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Pain Presented in the Pagliacci Package:

Traumatic Symbolism in *Persepolis* and *Watchmen*

Graphic novels serve as vessels for several genres, allowing authors and artists to freely express a multitude of ideas and concepts in a form alternative to traditional storytelling. Through this outlet, creators communicate complex ideas in easy-to-manage packages, condensing entire messages of hope, despair, support, resistance, or fun within a single panel. Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, along with Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*, exercises this ability by depicting the traumatic effects of war on the mental states of children and adults alike. *Persepolis* is a memoir of the author's childhood, whereas *Watchmen* is arguably a combination of historical and science fiction; however, both texts create similar metaphors of darkness to express trauma through art and storytelling. Specific analysis of Marjane Satrapi from *Persepolis* and Rorschach from *Watchmen* reveals how Satrapi, Moore, and Gibbons illustrate the complexity of trauma and the effects thereof, including the contagious nature of traumatic symptoms.

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* documents the author's personal childhood experience with the Islamic Revolution in Iran. While the graphic memoir lacks color, *Persepolis* still contains artistic elements of shading, shadows, and repetition to exhibit Satrapi's multilayered storytelling. Satrapi's black-and-white style allows for multilayered symbolism within even a single panel. For example, after discussing the exiled Shah taking refuge with

the president of Egypt, Satrapi's father insists, "Let's talk about something else. Let's enjoy our new freedom!" (Satrapi 43). "Now that the devil has left!" Satrapi's mother interjects; contrary to this declaration, however, readers see a black cartoon devil wrapped around the deceptively relieved family (Satrapi 43). Shadows fall behind Satrapi and her parents as a result of light coming through one corner the devil's body does not cover; conclusively, analytical readers infer that whatever this devil represents casts shadows and eliminates light around the characters as a result. Satrapi's father's ironic celebration over escaping the devil further brings an element of suspense to the story, bringing readers to question what is to come for Satrapi's family.

Satrapi's Devil must represent some concrete or abstract concept that Satrapi wishes to communicate to readers; the question arises, what is the author attempting to represent with a cartoon devil? Readers find the answer in the next notable instance of darkness, where Satrapi and her parents watch a news report in a Madrid hotel (Satrapi 78). Although the channel is in Spanish, the family notices a black cloud gradually covering Iran. Satrapi's grandmother later reveals that Iran is at war, connecting the previously "harmless" black cloud from the Madrid report with a dark fate (Satrapi 79). Conclusively, Satrapi's Devil is an artistic manifestation of war and the effects thereof.

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*—a much more fictional story than *Persepolis*—enters excruciating detail and expert storytelling by following the fictional accounts of heroes, authorities, and pedestrians as victims of the Cold War's psychological trauma. While *Persepolis* indirectly addresses the effects of war through a cartoon metaphor, *Watchmen* dedicates an entire chapter to understanding the effects of the Cold War manifesting in an abyss. Chapter XI, "The Abyss Gazes Also," documents Dr. Malcolm

Long's attempted psychiatric evaluation and treatment of Walter Joseph Kovacs, who is more commonly known as Rorschach. Dr. Long begins with a blot test on Rorschach, which proves to be fruitless in terms of "fixing" Rorschach's psychological issues. Rorschach immediately sees a murdered dog in the inkblot, but tells Dr. Long that the image is "a pretty butterfly;" Dr. Long believes the lie and congratulates Rorschach, writing, "His responses to the Rorschach blot tests were surprisingly bright and positive and healthy. I really think he might be getting better" (Moore and Gibbons 179). Dr. Long later realizes that Rorschach is lying; after pressing for the patient's true interpretation of the inkblots, Dr. Long horrifically listens to Rorschach's explanation of the dog image's origin:

"Live our lives, lacking anything better to do. Devise reason later. Born from oblivion; bear children, hellbound as ourselves, go into oblivion. There is nothing else. . . . Streets stank of fire. The void breathed hard on my heart, turning its illusions to ice, shattering them. Was reborn then, free to scrawl own design on this morally blank world. Was Rorschach." (Moore and Gibbons 204)

Through this twisted origin story, Rorschach addresses the existence of a metaphorical abyss that has consumed him; by the end of the chapter, Dr. Long finds himself in the abyss as well. This fate comes about as Dr. Long progresses from addressing Walter as "Kovacs" to "Rorschach," thereby supporting the vigilante's preferred violent identity. Finally, Dr. Long's wife leaves him by the end of the chapter due to his consummation with Rorschach's case, which results in Dr. Long lamenting, "The horror is this: in the end, it is simply a picture of empty meaningless blackness. We are alone. There is nothing else (Moore and Gibbons 206)."

While differing in genre and style, *Persepolis* and *Watchmen* portray the progression of traumatic effects through artistic representation; additionally, Satrapi and Rorschach both follow a similar process—or a “Falling Formula”—of exposure, pressure, puncture, and plunge. This process results in a full adoption of a pessimistic worldview, as well as a contagious element that draws surrounding characters into the fruits of trauma, where the new victims either take on a similar pessimism or carry a lasting memory of the initial party’s “twisted” state of mind.

