



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS
Hugvísindasvið

Religion in *Good Omens*

***A Study of the Usage and Effect of Religion in the
Comedic Fantasy Novel Good Omens***

Ritgerð til BA-prófs í Ensku

Erla Filipía Haraldsdóttir

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Abstract

When analysing the fantasy novel *Good Omens* (1990) by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, one comes across various interesting features, most to do with its relationship with the source material, the Bible. As it is a fantasy novel, the authors have defined the Christian biblical elements as foreign and 'other', outside of the realm that is familiar and natural to the reader, and can thereby render both Heaven and Hell antagonistic. An important element of that is the morality of the central characters. Those of them that are human have free will, and are therefore in control of their own destiny and consequently can take responsibility for their actions. Thus the humans are moral creatures. On the other hand, the characters that belong to either the forces of Heaven or Hell, that is, angels or demons, have no free will, and are completely under the control of either God or Satan. Therefore Heaven and Hell are exempt from moral consequences. They have no free will, are not to blame for their actions, and therefore their actions can not be classified as morally good or bad.

Furthermore, the story takes place in the last eleven years before the apocalypse, as told in Revelation, and therefore a number of biblical characters are included, such as The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Besides Revelation, *Good Omens* pays homage to two other chapters from the Bible, these being Genesis and the Gospels. This essay attempts to examine the influences of these biblical passages and look at their effects in correlation with the novel's themes.

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1 Introduction

In early works of literature, in the period ranging from ancient times until the Middle Ages, religion and real life were hardly distinguishable. This was partly because of the immense integration of the two in everyday life, but also because there was no common world view that didn't feature the presence of a deity of some sort. As different world views became increasingly widespread, and as science began to undermine the dependence people had on biblical and theological explanations of life's mysteries, these elements began to disappear from realist fiction. They were later relegated to the side-lines of literature, along with myths, fairy tales and folklore. In an increasingly secularized society, religious novels concerning matters of faith directly seem to have fallen out of favour, having been replaced by literature featuring more subtle references to religion. One example of such a 20th century novel with religious undertones is C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* series (1950-1956), which relies heavily on Christian symbolism and biblical connotations. In recent times, novels featuring direct references to events from the Bible seem to have mostly been apocalyptic, since, in the Christian world view, the only biblical event yet to take place is that of the end of the world. This is where *Good Omens* (1990) by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman comes in. While it belongs to the latter group of novels, pertaining directly to the apocalypse as described in Revelation, it enters this religious dialogue from a slightly different angle than has previously been employed. Using humour to convey significant messages about the nature of creation, *Good Omens* manages to divert the attention away from the biblical event of the apocalypse itself. Instead it is focused on the consequences and

the catalyst of the apocalypse, shedding light on the functions of Heaven and Hell, and their ultimate intent. At the same time, the unfolding events deviate from the ones described in the Bible, in concordance with the changed perspective. Thus the traditional paradigm of good versus evil, Heaven versus Hell, falls into the background as humanity enters the debate, and in the end defeats both sides' combined efforts to initiate the apocalypse. This essay aims to explore this change as well as the usage of biblical references and Christian symbolism in *Good Omens* to better understand the narrative and the deeper ethical questions that the novel evokes, as it separates the ideas of Heaven's goodness and Hell's evil from their ethical counterparts.

2 About *Good Omens*

Good Omens is a comedic fantasy novel jointly written by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman and published in 1990. It is about the apocalypse and the effect of its imminence on those aware of it, namely a handful of humans, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the angel Aziraphale, the demon Crowley and Adam Young the Antichrist. However, instead of being a traditional story about good triumphing over evil, *Good Omens* tells of humanity's triumph over the joint forces of Heaven and Hell, as the apocalypse is avoided. Furthermore, *Good Omens* is a comedic novel, and as such it manages to be light and cheerful while dealing with the heavy theological subjects and serious implications that a work on the apocalypse entails. This light-heartedness is a trademark of Terry Pratchett's, whose *Discworld* series (1983-) also falls under the comedic fantasy category. Neil Gaiman on the other hand is more famous for his Gothic fantasy novels, such as *Neverwhere* (1996) and *Coraline* (2002), as well as his comic book series *Sandman* (1989-1996). Although they are at present both atheists, both authors grew up in religious environments. Pratchett was raised within the Church of England, and Gaiman was a member of the Church of Scientology from a young age and well into his adult life. Furthermore they have both touched on theology before in their works. Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series contains a plethora of gods, reminiscent of the Greek pantheon, and Gaiman has written two best-selling novels about gods in a modern day setting, *American Gods* (2001) and *Anansi Boys* (2005). Combining their talents, *Good Omens* is a humorous examination of biblical matters, interwoven with Gothic elements and mysticism. Several features from their

other works have also made their way into this book. Death is comparable to his *Discworld* counterpart in mannerisms, attitude towards his work and even in his speech, which in both instances is recorded on paper in all capital letters. Although Pratchett has written about the other Horsemen of the Apocalypse as well in the *Discworld* series, the rest of the Horsemen bear a more striking resemblance to The Eternal in Gaiman's *Sandman* series. These are personifications of seven human traits of a more psychological nature than the Horsemen. They are Dream, Death, Delirium, Desire, Destruction, Destiny and Despair. Gaiman also wrote a short story entitled "Murder Mysteries", which is about the murder of an angel, and deals with much the same questions of morality and free will among angelic beings as *Good Omens*.

