

# Having a Bad Day: Explorations of Good and Evil in Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke*

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## Abstract

While Alan Moore's entire *oeuvre* may be called controversial, and, while *The Killing Joke* is not without its own controversies, one of the reasons that we are more than satisfied with this classic graphic novel is the themes within it which have transcendent resonance. It is not just the parallel narratives in the novel itself, though those do illuminate to us the insanity of the Joker; it is in the parallel tales that we gain sympathy, or at least empathy for Joker and as such we see the tragedy of his life. It is in the same narratives where we understand that Batman is equally obsessed, and so that we realize the tropes of "good" and "evil" may also be mediated by a third category, that of "human".

## Keywords

Batman, Joker, Alan Moore, Killing Joke, Graphic Novels, Graphic Religion, Brian Bolland

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## 1. Introduction

Writer Alan Moore's name has become synonymous with the genre of the graphic novel but of Moore's *oeuvre*, *The Killing Joke* (Moore and Bolland, 2008) is unique because the project was not initiated by the writer or by the publisher. Instead the script for this story was commissioned by the artist, Brian Bolland, who wanted to work with Moore (Bolland, 2008). Artistically and narratively, *The Killing Joke* deals with eternal human themes: the opposites of good and evil, madness and sanity, life and death. Moore and Bolland present the dichotomy and struggle of the human to understand these themes as personified by the seeming eternal conflict between the Batman and the Joker. While it may not have been Moore and Bolland's intent when they were writing it, some of the tropes and ideas they bring to the surface in the killing joke also resonate from a religious or a spiritual point of view. While as a conflict unto itself, the Batman and the Joker fighting through the years with neither of them ultimately winning can be regarded as a spiritual battle<sup>1</sup>, Moore's story and Bolland's art work introduce the human to this conflict between good and evil, in the form of Barbara Gordon and Police Commissioner Gordon.

These two dichotomies, these seeming opposites, become representative of the collateral damage that human beings may undergo when they stand between the forces of the divine and the forces of the demonic, between heaven and hell, between good and evil. In a sense, though, Moore's human being, represented by James Gordon, is greater than good and evil. Good and evil, which are in their most unbridled forms are both destructive forces and artist Brian Bolland's artwork helps to indicate this theme. It is not in good or in evil that Moore sees humanity's salvation,

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<sup>1</sup>This idea is, of course, also reminiscent of the Christian Gnostic heresy where the Deity of the Hebrew Bible, typified as Evil, fought the Deity of the New Testament, who was typified as Good (Anonymous, N.D.), or the Zoroastrian idea of life being a constant battle between the forces of good and evil (Editors of the Encyclopedia Britannica 2015).

because while Moore's view of evil is as a capricious force, his view of good, is equally capricious or even more so. Bolland's artwork bolsters Moore's view by visually quoting the usually macabre images from expressionist style films and these images resonate their contexts and jar our sensibilities. The graphic narrative of *The Killing Joke* is, in a sense full blown cinema, a visual journey which illustrates that the struggle between ostensible good and evil is really merely two sides of the same coin and also that crucially to be human is to be resilient, to succumb to neither the destruction of good nor the destruction of evil but instead to tread the line between the two.

## 2. The Joke—Color and Cinematic Narrative

Moore's script of *The Killing Joke* splits the narrative in two. There are two stories, one which takes place in "real" time, in the ostensible present, and one which takes place in the past. The Moore and Bolland story line which takes place in the now is presented in full and brilliant color which contrasts with the secondary Joker origin story. The story line that takes place in the past has been presented by artist and colorist Brian Bolland<sup>2</sup> in muted sepia tone, so that we feel that things are not quite black and white black, but that things happen in an old-time movie, and we get a sense of cinematography. The crucial exception, as Tim Sale notes, is that Bolland, who also was colorist of the deluxe edition, has added a key color, a blood red crimson, to the flashbacks. The color attracts our eyes, despite the otherwise muted color scheme (Sale, 2008). This accent gives the narrative a cinematic quality, almost like the usage of color in the movie *Interiors* (Allen, 1978) which "had been photographed by Gordon Willis in cool colors that suggest civilization's precarious control of natural forces (Canby, 1978)". Further, as Trevor Goring notes in an interview, while both comic books and movie story boards have different limitations and expectations, they are also extremely similar in that "With comics, you're the director, production designer, fashion designer, etc., rolled into one (Dooley, 2014). This line between cinema and comic books is blurred where, as a case in point, *The Flashpoint Paradox* (2013), based and expanded on the graphic novel *Flashpoint* (Johns and Kubert, 2012) is an "animated" movie but during fight sequences, we are presented with completely still images and apparent camera pans, zooms and quick cuts over completely still images all work together with the imagination to create the illusion of animation during these scenes and to accentuate the horror and violence of the alternate world in which the Flash finds himself.

