

# SNOWMAN AND DR. MANHATTAN: WANDERING AS A METAPHOR OF EXISTENCE

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**Abstract:** *This article makes a comparison between two literary characters: Snowman, from the novel Oryx & Crake (2003) by Margaret Atwood, and Dr. Manhattan, from the graphic novel Watchmen (1987) by Alan Moore. The aim is to discuss the confluence in the construction of both figures, taking into account some literary criticism of the books from which they originate, as well as theoretical assumptions about questions concerning nomadism. By problematizing a range of subjects, it is possible to connect two characters with different specificities, since they share a feature of errant life and can be considered a subversion of the traditional hero.*

**Keywords:** *probation; time; detachment; illusion.*

Tomorrow will be another part of yesterday  
And yesterday will be another part of the day before. 🎵  
("Insomnia" – Silverchair)

## 1. Introduction: paper people with no flesh and blood?

It would be interesting to start pointing out a brief definition that proves useful in the reading of this article (although this subject is not the main focus here): "Narratology is the ensemble of theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that 'tell a story.' Such a theory helps to understand, analyse, and evaluate narratives" (Bal 2009: 3). It is quite obvious to affirm that there are many different levels in the study of narrative, such as the story, the narrator, the setting, the time, etc. Analyzing all these elements is not as simple as it sounds, since some categories are not static (and, in this sense, to call them "category" already represents a kind of ambiguity). According to Herman and Vervaeck (2005: 67), "next to time, *characterization* makes up the second dimension of

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narrative. While story deals with abstract roles, narrative involves their concretization". Hence, for the purpose of this work, characterization will be the most representative aspect to be observed in the narrative, both in a concrete manner (in terms of structure) and in an abstract manner (in terms of content).

Characters resemble people. Literature is written by, for, and about people. That remains a truism, so banal that we often tend to forget it, and so problematic that we as often repress it with the same ease. On the other hand, the people with whom literature is concerned are not real people. They are fabricated creatures made up from fantasy, imitation, memory: paper people, without flesh and blood. [...] The character is not a human being, but it resembles one. It has no real psyche, personality, ideology, or competence to act, but it does possess characteristics that make readers assume it does, and makes psychological and ideological descriptions possible. Character is intuitively the most crucial category of narrative, and also most subject to projection and fallacies (Bal 2009: 113).

Even if they are dispossessed of flesh and blood, characters are assumed by readers to be a kind of extension of material reality, and this is simply because we identify with them, since it is possible to apprehend labyrinths of human construction through them. That is to say we get in touch with some of our own particularities – powers and limitations, qualities and frailties –, finally confronting our human personality. Bal (2009: 112) explains that narrative, fiction as well as journalism or films, “thrives on the affective appeal of characters. Whether we like them or not, we are compelled to read on because we respond to those paper people”. Thus, with a particular motivation, I chose Snowman and Dr. Manhattan to exemplify some of my favorite paper people, for the reason that both are really complex constructions of characters, possible depictions of detached human beings, and also deconstructions of traditional heroes.

*Watchmen* is a comic book created by the writer Alan Moore, along with the artist Dave Gibbons, and the colorist John Higgins, and published by DC Comics during 1986 and 1987. The graphic novel reveals a world of retired “masked adventurers, vigilantes, and semi-deities, who are virtually powerless after the 1977 Keene Act forcibly retired them. Eight years later, a strange string of murders catches the attention of Rorschach, a slovenly transient vigilante who has refused to comply with the government mandate” (Van Ness 2010: 1). But then, people see the executions as a “random result of the chaotic times” (Van Ness 2010: 1), while Rorschach strongly believes in a conspiracy. The book could have been just one more story of superheroes, but it proved to represent much more than this, since it “explores a variety of complex themes that question the heroic ideal, the validity of utopias, the fundamental qualities of good and evil, and the dangers of possible world destruction and even world peace” (Van Ness 2010: 1).

Moore used the story as a means to reflect on contemporary anxieties and to problematize the superhero conception. *Watchmen* then depicts an alternative History where masked heroes emerged in the 1940s and 1960s, helping the United States win the Vietnam War. However, there are two generations of costumed adventurers in the story: the group from the previous era, entitled the Minutemen, was replaced by the Crimebusters (to which Dr. Manhattan belongs), who were forced to disband in 1977. As the story opens, the country is edging towards a nuclear war with the Soviet Union and some members of the Crimebusters decide to become active again. The story focuses on the personal development and struggles faced by the protagonists, and eventually they are lead to confront a plot that could provoke a global nuclear war. The narrative “contains many stories within stories or ‘frames’” (Van Ness 2010: 63). Besides, the creative structure of the book works with a nine-panel grid layout, plus extra material that functions as documents inserted between chapters, and also a nonlinear narrative, since the story often skips through time and space.