3 Theory

The study of fantasy literature has been scarce throughout the history of literary criticism, although the genre can be traced back to ancient myth and legends, and is therefore interwoven with literary history. Fantasy works might at first glance appear to have no rules and to be free of the boundaries of normal literature set in the world we know, but looking closer we realize that the fantastic is rooted in the social environment of the author in much the same manner as other novels. A seminal work on fantasy writing is Rosemary Jackson's *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981). Therein Jackson argues against the popular belief that “literature of the fantastic [is] 'transcending' reality, 'escaping' the human condition and constructing superior alternate, 'secondary' worlds” (2). Instead she claims that “it [is] impossible to accept a reading of [fantasy] literature which places it somehow mysteriously 'outside' time altogether. [...] The literary fantasy is never free” (3). She states that fantasy literature is strongly linked to the social context in which it is written. Many definitions of the fantastic element in fiction have been put forth, most pertaining to a shift in – or even a reversal of – reality; fantasy makes something that is impossible possible. Such is the definition put forth William R. Irwin in his book, *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy* (1976): “Fantasy is that kind of extended narrative which establishes and develops an artifact, that is, plays the game of the impossible ... a fantasy is a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility” (Irwin, qtd. in Jackson 21). On a similar note Joanna Russ claims fantasy is the embodiment of what she calls negative subjunctivity, a term which she

translates thus: "Fantasy is what *could not have happened*; i.e. what *cannot* happen, what *cannot* exist" (Russ, qtd. in Jackson 21-22). But merely describing fantasy as literature of the impossible is not satisfactory, as these narratives also have to convey the sense of realism to have any effect on the reader. Dostoevsky proposes that a story of a man with no heart incites no believability, and therefore loses the reader. "The fantastic [...] must be so close to the real that you almost have to believe in it" (Dostoevsky, qtd. in Jackson 27). Fantasy, therefore, is a mixture of the real and the unreal, and it is this juxtaposition of what we know and what is alien to us that constitutes the central conflict of the fantastic narrative. In the context of *Good Omens*, this conflict is, in broad terms, between the secular and the sacred, although we will find that these terms are not really suitable for the scope of the subjects they define. The subject of criticism in the novel, that is Christian ideology concerning the forces of Heaven and Hell, is put under the spotlight as the fantastic element of the novel, the 'other', and thus it becomes the focal point of the narrative. In most fantasy literature, the 'other' is something evil or malign, detrimental to the status quo. In the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954-1955) it is the embodiment of corruption and hunger for power. The *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) has connotations to the Second World War, with its antagonist set on eradicating those of perceived impure blood. A similar thing is observed in religion, where this conflict is traditionally between the forces of good and the forces of evil. This pertains not only to Christian doctrine but also other religions. When reading *Good Omens*, the reader assumes that the conflict from Christian religious doctrine is carried over into the novel, since the primary source for the

material covered in the narrative comes from the Bible. This is traditional in religious fantasies. “The other tends to be identified as an otherworldly, evil force: Satan, the devil, the demon (just as good is identified through figures of angels, benevolent fairies, wise men). In religious fantasies and in pagan ones, this context of supernaturalism/magic locates good and evil *outside* the merely human, in a different dimension” (Jackson 53). Although it's made clear in this passage that both good and evil is put beyond humanity, into the realm of the supernatural and otherworldly, only the forces of evil are characterised as malevolent. Breaking away from the confines of the traditional, the central conflict of *Good Omens* is not between Heaven and Hell. Instead, all theological elements are part of the 'other', and are therefore seen as a threat to the status quo. Examining *Good Omens* therefore leads the reader to define Heaven in *Good Omens* as antagonistic, alongside Hell.

To examine this in detail, we can look at the exceptions to this rule: The three supernatural beings that defy Heaven and Hell. These are Adam Young, the Antichrist, and Aziraphale and Crowley, an angel and a demon, respectively. These three characters go against the will of their masters because they have become more a part of humanity than of Heaven or Hell. They display human traits and are generally perceived as humans, both by other humans within the narrative, and by the reader, who expects them to act in line with humanity. This enables the reader to identify these characters as part of the familiar world, as opposed to the fantastical 'other'. Thus, instead of the distinction within the fantastical element of good and evil, as suggested by Jackson in the above quote, the distinction lies in the distance the fantastical element is from the

realistic. In fact, the antagonistic Heaven and Hell might fall more neatly within the definition of what Goethe calls 'demonic': "It was not godlike, for it seemed unreasonable; not human, for it had no understanding; nor devilish, for it was beneficent; not angelic, for it often betrayed a malicious pleasure" (Goethe, qtd. in Jackson 56). Conversely, Aziraphale, Crowley and Adam Young do not fit this description. Despite their fantastical origins and nature, their appearance and characteristics separate them from Heaven and Hell. These characteristics, and the philosophical reason behind them, will be discussed in more detail later on in this essay.

4 Theology

4.1 Bible

The Bible, on which some of the events of *Good Omens* are based, consists of many texts of different authorship and age. These texts enjoy varying popularity today. Several of the texts are the foundation for well-established Christian myths that all Christians know, such as the story of Adam and Eve, Noah's flood and the life of Jesus from the Gospels. Other parts of the Bible have fallen into obscurity, likely due to changes in society rendering the message of these passages obsolete or unnecessary. The authors of *Good Omens* use references both to specific biblical passages, on several occasions even citing verse directly, and they also refer to common biblical knowledge, and the popular versions of these myths that are known throughout the Christian world. Thus we get the version of the apocalypse including the advent of the Four Riders of the Apocalypse, the sounding of trumpets and, of course, the inclusion of the Antichrist himself, who is never directly referred to in Revelation as a person, the term instead referring to anything from someone who defies Christ to simply someone who is not Christ.

