

Charles University
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BACHELOR THESIS

The Unique Portrayal of the Christian Apocalypse in *Good Omens*

Unikátní Zobrazení Křesťanské Apokalypsy v *Dobrych Znameních*

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Declaration: I hereby declare that I have written this paper on my own and only using the sources cited.

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Abstrakt:

Toto je bakalářská práce zaměřená na román Terryho Pratchetta a Neila Gaimana “*Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*”. Cílem práce je porovnat zobrazení románu Křesťanské apokalypsy z knihy *Zjevení* s původními biblickými texty a jinými médii apokalyptického žánru a analyzovat jeho jedinečné zobrazení apokalypsy, které nabízí prostřednictvím zobrazení biblických postav a témat ze *Zjevení* a zjistit, zdali jde o vlastní umělecké dílo, originální intertextuální zpracování křesťanské apokalypsy, které sice zachovává elementy ze *Zjevení Janova*, ale zároveň není jen jeho derivací. Text má dvě hlavní části, kterými se snaží dospět k závěru. Teoretická část je věnována knize *Zjevení*, která shrnuje proroctví z Bible, poté hovoří o čtyřech typech exegéz, futuristické, historické, idealistické a preteristické a vysvětluje apokalyptický žánr a roli *Zjevení* v něm a uvádí několik významných literárních nebo filmových příkladů ztvárnění křesťanské apokalypsy. V praktické části je pak analyzován sám román *Good Omens* a jeho obsah je porovnán s obsahem knihy *Zjevení*, aby se zjistilo, jak originální román vlastně je. Část je zaměřena na analýzu Antikrista, čtyř jezdců apokalypsy, Nebe, Pekla a dobra a zla, samotných proroctví a biblické numerologie. V poslední podkapitole se dále také dívá na nebiblické inspirace, se kterými *Good Omens* pracovalo.

Klíčová slova: Dobrá Znamení, Bible, Apokalypsa, Zjevení sv. Jana, Antikrist, čtyři jezdcí apokalypsy, proroctví

Abstract:

This is a bachelor thesis focusing on Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman's novel "*Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*". The work's aim is to compare the novel's portrayal of the Christian Apocalypse from *The Book of Revelation* with the original biblical texts and other media of the Apocalyptic genre and to analyse its unique portrayal of the Apocalypse that it offers through its depiction of biblical characters and themes from *Revelation* and see whether or not it is its own piece of art, an original intertextual riff of the Christian apocalypse that retains symptoms of The Book of Revelation but is more than just a derivation. The text has two main parts which try to reach a conclusion. The theoretical part is dedicated to the *Book of Revelation* which summarises the prophecy from the Bible then talks about the four types of exegeses, Futurist, Historicist, Idealist and Preterist, and explaining the apocalyptic genre and *Revelation's* role in it, introduces several noteworthy literary or film examples of renditions of the Christian Apocalypse. In the practical part, the *Good Omens* novel itself is analysed and its content compared to that of the *Book of Revelation* to see how original the novel is. The part focuses on the analysis of the Antichrist, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Heaven, Hell and good and evil, the prophecies themselves and biblical numerology. In the last subchapter it then also looks at the non-biblical inspirations that *Good Omens* worked with.

Key words: Good Omens, Apocalypse, Bible, Book of Revelation, Antichrist, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, prophecy

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1 INTRODUCTION

“*Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*” has been my special interest for over two years now, swiftly replacing my previous long-term obsession with Tolkien’s works in June 2019, after the six-episode TV adaptation, written and directed by one of the original creators, came out. I was not sure what to write my thesis on for a long time as I did not know whether I would be able to think of something for my other specialisation and I was not sure if writing a thesis on something one is obsessed with is a good idea, as much of the information one has is not in written form and tracing it back can be a very difficult task, but I ended up deciding to write my thesis on the subject of *Good Omens* for one good reason: As much as I was familiar with the depiction of the Apocalypse in the novel, my knowledge of the original biblical text its story stems from was rather patchy and only surface level as I grew up in an atheist family and the closest I got to properly learning about the *Revelation of John* was from conversations with my friend at grammar school, who happened to be a Jehovah’s witness.

