

Unwrapping Moloch: Game Theory, Apocalypse, and Human Nature in 'Watchmen.'

"(...) Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men!

Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are judgment! Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments!

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb! (...)" (Ginsberg)

Within the haunting verses penned by Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl*, a spectral force emerges - Moloch, the embodiment of societal decay and the relentless pursuit of self-interest at the cost of collective well-being. As we navigate through the labyrinth of Moore and Gibbons' infamous graphic novel *Watchmen*, we unravel the threads of a force resembling Ginsberg's Moloch; a world where conscience is sacrificed on the altar of unrestrained pragmatism, and the juggernaut of doom hurtles forward with inexorable momentum. This essay connects the poem with the graphic novel, embarking on an exploration into the shadows cast by Ginsberg's Moloch on the world of *Watchmen*, dissecting its role as an inscrutable puppeteer guiding society towards its impending demise. Ginsberg's creation serves as an allegory for everything that is malign in *Watchmen*; it is an enigmatic force propelling both micro-aggressions among everyday citizens as well as global cataclysms, notably the inescapable nuclear arms race.

It is of course necessary to, at this point, draw a sharp distinction between the metaphysical force of Moloch derived from Ginsberg's work, and the character of Edgar Jacobi – also known as Moloch – that appears in *Watchmen*. The two entities have no discernible connection. Though Edgar Jacobi is plausibly the principal villain of the crimefighters in *Watchmen*, the heroes have been focused on the wrong Moloch all along.

In a sociological analysis of *Howl*, Scott Alexander considers the world to be a series of games, interpreting Moloch as the force driving the prisoner's dilemma. Moloch compels players – people – to do harm to themselves, the environment, or others on the basis of the realization that they cannot control the actions of other players, who will likely take advantage of the game and will not cooperate due to their self-interest, a prisoner's dilemma. A world where Moloch permeates society is a world devoid of conscience, a world of unrestrained and unhinged pragmatism and vicious competition. A conversation between Doctor Manhattan and Adrian Veidt provides an early sign of this:

“With our help, our scientists are limited only by their imaginations.”

- “And by their consciences, surely?”

“Let's hope so” His eyes are sad and knowing (...) (Moore, 131).

As if knowing of the fact that Moloch strips scientists of conscience, prioritizing technological advantage over competitors. The exact problem of the traditional case of a prisoner's dilemma, where players don't have certainty as to the strategy of their coplayer, is noticed by a street merchant in chapter 11; *“people don't reach out and make contact. That's why there's this commotion all the time, this conflict. People don't connect with each other”* (Moore, 371). The ideal solution to a prisoner's dilemma would be for both parties to cooperate – for nuclear powers to lift arms, or for criminals and law enforcement to compromise. Communication and dialogue can facilitate a solution – but the problem with society, as outlined in *Watchmen*, is the absolute lack of dialogue; the ‘absence of American love’ (Moore, 67).

I. Vigilantism

Ginsberg's Moloch introduces an overwhelming pessimism about society in *Watchmen*. There is a sense of society being a passenger on an unstoppable train towards demise, introducing moral questions whether doing good has any meaning. Hollis questions whether all that soldiers in war and the Minutemen have fought for in the 1940s and 50s was worth it, considering the illness that is omnipresent in society in the 60s. There is a feeling that societal degeneration never rests and that the train of doom cannot be stopped. That no matter what any one crimefighter achieves, the fate of society remains equally ill, because Moloch puts society in conflict. Even Dr. Manhattan, a being said to possess absolute rationality and self-determination, notices this: "*We're all just puppets, Laurie. I'm just a puppet who can see the strings*" (Moore, 285). Manhattan sees the wider game being played – he realizes that his actions alone won't change society if society itself is doomed. Paradoxically, the Minutemen might have strengthened Moloch. Hollis acknowledges that if the Minutemen had never materialized, the world might have not got to where it ended up (Moore, 73). This makes sense, considering the various instances of public outrage at the presence of masked superheroes instead of a more civil police force. In some sense, this represents a vicious cycle; the ills of society motivate the ills of the *Watchmen*. Social unrest forces the Watchmen to overstep; to cause heart attacks by disrupting protests or hurt innocent people for information. This, in turn, antagonizes the Watchmen further and catalyzes social unrest.