First, Satrapi and Rorschach are exposed to war or another traumatic experience that the characters will fully fall victim to later on; coincidentally, both characters witness first these events at school and home. Satrapi’s initial exposure to the Iranian Revolution is at school, where she is required to wear a veil and learn separately from male students. Furthermore, Satrapi’s parents continually express resistance to the law within the walls of their household, adding a more personal element to Satrapi’s exposure. Rorschach’s first exposure, however, appears to be child abuse; in his youth, Rorschach disrupts his mother’s work as a prostitute, driving away her client and—consequently—her pay. As a result, Rorschach’s mother physically and verbally abuses him for negatively affecting her paycheck. Rorschach also gets bullied at school for his mother’s reputation, adding onto the negative atmosphere in his household.

After these inciting incidents, Satrapi and Rorschach experience pressure from the world around them; this pressure does not directly affect the characters, but they still witness others’ experiences and interpret the encounters through their own lens. Satrapi’s family continuously discusses the Iranian Revolution and their personal political views, including both family members and close friends who fell prisoner for their rebellious

attitudes and behavior. Towards the beginning of the story, Satrapi's maid, Mehri, experiences heartbreak from falling in love with a neighbor outside of her social class; the neighbor breaks ties with Mehri after finding out she is a peasant, causing disruption in Satrapi's household (Satrapi 37). In "The Sheep," Satrapi visits her Uncle Anoosh one last time before his execution for rebelling against the government (Satrapi 69). The panels showcasing this meeting suitably contain black backgrounds, highlighting the dark nature of Satrapi's Devil and its looming effects. Following this episode, Satrapi dedicates an entire page to an illustration of her childhood self floating in a black space with a few planets and stars as her mother cries, "Marji, run to the basement! We're being bombed!" (Satrapi 71). The author captions the drawing with the revelatory phrase, "It was the beginning of the war" (Satrapi 71). Most of the dark episodes in *Persepolis*, including the ones discussed here, contain a black background in contrast to the white panels Satrapi uses otherwise.

Rorschach's pressure comes from the crime-filled world around him, especially as American citizens negatively react to the Cold War and media scares. Rorschach continues to be bullied as a child due to his mother's prostitutional profession (Moore and Gibbons 184). As a sixteen-year-old, Rorschach takes an unpleasant job as an unskilled manual worker in the garment industry; while working, Rorschach takes home and modifies a dress that a young female customer personally requested, but rejected due to its "ugly" appearance. Rorschach later learns that the unsatisfied customer was raped, tortured, and killed outside of her apartment building, where nearly forty other residents ignored her screams, and "some of them even watched" (Moore and Gibbons 188). In response to this horrific report, Rorschach recounts to Dr. Long, "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” (Moore and Gibbons 188). This self-observant response to the pressure of traumatizing events illustrates the background for Rorschach's lack of faith in humanity, as well as the reasoning behind his immoral actions as a masked “hero.”

Next, Satrapi and Rorschach receive a puncture, or an experience that affects them directly; this puncture usually results from the death of a close friend or family member, or even direct torture of the character. Satrapi’s puncture occurs when she finds the remains of her friend, Neda Baba-Levy, after a bomb explodes on the girls’ street. Satrapi narrates,

“When we walked past the Baba-Levy’s house, which was completely destroyed, I could feel that [my mother] was discreetly pulling me away. Something told me that the Baba-Levys had been at home. Something caught my attention. I saw a turquoise bracelet. It was Neda’s . . . the bracelet was still attached to . . . I don’t know what.” (Satrapi 142)

Immediately following this recount is the only completely black panel in Satrapi’s entire graphic novel, in which she expounds, “No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger” (Satrapi 142). Other black panels in Satrapi’s book contain some stark contrast of white, such as stars or planets, potentially as some indicator of hope. In contrast, this specific panel is completely black, perhaps as a display of the hopelessness and torment Satrapi cannot put into words or drawings.

Rorschach’s personal puncture occurs many times, which largely contributes to his being exponentially more corrupted from his trauma than Satrapi is from hers. Rorschach consistently receives abuse from his prostitute mother, neighborhood bullies, and

adult enemies. Some of Rorschach's enemies justifiably attack him in revenge; nonetheless, there is a fine line between delivering balanced justice for extreme attacks and just adding insult to injury, a line that even Rorschach himself crosses many times. Nonetheless, Rorschach's specific inciting incident appears to be the aforementioned episode with his mother. This experience directly affects Rorschach's worldview as he carries a misogynistic lens of humanity. Rorschach constantly degrades women throughout the story; when describing the rejected dress he took home from the factory as a teenager, Rorschach says, "When I had cut it enough, it didn't look like a woman anymore" (Moore and Gibbons 188). As a result of his childhood experiences, Rorschach also addresses women with insulting sexual terminology.

