, least of all – were among the true reasons that impelled men, time after time, to hazard the making of golems. The shaping of a golem, to him, was a gesture of hope, offered against hope, in a time of desperation. It was the expression of a yearning that a few magic words and an artful hand might produce something – one poor, dumb, powerful thing – exempt from the crushing strictures, from the ills, cruelties and inevitable failures of the greater Creation” (58).

The narrative Joe creates can be hopeful, it does not have to carry the literality of the events. It can be adapted so that it can help Joe work through his trauma. However, the golem as a savior might also suggest that Joe still feels guilty for having survived the Holocaust: he needs to add a savior to deal with this survivors guilt.

An important trait of Joe’s graphic novel, is the lack of words. Sammy even wonders if it is “a silent movie” (Chabon 578). Although Joe meant to add text balloons to his drawings, “he had never been able to bring himself to mar the panels in this way” (578). Joe cannot put his story in words: language has failed him, however, as an artist he chooses to draw his story, to present the events that defy language in a different manner. Sammy understands what Joe is trying to tell with his drawings. Joe uses a different kind of language to transform his traumatic memories into narrative memories. As Granofsky has said: the retelling of any trauma, even the sheer experiencing of it, is surely itself a transfiguring of reality into some kind of order, aesthetic or otherwise. Narrative memory is healing precisely because it shapes” (174). Joe creates a golem, although he does not use words to fabricate his creation. Joe draws a graphic novel with no text, except for words that belong to the drawings: words cannot capture the events, but Joe’s drawings can. The drawings can capture and transform the trauma. Like the golem of Prague, Joe’s golem does not speak but he does convey his message.

By creating *The Golem* Joe reintegrates his traumatized silent self in his personality. After finishing his work, he wants to be reunited with his family. He meets his son in secret, and his son is also the necessary impulse to face his family again. When Tommy writes the false suicide threat to the newspaper, Joe decides to attempt to jump from the Empire State
Building dressed as the Escapist. It would not be a suicide attempt but an experiment with possible lethal consequences. Why does Joe put on the Escapist costume? Perhaps it is a final attempt to escape from his problems instead of facing them. It might be a way to leave the Escapist in the past, he does not run away because he is attached to strings. The jump might also be an act to free himself from his self-imposed isolation: he claims to “have been in jail before”, his trauma was a prison (554). The jump frees him: Joe is ready to confront his past, his family.

Joe’s jump is the final straw for Anapol who decides to “kill” the Escapist after much legal trouble. The Escapist retires because Joe does not need him anymore. He is no longer running and he has “run out of things to draw” (Chabon 592). After his jump and the reunion with Rosa and Sammy, the Golem of Prague arrives. However, he is no longer a light statue: the golem has been degraded to a pile of dirt. The golem has followed Joe: the trauma he has carried around with him has found him. The golem finds him when Joe has finished his graphic novel: the traumatized self has been reintegrated in Joe. The golem has helped Joe in working through his trauma and returns to dust so that new golems can be created. The golem is heavy because he carries the weight of “more than one lost soul”, he has helped many people to heal their wounded souls (612).
Part IV: Similarities between *Watchmen* and *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*

There are several important similarities between Chabon’s novel and Moore and Gibbon’s graphic novel. In both literary works we find a confusion between fact and fiction, there are many points of view and different narratives. However, the most important similarity between both works, is the characters’ reliance on superheroes to deal with their trauma.

4.1 A mix of fact and fiction

In his master thesis Andreas Hooftman discusses the blend of facts and fiction in *Kavalier & Clay*. Chabon’s description of New York in the 1940s is filled with details to make it seem historically accurate. Despite this factual accurateness, the narrative loses credibility because of its use of unrealistic events, such as Joe’s escape from Prague in the golem’s coffin, the lives of Joe and Sammy which seem to be characterized by both extreme luck and hardships, etc. Hooftman sees this “lack of a sense of reality” as a typical trait of comic books. To some extent the novel’s protagonists can even be regarded as comic book characters. Joe is a traumatized Escapist, and Sammy is his sidekick. Joe even has his arch nemesis in Carl Ebling, the Saboteur. So many amazing things happen to the creators of the *Amazing Midget Radio Comics*, so that the creators become comic book characters themselves.