*Oryx & Crake*, a speculative novel published by the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood in 2003, is constructed in accordance with the protagonist’s perspective, Jimmy, a 20-something man almost alone on a beach – *almost* because there is the presence of the Crakers, a group of humanoids created by Jimmy’s best friend, Crake, before the pandemic that killed everyone else. Jimmy denominates himself “the Abominable Snowman”, since, amid the others, he looks like a menacing monster from an endangered species that will disappear sooner or later. Following his reminiscences while looking for food and teaching lessons to the humanoids, we come to know about Crake, a scientist, and Oryx, a girl discovered by the two friends in a child porn website when they were teenagers. According to Jimmy’s memories, we finally come to understand what happened to humankind when one of Crake’s scientific innovations goes wrong – among his inventions are transgenic plants, animals, and even humans.

“As is the case with most utopian and dystopian texts, its primary preoccupation is with presenting a mirror to the reader that reflects, often with only minimal distortion, the current dilemmas of his/her society on a local, national or global scale” (Cole 2005: 2). Thereby, the story of *Oryx & Crake* raises questions that can depict a dystopian fictional world which is, at the same time, entirely possible, since it brings different questionings regarding biotechnology and bioethics, ecosabotage, global warming, genetic engineering, dwindling resources, endangered species, sexploitation, erosion of compassion and families, religion, alienation in cyberspace, mass suicide, manipulation and power – in a way we can easily feel familiar with. Thus, Atwood also reflects on contemporary anxieties and problematizes the concept of hero by presenting the last human survivor as a weak and lost man. Furthermore, in terms of structure, there is also a constant skip through time and space, since the story is told by an omniscient or extradiegetic

narrator (third-person), exploring Jimmy as the focalizer<sup>2</sup> with his multiple flashbacks.

## 2. Probation and double identities

The question of who is narrating the story represents an issue in both books chosen as objects of analysis. But it is not the aim of this article to discuss this problem, even though it can possibly affect the role of the characters somehow, especially Jimmy's. Thus, continuing inside the field of characterization, let us take a look at the paper people construction (using the expression proposed by Bal), to begin with the tragedies that lead to their double identities: Jimmy/Snowman and Jonathan Osterman/Dr. Manhattan.

*Oryx & Crake* opens with Snowman, apparently the only survivor of something that has killed Earth's entire population. At this point in the story, we do not know exactly what happened, however we can realize that he is on a waste beach, living on the top of a tree. "Snowman wakes before dawn. He lies unmoving, listening to the tide coming in, wave after wave sloshing over the various barricades, wish-wash, wish-wash, the rhythm of heartbeat. He would so like to believe he is still asleep" (Atwood 2003: 3). Then we are guided to his everyday life: "he scans the ground below for wildlife: all quiet, no scales and tails. Left hand, right foot, right hand, left foot, he makes his way down from the tree" (Atwood 2003: 4). The beginning of the narrative is actually the end of the story, and after the presentation of the main character, his routine on the beach, and the creatures he comes to meet, the recollections on the past start in the next chapter.

"Once upon a time, Snowman wasn't Snowman. Instead he was Jimmy. He'd been a good boy then" (Atwood 2003: 15). This is the opening of chapter two, when Snowman starts to remember his past, especially his childhood. The name *Jimmy* is associated with a time of certain innocence or, at least, with a time when life seemed *normal*, before the plague caused by a pill which contained the virus of an Ebola-like disease. "Jimmy's transformation into Snowman is thoroughly grounded in whiteness. He presents some problems for his own historical analysis since he wishes to erase history" (Davis 2007: 4). With the desperation to become someone else after the whole tragedy that he has luckily – or not – survived, he adopts a dubious label for himself: "the Abominable Snowman – existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards, apelike man or manlike ape, stealthy, elusive, known only through rumours and through its backward-pointing footprints" (Atwood 2003: 7-8). Later on, he decides to keep the *abominable* to himself, like a mocking little secret.

<sup>2</sup> The focalizer is the primary consciousness of the story. The events are all filtered through his/her perspective. However, the focalizer does not necessarily coincide with the narrator or the main character. In the case of Jimmy, he is the main character, but not the narrator. Curiously, the possibility of seeing him as focalizer can cause a certain misunderstanding, since one can accept – erroneously – that the narration flows due to a diegetic narrator.

We can imply several meanings from the label *Snowman*. First, the appropriation of the mythological figure, the Yeti, an ape-like cryptic creature that inhabits the Himalayan region of Nepal and Tibet. Similar to the Bigfoot in North America or to the Loch Ness Monster in Scotland, it is regarded by people as a legend, given the lack of conclusive evidence, of course. The picture of monstrosity and hidden legendary being is applicable to what Jimmy became: an outsider who is inadequate to the new environment occupied by new sorts of creatures. Secondly, *Snowman* is an ironic way to refer to something that no longer exists in that overheated place that resulted from global warming: snow. Furthermore, *Snowman* represents a way to show the inadequacy of whiteness (in terms of skin): “he fails to embody the ideal of that system. He feels powerless within his own power, and, to some extent, he feels victimized” (Davis 2007: 5) among the other creatures, since he is the last representative human being, but more, the last *white* human being. Finally, the new name means a denial, as if he could erase history and forget the past in order to exist somehow in the present, with no expectations or remorse, with a new personification (more mental than physical, actually).