My point is that the cinematic quality of the graphic novel in general, and of *The Killing Joke* in specific, allows Moore and Bolland to cut and back and forth between the two narratives, almost like the "A" story and "B" story of a typical movie. Further, the use of color creates a visual unity, whether in this case the color red is crustaceans on a plate, the Joker's bright red lips or, tragically and grotesquely, Barbara Gordon's blood. This color use allows us, as a reader to create a narratological unity via the element of color. Sale notes further that Bolland's use of color is masterful in that he chooses to highlight red objects throughout the flashback sequences in increasing intensity until the removal of the iconic Red Hood which - first ever viewed in the Joker's 1951 origin story<sup>3</sup> - when removed reveals "the transformation of the milquetoast failed comedian to insane criminal mastermind (Sale, 2008)". The use of color imagery and juxtaposition of flashbacks and flash forwards in time provide a cinematic style that gives a depth to the Joker's character. In one sense we can view the Joker as a tragic antihero with a fatal flaw, a character weakness and, in another sense, we see him transformed into a depraved monster, one who was created as a form of punishment due to his own actions. This narrative causality gives us a better sense of the person who the Joker might be and adds a sense of depth to his characterization of evil.

## 3. Portrait of the Comedian as Mentally Ill

In terms of the narrative of *The Killing Joke*, we must, as always, start at the start. In a narrative, a character or characters do things. In our story the nameless person<sup>4</sup> who later became the Joker had a bad day. In the flashback

<sup>2</sup>Bolland was not the colorist for the original edition of the story but was the colorist of the special edition.

<sup>3</sup>See Detective comics, number 168, The Man Behind the Red Hood.

<sup>4</sup> The Joker's actual identity is probably the only unsolved major puzzle of the DC universe. Other Batman villains, such as Two Face, The Riddler, Cat woman, Poison Ivy, The Scarecrow and The Penguin, for example, have well known other identities (Harvey Dent, Edward Nigma, Selina Kyle, Pamela Lillian Isley, Jonathan Crane and Oswald Cobblepot) and we know where they came from and what motivates these people to become evil. Even while some of these identities and narratives have been "retconned" (retold so as to retroactively create a form of narrative continuity) the players themselves have not changed. The Scarecrow is still Jonathan Crane who uses gas to create deep fear in his victims. We know that The Riddler creates puzzles which point out both the current crime that he has planned and often, when the puzzles are taken together, these clues or crimes may form a meta-clue to a grander scheme. Cat woman, Poison Ivy, and the Penguin also have standard modus operandi and a back story that fleshes out the character and the reason or reasons for their crimes. Moore fills out some of the missing narrative but we honestly still have no idea, ultimately, who the Joker is. Finally the entire endeavour is moot because *The Killing Joke* narrative was never meant to be a canonical Batman story and so, while some elements were indeed borrowed into canon, such as the shooting and injuring of Barbara Gordon,

portion of the narrative, this nameless stand-up comedian<sup>5</sup> suffered through a series of events which changed his life forever (Moore and Bolland, 2008). As recounted in *The Killing Joke*, the person who became the Joker was a lab technician who became a stand-up comedian, was married and, while he did agree to lead the Red Hood gang in a crime, our unnamed protagonist did evil only to get money to help better his family. We can forgive this transgression in our unnamed antagonist, in the sense that we can see that at least at some point he attempted to do good. Unfortunately, and on the same day he was to lead the gang, his wife and unborn child were killed in a freak accident and, the man who later becomes the Joker, despite the fact that he wished to withdraw, was forced to lead the “Red Hood” gang. The Batman, a dark knight on a dark night, intervenes and our antagonist has a freak accident, slips into chemicals that bleach his skin, turn his hair green, twist his face into a rictus grin and drive him insane (Moore and Bolland, 2008)<sup>6</sup>. It is noteworthy that on this page of the narrative the colors change rapidly from sepia tone into full blown color. In the bottom panel of the page our nameless antagonist is revealed in full blown mental illness as the Joker. His eyes are full of madness and the rest of the panel is filled with the word “HAHAHAHAHA”. The transformation from mundane to mundane mobster to absolute monster is complete<sup>7</sup>.