In *Watchmen* we find a similar union of fact and fiction. At first the novel seems to be set in 1980s Cold War America. The majority of the vigilantes is not superhuman, they are merely regular people who dress up in costumes and fight crime, sometimes with the aid of technological gadgets. They were people who found their inspiration for vigilantism in comic books. Hollis Mason, the original Nite Owl, writes in his biography *Under the Hood* that to him “it all started in 1938, the year they invented the super-hero” (Moore ch.1). These vigilantes do not have superpowers, they do, however, attempt to act like superheroes. The story of these people could be realistic. However, the existence of Dr. Manhattan and all the inventions that follow his “creation” cause the story to become less plausible. Not only because he has supernatural powers that defy the laws of physics, also because his existence has changed the course of ‘history’: the Americans won the war in Vietnam, the “Iranian hostage situation” has been taken care of successfully by the Comedian, etc. In real life, these events were fiascos in the history of the United States. The Comedian is also said to have
assassinated president Kennedy, and the Watergate scandal never took place, allowing Nixon to remain president. Dr. Manhattan’s alliance to the United States changed the course of many events, however, his existence has not resulted in peace. The historical setting is still the same: although the outcome of certain events was different, the Cold War is still raging. The two nations can destroy each other and the world. With or without Dr. Manhattan, a huge catastrophe would occur.

4.2 Multiple points of view and different narratives

We find an abundance of different narratives and points of view in both Kavalier & Clay and Watchmen. In Chabon’s novel we see the points of view of Joe, Sammy, Tommy, Carl Ebling, and Kornblum. Hooftman explains this variety of voices as Chabon’s attempt to “emphasize the highly personal nature of traumatic experiences” (84).

In Watchmen we find even more voices: Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan, Laurie, Dan, Adrian, Dr. Long, the newspaper vendor, etc. We see several individual traumata but also the collective trauma that is caused by the explosion in New York. Every character has his own way of dealing with the nuclear threat, their trauma, and the violent world around them. The multiple points of view allow us to fully understand the characters’ actions and motives: although Adrian’s plan kills millions of people, we do realize he did what he did to save the world; we understand Rorschach’s refusal to compromise even when such compromise could bring peace. These voices make it difficult to have a clear-cut moral dichotomy between good and evil.

The narratives in Kavalier & Clay are a blend of high and low literature. The novel shows Joe’s and Sammy’s personal development, so in that respect it is a Bildungsroman. However, it also contains legends, myths, comic book plots, letters, historical facts, etc. Like Joe’s graphic novel, The Golem Chabon’s novel is “Jewish and American, combines high and low-brow culture” (Hooftman 79). Like Joe and Sammy in their comic books, Chabon integrates Jewish culture in the American culture. Through Joe Chabon demonstrates that comic books can be more than low literature: they help Joe deal with his trauma (80).

Watchmen contains even more different narratives: not only do we find the main narrative, the graphic novel also contains a comic within the comic, Tales of the Black Freighter; letters, interviews, police reports, psychological reports, excerpts from Hollis
Mason’s biography, scientific articles, etc. These narratives have different functions. *Tales of the Black Freighter* reflects on Adrian’s plan and foreshadows the catastrophe that will take place. Dr. Long’s psychological report provides us with more insight into Rorschach’s psyche. Sally Jupiter’s interview demonstrates that she blames herself for almost being raped. These narratives are intertwined as well. An example of such intertwining can be found in instances where the verbal narrative of the *Tales of the Black Freighter* is placed in the main narrative, or when the verbal narrative of the main narrative is placed in the fictional comic book. According to Jeffrey Lewis “the juxtaposition of a visual narrative with a seemingly disconnected verbal narrative in such a way that a third meaning is obtained when the visual and the verbal elements of each panel are put together” (11:140). This technique of juxtaposition is used to foreshadow events and to comment on events. It is also used in instances when historical traumatic events are placed next to the new event: the massacre in New York: the scene of death is linked to Kristallnacht through a billboard and to the bombing of Hiroshima through the silhouette lovers (Moore 2-5, ch. 12).