4.2 Genesis

Genesis is the first book of the Old Testament, of which chapters 2 and 3 contain the story of Adam and Eve. This is directly referenced in the first chapter of *Good Omens*. These passages explain the origin of morality in Christianity, the original sin, and the influence of evil on the actions of man in the most simplified way: the disobedience of the will of God. These are themes that come into play in *Good Omens* as well. In the aftermath of Adam and Eve's banishment from the Garden of Eden, Crowley and Aziraphale are also

discussing good and evil. At the same time as Adam and Eve have tasted the forbidden fruit and therefore know the difference between good and evil, an angel and a demon are not sure they do. This clever juxtaposition is a taste of what is to come in the rest of the novel, a muddled distinction between moral opposites.

4.2.1 *Adam Young*

Later on in *Good Omens* Genesis comes into play again, then in the form of Adam Young. Of particular interest is this short passage from the final chapter of the novel, which highlights his links with his biblical namesake:

Adam looked up. Above him hung an old apple tree, gnarled and heavy. It might been there since the dawn of time. Its boughs were bent with the weight of apples, small and green and unripe.

With the speed of a striking cobra the boy was up the tree. He returned to the ground seconds later with his pockets bulging, munching noisily on a tart and perfect apple.

[...]

He couldn't see why people made such a fuss about people eating their silly old fruit anyway, but life would be a lot less *fun* if they didn't. And there never was an apple, in Adam's opinion, that wasn't worth the trouble you got into for eating it. (Pratchett and Gaiman 397-8)

These paragraphs describe not only a parallel of Adam's namesake's fall, but also describe Adam Young's feelings on the matter. The fall from Eden is the result of humanity's first rebellion against the control of God, and the source of the knowledge between good and evil. At this point in the narrative Adam Young has prevented the apocalypse and thereby gone against the will of Heaven and

Hell, in a similar way to how Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating the apple. Adam also alludes to the benefits in knowledge and independence humanity gained from Adam and Eve's actions, comparable to the new-found freedom he foresees humanity having from the influences of Heaven and Hell.

The fact that these two characters bear the same name is no coincidence. Names often tell the reader what sort of character the holder is, both in the Bible and in literature. The conversation between Sister Mary Loquacious, a satanic nun and delivery nurse, and Mr Young, Adam's father, can be interpreted as a decisive moment in the fate of the newborn Antichrist. They discuss various names, several of them from the Bible, ranging from the Four Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, to Wormwood, which is a star that falls from the sky in Revelation. "And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters; And the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter" (*King James Version*, Rev 8:10-11). Settling at last on the name Adam, the antichrist automatically adopts a certain character similar to that of the original Adam from Genesis. Furthermore, names from the Bible often have a meaning significant to the bearer, thus the Bible claims Moses means 'drawn out', referring to his mother finding him in the reed (*King James Version*, Exo 2:10), and Jesus means 'God's salvation', referring to him dying for people's sins ("Jesus"). Adam is the Hebrew word for 'man', and with that in mind, it's not surprising at all that Adam Young became the main advocate for the human race.

As previously mentioned, Adam Young shares traits and roles with his biblical counterpart. For example, Adam from Genesis is given the role of naming all the animals and plants that God creates. "And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field" (*King James Version*, Gen 2:20). Similarly, *Good Omens'* Adam is responsible for naming the hell-hound he was given on his eleventh birthday. "It's very important that he names it himself. It gives it its purpose" (71). The name Dog affects the hell-hound directly, shaping it physically and mentally, in a similar way that being named the Hebrew word for 'man' shaped Adam Young. Had any of Crowley's guesses of "Killer, or Terror, or Stalks-By-Night" (Pratchett and Gaiman 71) been accurate, then Dog would have turned out differently. But since it is just called Dog, it is in its nature to be dog-like. Reflecting the naming tradition from the Bible, *Good Omens* hints subtly at a link between its events and those of the Bible.

4.3 Revelation

The Revelation of St John the Evangelist is the last book of the New Testament, and is the only chapter of the Bible to fall under the literary definition of an 'apocalypse', meaning a work of prophecy concerning the end of times.

Revelation is a heavily encrypted passage about the end of times, containing many references to contemporary events and threats to Jews at the time of writing, and thus making it nearly illegible to laymen today (Zukeran). Many different schools of thought exist to understand the events described in apocalyptic texts such as Revelation. *Good Omens* follows one of those schools, Futurism, which dictates that the events described will happen at the

end of the world. This is a literal approach to the text, and it is a popular school of thought with a lot of Christian sects today (Zukeran).