On one hand, we have the optimism for Snowman’s ability to reconstruct the human; on the other hand, Snowman is likely doomed to live out his days in suffering as the last witness to humanity or to end humanity in an act of violence. Of concern to all readings is Snowman’s responsibility to his situation: is he a victim of circumstance or architect of his own downfall? (Davis 2007: 7)

Before the plague, Jimmy had obtained a degree in Problematics from Martha Graham<sup>3</sup>, the college destined to *words people* in opposition to Watson-Crick<sup>4</sup>, intended to *numbers people*, and worked as an advertisement writer for pharmaceutical companies. Later on, Crake hires him to work in this capacity at his own firm. Being a *words person* in the story means to be an outcast living in a society filled with highly logical, scientifically oriented people (such as Crake, the man of science). Jimmy is considered the *neurotypical*, since he is not a genius number-man. He “is caught between the old world of Shakespeare’s words and ‘the brave new world’ of virtual reality” (Labudová 2010: 138). Moreover, Jimmy’s disadvantage relies as well on the disjunction of his family when he was a child, a fact that left many painful memories.

In *Watchmen*, Jon Osterman – one of the main characters – is a physicist who is accidentally locked in a test chamber for intrinsic field separation experiments in 1959. After having his body dispersed and reassembling himself, he becomes a blue-skinned god-like being. “The accident transforms him into Dr. Manhattan, a super-

<sup>3</sup> The college’s name refers to Martha Graham (1894-1991), the great influent American modern dancer and choreographer.

<sup>4</sup> Reference to James Dewey Watson (1928) and Francis Harry Compton Crick (1916-2004), the two co-discoverers of the structure of DNA, in 1953.



powered being who slowly becomes more super and less human" (Van Ness 2010: 165). Observing images and text in the graphic novel, we can literally watch his tragic dissolution: "The accident is almost upon me now. [...] The air grows to warm, too quickly [...] All the atoms in the test chamber are screaming at once. The light... The light is taking me to pieces" (Moore 2008: chapter 4, p. 7, 8). And similar to *Oryx & Crake*, we come to know the *alter ego* before the *real guy*, since the narrative presents Dr. Manhattan first, to explain who he was in the past afterwards.

Van Ness (2010: 166) describes his transformation as a rebirth: "his form is reminiscent of many artistic renditions of the Resurrection of Christ, and his blue skin resembles many artistic renderings of the Hindu deity Krishna". Often nude and with a kind of glow emanating from his bluish body as if he were almost translucent, he receives the name Dr. Manhattan from the New York city government, since they see him as an American superman. "His potential as a lucrative instrument against adversaries is quickly noticed by the American government, who christen him Dr. Manhattan and market him as their personal weapon against invasion and attacks by foreign countries. They choose his costume, his 'symbol', and even his name" (Van Ness 2010: 166). Though, he refuses the symbol chosen and does not like the circumstance of being a salvation to the country:

It's February, 1960, and everything is frozen. I am starting to accept that I shall never feel cold or warm again. [...] They don't know what I need. You don't know what I need. If I'm to have a symbol, it shall be one I respect. [...] They explain that the name has been chosen for the ominous associations it will raise in America's enemies. They're shaping me into something gaudy and lethal... It's all getting out of my hands... (Moore 2008: chapter 4, p. 12).

In the past, Jon Osterman used to work with his father, a watchmaker. But then his father realizes that his son should be more than that. "My profession is a thing of the past. Instead, my son must have a future" (Moore 2008: chapter 4, p. 3). For this reason, he tries to convince him to do something else, and Jon graduates with a PhD in atomic physics at Princeton University, in 1958. Nevertheless, the symbolism of the watch and its internal minimal parts will be always present in his life, especially subsequent to the accident, when he totally loses – or just realizes that he never had – control over time.

As a result, we can assume the characters' names as something crucial in the stories, since they reveal important meanings regarding their intricate personalities. Jimmy and Jon are simple names which refer to simple guys, whereas Snowman and Dr. Manhattan conceal obscure significances to characterize what the two men came to be after passing through probation. Herman and Vervaeck (2005: 69) affirm that "similar to the name, the alter ego or second self presents a borderline case between metonymical and metaphorical characterization". Finally, despite the second selves, we can say that none of them coexists with two simultaneous identities as might be expected when we talk about double identities, but with two distinct personalities in

different moments of life: before and after misfortune. And “life is a succession of trials that should be overcome or, at least, assumed”<sup>5</sup> (Maffesoli 2001: 173).

