

10-1-2009

The Final Word: The Use of Epigraphs in *Watchmen*

Kevin Chen '10

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/fall2009>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Chen, Kevin '10, "The Final Word: The Use of Epigraphs in *Watchmen*" (2009). *2009 Fall Semester*. Paper 2.
<http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/fall2009/2>

This Senior Award Winner is brought to you for free and open access by the Award for Excellence in Expository Writing at DigitalCommons@IMSA. It has been accepted for inclusion in 2009 Fall Semester by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@IMSA. For more information, please contact pgarrett@imsa.edu, jean@imsa.edu.

Kevin Chen

Hancock

Graphic Novels

30 November 2009

The Final Word: The Use of Epigraphs in *Watchmen*

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*, a graphic novel depicting a superhero-inhabited, Cold War-era world on the verge of mutually assured destruction, presents an alternate-universe story that examines the ethics of justice underlying humanity. Through the skillful synergy of image and text, the author and illustrator have created a vibrant novel offering an aesthetic, intellectual experience that traditional literature and visual art independently fail to achieve. Of significance are the quotations that Moore cites to complete each chapter of the book. While taken from disparate sources, they share a commonality in their remarkable relevance to the story. Moore concludes each chapter with an epigraph that not only summarizes a thematic concept and draws upon visual cues from the preceding panels, but also stands alone as a provocative quote that encourages the reader to contemplate the issues presented in the text.

Early in the novel, Moore's quotation of the Bible at the end of Chapter 3 ("Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?") recalls preceding events while presenting thoughtful commentary on war and the existence of God (27). Jon, the once-human superman created from a physics accident, has been exiled from Earth, and the final panels of the chapter, which depict Jon on Mars, are interspersed with the United States President's commentary on imminent war. At the end of this sequence, Moore places his epigraph immediately beneath a large splash panel of Jon sitting on a lone rock in a vast, flat, Martian expanse. Because of his elevated position, Jon appears to be a judge himself, perhaps the judge to whom the epigraph refers.

A reader familiar with the Bible will identify the epigraph as Abraham begging the Lord to spare the sin-filled cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of the few righteous who live there. In its original context, the quote reads: “That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (*King James Version*, Gen. 18.25). While the Lord agrees to honor Abraham’s request, both Sodom and Gomorrah burn of “brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven” for a lack of even ten virtuous souls (Gen. 19.24). Jon’s departure from Earth has triggered the advent of nuclear war, and thus readers of *Watchmen* who recognize the Biblical reference may assume that a fate similar to Sodom and Gomorrah awaits humanity. In this sense, a higher entity—God, nature, chance—will decide whether Earth and its inhabitants survive.

A more controversial interpretation goes beyond forcing the reader to ponder the ramifications of nuclear war and implies that Jon himself is the God who determines the destiny of the world. Indeed, with his superhuman abilities to control matter, Jon possesses the capabilities to guide the direction of the world as he sees fit. What is intriguing, even frightening, is the realization that Jon is unmistakably human; the image of Jon contemplating a photo of his ex-girlfriend is evidence of emotional attachment. Ultimately, this epigraph prompts the reader to consider whether a “human” God can exist on earth and whether such a figure can assume the Godlike role of controlling the fate of the world.

Via the same approach as the one in Chapter 3, Moore uses the epigraph at the end of Chapter 9 to present a thoughtful commentary on the meaning of life. At the end of this chapter, in which Jon takes his girlfriend Laurie to Mars and back to Earth, Moore quotes from C. G. Jung’s *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*: “As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human

existence is to kindle a light of meaning in the darkness of mere being” (28). From a visual perspective, the quotation is fitting as it concludes a sequence of panels that shows Laurie and Jon on Mars, fading into the background of a few stars speckled throughout the blackness of outer space.