4.3.1 *Riders of the Apocalypse*

One of the most significant images in *Good Omens* linking it with the apocalypse are the Four Horsemen – here called Riders – of the Apocalypse, who feature in Rev 6:2-8. There they enter the scene as seals are broken from a book, releasing them. Their presence in *Good Omens* is announced early on, and they are gradually built up to be significant characters, and ultimately play a huge role in the final act of the story. Although the Horsemen are the only real characters from the Bible represented in *Good Omens*, they are developed to an extent that separates them considerably from their original counterparts in Revelation. The Four Riders also bear a resemblance to a set of characters from Pratchett's *Discworld* series, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. They differ quite significantly in character – for example, *The New Discworld Companion* (2004) describes Famine as “arrogant and always hungry” (Pratchett and Briggs 95) and War as a “large [and] jolly” man (Pratchett and Briggs 255). In the *Discworld* novel *Sourcery* (1988), these characters meet up in a bar in anticipation of the upcoming apocalypse, similar to *Good Omens'* Riders, who meet in a roadside café. They then go on to catch up, before going out to start the apocalypse, but are unable to complete their tasks because of a few humans, who have stolen their horses. Compared to the way that the Four Riders of the Apocalypse in *Good Omens* are brought together, and ultimately thwarted, it is clear that certain elements from this *Discworld* novel, which was

only published a couple of years previously to *Good Omens*, were borrowed and reused.

War, for example, alias as Carmine Zuigiber, is a beautiful female, a femme fatale, who has men falling at her knees. Her Revelation counterpart is not described in any detail, only being referred to as a man atop a red horse, holding a sword and removing peace from the earth, causing men to fight one another. Although there is not much to go on textually, the myth of the Four Horsemen, and the image this character has in the popular consciousness is that of a warrior, a large and muscular man, armed and armoured to the teeth, an image far removed from Carmine Zuigiber.

Famine's counterpart, Dr Sable, the dietitian recommending his nutrition-less foodstuff, Newtrition, is perhaps not so much developed from the ideas of famines and hunger, but from the superficiality of modern life, and the urge to be lean and skinny. Revelation's Famine is quoted in the Bible, saying "A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine" (*King James Version*, Rev 6:6). This refers to rising prices due to failing crops; the prices quoted are tenfold that of the regular prices (Kee 237 ann. 6.5-6). The oil and wine is not affected because olive trees and grapevines are less easily spoiled than cereal harvests.

War and Famine strike the reader as simple modernizations of their corresponding Horsemen, because despite the way they are developed beyond their original versions in the folklore surrounding Revelation and the apocalypse, they are the logical result of placing these biblical figures into

modern times. The other two characters, Pollution and Death, are less straightforward.

Pollution is not too dissimilarly modernized from War and Famine, and it is perhaps wrong to single him out, but for the fact that he is not in Revelation at all; he is an addition by Pratchett and Gaiman, said to have replaced Pestilence at the advent of penicillin. His counterpart in Revelation is the least understood of them all, because of the intent of the author, St John the Evangelist, and the modern day readers being quite different. It's generally understood that this Horseman originally represented military conquest (Kee p237 ann. 6.2), as the passage in Revelation quite clearly indicates, "And a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer" (*King James Version*, Rev 6:2). It is possible that the change from conquest to pestilence came as a result of the demonization of the Four Horsemen as a way of explaining the meaning of Revelation, thus making them figures of ill omen and representing something akin to the plagues of Egypt. It is unknown if the change in *Good Omens* is deliberately done to reflect this shift in understanding in the figure of Conquest, or if it is a coincidence.

The final Horseman to be introduced in Revelation, appearing as the fourth seal is opened, is Death. Death is the only real traditionalist of the Four Riders of the Apocalypse in *Good Omens*, and is depicted as something of a superior to the others. At one point he introduces himself as "AZRAEL, CREATED TO BE CREATION'S SHADOW" (Pratchett and Gaiman 356), and he says he is indestructible. Revelation claims that Hell follows in his wake, and that is the only indication the Bible gives that he is in any way superior to the

other Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Indeed, he is the only Horseman not to have a whole verse dedicated to himself. The rest of Rev 6:8 refers to them all together, whereas the other Horsemen each has a whole verse, and Famine has two. None the less, Death has a symbolic role that extends beyond his role as part of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, and because of it, his image is an iconic one in mythology around the world.

4.3.2 *Them*

In addition to this direct correlation between the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and the Four Riders of the Apocalypse, the chain of references and reflections between characters stretches even further. Thus we can see that the Them, Adam's gang of friends, corresponds to the Four Riders of the Apocalypse as they are described in *Good Omens*, and is thereby also indirectly an echo of the Four Horsemen from Revelation. This is subtly hinted at throughout the novel, but the juxtaposition is made apparent in the climax at the airbase, where each of the Them takes on a member of the Four Riders. Adam Young is then opposed by Death as the leader of the gang, Adam of course being the Antichrist, and Death being the angel Azrael. The other Them have similar characteristics to their counterparts. Pepper, apart from being female and red haired, thus sharing physical traits with War, has a violent streak which connects her to what War represents in addition to what she outwardly displays. Brian has clear connotations with Pollution on account of his eternal grubbiness, although this differs from Pollution's appearance, which is characterized by his white clothes and hair. On the other hand, Wensleydale shares little in the way of characteristics or appearance with Famine, other than

his business-like manner and serious outlook on life. These parallels structure the story and anticipate the inevitable climax of the novel, where the members of the Them defeat their counterparts.