Rorschach comes to the same realization about America's trajectory: "*Others bury their heads between the swollen teats of indulgence and gratification, piglets squirming beneath a sow for shelter... but there is no shelter... and the future is bearing down like an express train*" (Moore, 68). Rorschach realizes that the train of apocalypse cannot be stopped – for as long as people keep antagonizing each other, everyone will keep wanting to exploit the game and Moloch will keep the train moving. Notwithstanding this realization, Rorschach endows himself with a relentless tenacity that attempts to break society's vicious cycle, and for that he pays with a nihilistic degeneration of ethics and psyche, noticeable during his incarceration: "*It's as if continual contact with society's grim elements has shaped him into something grimmer, something*

even worse. If only I could convince him that life isn't like that. The world isn't like that." (Moore, 194). Rorschach keeps spiraling downward because, when understood through game theory, he keeps wanting to cooperate. In the ever-present prisoner's dilemma cast by Moloch, he keeps playing the strategy that isn't best for him by trying to eradicate an infinite evil; by fighting crime and injustice. Rorschach recognizes the game that is being played, that human capabilities are unrestricted; that there is no God and no destiny. His psychiatrist, who at the start of therapy was so optimistic, eventually becomes so convinced of Rorschach's worldview that he falls prey to the same nihilism himself.

The Comedian, Blake, burned down the crimebusters' original plan because he was the first to recognize that Moloch cannot be stopped, that interventions by the superheroes are insignificant distractions. Rorschach retrospectively realizes this, after Blake's death:

"Blake understood. Treated it like a joke, but he understood. He saw the cracks in society, saw the little men in masks trying to hold it together... He saw the true face of the twentieth century and chose to become a reflection, a parody of it. No one else saw the joke. That was why he was lonely" (Moore, 69).

It is in this passage that we actually discover The Comedian's joke, the secret behind his identity. It was his understanding of society and his job as a soldier, a savior, that was the joke. In the face of Moloch, none of it mattered. Granted Blake held this worldview, his ruthless actions can now be better understood. Blake is 'deliberately amoral' as a result of this understanding. He understands perfectly the horrid nature of the world, 'and he doesn't care' (Moore, 129). In a way, he adapts himself to it – he suits the 'climate of madness, of pointless butchery.' Blake realized that no matter how he behaved, Moloch still has the final say. Once you discover the influence of Ginsberg's Moloch, you cannot help but notice his all-encompassing influence:

“[Blake] understood. Understood man’s capacity for horrors and never quit. Saw the world’s black underbelly and never surrendered. Once a man has seen, he can never turn his back on it, never pretend it doesn’t exist. No matter who orders him to look away” (Moore, 193).

II. Nuclear Meltdown

Throughout the graphic novel, there is an illusion of a Soviet threat to America – there is misguided attention on the external and not enough scrutiny on the internal. It is Ginsberg’s Moloch that consumes American society, not the Soviets. This dilemma bedevils Soviet society as well, and is quintessentially a representation of the nuclear arms race: ‘we launch if they launch; we grow our stockpiles if they grow their stockpiles,’ etc. It’s a world where no matter what one player in the game does, the result will be the same – because if one player refrains from expanding their stockpile, the other will have an overwhelming incentive to increase their own. The constant fear of annihilation and apocalypse permits ordinary citizens to commit terrible acts, such as a father killing his kids out of fear for them getting killed by a nuclear warhead, or living in a post-apocalyptic world (pg151). Moloch’s influence – I must do X, no matter how immoral it is, because if not, THEY will do Y – is evident in this example.

The theme of nuclear meltdown links excellently with the fate of the sailor in the Tale of the Black Freighter that permeates the novel as a parallel, and in fact largely comparable, story. In the tale, the sailor is the de-facto threat – everything else, including his certainty of his benign intentions – is a fictitious illusion (*“How had I reached this appalling position with love, only love, as my guide?”* [Moore, 357]). Stories of apocalypse appear many times across ordinary citizenry in *Watchmen*’s world – stories of comets (“omens of doom”), or of the Soviet Union invading Afghanistan (Moore, 151). In reality, there is no such thing as a predetermined doom *“both intolerable and unavoidable,”* the kind of which causes the sailor in the tale to devolve into *“madness”* (Moore, 249), becoming increasingly grotesque as the game keeps being played – just like society. These threats are phantoms alike, illusions; they are rather products of the vicious games

played by humanity under the spell of Moloch. The sailor chose madness because he considered it his only option; either he became mad and returned to his town for revenge, or he stayed sane and witnessed the pirates of the black freighter annihilate his family. In the end, of course, the threat turns out to be a fiction – but the sailor has committed to insanity and is doomed forever. Comparably, back in the actual world of *Watchmen*, rioters kill innocent Hollis Mason out of the excuse that he (whom they mistook for Dan Dreiberg), busted out a criminal from jail (Moore 273-4). Moloch compelled the killers to do this. From their perspective, if they didn't punish Mason, he would keep roaming with impunity. Illustratively, the rioters killed Mason with the very reward – a statue – that he received for his service to the American nation.