As noted above, not only do we still not know who the Joker is, we have had, until Moore’s insight and narrative, no idea why he acted the way he did. In this sense, the Joker can be seen as a force of malevolence, an evil so pure that it that makes no sense to mere humans such as us. The Joker is, in this sense, a force of chaotic corruption, incarnate. He appears Luciferian, sitting on a throne which rests on a pile of dolls that look like dead babies (Moore and Bolland, 1988) and his henchmen resemble cast members from the horror movie *Freaks* (1932). This pre “Hays code” movie included cast members who were recruited from carnival sideshows and who were legitimately physiologically diverse humans. “Freaks” was originally considered so very grotesque that even in its original release it was purportedly banned in some US cities (Patterson, 2015). It is a disturbing movie filled with “the underlying sense of horror, the love of the macabre that fills the circus sideshows in the first place (New York Times, 1932)”. Similarly, the graphics and action in *The Killing Joke* are, to our modern sensibilities, equivalently grotesque and violent. When the Joker shoots Barbara Gordon, Bolland shows us the bullet entry into her body and the blood cascading from the wound. We are reminded of scenes violently reminiscent of the movie *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994) where an accidental shooting splatters blood completely through a car. Not to be outdone by this outrage, the Joker then strips Barbara Gordon’s injured body and defiles it so that he can then exhibit photographs of that scene to her father (these details are visually and narratively alluded to, fortunately, and left to the imagination, which in a sense makes them worse), the Joker does so, not with any prurience or enmity but with precision, merely “to prove a point (Moore and Bolland, 1988)”.

In comparison, the seminal sadomasochistic graphic novel *Story of O* (Reage and Crepax, 2009), based on the violently erotic novel, is far less disturbing in its depiction of graphic but consensual sadomasochism and sexuality, perhaps because, in Crepax’s retelling of Reage’s tale, we know there is point to the violence and O is ultimately treated as a person. Moore wishes us to see naked evil incarnate and thus the diabolical Joker, dressed as a travesty of the prototypical tourist in Bermuda shorts, treats Barbara Gordon, as an object to be used and discarded as refuse as literally an object lesson. If collateral damage is experienced by that object, so be it. Joker’s evil is chaos incarnate. He uses people and their damage is, to him, less important than what he can use them for. As a case in point, later in the novel the Joker says of the traumatized Commissioner Gordon “God how boring. The man’s a complete turnip (Moore and Bolland, 2008)”. He says of the Barbara Gordon whom he just shot that she is like a book “with a hole in the jacket with a damaged spine (Moore and Bolland, 2008)”. Even when the Batman rescues Gordon and tries to apprehend the Joker, we are told by the Joker that it doesn’t matter because “I’ve proved my point (Moore and Bolland, 2008). There is no remorse for the destruction, the body count the lives hurt, just satisfaction that he proved his point.

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none of the story was meant to have taken place inside the mainstream DC Comics fictional universe at all. As Peaslee and Weiner note about the Joker, “There is no definitive origin story that sticks (Peaslee and Weiner, 2015)”

<sup>5</sup>It is possible to read the title “The Killing Joke” as blackly comical since professional comedians speak of jokes that “kill” the audience and The Joker was a stand-up comic.

<sup>6</sup>In scientific models, adult trauma is rarely given as an etiology for psychopathy or psychopathic behavior. In general, on the other hand, childhood trauma is certainly seen as a contributing factor to psychopathy. That being stated, Moore’s narrative is narratively and psychologically satisfying, despite any lack of scientific rigor.

<sup>7</sup>The Joker resembles no one so much as the character of Gwynepaine, played by Conrad Veidt in *The Man Who Laughs* (Leni 1928).

#### 4. The Bad Day: Good, Evil and Human

If the Joker is callously evil, then the Batman is the counterpoint of that evil, and thus represents its opposite, which we call “good”. Batman has been known as a “caped crusader” a “dark knight” and “the world’s greatest detective”. When we meet Batman in this novel, we follow a cinematic storyboard that follows Batman as an omniscient camera would, to a cell in Arkham Asylum where Batman confronts a prisoner, ostensibly the Joker, playing solitaire. In this sense we have good saying to evil “I came to talk (Moore and Bolland, 1988)”. I think it’s crucial that the denouement of narrative also ends with Batman saying to Joker, “I came to talk (Miller and Bolland, 2008)” and this repetition creates a set of narrative bookends. Good is presented as rational, arriving to discuss a problem”.