I firmly believe that “*Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*” is, while being a piece of media that works off of the *Book of Revelation* and retains many aspects, by no means a derivative and is its own original work, but I wanted to know whether this is true and exactly how much of the Apocalypse depicted in *Good Omens* is a direct parody of the original prophetic text and how much is taken from popular culture that deals with the same theme. What I also wondered about was exactly how original its depiction is as I had not heard of a book or other piece of media that deals with the Christian Apocalypse in the same or similar comedic way, so I decided to compare it with the original and other literary renderings of the apocalyptic genre.

Thus, this thesis will be working with the hypothesis of *Good Omens* being an original riff off the Christian apocalypse that retains many symptoms of the Book of Revelation but is not its mere derivative and can be viewed as an original piece of art in its own right. This assumption will be put to a test by juxtaposing the two texts.

As the author, I am very much aware that this is an analysis made by someone who is quite new to the biblical text of *Revelation* and despite hours of research, might have missed and misinterpreted certain aspects.

2 GOOD OMENS, THE APOCALYPTIC GENRE AND REVELATION

“*Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*” otherwise known as just *Good Omens*, is a humorous contemporary fantasy (anti-)apocalyptic novel written by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman. It is a gentle religious satire, a polemic of sorts that jabs at the Christian Apocalypse and the trust that people are willing to place in prophecies and religious truths.

It follows the story of the angel Aziraphale and the demon Crowley who are stationed on earth, as well as several other characters, such as a professional descendant witch, a bad-at-computers descendant of a witch-hunter, a deranged elderly witch-hunter and his sex worker neighbour, who all, despite not having much in common with the prophecy, due to their love of life on earth and humanity, try to influence the young Antichrist to stop the impending Apocalypse.

The text, while by no means following it directly, is a work of apocalyptic fiction that works with a lot of symbolism and themes from the biblical *Book of Revelation*. So, to analyse the text properly and see how much it draws on the prophecy and how much of the text is original or inspired by other media, it is important to know the plot and at least somewhat understand the original biblical text.

2.1 Original Apocalyptic Text – *The Book of Revelation*

The original version of the Christian Apocalypse comes from the *Book of Revelation*, a mostly canonised apocalyptic prophetic text from the *New Testament* that was written by a St. John of Patmos, a figure in the biblical canon whose real identity is a point of academic debate, as it is uncertain whether he is the same John as John the Apostle who lived well into his 90s or a different John entirely (Helyer 24-25).

The Book of Revelation is, where canonised, the last book that appears in *The Bible* and is a prophetic text describing the end of the mortal world as explained to John by an angel in a vision. It is written in a mystical and ambiguous speech typical of prophecies, making it arguably the most difficult text of the Bible to read and understand, causing much debate among scholars. The text is canonised in most major Christian denominations, although some Eastern Churches of the Syrian tradition such as the Syriac Orthodox Church or Assyrian Church of

the East use the *Peshitto*, a standardised version of The Bible that excludes several *New Testament* texts, including the *Book of Revelation* (Bomiley, 976).

The prophecy is thought to have been written nearly a lifetime after the main texts of the *New Testament*, and it is by far not the only Christian prophetic end of times text to emerge after the death of Christ. It is however arguably the most complex, related to the times of Christian persecution in which it was written, and its author was possibly one of the Apostles (Helyer 24).

2.1.1 Revelation Summary

The text itself is split into 22 sections. The first chapter serves as a prologue to the Revelation of John, an introduction in which John introduces the reader to his vision of God's plans for the world as given to him by Jesus through an angel he sent, and provides context for the prophetic text to come. John wrote these visions down as a series of letters to the seven churches of Asia, which is why in the next two sections (Rev. 2-3) he directly addresses each of the seven churches of Asia, presumably talking to them about their current state. He praises Smyrna and Philadelphia, commends Sardis, Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira while also alerting them to their failures and finally calls for repentance from Laodicea for which he has no encouragement.

What follows is the main prophetic text (Rev. 4-22) that John views from Heaven, one that contains a series of judgements that are revealed but not necessarily in chronological order. The judgements in Revelation come in three sets of seven each: The seven seals, the seven trumpets and the seven vials.