4.3 Comic books and superheroes.

Despite the fact that Chabon’s novel and Moore and Gibbon’s novel do not explore the same trauma and use a different medium for their stories, the novels do share one important feature: their characters turn to superheroes and comic books to deal with their traumata and their personal issues. Andreas Hooftman has observed that Chabon defends “comic books for the positive effects they can have on readers” but also shows that this escapism can also have negative consequences (87). In *Watchmen* we see some of these negative consequences: “who watches the watchmen” is the central question of the entire graphic novel: what happens when these vigilantes make decisions such as Veidt’s? Who controls these ‘heroes’ who think they are morally right and act outside of the law? What happens when the world of comic books turns into reality?

In both *Watchmen* and *Kavalier & Clay* characters turn to comic books to escape from reality. In the latter the escaping from reality happens through the creating of comic books: Joe, Sammy, and Rosa all make comics to construct a more hopeful version of reality and to

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20 “Quis custodiet ipsos custodes” or “who watches the watchmen” is citation from Juvenal, and is quoted on several pages of *Watchmen*, mostly as a graffiti message.
avoid dealing with their problems. However, Joe also seeks refuge in the fictional universes of comics to deal with his trauma:

“Having lost his mother, father, brother, and grandfather, the friends and foes of his youth, his beloved teacher Bernard Kornblum, his city, his history – his home – the usual charge leveled against comic books, that they offered *merely an easy escape from reality*, seemed to Joe actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf…. The escape from reality was, he felt – especially right after the war – a worthy challenge” (Chabon 575).

In *Watchmen* the need to escape from reality can be found in Bernie, the boy who is constantly reading *Tales of the Black Freighter* at the newspaper stand. He reads this pirate comic because – in Alan Moore’s opinion – people would not be interested in superheroes since they have those in real life. Bernie is always reading his comics, he rarely interacts with the newsvendor Bernard. The importance of comic books can be noticed in the descriptions of comic book history: the references to the creation of such comics as Superman and the work of Dr. Werham in Chabon’s novel, the article on Joe Orlando’s pirate comics and importance of the original comic books in Hollis Mason’s biography in *Watchmen*, etc.

Nevertheless, escapism is not the only purpose these comic books and their superheroes serve. The characters also create a double, a superhero, to cope with their trauma. In *Kavalier & Clay*, Joe, Rosa, Sammy, and Tommy have created fictional alter egos. Carl Ebling also has created an alter ego after his confrontation with Joe: the Saboteur, the Escapist’s nemesis. However, Ebling, who cannot separate reality from fiction, attempts to become his alter ego and tries to kill Joe. After finishing his work *The Golem*, Joe decides to try to jump of the Empire State Building, wearing the Escapist costume. Does Joe believe he is the Escapist? No, because “the Escapist doesn’t fly” (Chabon 538). The jump frees him: Tommy’s love and the jump allow him to come home to Rosa and Sammy.

In *Watchmen* the characters assume their superhero alter egos in real life. They dress up in costumes to fight crime. Their superhero comics provided the inspiration for their vigilantism. The reasons for their secret lives vary, but generally they want justice. However, this cannot be said about all of them: the Comedian, for example, seems to be amoral: he is very violent and shows little remorse about taking lives. Adrian Veidt is also a problematic