### 3. The symbolism of time

As much as for Dr. Manhattan, the watch is also something really important to Snowman. Both the opening and the ending of the novel use the object as a sort of symbol to demonstrate the irrelevance of official time in that landscape. “Out of habit he looks at his watch – stainless-steel case, burnished aluminum band, still shiny although it no longer works. He wears it now as his only talisman. A blank face is what it shows him: zero hour. It causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time. Nobody nowhere knows what times it is” (Atwood 2003: 3). As the story is open-ended, we can perceive a certain sense of circularity, as if the protagonist were trapped in a sick cycle. And at the end that does not end at all: “From habit he lifts his watch; it shows him its blank face. Zero hour, Snowman thinks. Time to go” (Atwood 2003: 374). But time to go *where*?

As it was commented previously: “Snowman has found himself in a world where time literally has no meaning. In the novel’s circuitous history, the ending of Jimmy’s biography occurs before the beginning. [...] Snowman’s trip into the past coincides with his present physical trip into his previous dwellings” (Cole 2005: 4). Thus, it is possible to establish two different times in the novel: current and retrospective. But all of this represents a paradox, the need to go back in order to move forward (Cole 2005). Atwood is probably problematizing retrospect and “memory, and all that it involves, becomes one of the crimes within the narrative” (Cole 2005: 6). The retrospective time takes place through flashbacks, in which there is still an omniscient narrator, but also dialogues and Jimmy/Snowman talking to himself.

In regards to flashbacks, we have Van Ness’ view (2010: 64): “Flashbacks or stories of past times provide context for subsequent events, while coloring the reader’s interpretation of events that precede it in the narrative progression”. In addition, it is also a way to build some proximity among readers and characters. Differently from Snowman’s, Dr. Manhattan’s story does not function only through flashbacks, but also with the use of flashforwards, since he gains a great power over time<sup>6</sup> after the accident. Besides, this *power* allows him to access present, past and future at the same time, as if they were simultaneous, everything taking place together. “I can’t prevent the future. To me, it’s already happening” (Moore 2008: chapter 4, p. 16). However, the power is limited, since he is not able to modify any fact.

<sup>5</sup> A vida é uma sucessão de provas que convém superar ou, pelo menos, assumir. [All Maffesoli’s quotations were translated into English by me].

<sup>6</sup> There is an interesting note in Van Ness (2010: 194), stating that “in his interview for *The Mindscape of Alan Moore*, Gibbons refers to chapter 4 in *Watchmen* as a ‘quantum gestalt’ and a ‘meditation on time.’”

Dr. Manhattan may be able to return to his previous life as Jon Osterman through his memories (he is literally able to see and experience time even before the accident), but he cannot control the process by which he ceased to be Osterman, the accident that transformed him into Dr. Manhattan. He has no power to change his present state and seems to have no control over the change in his now otherworldly view of life on Earth (Van Ness 2010: 87).

The sensation of experiencing everything at the same time and of living in an eternal present is described by him as “standing still” (Moore 2008: chapter 4, p. 17). Everyone is getting older while he continues exactly the same, an influential creature who tries to deny in silence his very nature of power. His “overall perspective is a collection of ‘photographs.’ The photographs that are part of Dr. Manhattan’s mentality are not just from the past, but also different places in the present and from the future. Even though he is able to see all of these snapshots at once, he is unable to interfere or alter their ‘contents’” (Van Ness 2010: 97). And it is curious to observe that the narration regarding Dr. Manhattan is always in the present tense. In regards to his father:

Unlike Dr. Manhattan’s later inability to experience events chronologically (as part of a diachrony), his father clearly separates the “past” and the “future,” emphasized in the text with bold lettering. Throughout his narration, Dr. Manhattan refers to all events in terms of precise quantifiable time as measured by clocks like the ones his father made for a living (Van Ness 2010: 97).

Dr. Manhattan’s persistence on seeing things as one-dimensional can be confirmed in chapter 9, p. 6: “There is no future. There is no past. Do you see? Time is simultaneous, an intricately structured jewel that humans insist on viewing one edge at a time, when the whole design is visible in every facet”. But Van Ness (2010) points out that his discourse is contradictory, since the structure he creates when he goes to Mars resembles the face of a clock, being multi-dimensional rather than having only one edge as he proposes in relation to time. Furthermore, his quantifiable measurements related to the seconds, minutes and hours on a clock to explain how time works are as useless as the watch Snowman still wears. None has the competence to change things. Actually, the circumstances change them, and the presence of the clocks is just a mordacious metaphor that shows the impossibility of redeeming past events.