After entering Heaven and describing his experience of four cherubim and twenty-four crowned elders seated around the throne of God, a scroll sealed with seven seals is revealed to John. It is made known that only the Lion of Judah can open the seal after which the Lamb with seven horns and eyes takes the scroll and reveals the judgements that it causes. As each seal is broken, a new judgement hits humanity on Earth. The first seal in chapter six unleashes the first horseman who is either conquest or pestilence in correlation with the Four Horsemen in Ezekiel, or, according to some futurists, the Antichrist (Helyer 94). The second seal unleashes the horseman of war, third of famine and fourth of death. The remaining three seals bring the crying out of the martyrs, celestial signs and finally the Rapture.

The breaking of the seven seals is followed by the seven trumpets sounded by angels, which are either unleashed by the final seal or simultaneous to the breakings. The first trumpet burns up 1/3 of the Earth's flora, the second causes 1/3 of the seas to turn to blood and destroys 1/3 of the ships and sea life. The third causes the star Wormwood to fall and turns 1/3 of the waters bitter while the fourth blocks out the light of 1/3 of celestial objects. The fifth, which is a part of the three woes, causes another star to fall and unleashes locusts and scorpions from the abyss who torture humanity unmarked by God for five months. The sixth trumpet calls the Four Horsemen to kill 1/3 of humanity. What follows is the image of a large angel with one foot on the sea and one foot on land, holding a little open book. What is said is a mystery of God as John is instructed not to write what the seven thunders of the angel's voice said and is instructed to eat the little book, which he does.

During this small break from judgements, John is given a rod to measure the temple of God and finds out about the Beast and two witnesses dressed in sackcloth who prophecy and are killed by the Beast, then resurrected by God and taken to heaven, sparking fear in non-believers. Only then is the seventh trumpet sounded and the heavens proclaim Jesus the ruler of God's kingdom and open the Ark of the covenant in His temple.

The next chapters write about the War in Heaven, mirroring that at the beginning of time, in which the angels of God, led by the Archangel Michael, fight against the Dragon and his fallen angels. Heaven wins and the fallen are hurled down to earth. What precedes the war is the unnamed pregnant woman who gives birth to a son who is to rule the world with an iron sceptre and is pursued by the Dragon that wishes to kill the child. The child is taken away by God, the War in Heaven commences and after the Dragon loses, he pursues the woman who grows wings and flies away. In anger, the Dragon decides to go to war with the rest of those who follow the commandments of God.

In chapter thirteen, the Beast and the false prophet rise from the sea and are given the authority to rule on Earth by the Dragon. People worship the Beast for its abilities and believe the false prophet, who looks like the Lamb but praises the Beast, and all those who do not worship God and bear His sign are made to wear the sign of the Beast instead. Angels appear, who declare the fall of Babylon, the gospel, and God's wrath on all those who accept the mark of the Beast.

After that, in chapter fifteen, the seven vials of plagues that angels pour onto Earth appear. Just like the trumpets, it is unspecified whether they take place chronologically after

the seals and trumpets or if they take place at least somewhat simultaneously. The first vial brings loathsome sores to those who worship the Beast and his false prophet and are marked with the number of the Beast. The second vial turns the entire sea to blood and kills everything in it. The content of the third vial turns all rivers, lakes and freshwater into blood. The fourth vial causes a massive heatwave that scorches the Earth with fire. The fifth vial covers the Earth in darkness. The pouring of the sixth vial causes the Euphrates to dry out and allows the kings of the east to cross over to the fields of Megiddo, along with three unclean spirits – the Dragon, the false prophet and the Beast, allowing for the Battle of Armageddon. After the seventh vial is poured out, all the cities of the world collapse, mountains and islands are levelled, and terrible weather of massive hailstones destroys the remaining non-believers.

With the last vial, John finishes the message of the scroll and goes back to expand on several key points. First, he follows with mostly symbolic chapters, Revelation: 17-18, in which John describes his vision of a woman and her explanation by the angel. He sees the “Whore of Babylon” or “The Great Prostitute”, drunk on the blood of Martyrs who rides upon the Beast. She is explained to be a symbolic figure in the place of evil and a symbol of a powerful city, the city being either Babylon as her name suggests, The Roman Empire (White) or Jerusalem (Beagley 95-108). She rules over 10 kings who pledged themselves to the Beast but then grow tired of the Whore’s influence and overthrow her, leading to the collapse of the city.