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21 Moore said this in *The Alan Moore Interview: Watchmen, microcosms and details* in [http://www.blather.net/articles/amoore/watchmen3.html](http://www.blather.net/articles/amoore/watchmen3.html)
character: in his quest for peace he kills millions of people and he is responsible for the death of some of his colleagues. Nevertheless, the most interesting vigilantes in *Watchmen* are Rorschach and Dr. Manhattan. They both have experienced traumatic events, and these events have made them superheroes. Dr. Manhattan is not a superhero by choice: the accident gave him superhuman powers, and the government hired him as a vigilante. Initially, he fights crime but he loses interest in humanity and focuses on science. He has become a weapon of the government. Rorschach on the other hand, did choose to become a vigilante. His childhood trauma and the death of Kitty Genovese cause him to assume a secret identity, Rorschach. When he fails to save Blaire Roche, Walter becomes his alter ego: Rorschach is born, the superhero has taken over: his true face is his mask.

In both *Watchmen* and *Kavalier & Clay* we find that traumatized characters – but other characters as well – turn to superheroes to deal with their trauma or their personal problems. The superhero alter ego then becomes the character’s double. This stronger personality forms one of the most important features of superheroes: the dual identity.

Danny Fingeroth considers this dual identity to be one of the most important traits of superheroes and villains. Superheroes often have a secret identity and when they operate as vigilantes or heroes, they put on a mask. To Fingeroth, the masks of superheroes function both “literally and metaphorically”: “A physical mask is not necessary to conceal identity, at least not among the superheroes”(51). The mask’s purpose is not only to conceal the hero’s identity, it also gives the person wearing it power: “It is simultaneously intended to make the wearer special and nondescript, the Everyman raised to the level of interlocutor with the holy. The mask is recognized as bestower of power as well as disguiser of identity” (Fingeroth 51).

It is precisely this empowerment that appeals to people. For that reason, superheroes are often used in counseling and play therapy. Children and adolescents can identify with superheroes:

“Just as superheroes are transformed by circumstances beyond their control, so, too, are clients altered by adversities and vicissitudes that include abuse, divorce, illness, loss, and relocation. Their ability to adapt to these transformative experiences lays the groundwork for the struggles and triumphs to follow. Although clients do not have superpowers or fatal flaws, identifying with the physical and moral strengths of a superhero can be transformative and aid in overcoming disability and deficiency, whether real or perceived” (Rubin 1:17).
The transformative experiences Rubin talks about can be abrupt and scientific: a scientific accident: Peter Parker became Spider-Man because he was bitten by a radioactive spider, The Fantastic Four were transformed by cosmic radiation. Dr. Manhattan’s transformation in *Watchmen* falls under this category. Other transformative experiences may be traumatic: Bruce Wayne chose to become Batman to avenge his parents’ deaths, Elektra Natchios had a traumatizing youth, or Walter’s trauma causes him to become Rorschach in *Watchmen* (13-14).

Seeing these traumatic experiences in the lives of their superheroes, traumatized people may decide to create their own alter egos, whether they be fictional characters or vigilantes in real life. The Escapist empowers Joe to some extent: he hopes his work can make a difference in the war. For Sammy, superheroes are a method of dealing with his father issues, his physical problems, and his failed marriage. In Joe’s *The Golem*, we find a superhero based on Jewish legend who sacrifices himself to save the world. Reading comics and creating fictional alter egos helps these characters. In Joe’s case we can see the truth of Fingeroth’s words: “The superhero avatar enables us to be victim and protector at the same time. We get to save ourselves” (67).

In *Watchmen* we do not find fictional alter egos, although the inspiration for vigilantism was drawn from comic books. People still escape in comic books, but superheroes have lost their appeal. Moore and Gibbon’s vigilantes are not the traditional superheroes either: the behavior these ‘superheroes’ display is hardly conventional. There is no clear-cut morality: the ‘villain’ Adrian Veidt saves the world, however, he kills millions of people. The Comedian is so amoral that it is difficult to call him a superhero.

