

Watchmen Essay Prompt Choices

During your reading of *Watchmen*, consider the following numbered prompts as possible subjects for your end-of-book essay. Each of the prompts is a slightly modified version of a past AP Lit Free Response prompt. Typically, you would have 40 minutes to respond on-demand without the text available to you. For this assignment, you are obviously expected to produce a more organized and polished final product.

You may sign up for a prompt in the classroom starting our second week with *Watchmen*. There are limited spots per prompts, and prompts will be available on a first-come, first-served basis. Please choose a prompt you feel somewhat comfortable with actually writing on: once you have signed up for it, the assignment is permanent. Choosing a prompt early in your reading of the novel allows you to focus on that specific aspect of the work throughout your time spent in its pages; on the other hand, choosing a prompt later in your reading of the novel allows you to consider more of the work as a whole before making a choice of prompt.

Even though all prompts may not explicitly state it, you will be asked to relate the claim of your prompt to the meaning of the work as a whole while avoiding plot summary.

- 1) Writers often highlight the values of a culture or a society by using characters who are alienated from that culture or society because of gender, race, class, or creed. Choose a character who plays a significant role in *Watchmen* and show how that character's alienation reveals the surrounding society's assumptions and moral values.
- 2) One definition of madness is "mental delusion or the eccentric behavior arising from it." But Emily Dickinson wrote, "Much madness is divinest sense to a discerning eye." Novelists have often seen madness with a "discerning eye." From *Watchmen*, select a character whose apparent madness or irrational behavior plays an important role. Then write a well-organized essay in which you explain what this delusion or eccentric behavior consists of and how it might be judged reasonable. Explain the significance of the "madness" to the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.
- 3) Morally ambiguous characters — characters whose behavior discourages readers from identifying them as purely evil or purely good — are at the heart of many works of literature. From *Watchmen*, choose a morally ambiguous character that plays a pivotal role. Then write an essay in which you explain how the character can be viewed as morally ambiguous and why his or her moral ambiguity is significant to the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.
- 4) Novels often depict characters caught between colliding cultures — national, regional, ethnic, religious, institutional. Such collisions can call a character's sense of identity into question. From *Watchmen*, select a character who responds to such cultural collisions. Then write a well-organized essay in which you describe the character's response and explain its relevance to the work as a whole.
- 5) Critic Roland Barthes has said, "Literature is the question minus the answer." Considering Barthes' observation, write an essay in which you analyze a central question *Watchmen* raises and the extent to which it offers any answers. Explain how the author's treatment of this question affects your understanding of the work as a whole. Avoid plot summary.
- 6) The most important themes in literature are sometimes developed in scenes in which a death or deaths take place. Write a well-organized essay in which you show how a specific death scene in *Watchmen* helps to illuminate the meaning of the work as a whole.