Finally, Satrapi and Rorschach take the plunge as both characters adopt more pessimistic worldviews and begin affecting their community, including family, friends, and bystanders alike. Satrapi directly addresses her shift in character: "After the death of Neda Baba-Levy, my life took a new turn. In 1984, I was fourteen and a rebel. Nothing scared me anymore" (Satrapi 143). Satrapi physically and verbally rebels against school authorities until she is expelled. This expulsion results from Satrapi wearing a bracelet against the principal's orders, then yelling at and slapping the principal in defiance (Satrapi 143). After hearing of her daughter's expulsion, Satrapi's mother breaks down at home, scolding Satrapi and asking if she knows what happens to the young girls the government arrests. The conversation triggers a defensive response from Satrapi's mother, who elaborates, "You know that it's against the law to kill a virgin . . . so a guardian of the revolution marries her and takes her virginity before executing her. Do you understand what that means? If

someone so much as touches a hair on your head, I'll kill him!" (Satrapi 145) A week after the episode, Satrapi's parents send her to Austria, permitting her to attend a better school and protect her life at the cost of separation from her parents and friends. Satrapi spots her father carrying her heartbroken and unconscious mother away from the airport, which comes to be the last image Satrapi has of her parents before her departure.

Rorschach directly affects those around him, of whom the most notable is Dr. Long. While in prison, Rorschach proclaims, "None of you understand. *I'm* not locked up in here with *you*. *You're* locked up in here with *me*" (Moore and Gibbons 191). Dr. Long, after realizing the neglect he's given his own wife, admits that Rorschach is "absolutely right" (Moore and Gibbons 191). Until the end of Chapter VI, Dr. Long never holds the inkblot cards to face himself; he only holds the cards up towards Rorschach or the ceiling. Dr. Long finally looks at the face of the inkblot test cards after his wife leaves him, specifically the same card that Rorschach saw as a dead dog earlier in the chapter. Dr. Long narrates:

"I sat on the bed. I looked at the Rorschach blot. I tried to pretend it looked like a spreading tree, shadows pooled beneath it, but it didn't. It looked more like a dead cat I once found, the fat, glistening grubs writhing blindly, squirming over each other, frantically tunneling away from the light. But even that is avoiding the real horror. The horror is this: in the end, it is simply a picture of empty meaningless blackness. We are alone. There is nothing else." (Moore and Gibbons 206).

The panels containing this internal monologue begin with a view of Dr. Long staring at the inkblot card, gradually closing in on the inkblots themselves until there is nothing but a panel of complete darkness—even absent of narration.

The revelatory nature of Dr. Long's descent into the abyss echoes an earlier story from Rorschach's journal, a story that exhibits comparable elements of the revelation of sorrow and hopelessness to Satrapi, Rorschach, and Dr. Long. After the Comedian's death, Rorschach writes:

“Heard joke once: man goes to doctor. Says he's depressed. Says life seems harsh and cruel. Says he feels all alone in a threatening world where what lies ahead is vague and uncertain. Doctor says, ‘Treatment is simple. Great clown Pagliacci is in town tonight. Go and see him. That should pick you up.’ Man bursts into tears. Says, ‘But doctor... I am Pagliacci.’” (Moore and Gibbons 69)

The story of Pagliacci reveals someone who displays hope, joy, and relief for the community around him, yet discovers that he does not have enough support to keep himself from falling into depression. As a result, Pagliacci acknowledges the absence of his community and assistance before lamenting his loneliness and despair.

Satrapi and Rorschach both exhibit elements of the Pagliacci story within their own narratives. Satrapi, as a child, serves as motivation for her parents to survive in order to love and protect her; similarly, Satrapi's own uncle asks to see her before he carries out his death sentence. However, Satrapi realizes that her support system weakens throughout the narrative as her friends and family are either killed or separated from her, concluding the novel with, “I turned around to see [my parents] one last time. It would have been better to just go” (Satrapi 153). Rorschach, upon elaborating on the abyss he has fallen into, accepts the darkness as part of his own identity. Dan Dreiburgh addresses this trait, exclaiming, “It's just so hard, reaching [Rorschach]. 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" (Moore and Gibbons 264).

In conclusion, Marjane Satrapi from *Persepolis* and Rorschach from *Watchmen* both present a process of trauma and its effects presented in the Pagliacci Package. Both of these characters, despite being represented in different genres, exhibit a process of exposure to trauma, pressure from several forms of media and communication, puncture from a significant moment of personal torment, and a plunge into the metaphorical darkness that injured them. Close reading of these texts reveals many elements and layers of artistic representation of psychological pain and torment, as well as the effects on the human mind. Satrapi, Moore, and Gibbons thoroughly address these themes in a matter of panels, whereas other forms of media would take up several pages, creating a condensed and complex experience of trauma.

Works Cited

Moore, Alan, et al. *Watchmen*. DC Comics, 2019.

Satrapa, Marjane. *Persepolis: the Story of a Childhood*. Pantheon Books, 2005.