

Doctor Manhattan's Voice

Jim Zittlaw

The superhero comic book series, *Watchmen* is both a love letter to the medium and a smart inversion of its conventions. Only one character possesses superhuman powers: Jonathan Osterman, also known as Dr. Manhattan. In a twist of the superhero-through-scientific-accident archetype, Osterman transforms into a powerful hero, yet impaired. He can safely be described as God-like, but one of Manhattan's new abilities becomes a tragic limitation. He perceives time as non-linear and, because of this, experiences past, present, and future simultaneously; meaning, he can see everything that has happened to him, is happening to him, and will happen to him—but cannot change any of it, and so drifts away from humanity. In the chapter "Watchmaker," writer Alan Moore's style choices—the use of verbs, phrases, sentence structure, and formatting in Manhattan's first-person narrating voice—reflect Manhattan's specific worldview. This literary style gives the reader access to the story's high ambitions.

To describe the situations he finds himself in, Dr. Manhattan utilizes many present-tense linking verbs. These are words such as *is*, *am*, and *are*, and their purpose is to equivocate the subject, Manhattan, with the predicate (Manhattan's presence in some time or place). Examples include sentences such as "I am sixteen years old" and "I am on Mars" (2). As his actions are defined as little more than his presence in different contexts, he is framed as a passive entity, which lets the reader understand Manhattan's non-linear view of time. Manhattan similarly expresses the actions of others in the present tense, whether the actions belong to the past, present, or future. His chosen verbs for these actions, however, are less often linking and more often transitive—for example, "[she] buys me a beer" (5) and "Janey shares the trip from Arizona" (6). The narrator's assignment of linking verbs to his actions stands in sharp contrast to the more independent verbs he chooses for others' actions. By allowing the subject to act on an object, the latter verbs grant their subjects a sense of autonomy and free will distinctly lacking in Manhattan's descriptions of his own actions.

Infinitive, prepositional, and participial phrases also demonstrate Dr. Manhattan's unique worldview. The rare times Manhattan undertakes some action in what humans perceive as the present, he uses an infinitive phrase to describe it. Examples include "I am going to look at the stars" (1) and "I am trying to give a name to the force that set them in motion" (2). Infinitives have no time or number and often indicate that an action is ongoing. It is appropriate,

then, that Manhattan would use infinitives whenever he speaks of starting a new task; for him, any task begun is never-ending. Manhattan's use of prepositional phrases is purposeful, as well. The narration overflows with these—for example, "[the] photograph lies at my feet, falls from my fingers, is in my hand" (2). These phrases serve to place objects in relation to each other and help to construct Manhattan's experiences for the reader. The bombardment of detail allows the reader to believe that his mind is stuck in the past, present, and future. Finally, participial phrases appear in sentences such as "I observe meteorites from a glass balcony, thinking about my father" (2) and "[we] sit together on the edge of the bed, examining the damage" (6). These phrases add extra information to main clauses, which allows the concurrence of two or more actions. Participial phrases provide easy access to the workings of Manhattan's mind, which contains excessive information as he, simultaneously, lives, relives, and pre-lives every moment of his life.

Two other characteristics of Dr. Manhattan's narration, his changing sentence structure and the text's use of boldface, allow the reader to trace the character's emotional development from Osterman into Manhattan. On Mars, where Manhattan has isolated himself from Earth and contemplates his recent past and close future, his sentences are simple. Accordingly, his voice is distant and unadorned. When he begins to recall the time leading up to his accident as Osterman, however, the style shifts to include more compound and complex sentences. The former sentences join clauses to associate ideas better, and the latter sentences show more complexity of thought. These structures allow for more emotional insight, and they are used in Osterman's recollections of falling in love with Janey Slater, and of being physically destroyed by his accident—the character's last moments of heightened, memorable emotion. Developed alongside the changes in sentence structure is the use of boldface, a formatting device commonly employed in comic books. Manhattan's narration throughout the story is notable for its lack of this visual cue, which reflects his lack of emotion. Boldface appears most frequently when the superhero narrates a pre-accident flashback, or discusses science (his passion). The simple sentences and lack of boldface together offer a glimpse into Manhattan's diminished humanity.

The reader understands and appreciates Dr. Manhattan's worldview precisely through Alan Moore's use of verbs, phrases, sentence structure, and formatting. Manhattan's voice is just one avenue through which the story articulates its complex themes. *Watchmen's* purposeful literary style simultaneously celebrates and transcends the superhero comic book medium.

References

- Moore, Allan. *Watchmen*. Illus. Dave Gibbons. New York: DC Comics. 2005.
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