- 7) In many works of literature, a physical journey – the literal movement from one place to another – plays a central role. Consider a physical journey that is an important element of *Watchmen* and discuss how the journey adds to the meaning of the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.
- 8) In many works of literature, past events can affect – positively or negatively – the present actions, attitudes, or values of a character. From *Watchmen*, choose a character who must contend with some aspect of the past, either personal or societal. Then write an essay in which you show how the character’s relationship to the past contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.
- 9) Works of literature often depict acts of betrayal. Friends and even family may betray a protagonist; main characters may likewise be guilty of treachery or may betray their own values. *Watchmen* includes such acts of betrayal. In a well-written essay, analyze the nature of a specific betrayal and show how it contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.
- 10) A symbol is an object, action, or event that represents something or that creates a range of associations beyond itself. In literary works a symbol can express an idea, clarify meaning, or enlarge literal meaning. Focusing on one symbol from *Watchmen*, write an essay analyzing how that symbol functions in the work and what it reveals about the characters or themes of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.
- 11) In a novel by William Styron, a father tells his son that life “is a search for justice.” From *Watchmen*, choose a character who responds in some significant way to justice or injustice. Then write a well-developed essay in which you analyze the character’s understanding of justice, the degree to which the character’s search for justice is successful, and the significance of this search for the work as a whole.
- 12) In *The Writing of Fiction*, novelist Edith Wharton states, “At every stage in the progress of his tale the novelist must rely on what may be called the *illuminating incident* to reveal and emphasize the inner meaning of each situation. Illuminating incidents are the magic casements of fiction, its vistas on infinity.” Using *Watchmen*, write a well-organized essay in which you describe an “illuminating” episode or moment and explain how it functions as a “casement,” a window that opens onto the meaning of the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.
- 13) In *Contending Forces*, Pauline Hopkins writes: “And, after all, our surroundings influence our lives and characters as much as fate, destiny or any supernatural agency.” Within *Watchmen*, consider how cultural, physical, or geographical surroundings shape psychological or moral traits in a character. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how surroundings affect this character and illuminate the meaning of the work as a whole.
- 14) Choose a specific inanimate object depicted in *Watchmen* that is important to the work as a whole, and write an essay in which you show how two or three of the purposes the object serves are related to one another.
- 15) The significance of a title such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is easy to discover. However, in other works (e.g. *Measure for Measure*), the full significance of the title becomes apparent to the reader only gradually. Show how the significance of *Watchmen*’s title is developed through the author’s use of devices such as contrast, repetition, allusion, and point of view.

- 16) Choose an implausible or strikingly unrealistic incident or character in *Watchmen*. Write an essay that explains how the incident or character is related to the more realistic or plausible elements in the rest of the work. Avoid plot summary.
- 17) An effective literary work does not merely stop or cease; it concludes. In the view of some critics, a work that does not provide the pleasure of significant “closure” has terminated with an artistic fault. A satisfactory ending is not, however, always conclusive in every sense; significant closure may require the reader to abide with or adjust to ambiguity and uncertainty. In an essay, discuss the ending of *Watchmen*. Explain precisely how and why the ending appropriately or inappropriately concludes the work. Do not merely summarize the plot.
- 18) The conflict created when the will of an individual opposes the will of the majority is the recurring theme of many novels and plays. From *Watchmen*, select a fictional character who is in opposition to his or her society. In a critical essay, analyze the conflict and discuss the moral and ethical implications for both the individual and the society. Do not summarize the plot or action of the work.
- 19) In some novels and plays certain parallel or recurring events prove to be significant. In an essay, describe the major similarities and differences in a sequence of parallel or recurring events in *Watchmen* and discuss the significance of such events. Do not merely summarize the plot.
- 20) Choose a complex and important character in *Watchmen* who might — on the basis of the character's actions alone — be considered evil or immoral. In a well-organized essay, explain both how and why the full presentation of the character in the work makes us react more sympathetically than we otherwise might. Avoid plot summary.
- 21) The meaning of some literary works is often enhanced by sustained allusions to classical mythology, the Bible, or other works of literature. Write a well-organized essay in which you explain an allusion that predominates in *Watchmen* and analyze how it enhances the work's meaning.
- 22) In great literature, no scene of violence exists for its own sake. *Watchmen* confronts the reader with scenes of violence. In a well-organized essay, explain how a scene contributes to the meaning of the complete work. Avoid plot summary.
- 23) From *Watchmen*, select an important character who is a villain. Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze the nature of the character's villainy and show how it enhances meaning in the work. Do not merely summarize the plot.
- 24) A critic has said that one important measure of a superior work of literature is its ability to produce in the reader a healthy confusion of pleasure and disquietude. *Watchmen* produces this “healthy confusion.” Write an essay in which you explain the sources of the “pleasure and disquietude” experienced by readers of the graphic novel.
- 25) Some works of literature use the element of time in a distinct way. The chronological sequence of events may be altered, or time may be suspended, accelerated, or expressed in an unconventional way. Show how Alan Moore's manipulation of time contributes to the effectiveness of *Watchmen* as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.