Rorschach pursues justice and truth – ideals most superheroes value – but he is unwilling to compromise, even when it could save mankind from destruction. His vigilantism is determined by his trauma. Despite his efforts to be a strong, ruthless bringer of justice, he is still haunted by his trauma. This can be observed in his costume. In *Secret Skin* Michael Chabon has observed that “the superhero’s costume often functions as a kind of magic screen onto which the repressed narrative may be projected. No matter how well he or she hides its traces, the secret narrative of transformation, of rebirth, is given up by the costume”. Rorschach’s costume is made from Kitty’s dress material, his blots represent traumatic experiences. Because of his trauma, he would rather die than lie. Under different
circumstances this is what a superhero would do, but even heroes sacrifice people to save the world.

The most problematic character is Dr. Manhattan: although he possesses superhuman powers as a result of the accident, he has lost his human personality. He has lost his interest in humanity. As Christopher Robichaud writes: “He lacks the emotions necessary to form appropriate moral judgments, and this explains his ambivalence toward the value of persons” (1:10). He is a godlike creature who does not care for the people he is supposed to protect. In a way he is like the golem: both have human appearances, they possess great powers – which could cause great destruction – and with which they should protect their people, they both cannot be controlled, etc. Because Dr. Manhattan has lost his moral judgment and his ability to understand human emotions, he appears to be a soulless creature like the golem. However, Jon Osterman did have a soul until it was destroyed by his traumatic accident and the aftermath of his disintegration.

The characters of both novels create superhero doubles. In Kavalier & Clay these fictional alter egos seem to help the traumatized characters. In Joe’s case the creation of his graphic novel, the narrative through which he reintegrates his traumatized self, allows him to heal. In Watchmen, however, the traumatized characters do not find healing in their masked double. Rorschach finds a coping mechanism, but his double is never reintegrated. He cannot work through his trauma and consequently he dies. Similarly, Jon does not achieve healing either: his double, Dr. Manhattan, does not try to work through his trauma. He has lost his connection to mankind and to the person he was before the accident. He prefers to leave. In Moore and Gibbon’s graphic novel, the traumatized characters cannot work through their trauma. On the contrary, a new collective trauma is added at the end.
Conclusion

Despite the different medium of expression Chabon and Moore have used to convey their story, there are several similarities between both novels. The most important similarity between both works lies in their use of comic books and superheroes. These characteristics are in line with the authors’ goals: Chabon wants to demonstrate the potential healing that can result from comic books, a genre that was and still is considered to be low-brow culture. Moore and Gibbons, however, made a critical narrative about the potential dangers of a reality with superheroes.

Superheroes empower us. This is very important to those people who feel disempowered, such as traumatized people. When we identify with superheroes we can save ourselves. The creation of a stronger, super alter ego, as a way of doubling to cope with this disempowerment, can enable victims to deal with their trauma. Nevertheless, because Chabon’s objectives differ from Moore and Gibbon’s, the characters in both works have different responses to the superhero doubles they have created. In Kavalier & Clay Joe acquires a certain level of healing by constructing a narrative: The Golem. The graphic novel allows him to reintegrate his traumatized self. In the superhero of the golem he can reconcile his Jewish heritage with his new American life. Chabon’s other characters – with the exception of Ebling – find some solace and hope in their fictional alter egos as well.

In Watchmen the traumatized characters do not benefit from their fictional doubles. Dr. Manhattan, Jon’s stronger double, has lost his ‘humanity’ and morality. He leaves Earth rather than trying to work through his trauma. Rorschach, Walter’s vigilante double, is not reintegrated either: the stronger self refuses to compromise, whereas Walter before all the traumatic events would have lied. Rorschach’s diary – if read – might be a form of testimony. However, the diary would only be a testimony to his death and the massacre in New York, and not about the other events. Until his death, Rorschach is possessed by all the traumatic events he has lived through.

As Chabon’s novel points out: comic books can have positive effects on people, whether they are traumatized or not. Moore and Gibbon’s graphic novel has shown that the ‘comic’ is also an excellent medium to represent trauma. The visual narrative can say what words cannot say. The technique of juxtaposition – where verbal meets visual narrative – generates new meaning and allows us deeper insights in the psyche of the characters, especially those characters that have been traumatized.
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