Chapter nineteen refers back to the sixth vial in which the nations started the battle of Armageddon. It introduces Jesus riding into battle on a white horse, covered in his own blood and armed only with his voice, followed by the armies of Heaven. This commences the first battle between God and his people which ends in Jesus winning, casting The Beast, The Dragon, The False Prophet and all who refuse to repent into the Lake of Fire.

Satan is trapped in the Lake for a thousand years during which all the Saints who died are resurrected and live during Jesus’ thousand-year reign. After the reign is over a second battle commences in which the Dragon along with Gog and Magog try to deceive the people of Jerusalem but are devoured by a flame from heaven and the Dragon thrown eternally into the Lake of Fire, never to leave it again.

After the Dragon’s final defeat, in the final chapter a new Earth, Heaven and Jerusalem replace the old in the marriage of Heaven and Earth. A bride of the Lamb, a symbol of humanity appears, and God comes to live on Earth. Due to His presence, no temples have to be built and

humanity fulfils its role to rule in God's image as they were meant to according to the first text of the *Old Testament*.

2.2 Widespread Exegeses

As the *Book of Revelation* is written in complicated and fairly ambiguous language that leaves much for personal interpretation, it is hard to agree on a most commonly agreed upon exegesis. Unlike most parts of the *New Testament* that were covered by John Calvin, probably the most widely accepted writer of commentaries on the Bible, who either died before he could write it or, according to some rumours, did not understand John's book enough to write a commentary on it, the *Book of Revelation* lacks Calvin's commentary and none of the existing commentaries are consensually accepted. *Revelation's* meanings are interpreted differently from denomination to denomination and sometimes church to church (Venema).

There are four major approaches to interpreting the *Book of Revelation* in Christian eschatology: The futurist approach, the historicist approach, the preterist approach and the idealist approach (Helyer 64).

2.2.1 Futurist Exegesis

Futurist interpretations of *Revelation* read the entire prophetic text as something that is to happen in the future. They interpret the text as mostly literal with very few symbols and as a true and straightforward vision of upcoming events. This was an especially common approach amongst the early premillennials, was the first way the text was read and understood among Christians and was endorsed by many important figures of the early church, such as Papius or Justin Martyr. The approach went out of fashion around the year 300 and then re-emerged after the Protestant Reformation, becoming a predominant approach in Protestant Evangelical churches in the late 19th, 20th and early 21st century (Helyer 65-69).

Even if the base of futurism is reading the text as a straightforward prophecy of the future, there are several perspectives on the timing of certain events in *Revelation*. The letters to the seven churches in *Revelation 2-3*. have two major interpretations; either they are literal letters referencing first century churches in Asia Minor and read as a part of *John's Revelation* preceding the prophetic text for the future or, according to futurist dispensationalists, the letters

are each meant for a different period of church history, Ephesus being the Apostolic church and Laodicea symbolising the churches of today (Helyer 70).

The futurist approach is criticised for its tendency to promote current events amongst radical Evangelical Christians as the start of the Apocalypse, trying to tie events from *Revelation* to current wars, politicians or movements, sparking a new sensationalist panic within their circles every time something that could be interpreted as a judgement or figure from Revelation happens in the world (Helyer 72).

2.2.2 Idealist Exegesis

Idealists on the other hand do not believe the text to be literal at all. Most if not everything in *Revelation* is read as symbolic, the whole book is an allegory, often read as a text meant to bring hope to Christians. This method of approach to the text was developed by Tyconius, backed by Augustine and was held as the absolute standard within the church for nearly 1000 years (Helyer 65).

The idealist approach, while embraced by Roman Catholics and churches with more theologically liberal views, is criticised by those who prefer other approaches for being too distrustful of the text (Helyer 66).

2.2.3 Historicist Exegesis

The next approach, the historicist, developed in the 12th century by Joachim of Fiore, read the prophecy as quite literal and currently passing. Certain events described in Revelation are from the past, some are currently happening, and some are prophecies for the future. Joachim argued that certain judgements prophesied in *Revelation* were simply covered in symbolic language and had already happened as major historical events, such as one of the seals representing the fall of Rome under the Barbarians. This approach became more prominent by the 15th century with the Protestant Reformation that favoured the historicist interpretations over idealist ones with figures such as Martin Luther even believing that the first Beast in *Revelation* 14 was referring to the Roman papacy. Historicism was predominant until the mid-19th century and is still somewhat popular in certain evangelical churches (Helyer 65, 73-75).

