

Good omens, a reactionary gothic novel



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“ Good Omens” by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett challenges the stereotypical conventions of Gothic literature and provides a more modern approach to the genre. Conventionally, the Gothic is associated with terrifying creatures such as Frankenstein or Dracula, and remote, dark settings such as abandoned castles or haunted graveyards. These paradigms led to the stagnation of Gothic imagination in the twentieth century in which the clichéd plots of well-known works such as Frankenstein or Dracula were merely reproduced under differing names. This is evidenced in the seemingly innumerable film variations of Dracula and Frankenstein that have been banished into obscurity. “ Good Omens”, in large part, is a reaction to this partial decline of the genre. In an attempt to introduce some originality to the genre, Gaiman and Pratchett intentionally abandoned the typical conventions of the Gothic novel. As is significantly noted on the opening page of the novel, “ It wasn’t a dark and stormy night” (Gaiman and Pratchett 4). In departing from these conventions, Gaiman and Pratchett helped to develop a sub-genre of Gothic literature known as Gothic satire. Although many Gothic stereotypes are parodied in the novel, it is thematically Gothic because of its rejection of Catholic belief, which is one of the fundamental aspects of Gothic literature (Caballero 145). The novel criticizes the central tenants of Catholic belief, particularly the dichotomous struggle between good and evil, and reveals how these pervasive beliefs often lead to excessive idealism that maintains a significant influence on society. Essentially, the novel challenges the foundation of modern society, namely the numerous aspects of Catholic history and theology that have combined with differing philosophical and political ideologies to form our notion of modernity. The novel’s irreverent attitude toward religious belief is

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apparent before reading the first page. In the character descriptions, the demon Crowley is facetiously referred to not as a fallen angel, but rather an angel who sauntered vaguely downwards (Gaiman and Pratchett xiii). Obviously, this is a parody of the Catholic belief that Satan and his compatriots were once angels who fell from god's grace because of their desire to become god-like. Consequently, they grew to be the tempters of man and the source of evil in the world. Furthermore, at the time of the Apocalypse, the armies of good and evil will engage in an epic battle for the souls of mankind. To any rational non-Catholic, this seems to be a preposterous explanation for the existence of evil and the ultimate fate of mankind. Although this may be merely a metaphorical abstraction of evil, it is troubling how frequently public leaders support this notion. Historically, Reagan defined the " Evil Empire" and initiated a war of good against evil. George W. Bush used the same language in the War on Terror. For Gaiman and Pratchett, this physical embodiment of the figurative struggle between good and evil is troubling. They express their criticism via the interaction between Crowley and Aziraphale. These two supernatural beings are combatants in the battle between good and evil. However, their alleged opposition is parodied through rather amicable dialogues. In one scene they both share several drinks and Crowley poses the question, " Anyway, why're we talking about good and evil? They're just names for sides. We know that" (Gaiman and Pratchett 45). This comment trivializes the Catholic notion of a struggle between good and evil and reduces it to its actuality, a meaningless distinction between two ineffable terms. Conversely, the Gothic is concerned with a sadomasochistic impulse focused on dominance, destruction and vengeance versus a transcendent potential for cooperation creativity, and

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passion (Peppetone 3). Gaiman and Pratchett also endorse this view of human behavior. As they state, The devil hardly made anyone do anything . . . That was what some humans found hard to understand. 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 (71). The Gothic approach endorses an existentialist view of human behavior. Rather than supernatural entities vying for the souls of humans, the Gothic proposes that the battle occurs within the human and is comparable to the Freudian struggle between the Thanatos and Eros. It is a more humanistic view that emphasizes the precept of free choice. Related to the struggle between good and evil is the existence of god's divine plan. Similarly, Gaiman and Pratchett characterize it through the conversation between Aziraphale and Crowley. As Aziraphale describes it, " Ah, but its all part of the overall divine plan, your side can't do anything without it being part of the ineffable divine plan" (Gaiman and Pratchett 43). Gaiman and Pratchett are critical of this deterministic philosophy and consider it to be nothing more than a feeble attempt to rationalize the inexplicable. This viewpoint is illustrated in the discussion of Agnes Nutter's death. There was much subsequent debate as to whether this had been sent by God or Satan, but a note found later in Agnes Nutter's cottage indicated that any divine or devilish intervention had been materially helped by the contents of Agnes' petticoats, wherein she had some foresight concealed eighty pounds of gunpowder and forty pounds of roofing nails (Gaiman and Pratchett 181). Although comical, this passage bluntly demonstrates the lack of divine intervention in human affairs. It is foolish to attempt to impose

some divine plan as the reason for all irrational occurrences. The existence of free choice necessarily entails undesirable and unjustifiable acts.