4.4 New Testament

4.4.1 Agnes Nutter

In addition to the direct references made to the book of Genesis and the book of Revelation, a more subtle connection is made between some of the characters of *Good Omens* and the characters of the Bible. One of those is the figure of Agnes Nutter, the author of *The Nice and Accurate Prophecies*. She shares some features with Jesus Christ; she tried to make a difference but was prosecuted as a witch and executed, although through her prophetic works she was able to continue her beneficial work from beyond the grave. Despite being described only as a prophetess with no magical powers, on two occasions her abilities are proven to be more extensive than those of the average prophet. Firstly, she is able to cause Sergeant Shadwell to dream of her execution, where she is able to address him directly and make him see the error of his ways. Secondly, she appears to Adam Young in a smoke formation in the epilogue of the novel. "He could hear a laughter. [...] For a fraction of an instant Adam saw, outlined in the smoke, a handsome, female face. A face that hadn't been seen on Earth for over three hundred years. Agnes Nutter winked at him" (Pratchett and Gaiman 397). In addition to those biographical similarities, Agnes and Jesus are both intrinsically linked with books, Jesus being the central figure of the Bible, and Agnes having written the *Nice and Accurate Prophecies*, on which *Good Omens* claims to base its narrative. The Prophecies and the Bible

come head to head in the finale of *Good Omens*. In the scene where Aziraphale and Crowley argue that the ineffable plan was not in accordance with the biblical account of the apocalypse, since the Bible's version of events didn't take place, it's hinted that although their account was "written" that, "It might be written differently somewhere else" (Pratchett and Gaiman 365). Of course, Agnes Nutter's account of these events turns out to be accurate, and both Aziraphale and Crowley would have been aware of that, having themselves read that account only a short while previously.

4.4.2 *Adam Young*

Another character with links to Jesus Christ is Adam Young the Antichrist, although he in fact is an amalgamation of several biblical characters. Some notable aspects of Adam's appearance and role in the unfolding events of *Good Omens* point towards him being a messianic figure. Firstly, the Antichrist – although, as mentioned previously, the word has a very different meaning in the Bible – has been depicted as the adversary of Jesus in popular biblical interpretations. Jesus features somewhat prominently in the apocalypse, and he and the Antichrist – there referred to respectively as the lamb and the beast as part of the heavily encrypted style, but generally understood to mean those two – are pitted against each other in the end of times, with Jesus winning decisively and ushering in a new era. Jesus does not make an appearance in *Good Omens*, suggesting that his role has already been filled. This is further supported by the fact that it is Adam that eventually stops the apocalypse from happening. Adam also resembles Jesus in deeds. As his powers gradually increase, he performs miracles in order to make the world a better place in his

opinion. For example, he removes nuclear reactors from a local power plant in order to remove the risk of it blowing up, he regrows the South American rainforest and he enacts revenge on whalers near Japan by releasing the Kraken (Pratchett and Gaiman 234-235). These miracles, although not directly in line with those performed by Jesus two thousand years previously, are easily comparable. Add to this the fact that both have loyal followers, with the Them making up Adam's disciples, and it is easy to see that the two are on some level connected.

An important moment in Adam Young's metamorphosis from a normal young boy to a supernatural Antichrist is described in *Good Omens* on page 222 onwards. There he exhibits signs of wanting to make the world better, as well as destructive desires, wanting to destroy the world and rid it of everything that does not meet his approval. "Something was saying, *You can do something, Adam Young. You can make it all better.* [...] Yes it's a rotten world, [...] and it's time to do something about it. That's what you're here for" (Pratchett and Gaiman 222). This passage is benevolent; it does not include any destruction, but later on his line of thinking transcends the benevolence and Adam comes to the conclusion that it would, "Serve everyone right if all the nuclear [*sic*] bombs went off and it all started again" (Pratchett and Gaiman 223). These two different natures battling for dominance in Adam could be called his benevolent nature, that is his likeness to Jesus, the will to make things right and better, and his malevolent nature, the demonic side of him which knows his place in the great plan, and embraces the destruction that comes with that role. Later on he defeats this malevolent aspect of himself, and

becomes hell-bent on stopping the apocalypse. “Something drained away [from Adam] [...] Whatever had been standing in the old quarry before, Adam Young was standing there now. [...] Possibly more of Adam Young than there had ever been before” (Pratchett and Gaiman 312). What is left of Adam Young is this Christ-like benevolent nature, working for the good of mankind.

4.5 *Angels and Demons*

Comparable to Adam Young's development into a human Antichrist we see the slow transformation of Crowley and Aziraphale from mindless servants of God and the Devil into individuals capable of deciding for themselves which side they belong on. It is clear that although the general depiction of angels and demons in *Good Omens* is somewhat similar to their counterparts in the Bible, Crowley and Aziraphale do not fit that description. Since the creation of the Bible spanned centuries, there is no one clear definition of an angel true throughout. The term ranges in meaning from human messengers or prophets to a kind of lesser deity similar to those found in Mesopotamian religion and Greek mythology (“Angels I-II”). In some instances the word is used figuratively of events caused by God or his angels, such as the pillar of cloud in Exodus and the plague in 2 Samuel (Eymann and Bechtle). In the later texts, such as the New Testament on which *Good Omens* is based, these creatures are better defined. There they act on behalf of God, protecting, punishing and relaying messages to humans. Modern Christian teachings suggest that angels are a distinct race of heavenly beings capable of almost godlike actions in aid of humans, to steer them on the path towards salvation (Eymann and Bechtle). Extrapolating from this we have demons or fallen angels, the antitheses of

angels who despite not making many appearances in the New Testament apart from possessing people, have become a firmly established doctrine within the religion. We can safely assume that the same rules apply to demons as angels, that they are the tools of the devil with no free will. In any case, when looking at other angels and demons in *Good Omens* we find that they fit this description relatively easily. Hastur and Ligur were sent from Hell to deliver the infant Antichrist to Crowley, and later to fetch Crowley himself and bring him to justice. Other entities such as the Metatron, Dagon and Beelzebub only appear as messengers. But Aziraphale and Crowley do not fit in with this group. Their role is to influence humanity on a constant basis, to tempt them or save them from temptation. Although this is not based on those of angels and demons in the Bible, they fit quite well with the roles modern Christians have assigned them, that of guardian angels and their demonic counterparts.