On the one hand, the choice revolving the epigraph of this article relies on its capacity to demonstrate time as something with only one dimension or, at least, with different extents which are strictly interconnected. The association between yesterday (past) and tomorrow (future) are, then, extremely clear in an everlasting timeline. On the other hand, contradicting in a way what the lyrics might indicate, Baudrillard



(1997) comes up with a total disruption of time, as if it no longer exists, since now we experience events that he considers as phantoms, ephemeral facts in a virtual reality.

Time is no longer counted progressively, by addition, starting from an origin, but by subtraction, starting from the end. This is what happens with rocket launches or time bombs. And that end is no longer the symbolic endpoint of a history, but the market of a zero sum, of a potential exhaustion. This is a perspective of entropy – by the exhausting of all possibilities – the perspective of a counting down to infinity... We are no longer in the finalistic, historical or providential vision, which was the vision of a world of progress and production. The final illusion of history, the final utopia of time no longer exists, since it is already registered there as something potentially accounted for, in digital time, just as mankind's finalities cease to exist at the point where they come to be registered in a genetic capital and solely in the biological perspective of the exploitation of the genome. When you count the seconds separating you from the end, the fact is that everything is already at an end; we are already beyond the end (Baudrillard 1997: 1).

According to Baudrillard, in the countdown, we are experiencing time and history in a kind of deep coma. "The time remaining is already past, and the maximal utopia of life gives way to the minimal utopia of survival" (Baudrillard 1997: 1). Also, in this scenario, we would be trapped between our fossils and our clones, what suggests again the mixture of past and future – not in a sense of progression, but retrocession towards the collapse. "The countdown has effects in both directions: not only does it put an end to time in the future, but it also exhausts itself in the obsessional revival of the events of the past" (Baudrillard 1997: 2). Hence, Baudrillard describes the actual society through its ecstasies: the ecstasy of the social, the masses; the ecstasy of the body, obesity; the ecstasy of information, simulation; the ecstasy of the real, the hyperreal; the ecstasy of sex, porn; the ecstasy of violence, terror; and finally, the ecstasy of time, real time, instantaneity; everything exceeding boundaries.

The idea of the countdown reminds us of the image of the Nuclear Doomsday Clock that accompanies the twelve chapters in *Watchmen*, starting with twelve minutes to midnight and moving forward by one minute in each chapter. It is a symbolic representation of how close the world is to catastrophic destruction. The closer the clock stands to midnight, the nearer the world is to Armageddon. Similarly, it recalls the zero hour in Snowman's wristwatch, as if the point in which time stops to be counted were revealing the inexorable oncoming of the end. Therefore, midnight and zero hour represent the same here: the final point in the stories. Moreover, the possibility of reverting time, not starting from the origin, but by subtraction, starting from the end, can be applied to both narratives, since they

begin by presenting the final events in the story: Rorschach's journal in *Watchmen*, and Snowman uselessly examining the hours in *Oryx & Crake*.

#### 4. Departure and isolation

As literary examples of errant livings, Michel Maffesoli (2001) cites Don Quixote by Miguel de Cervantes, Tristram Shandy by Laurence Sterne, and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. According to him, in each of these cases there is a kind of playful escapism from reality. The sociologist (2001: 23) sees the desire of wandering as the thirst for the infinite and also as a necessity of emptiness and loss. But we have many other examples regarding escapism and solitude in literature and even beyond, which reminds me as well of the wanderer-figure of Christopher McCandless across North America and his short life spent in the Alaska wilderness, a drama that was told in a non-fiction book published in 1996 and adapted to the cinema in 2007 by Sean Penn, with the same title as the book: *Into the Wild*. So, unlike the shameless life of escaping pointed by Maffesoli – and the happiness found in the liberation from institutional chains –, there are stories which have a tendency to be more tragic, in which the possibility of detachment and isolation may not represent a genuine choice, but the only and ultimate option. In any case, all of us are nomads in a way, geographically or just mentally – all travelers through time and space.

Hippies, vagabonds, poets, young people with no reference, or even tourists caught in the circuits of scheduled vacation. What is certain is that the "running" starts over again. [...] Nothing and no one is unaffected. It breaks the chains and the established limits, and whatever its domains are – political, ideological, professional, cultural or cultic – the barriers crumble. Nothing can dam its flow. The movement or the effervescence is everywhere <sup>7</sup> (Maffesoli 2001: 27).