Deeper analysis of the epigraph reveals the parallels between Jung’s quote and the mentality toward life that Jon assumes by the end of the chapter. Throughout the preceding text, Jon expresses admiration of the geologic features of Mars and of the thermodynamic miracles that occur at a subatomic level. In essence, he is admiring objects only for the sake of their physical existence. Opposed to this ideology, Laurie argues that life and its capacity to achieve, while not quantifiable in physical terms, merit appreciation as well. Despite Laurie’s protests, Jon expresses apathy toward the struggles that plague humankind and dismisses them as “endless labor; accomplishing nothing, leaving people empty and disillusioned” (12). Only at the end of the chapter does Jon realize that life is as much a miracle as the thermodynamics occurring at a subatomic level, that its likelihood is “rarer than a quark and unpredictable beyond the dreams of Heisenberg” (28). In citing Jung’s philosophical conjecture, Moore emphasizes the point he has attempted to prove through the dialogue between Jon and Laurie; in spite of the objective, emotionless reasoning that seems to define and explain matter, the phenomenon that produces human life transcends scientific rationale and must be appreciated for the sake of treasuring the miracle of life itself.

Perhaps the most recognizable and the most poignant epigraph in *Watchmen* is the one Moore uses to conclude Chapter 11: “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!” from the poem “Ozymandias” by Percy Bysshe Shelley. The character Adrian Veidt, a brilliant ex-crime-fighter who operated under the alias Ozymandias,

has begged comparison to Shelley's famous poem since the beginning of *Watchmen*, yet Moore withholds the reference until the penultimate chapter. In Chapter 11, masked vigilantes Nite Owl and Rorschach visit Veidt in his Antarctic home, and Veidt reveals that he has succeeded in teleporting an extraterrestrial being to detonate in New York City, the first step in his plan to purge the world of evil. The epigraph follows a sequence of panels in which two recurring characters, a news vendor and the boy who frequents his booth, embrace as they disintegrate into nothingness from the explosion. The final panel, which occupies nearly a third of the page, is completely white, emphasizing the complete annihilation of matter that Veidt's creation has caused and also implying barrenness and emptiness, a clean slate on which Veidt can carry out the rest of his plan.

In addition to being a strikingly accurate summary of the chapter, the epigraph that concludes Chapter 11 also prompts consideration of the world that follows the destruction of New York City. The parallels between Shelley's poem and *Watchmen* are obvious; both texts speak of a seemingly omnipotent individual named Ozymandias who constructs a tremendous work (a monument in the case of Shelley's Ozymandias and a city-demolishing alien in the case of Moore's), and in this sense, the quote fits perfectly. Yet this epigraph is particularly important because of what it implies about the future of Veidt's plan. Immediately following the two lines that Moore has chosen to cite, Shelley's poem concludes with "Nothing beside remains. Round the decay/ Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,/ The lone and level sands stretch far away." If the reader extrapolates from the text, Veidt's ultimatum solution seems destined to fail in the end, just as the Egyptian Ozymandias' once-revered monuments eventually crumbled. Interestingly, the "lone and level sands" of Shelley's poem are reminiscent of the blank canvas of

the last panel in the chapter, suggesting that the emptiness upon which Veidt hopes to build a new world may end up an empty expanse devoid of life and meaning.

Moore's use of epigraphs as a complement to art and text is a feature unique to the genre of graphic novels. If *Watchmen* were written as a standard novel or illustrated as visual art, the work would lose much of the thoughtful commentary provided through the quotations that conclude each chapter. In utilizing these quotes, Moore effectively summarizes the themes he presents in the preceding pages and packages it in a concise, poignant format that forces the reader to contemplate. Short, succinct, and incredibly powerful, these epigraphs serve as statements that highlight the ethical issues presented in *Watchmen*.

Works Cited

The Holy Bible: King James Version. Iowa Falls, IA: World Bible Publishers, 2001. Print.

Moore, Alan, and Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen*. New York: DC Comics, 2005. Print.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Ozymandias*. Poetry Foundation, 2009. Web. 9 Oct. 2009.