5 Philosophy

5.1 *Free Will*

The central story of *Good Omens* is the anticipation of the apocalypse, and given that topic, it is not unnatural that the central figures of the story are an angel, a demon and the Antichrist, alongside a plethora of other biblical characters. Generally, these characters behave according to the social norms of society, and this is especially true of Aziraphale and Crowley. The novel's authors, Pratchett and Gaiman, portray them with human traits in order for the reader to accept them as the protagonists of the story, to regard them as part of the 'known' rather than the 'other'. However, at the same time it is also made clear that this is not normal behaviour for angels and demons. One fundamental way in which this is achieved is through the idea of free will. Humanity differs from angels and demons in that they choose their own fate and are not governed by the will of God or Satan. Crowley and Aziraphale represent the exception to the rule since they have adopted free will from their 6000 years of association with humanity. Thus they have their own agenda, which is in line with that of humanity, not Heaven or Hell. Similarly, since Adam Young, the Antichrist, was brought up human, with no angelic or demonic interference, he too has the power to choose his own fate, and chooses to stay loyal to his adoptive kind. As the three of them turn their backs on Heaven and Hell and join forces with humanity against the apocalypse, the reader starts to see the main conflict of the story: the forces of Heaven and Hell together against humankind.

Free will is the main distinction between humans and the other characters, namely the angels, demons and the Four Riders of the Apocalypse. Humans act of their own volition, whereas angels and demons have no free will, they are merely the tools of their superiors, and exist only to spread their sides' influences amongst humanity. This roughly corresponds with Crowley and Aziraphale, but although these functions are their central focus in the beginning of the novel, they also have personal aspirations. Aziraphale has maintained a secret identity as the owner of a, "dingy old bookshop in Soho" (Pratchett and Gaiman 52), and his book collecting hobby has resulted in a large collection of rare misprinted Bibles and works of prophecy. Similarly, Crowley is dedicated to his Bentley, which "he [has] maintained [...] without a scratch for sixty years" (Pratchett and Gaiman 305), and his house plants, which he frightens into submission, and which consequently are, "the most luxurious, verdant, and beautiful in London. Also the most terrified" (Pratchett and Gaiman 248). He also vainly keeps up appearances by renewing his electronic equipment regularly, "because a sleek computer [is] the sort of thing that Crowley felt that the sort of human he tried to be would have" (Pratchett and Gaiman 247). Crowley and Aziraphale thereby clearly show some evidence of having a free will, to desire and want something, that an angel or a demon otherwise would not. Comparing them to other angels and demons shows the extent they have deviated. Looking at Crowley's superiors and fellow demons we can see that they become less and less empathetic the further away from humanity they are, culminating in those demons that only communicate with Crowley via the radio, presumably never having come in contact with humans. A similar thing is

apparent when looking at the only other angel present in the novel, the Metatron, who seems just as antisocial and unemotional as his demonic counterpart. An explanation for this is given in the novel, and it is that an aspect of humanity has rubbed off on Aziraphale and Crowley, thus making the angel less angelic and the demon less demonic. This then anticipates the way they later distance themselves from Heaven and Hell, and join forces with humanity. Comparably, Adam Young was raised as a human, and thus has had no influences from either Heaven or Hell. Aziraphale and Crowley speculate early on in the novel what the Antichrist would be like if he had no satanic or angelic influences, and come to the conclusion that the child is angelic, in the sense that so was his father when he was created. "Saying he'll grow up to be a demon just because his dad *became* one is like saying a mouse with its tail cut off will give birth to tailless mice" (Pratchett and Gaiman 58).

When discussing free will, one cannot help but mention its opposite, determinism, the theory that everything has been decided already. This comes into play in *Good Omens* as the ineffable plan, God's plan for everything that will happen. Heaven and Hell go by what little they know of this plan, most of which seems to be what is written in the Bible. But as it turns out that the apocalypse will not take place as their Great Plan predicted, they falter, unable to deviate from it because they have no free will, and could not possibly make decisions on their own. Thus emissaries are sent to talk to Adam Young and convince him of following the plan. Crowley and Aziraphale however solve their problems by suggesting that, "the Great Plan can only be a tiny part of the overall ineffability. [...] You can't be certain that what's happening right now isn't

exactly right, from an ineffable point of view” (Pratchett and Gaiman 365). In the finale of the novel, Aziraphale and Crowley's reasoning goes further, as they discuss the possibility of everything being predetermined. “Maybe it's all part of one great big ineffable plan. All of it. You, me, him, everything” (Pratchett and Gaiman 389).