Accordingly, Snowman and Dr. Manhattan are also examples of travelers, errant beings or even nomads *lato sensu*. They are engaged in an unconscious search for the invisible. And even with no definite purpose, their journey is legitimate, since the move is part of life, as just noted. Living *like a rolling stone* (Maffesoli 2001) means an existential adventure in order to overcome the logic of identity. And this is significant if we remember the double identities in both characters, that is to say the impossibility of being a singular one. This also has to do with the permanent incompleteness of life which Maffesoli (2001) talks about, and, at the same time, with the tension between a place and a non-place. "Reality is nothing more than an

<sup>7</sup> "Hippies, vagabundos, poetas, jovens sem ponto de referência, ou mesmo turistas surpreendidos nos circuitos de férias programadas. O certo é que a 'circulação' recomeça. [...] Não deixa nada nem ninguém indene. Quebra os grilhões e os limites estabelecidos, e quaisquer que sejam seus domínios: político, ideológico, profissional, cultural ou cultural, as barreiras desmoronam. Nada pode represar seu fluxo. O movimento ou a efervescência está em todas as cabeças." [My translation]

illusion, it is always floating, and cannot be understood except in its perpetual becoming"<sup>8</sup> (Maffesoli 2001: 88). In addition, "when the soil is no longer solid, the spirits also wander and roam"<sup>9</sup> (Maffesoli 2001: 93), which is exactly what happens to the protagonists, for the reason that after probation they no longer have ground under their feet.

Even before the plague, Jimmy (Snowman) prefers to be alone, since he had faced disappointments in relation to his family, the disappearance of his mother, meaningless sexual interactions, and, of course, prejudice for not being a man of science. He is, then, an outcast, and his seclusion is not fortuitous. He deals with the impossibility of human communication and "rather satirizes any indication of his true emotions. [...] Coming from a broken family, he is unable to have a true relationship with people (women in particular): he ignores them, ridicules them and victimizes them in a parody of love affairs" (Labudová 2010: 139). Concerning the relationships with women, Jimmy describes himself as "a lost cause", "emotionally dyslexic", and "an emotional landfill site" (Atwood 2003: 190).

But everything changes when he sees Oryx in person for the first time. To his doom, however, she is his best friend's girlfriend, and the love triangle does not end peacefully. When Jimmy finds out that Crake used her as an instrument to spread the virus around the world, Crake kills her and, finally, Jimmy angrily kills him. After this episode, Jimmy locks himself inside a laboratory, which will be his salvation, since he will not be in contact with the air contaminated by the virus outside, where people are becoming carcasses little by little. After the plague, Jimmy tries hard to keep himself drunk, using what is left of all alcoholic drinks. "Alcohol provides him with an anaesthetic: he does not mourn his lost ones; he does not hope for any future; he is just masturbating" (Labudová 2010: 139). As a result, everything contributes for him to become apathetic in all senses.

Coral Ann Howells suggests that Jimmy is an outcast from his own narrative, as "the story is told not in the first person but through third-person indirect interior monologue, which shifts restlessly between the narrative present and Jimmy/Snowman's memories of his own and other people's stories in a series of associative leaps, and the context is provided by an omniscient narrator" (Howells 2005: 173). Howells says that this method displaces Jimmy from "the centre of his own narrative" (Howells 2005: 173) in a parallel to his displacement in the post-human world (Labudová 2010: 145).

His displacement before, but especially after the plague, impedes any rooting and leads him to be an eternal errant being, even in the present time, since living in the present is also a way to reach eternity. The recollections of the past, mainly those

<sup>8</sup> "A realidade em si não é mais que uma ilusão, é sempre flutuante, e não pode ser compreendida a não ser em seu perpétuo devir". [My translation]

<sup>9</sup> "Quando o solo não mais é sólido, os espíritos também erram e vagabundeiam." [My translation]

related to his beloved Oryx, contribute to his new embodiment, because there cannot be progress without regression. Hence, memories can mean a step forward, but, at the same time, something that prevents him from being in contact with other creatures and facing a new life – with not much prospect of finding other human beings. Recollecting is development, but only individually, without the pursuit of the collectivity. In this sense, Snowman closes himself, because he cannot see in the Crakers an opportunity of communication, just a joke of destiny. The fact that he talks to them sometimes does not mean that he is really involved in social interaction.

Dr. Manhattan, in contrast, only moves away from life after the accident which transforms him into a quantum creature, much less human. Before, as Jon Osterman, he had a good life, a great social position, and someone to love: Janey Slater. After his metamorphosis, he leaves Janey in order to be with Laurie Juspezyk, also a Crimebuster. But, while he unconsciously disconnects from the mundane, he also moves away from her. Although Laurie has taught him a lot of lessons, his main affective recollections are perhaps more intensely related to the first woman, since she can elicit memories of a time when he could still feel something. And this can be verified in the recurring image of the couple's photograph, which he takes with him when he leaves Earth. "It is the photograph of a man and a woman. They are at an amusement park, in 1959" (Moore 2008: chapter 4, p. 1). He probably feels guilty too, because people accuse him of having caused a cancer in Janey. She represents to him what Oryx represents to Snowman: a recollection of love and, withal, despair for not being able to prevent a tragedy – cancer and death, respectively.