However, the Gothic contends that we must take these events for what they are and not attempt to rationalize them. As Gregory Peperone states, The Gothic imagination gives expression and meaning to life's darkly mysterious, painful, frightening, and seemingly irrational experiences by embracing them as a potential source of insight and transcendence (23). The juxtaposition of the mysterious and frightening with insight and transcendence is suggestive of the Gothic notion of the sublime. This experience of the sublime provides a basis for Gothic spirituality that stands in stark contrast to the determinism of a divine plan. Although belief in a divine plan is seemingly innocuous, it can devolve into a pernicious idealism with the aid of extremist influence. This fact is exhibited in Gaiman and Pratchett's version of Catholic witch-hunts and the Spanish Inquisition. The anti-Catholic aspect of the Gothic is due, in large part, to a reaction against the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition (Caballero 153). Gaiman and Pratchett represent the irrationality of the inquisition process via the interrogation conducted by the Grand Inquisitor. As he says, "Art thou a witch?" "Yes," said Pepper's sister who was six and built like a small golden-haired football. "You mustn't say yes, you've got to say no," hissed the Head Torturer. "And then what?" demanded the suspect. "And then we torture you to make you say yes," said the Head Torturer (121). This line of reasoning was not far from the one used in the actual Inquisition. Thousands were tortured until they confessed to heresy and then killed. No one was able to see the flawed logic because of the fixation on god's divine plan. Gaiman and Pratchett use this comic rendition of the Inquisition to illustrate how the guise of religion, or belief in a divine

plan, can have catastrophic consequences. In addition, the absurdity of witch-hunts is made evident in the dialogue between Brian and Adam. When discussing the possibility of witches, Adam contends, like any rational human being, “ I don’t reckon its allowed, going round setting fire to people” (118). However, Brian responds, “ It’s all right if your religious, and it stops the witches from going to hell so I expect they’d be quite grateful if they understood it properly” (118). Essentially, this is the fundamental argument of all religious extremists. Any act, regardless of its intrinsic moral value, is permissible in the name of religion. This type of extremism completely distorts one’s perception of reality and inhibits logical reasoning that often leads to violence. The Gothic militates against this idea of extremist dogma, particularly in the Catholic tradition. For the Gothic, that which is Catholic intrudes upon the realities of the characters and not just in their imaginings, intervening in their lives in tangible, corrupt ways (Caballero 149). This religious intervention, or extremism is clearly evidenced in the character of Brian. He bases the righteousness of an action on whether or not he will be condemned to hell for it, yet he has no reservations about burning a human being. Although it is a rather hyperbolic example, certainly religion is a corrupting influence on him. The origin of the extremism that resulted in the atrocities of the witch-hunts and Inquisition is unclear. However, it seemed to be socially accepted on a large scale (by Catholics). Presumably, it arose from a literal interpretation of a specific Biblical passage or possibly a general perversion of Catholic doctrine. Regardless of its exact origin, religious extremism, and extremism of any sort, is perpetuated and justified by the means of excessive idealism. According to Peppetone, excessive idealism is the pursuit of a single-minded obsession that ultimately sacrifices

its own principles to some lesser good. He argues that it is the function of the Gothic imagination in society to root out any dystopian elements from our natural experience, namely excessive idealism. As he notes, “ Excessive idealism turned the Salem judiciary into a witch-hunt; it turned the fanatical defense of democracy during the Cold War into a political witch-hunt, and it turned Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde” (3). Gaiman and Pratchett are aware of the devastating effects of this excessive idealism on society. They relate this concern within the death and destruction resulting from the “ deep religio-political divide” that exists between the fictitious Pro-Turkish liberation Faction, pro-Greek territorial brigade, and Italo-Maltese Freedom Fighters. Despite the humorous names, this satire of religio-political factionism is certainly poignant in the parlance of our times. Although the majority of the novel is riddled with humorous satire and parody, Gaiman and Pratchett include serious social commentary regarding the state of modern society. During a powerful thunderstorm, Adam shares his thoughts regarding the Apocalypse with Dog. As he says, “ Serve everyone right if all the nuclear bombs went off and it all started again, only properly organized. Sometimes I think that’s what I’d like to happen. An’ then we could sort everythin’ out” (201). Plainly, Gaiman and Pratchett are not satisfied with the current direction of society. They argue metaphorically, through the Apocalypse, that we need to continually examine and reconsider our values in order to thrive as a society. Albeit we may come to distasteful conclusions about ourselves and society, there is still value in the process of self-scrutiny. This dialectic process is the hallmark of the modern Gothic and verifies the significance of Gothic expression in modern thought. As Pepetone asserts, The Gothic imagination provides a permanent counterculture, a discordant, minor key

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accompaniment to an idealized America graced by God and crowned with continental brotherhood. America's archetypal gothic plot details an inward journey toward our own telltale heart of darkness. It compels us to scrutinize those cultural ambiguities, traumas, and inconsistencies that we would prefer to forget, deny, or simply dismiss. Ultimately, it leads to the realization that our most cherished conceptions of ourselves are, at best, only partially justified. At worst, they are dangerously deceptive (170). Works Cited Caballero, Soledad. "Gothic Routes or the Thrills of Ethnography." *The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination*. Ed. Ruth Bienstock Anolik. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2004. 143-162 Gaiman, Neil, and Terry Pratchett. *Good Omens*. New York: Ace, 1990. Peppone, Gregory. *Gothic Perspectives on the American Experience*. New York: Peter Lang, 2003.