In fact what is going on here is a clash of two different views on the nature of free will and determinism. Since it is later revealed that events had been predetermined, and indeed predicted, determinism can be considered proven within the case of *Good Omens*, but it still remains to define the presence of free will. This is done in two separate ways. Firstly, humanity has free will, and thus fall under Compatibilism, which claims that although people are able to do what they want, they are unable to control what they want. This fits neatly with a passage describing Aziraphale's difficulty in reconciling his conscience with his purpose: “He ought to tell Crowley. No he didn't. He *wanted* to tell Crowley. He *ought* to tell Heaven. He was an angel after all. You had to do the right thing” (Pratchett and Gaiman 240). Aziraphale therefore, along with Crowley and Adam Young, fall under the same category as humanity; They have free will. Secondly, the forces of Heaven and Hell appear not to have free will. In certain instances they might act as if of their own volition, but they have no control over their core functions. For instance, Red Zuigiber, The human persona of War, may appear to lead the life she desires, but she is unable to avoid her purpose, to spread war, to the point that war is an inseparable part of her. Later on when the Four Riders' human forms begin to melt away, it

becomes clear that their humanity was a mere façade to hide the horror that they truly represented. Therefore the Four Riders do not have free will.

5.2 Morality

Since the central conflict in theology is between Heaven and Hell, it is only natural to assume that this is also the case in *Good Omens*. But as the story unfolds this conflict falls into the background and becomes secondary to the efforts of mankind's supporters against the planned apocalypse of Heaven and Hell. In this way the gap between what seems like the extreme ends of the spectrum, good and evil, is bridged. However, the terms 'good' and 'evil' might not be apt to describe Heaven and Hell, because, as mentioned, the agents of Heaven and Hell have no free will, and therefore cannot be held accountable for the moral implications of their actions. It is even stated that, "Hell wasn't a major reservoir of evil, any more than Heaven, in Crowley's opinion, was a fountain of goodness; they were just sides in the great cosmic chess game. Where you found the real McCoy, the real grace and the real heart-stopping evil, was right inside the human mind" (Pratchett and Gaiman 86). This of course negates the whole purpose of Heaven and Hell. Arguably, free will is the basis of ethics, because without the capability to intend something to happen, a being cannot be held accountable for the consequences. Angels and demons are only able to influence people either way. But these influences come second to the benevolence and malevolence inherent in humanity itself. "There's nothing [Hell] can do to [humanity] that they don't do themselves [...] And just when you'd think they were more malignant than ever Hell could be, they could occasionally show more grace than Heaven ever dreamed of [...] It was this

free-will thing, of course. It was a bugger” (Pratchett and Gaiman 38).

Understanding that the agents of Heaven and Hell are amoral further emphasizes the distance between these two central factions in the novel.

Without ethics they become less empathetic, and more fantastical.

The two sides of the conflict in *Good Omens*, humanity and the supernatural forces of Heaven and Hell, are distinguished by free will, a trait firmly rooted in humanity, and it is only by constant contact with humanity that supernatural beings such as Crowley, Aziraphale and Adam have acquired it. They have stopped listening to what they should do, and started doing what they want. This is in line with a famous quote from Henry David Thoreau, who said “[...] I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward” (Thoreau 456), referring to justifiable civil disobedience in the face of a government of less than desirable morals. Although Aziraphale and Crowley are not men, they have more in common with humanity than with Heaven and Hell at the conclusion of *Good Omens*. As such they follow Thoreau's example, by disobeying their superiors throughout the novel and staying on Earth to fight alongside humanity for a cause they feel is better than that which they are supposed to stand for. Thus they transcend the boundary of unfamiliarity and become human enough for the reader to identify with them.

Aziraphale and Crowley's development from servants of Heaven and Hell to independent beings is also the final stage in their developing of moral integrity. They each break out of their roles on occasion and do something counter to their purpose. Early on in the novel a good example of this is made, where it is said that if one of them was travelling across the country, “For a

quick temptation, it made sense to nip across the city and carry out a standard brief moment of divine ecstasy” (Pratchett and Gaiman 44). Crowley and Aziraphale call this The Arrangement, and it ensures, “that while neither really won, also neither really lost” (Pratchett and Gaiman 43), creating a stalemate that enables them both to continue on with their lives as they want. But this deviation from their purpose first occurs long before the Arrangement was agreed on. In the prologue of the novel. Aziraphale and Crowley are discussing the recent banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Crowley played the part of the snake in the unfolding events, and afterwards is having doubts about the ethics of his actions, wondering “whether the apple thing wasn't the right thing to do [...]”(Pratchett and Gaiman 5). At the same time, Aziraphale is contemplating his own actions, giving his fiery sword to Adam and Eve for warmth. Aziraphale is not punished, although his deed mirrors those of Prometheus in Greek mythology, who gave the gift of fire to the first humans and was severely punished in return. Aziraphale and Crowley's dilemma stems from not knowing if the correct thing to do is to follow orders or to act ethically. Thus Aziraphale thinks he has done wrong by going against the will of God, despite acting ethically, and Crowley thinks he has done right because his actions were morally right towards Adam and Eve, although they were at the request of Satan, and therefore should be to their detriment. From this it is clear that from the very beginning linking goodness with Heaven and badness with Hell is problematic.