Just like futurism though, historicism is criticised for its tendency to search for events in the real world that they could link a new judgement to. Also, while the other approaches have at least some consensus, historicists rarely agree on their interpretations. (Helyer 74)

2.2.4 Preterist Exegesis

The last approach is the least common. Preterists see the text as finished, all that is said has already happened and most was symbolic. The approach is thought to have been developed by Louis de Alcazar in 1614 who claimed that the text referred to the struggles of the early first century church (Helyer 66).

While the preterist approach does claim the prophecy to be finished, the last two chapters, twenty-one and twenty-two of *Revelation* concerning the marriage of Heaven and Earth, are still accepted by many as a true prophecy for the future (Venema)

The way preterists interpret the prophecy happens to distance its message of *Revelation* from the current audience and it is hard to pinpoint certain judgements, for which the approach is often criticised by outsiders (Helyer 78)

2.3 The Apocalyptic (Sub)Genre and Notable Renditions of the Christian Apocalypse

The theme of the Apocalypse is quite common in fantasy, horror, dystopia and science fiction literature at present, earning its own defined subgenre. Not all fiction about the Apocalypse is related to the Apocalypse in the biblical sense; common themes are man-made Apocalypse and post-apocalyptic scenarios caused by war, pollution or a natural disaster and non-supernatural outside forces of aliens (Baker 264). An increase in Apocalyptic references in the media and apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives in science fiction and fantasy arose after the end of the second world war due to the world's political climate (Baker 265).

The subgenre of apocalyptic fiction, as defined by Tanja Galley, is a literary subgenre that portrays the events leading up to and including the end of the world or annihilation of a nation and sometimes portrays what comes after it (7). Others, such as Joseph Collins define apocalyptic literature as that which includes “1) the urgent expectation of the end of earthly conditions in the immediate future; 2) the end as a cosmic catastrophe; 3) periodization and

determinism; 4) the activity of angels and demons; 5) new salvation, paradisaical in character; 6) a manifestation of the kingdom of God; 7) a mediator with royal functions; and 8) the catchword ‘glory’” (Clemons 89), a definition which would make *Good Omens* a borderline piece, possibly not fitting into the apocalyptic genre at all as it only features several of the points and it would push all non-religious fiction about apocalyptic scenarios out of the genre entirely. This definition is definitely more apt for describing Christian apocalyptic fiction.

Despite most current pieces of popular apocalyptic fiction not being renderings of *Revelation* or related to Christian end-of-the-world scenarios, many use symbols, themes and vocabulary from *Revelation* as *Revelation* has become the base standard for apocalyptic fiction in the western world, religious or not (Baker 269).

The contemporary public understanding of the Christian Apocalypse comes from derivative fantasy and science fiction media rather than the Bible itself or one of its commentaries. As writers and directors take and took artistic liberties in shaping the Apocalypse in their own way, their depictions commonly straying from the original text, sometimes quite significantly as authors, in their attempt to narrativize *Revelation*, add and subtract details in order to invest the audience in their work, the societal view of the biblical Apocalypse now contains aspects that were not present in the past (Clemons 86).

The most commonly used themes and characters from the *Revelation* in Christian but also secular apocalyptic fiction are:

- The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse
- The character of the Antichrist, seen in place of the Beast
- Armageddon, though often used as a synonym for the Apocalypse rather than a place
- Angels with seven trumpets
- The Rapture
- The Dragon/Satan waging war on Heaven
- The return of Christ (Stableford 18)

The way fiction approaches the biblical Apocalypse tends to be futurist. The historicist, idealist and preterist approaches seem to be, except for a few rare cases, left out from the way the Apocalypse is narrativized in fiction as they are too allegorical or stuck to the past (Doyle)(Stander 5).

Let us continue with a brief inventory of notable examples of literary works that can be perceived as legitimate renditions of the Apocalypse from the *Book of Revelation*.