The issue here is that unchained good can also cause problems. When Batman has realized that the Joker had escaped from Arkham Asylum he loses his temper to the point that the counterfeit Joker has to call for help (Moore and Bolland, 1988). We get the feeling that Gordon and the police are standing by to protect the prisoners as much as they are there to protect Batman. As we see, Batman, ostensibly on the side of good, violently attacks the fake Joker and must be pulled off of him lest he do permanent damage. Later in the narrative, we see Batman roughing up a street thug to get information on Commissioner Gordon’s whereabouts (Moore and Bolland, 1988). And much, much later, in what turns out to be the *dénouement* of the tale, Gordon has to remind Batman not to use excessive force (Moore and Bolland, 1988), a proviso to which Batman grudgingly agrees. The fact is that this Batman is as callously good and dehumanized as the Joker is callously evil. Batman is so violent that he requires watching and while the scale is different, he uses similar methodology to the Joker. The moments that humanize this Batman for us occur when Barbara Gordon calls him “Bruce (Moore and Bolland, 1988)” and when he holds and comforts a sobbing commissioner Gordon (Miller and Bolland, 2008). These moments remind us that underneath the cape and cowl, there exists a human, perhaps an extremely damaged human, but one who represents as much unrelenting good as much as Joker represents unrelenting evil. Batman objectifies the evil doers so that, both of these, good unrestrained and evil unrestrained, can be equally harmful.

Batman, as we know, has in his past, had a “bad day”. Bruce Wayne was orphaned and this trauma set young Bruce on the course to become Batman. As above we know that the Joker also had a bad day and that led him, in turn, to become the Joker. The Joker’s plan is to traumatize James Gordon and to cause him to go insane. It is important to note that the Joker’s plan, in itself, is psychopathic in its extreme cruelty, and while parallels may be drawn to the Stanford Prison Experiment (Zimbardo, 2017) or Milgram’s shock experiments (APA, 2014) we must also note that at the very least both of those experiments used willing, consensual human subjects. The Joker treats Barbara Gordon as an object to be violated, destroyed and discarded, only because he wishes “to prove a point” and to give Commissioner James Gordon a “bad day.” The point is that Bruce Wayne’s reaction to extreme trauma was to become Batman. Joker’s reaction was to, as he says, “Go crazy (Moore, 2008)” and to become the Joker. Only Gordon retains his basic humanity, even after extreme trauma. Gordon even remembers to remind Batman to stay within the law. If Batman is “Good” and “Joker” is evil then Gordon is “Human” and he retains his basic human decency and resilience despite being put to the test.

We might, if we wish, relate The Killing Joke to the biblical Job narrative. To remind ourselves, Job was a righteous man who was tested by “The Satan” (in Hebrew, literally, “The Adversary” and the one whom Christians call “the Devil”). The Satan tested Job’s faith, by killing his family, by afflicting him with boils on his skin and by stripping away of all of his wealth. Despite this, Job remains righteous and pious and refuses to abandon his faith in God and in God’s justice. This is to say that despite terrible trauma, Job believes that the universe has meaning and it is by clinging to meaning that allows Job to survive as a faithful. I could make the analogy that Commissioner James Gordon is Job, in that, despite the absolutely horrendous traumas that the Joker inflicts on him, Gordon remains resilient and that Gordon retains his belief and faith. While Job has faith in God, Gordon has faith in the law, and in justice, and in police procedure “by the book.” This faith carries Gordon to the point that he even is able to remind Batman to bring the Joker in “by the book,” and Gordon’s reasoning is because the Joker needs to see “our way works (Moore, 2008)”. Gordon’s clinging to “the Way” could even be an allusion to the New testament’s John 14:6, “I am the way and the truth and the light.” Gordon’s “way” might also be a cognate of *Tao* which translates into English as way and his suffering as human is indeed *wúwéi*, effortless action, which saves him at the end. And indeed, Gordon’s way works well enough that he retains his sanity and so that at the very end of *The Killing Joke*, it is unclear whether Batman does destroy the Joker, or perhaps Joker destroys Batman. Batman and Joker share catharsis of a joke, told by the Joker the former comedian and they both laugh, where Good and Evil are reduced by laughter which is a truly human act.

## 5. Conclusion

Ultimately then, while this exploration has looked at some of the cinematic elements of Moore and Bolland's illustrated narrative and how they can be viewed as augmenting the possible spiritual elements within the text, it is important to note that this theme, that of the eternal struggle between good and evil, can be found in almost any comic book, especially of this era. The reason for this retelling of this kind of tale is that ultimately, this is conflict of a kind and that without conflict of any kind, we have nothing to constitute narrative. In the future, one area that might be worthwhile exploring is that broader idea, the idea of narrative, and how it is that humans use it, specifically within the spiritual, but that exploration is beyond the scope of this small work. That being said, the narrative of the mutual antagonism between good and evil is what keeps us entertained and also, depending on the context, is also the thing that edifies us spiritually.

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