For a comparison, it is possible to look at another group of characters, the Four Riders of the Apocalypse. They are personifications of certain aspects

of humanity, representing three of the worst things humanity has inflicted upon itself, war, famine and pollution, and its ultimate consequence, death. The Riders represent a separate entity altogether from the likes of Aziraphale and Crowley. Early on in the novel they share similarities; the Four Riders have also been among humans since their creation, and in their introductory paragraphs they are described as human, with the accompanying aspirations connected to their purpose. Unlike Crowley and Aziraphale however, their human identities, Carmine Zuigiber, Dr Raven Sable and Mr White, are mere facets disguising what they truly are. Death himself states that the other three Riders “BELONG ... IN THE MINDS OF MAN,” and that he himself is “CREATION'S SHADOW” (Pratchett and Gaiman 356), thereby linking them firmly to humanity. War, Famine and Pollution are personifications of human characteristics, whereas angels and demons are physical creatures in the *Good Omens* universe. Their role is not to influence; they are the consequence of influence, and of humanity's own folly. Therefore, when the apocalypse draws nearer, these human facets melt away, revealing their true nature, which is barely recognisably human, and consists of what humanity associates with each particular trait. While their actions are to the detriment of humanity, they do not have free will and can not be identified as morally bad.

At the climax of the novel, as Adam Young breaks free from the influences of Hell, he decides that the best thing for humanity is the non-involvement of both Heaven and Hell. Even as the Metatron and Beelzebub suggest he just wants to rule the world by himself, he explains that the best

thing for humanity is to be left alone. Crowley and Aziraphale come to the same realization shortly later.

“People knew the difference between right and wrong in [the good old] days,” said Aziraphale dreamily.

“Well, yes. Think about it.”

“Ah. Yes. Too much messin' about.”

“Yes.” (Pratchett and Gaiman 370)

Adam chooses to let humanity be in control of itself rather than manipulate it either way. This *laissez faire* attitude is the culmination of a development throughout *Good Omens*. At the beginning he is a leader, with power over the Them. As his powers grow beyond his friends and as he becomes more aware of the world around him and the problems it faces, he inadvertently adjusts reality to suit himself, creating things that he feels should exist, such as Atlantis, and erasing things that he feels shouldn't, such as nuclear reactors. His powers and will to manipulate reality to meet his desires are at its most as he delivers his monologue to the Them about the fantastic life they would lead if he were to be in control. But then a clear shift happens in his persona, and he abandons these plans as the last remnants of his demonic self is subdued. From then on he strives to free humanity from divine and satanic influences, starting with the planned apocalypse. Realising whose side he is on enables him to fight for that side's rights, and demand its autonomy. His actions are benevolent towards humanity in a political sense, but in wanting to establish a self governing humanity Adam might better be described as amoral, having turned down the

opportunity to influence either for good or bad. He is also comparable to Nietzsche's ideas of a Superman, *Übermensch*, explained by Encyclopedia Britannica thus: "Nietzsche thought that the era of traditional religion was over. [...]Yet, what was to take religion's place? [...] He suggested a "reevaluation of all values" that would lead to a new ideal: the *Übermensch* [...] a person who could rise above the limitations of ordinary morality [...] and not necessarily the use of power to oppress others" ("Ethics"). This correlates with Adam's actions. Having achieved a greater insight into the nature of the world, he abandons the Christian religious doctrine in favour of a different moral stance, that of autonomy.

Good Omens takes an interesting stance on ethics, whereby the capacity for moral decisions itself becomes a central theme in the narrative. It's the dividing factor between the two opposing factions, where those with free will have the ethical capacity to make their own decisions, and those without free will act in accordance with their superior's plans. Tracing the origin of the moral ideas that linger around angels and demons in *Good Omens* leads the reader to God's great plan itself; if it is true that neither the forces of Heaven nor Hell have the capacity to deviate from the great plan, and thus are at the mercy of that plan, then their actions must be credited to God, since it is he who wrote the plan, and thus controls both Heaven and Hell. This is the result that Nietzsche came to as a child. He writes in his work *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), "I devoted [...] my first exercise in philosophical writing to this subject—and as for my 'solution' to the problem at that time, I gave God the honour, as is fitting, and made him the father of *evil*" (Nietzsche 5). In their philosophical musings,

Crowley and Aziraphale also come to this conclusion. “Maybe it's all part of a great big ineffable plan. All of it. You, me, him, everything. Some great big test to see if what you've built all works properly, eh? You start thinking: It *can't* be a great cosmic game of chess, it *has* to be just very complicated Solitaire”

(Pratchett and Gaiman 389). In light of this, it is even possible to discard the idea of good and evil altogether, and focus more of the combined result of the good and bad actions performed by Heaven and Hell. If morals don't play a role in their being, then there is no real difference between the two sides. Characters without free will can not be ethically responsible; the responsibility lies with God, the creator of the plan and the master of their actions.

6 Conclusion

Balancing comedy with some of the more obtuse theological questions of Christian religion, *Good Omens* tackles the moral implications of the apocalypse and the characters involved in it as described in the eschatological parts of the Bible. Writing in a comedic style gives the authors the freedom to go further and doubt the benevolence of Heaven as well as the intrinsic evilness of Hell. As the story unfolds the ethical and theological questions lead the reader to question biblical doctrines and stables that the narrative relies on in the beginning of the novel, and at the culmination of the apocalypse the story has evolved far enough from the biblical passages it's based on that events and characters can be de-constructed and re-examined according to literary theory and philosophy. In this way *Good Omens* deviates from other religious novels. It does not treat the Bible as irrefutable truth, but as a story and a prophecy that can be manipulated and expanded on. Shedding new light on old topics, *Good Omens* evokes questions about the biblical apocalypse, free will, fate and many other subjects discussed in this essay. This is a hallmark of good literature, be it a work of fantasy fiction or not. Fantasy has the capacity to introduce the reader to philosophical thought that realist fiction often times can not. That is why it has been a stable of storytelling since antiquity.

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