Even though Dr. Manhattan has gained many different powers, such as superhuman strength, telekinesis, the manipulation of matter at the subatomic level, the ability to teleport interplanetary and intergalactic distances, etc., his greatest weakness is what really constitutes him: the loss of human nature. Without being able to actually feel and embrace the feelings of a pure perception of things, he begins to lose vision and sense of humanity. After losing everything, including Laurie, he feels tired of Earth and finally prefers the last departure to Mars.

What also marks his detachment are the speech bubbles in the graphic novel. "His word balloons are filled with a pale blue color and insulated by thick, white borders. His balloons are cold and detached, like his relationships with others, and they reflect his isolation as a result of his otherworldly perspective and abilities" (Van Ness 2010: 26). Moreover, Dr. Manhattan narrates his personal tragic story as if it belongs to someone else – and, in fact, it does, since Jon Osterman is already dead. While images can be dramatic and scary (like his material disintegration), the narrative goes straight to the point, being almost insensitive.

Dr. Manhattan exists in the same world as other characters; however, his perspective is entirely different, distant, and remote. The disjointedness of images and words that appear to be conveying the same information here provide the reader with a greater meaning for the panel by highlighting Dr. Manhattan's detachment from human beings (Van Ness 2010: 53, 54).

Dissatisfaction is the engine par excellence of wandering, and evasion becomes a need when everything is sclerotic or encoded. Furthermore, the desert can be the metaphor of nomadism (Maffesoli 2001). The two characters I described here coincidentally share this same residence, each in his own way. Snowman survives on the hot sand of a beach, whereas Dr. Manhattan goes to live on the cold sand of the Red Planet. Both can be included in this metaphor of nomadism by inhabiting the desert (physical or just psychological). The metaphor of wandering “is not simply negative. Like all natural things, it is ambivalent”<sup>10</sup> (Maffesoli 2001: 177). Therefore, the characters’ detachment has to do with geography, but, to the same extent, with their conscience. Isolation is a way of escaping from a civilization to which they do not belong anymore, and being lost becomes compulsory in order to recover. Finally, departure means, then, a kind of medication, a cure, and does not necessarily signify a conclusion, but a continuous initiation.

## 5. Final considerations: heroism and illusion

Aristotle (2000: 20) proposed that “in respect of Character there are four things to be aimed at. First, and most important, it must be good. [...] The second thing to aim at is propriety. [...] Thirdly, character must be true to life. [...] The fourth point is consistency”, which means that the tragic hero should be good in relation to his nature; be appropriate and true to life in relation to tradition; and, finally, he has to be consistent, that is to say, to be coherent, to be reasonable in the plot. We know that this classification has been exceeded by different notions nowadays. However, despite the seeming naivety of the philosopher’s propositions, this definition of tragic hero still remains a point of start when analyzing the role of characters. We can say the same in relation to Joseph Campbell’s widely used structure described in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, first published in 1949. If we consider that any hero follows the same standard of stages in his personal journey, as the book proposes, there are no *faces*, but only one. Therefore, the only usefulness of the reproduction of Aristotle’s and Campbell’s notions today is to be subverted in order to build a comprehension on a hero who is no longer good or bad, powerful or weak, but everything together: a hero who is a non-hero, a non-hero who is a villain, and a villain who can become a hero again.

Those similarities between Campbell’s monomyth and Moore and Gibbons’ work do not indicate that they were aware of or were purposely mirroring the steps that Campbell identifies in his monomyth, but that Moore and Gibbons, as well as Campbell, recognize some common elements of the hero’s journey in literature

<sup>10</sup> “Não se trata de metáfora simplesmente negativa. Como todas as coisas naturais, ela é ambivalente.” [My translation]



and myth. *Watchmen* deconstructs the construct that Campbell established in the pages of *Hero* almost forty years earlier, destabilizing reader's notions of heroism and the heroic archetype in order to push the reader toward the most difficult task: *reconstructing* for him or herself what it means to be a hero (Van Ness 2010: 148).

According to Van Ness (2010: 102), the heroes in *Watchmen* find themselves caught in the middle of two sets of laws, natural and conventional: "a natural hero is one who would be affected only by natural law and not the social or political conventions established by the society, whereas a conventional hero abides by the laws of a society and the government". With both types, "*Watchmen's* world demonstrates that heroism and villainy are all a matter of perspective" (Van Ness 2010: 102). Then, Dr. Manhattan would belong to a neutral category, being a *non conventional* hero, in opposition to *conventional*, but not necessarily *natural*. "Even though Dr. Manhattan works in accordance with the government, they cannot control him or his actions; he works as a natural hero who happens to comply with the conventional law, but is not bound by it" (Van Ness 2010: 104). He is an ambiguous entity; he is not controlled by the conventional law, but decides to act in accordance with it. Thus, Van Ness' scheme just confirms that there are many possible ways to label a character and these labels are always interchangeable and can be recreated.