III. Veidt's Solution

Amidst a dystopian world where agency and morality are eroded by Moloch's vicious game, Adrian Veidt is in some sense a perfect player in the game. He, as opposed to perhaps anyone else, observes society's moves first and responds second. He acknowledges the omnipresence of Moloch, choosing instead to respond to the particularities of society. This is visible not only upon scrutinizing the fragments from his business correspondence (Moore 343), but also in his description of his grand catastrophic solution:

“Both sides realized the suicidal implications of nuclear conflict, yet couldn't stop racing towards it lest their opponents should overtake them. Afraid of their weapons, afraid of losing them, afraid to blink or turn their backs... Meanwhile, expensive arsenals meant less cash to spend on their old; their sick and homeless; on their children's educations. As stockpiles grew, as computers reduced human involvement, the specter of accidental apocalypse stalked ever closer. Simply given the mathematics of the situation, sooner or later conflict would be inevitable! (...) However, without a practical solution at hand, what use was it to suddenly notice the perils of the situation? (...)” (Moore, 369).

Veidt designs his ominous scheme to save the world as a response to Moloch, and out of recognition of the fact that in order to defeat him, the game must be broken. It must be reset. Veidt's perfect understanding of the prisoners dilemma that society finds itself in is further displayed in his monologue:

"Other factors emerged: arms expenditures boosted international lending rates. To repay soaring debt interest, nations like Brazil levelled their forests. Nuclear power, providing vital weapons-grade waste, became mandatory. War aside, atomic deadlock guided us downhill toward environmental ruin" (Moore, 369).

Veidt manages to reference the dangers of both an ever-growing nuclear stockpile, and of environmental collapse stemming out of the fact that refraining from exploitation will cast a nation behind its competitors. This "intractable problem" could "only be resolved by stepping beyond conventional solutions" – for 'a disease cannot be cured by suppressing its symptoms' (Moore, 379). Veidt manages to reset the game by uniting the players into one – he creates a common enemy amongst them, a fiction of an alien invasion, and in doing so he strips power away from Moloch by ending the game of humans versus humans, American versus Soviet, East versus West. Interestingly, in Rorschach's last dance, he fails to play the new game and refuses to cooperate, by still pitting human against human (he is determined to reveal Veidt's plot to the world, insisting on playing the old game) – and for that he is killed. In delivering his final solution, Veidt manages to "save earth from hell" (Moore, 402) – the irony in this is that in order to achieve this claim, he unleashed hell on earth, on the people of New York. The novel leaves us in this very moment with uncertainty. Did it work? Did Veidt defeat Moloch?

Watchmen's dystopia becomes clearly understood when considered haunted by the specter of Allen Ginsberg's Moloch looming large over the fate of humanity. The metaphysical force creates an absence of dialogue that, in a world driven by self-interest, leads to a perpetual prisoners' dilemma deeming cooperation elusive. The characters' struggles against Moloch serve as a mirror reflecting the darker facets of society, where the pursuit of justice becomes a Sisyphean task in the face of an ever-degenerating world.

Moreover, when we extend the lens beyond the confines of *Watchmen*, contemporary manifestations of Moloch's influence become apparent. On a macro scale, the unrestrained development of artificial intelligence, the persistent threat of nuclear Armageddon, and the erosion of disarmament treaties all echo the influence of Moloch. On a micro scale, everyday phenomena such as the obsessive use of digital beauty enhancements in photos or widespread cheating on online exams are examples of the “everyone is doing it so I must too” rationale propagated by Moloch. *Watchmen* teaches us that apocalypse may be avoided if the nature of the game is altered. Will humans succeed in depriving Moloch of its power, or will the shadow of apocalypse plague the world to come?

Works Cited

Alexander, Scott. "Meditations on Moloch." *Slate Star Codex*, 30 July 2014, slatestarcodex.com/2014/07/30/meditations-on-moloch/.

Allen Ginsberg. "Howl." *Poetry Foundation*, 1956, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49303/howl.

Moore, Alan, and Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen*. 1986. Burbank, CA, DC Comics, 2014.