Although Jon Osterman is reborn as a new being, he never really returns, "he only completes half of the monomyth, experiencing what Campbell labels the 'refusal of return'" (Van Ness 2010: 166). Thus, society shapes Dr. Manhattan into the hero that he does not see himself to be. "Don't you see the futility of asking me to save a world that I no longer have any stake in? [...] My red world here means more to me than your blue one" (Moore 2008: chapter 9, p. 8, 9). Besides his refusal of being a hero, he kills Rorschach, a fact that contradicts all traditional notions of what is to be a heroic person. "He becomes a 'non-hero' whose decision is based on his personal gain" (Van Ness 2010: 119). Consequently, despite many heroic acts during the story, we may say that he does not achieve a traditional hero status.

In what concerns Jimmy/Snowman, we can affirm the same: he is a non-hero. He refuses, or just does not comprehend his position as the last survivor. He does not assume that the maintenance of civilization depends on his willingness to continue his life and to teach the creatures that remain in that landscape. He talks to the humanoids because he had promised Oryx not to abandon them, not because he wants to, since his total apathy and lunacy make him to desire to be alone until death. Snowman is then a white illusion of a man, as Davis (2007) points out, and more: he seems to feel comfortable in this invisible human position, almost enjoying the status of monster that he attributes to himself.

At the end of *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy faces not only the real pain in his foot and the possibility of his near death but also the question of choice, moral responsibility and the chance of entering again into human

relationships. By finding out that there are more people alive, he is pushed into the three-dimensional reality and 'zero hour' time again (Labudová 2010: 141).

Moreover, we can feel sorry and even see Jimmy as a victim; however, he is a co-conspirator, as well. He "becomes victim of Crake's domination and manipulation. Crake's best friend becomes an accomplice, as he assists Crake to promote The BlyssPluss Pill which is infected with the deadly virus. [...] Paradoxically, Jimmy's slogans helped Crake to sell the lethal pill" (Labudová 2010: 143). So, despite the fact that "number people" have greater influence in Atwood's society, a "man of words" is who actually induces a lot of people into dying. And we cannot forget the episode when Jimmy vents his anger and murders his friend. Labudová (2010: 142) also states that the characters in Atwood's stories "function simultaneously as victims and victimizers, manipulators and manipulated". Traditional notions would say that a manipulator, a murderer, a rude, suspicious, desperate, frustrated or powerless character cannot be a hero. But it is not that easy when the role of a character is really intricate and impossible to be defined according to simplified labels.

Baudrillard (1997) sees the world as an illusion. If we assume this idea, the creatures that inhabit it are also illusions: illusionary animals, illusionary men and women, illusionary heroes. Let's keep in mind that literary characters are people with no flesh and blood, that is, illusionary beings inside a deceptive real world, though. Therefore, there are three layers of illusion here: the illusion of being a character, the illusion of being a hero inside the characterization, and, finally, the illusion of being a double illusion in a material reality which, according to Baudrillard, does not exist at all.

So, the three-dimensional illusion that I propose here has to do with detachment as an option of the characters. They want to depart, to pursue or to lapidate an identity far away from a world that is no longer recognizable – living on the top of a tree or amid the dust of another planet. Snowman and Dr. Manhattan are, then, examples of post-modern errant beings, heroes and non-heroes – potential deconstructions of the traditional hero. Furthermore, wandering means to exist, and existence means to wander, in a constant ambulation, even if the existence is illusory.

As a final point, we do not know what happens to the characters subsequent to "the end". Will Dr. Manhattan live forever in another planet? Will Snowman survive and find other humans?<sup>11</sup> It does not matter, since we know that wandering is a metaphor of existence – wandering alone, along with others, with purpose, without purpose, in a material reality, in dreams, in the present, in the past, in the future, until death, or even forgotten in eternity. And Dr. Manhattan wonderfully says that: "Nothing ends [...] Nothing ever ends" (Moore 2008: chapter 12, p. 27). Maybe he is right, after all.

<sup>11</sup> Spoiler: Snowman can be seen again in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*. In the end of *Oryx & Crake*, he finds other human survivors, who we come to know in the other book just mentioned.

## SNOWMAN E DR. MANHATTAN: ERRÂNCIA COMO METÁFORA DA EXISTÊNCIA

**Resumo:** Este artigo faz uma comparação entre dois personagens da literatura: Snowman, do romance *Oryx & Crake* (2003), de Margaret Atwood, e Dr. Manhattan, da graphic novel *Watchmen* (1987), de Alan Moore. O objetivo é discutir a confluência na construção de ambas as figuras, considerando algumas críticas sobre as obras das quais elas foram retiradas, bem como pressupostos teóricos sobre questões relativas ao nomadismo. Ao problematizar uma série de temas, é possível conectar dois personagens com diferentes especificidades, visto que partilham uma característica de vida errante, além de poderem ser considerados uma subversão do herói tradicional.

**Palavras-chave:** provação; tempo; distanciamento; ilusão.

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