2.3.1 Noteworthy Books

Le Dernier Homme (1805) by Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville

- An epic prose retelling the events leading up to the Rapture in the *Book of Revelation* through the character of Omegarus, the last fertile man on the planet searching for the last fertile woman on earth, who he finds but then leaves after the pleading of Adam to end the human lineage and begin the Rapture. Compared to other renderings of the biblical Apocalypse, Grainville's text is quite true to the text of *Revelation*, despite its combination with the story of Adam and Eve. The novel approaches and embraces the end of the world in a Christian sense as an inevitable and necessary step for humanity's redemption. Grainville's prose is seen as the first piece of modern apocalyptic fiction, even predating Mary Shelly's secular apocalyptic novel *Last Man* (Wagar 178).

Left Behind (1995-2007) by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins

- *Left Behind* is a Christian apocalyptic series of 16 religious novels set in the 20th or 21st century, dealing with the End Times from a dispensationalist perspective. The books take place after the Rapture where people who have been left on Earth are dealing with the rule of the Antichrist, Nicolae Jetty Carpathia, the leader of the United Nations. To fight against him, several born-again Christian characters form the Tribulation Force and prepare for the Judgements. The novels draw strongly from *Revelation* and view it from a heavily protestant perspective, making the texts suitable mostly for people who are familiar with the prophecy. There were 4 attempts at film adaptations, but all ended up low rated and made very little or even flopped at the box office. (Dittmer, Spears 183).

The Late, Great Planet Earth (1970) by Hal Lindsey and Carole C. Carlson

- *The Late, Great Planet Earth* is a popular heavily derivative literalist fiction setting John's Apocalypse in the 1970s and 1980s, depicting events from *Revelation*, specifically the Tribulation, in a setting of European politics after creating a treaty with Israel. The formation of the United States of Europe represents a newly revived

Roman Empire with the Antichrist at its head. Different countries and powers represent different beings from *Revelation*, such as Russia being Gog (Doyle).

The Last Battle (1956) by C.S.Lewis

- The last book in the Chronicles of Narnia series, a series of children's novels that are heavily inspired by the Bible, *The Last Battle* is based on events from the *Revelation*, with the lion Aslan standing in as God. It is not a direct retelling, yet upon being viewed by someone familiar with the *Book of Revelation*, seeing the novel telling of the end of Narnia and last judgment of its inhabitant, the strong influence is clear. It even includes its own Antichrist (Krouse).

2.3.2 Noteworthy Films and TV Shows

The Omen (1976)

- *The Omen* is one of the pieces within the apocalyptic genre that *Good Omens* directly parodies with its depiction of the Antichrist, according to Neil Gaiman (229). *The Omen* is a trilogy of cult-followed supernatural horror films written and directed by Richard Donner, following the childhood of the Antichrist, portrayed as Satan's son, who sets events from *Revelation* into motion, given to grow up with the family of an American diplomat. The horror does not depict the whole of *Revelation* and strays from it a lot, but it is one of the most notable depictions of the Antichrist in popular culture, essentially shaping the current idea of what the Antichrist is. (Gerlach)

The Prophecy (1995-2005)

- An American horror film pentalogy depicting the final battle of heaven and hell as an angelic civil war, starring the Archangel Gabriel as one of the main characters and antagonists. The horror strays greatly from its source material, focusing mostly on angels and a heavily changed war in Heaven (Tripp, 57-70).

Season 4-5 of *Supernatural* (2008-2020)

- *Supernatural* is an American cult followed dark supernatural fantasy television show centred around two demon hunters and an angel. In its fourth season, the

show focuses on diverting an upcoming Apocalypse and the breaking of the seals (66 of 600 as opposed to the seven found in the Bible), and after failing to do so, season 5 introduces a Satan released onto earth, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the Antichrist, the Whore of Babylon and many events from *Revelation*. In a similar way to *Good Omens*, the Antichrist in *Supernatural* rejects his role in the Apocalypse but not on his own. The show strays from the biblical source material greatly at times (Brown, ch.11).

3 *GOOD OMENS* – ANALYSIS

As mentioned earlier, *Good Omens* is a humorous contemporary supernatural fantasy novel that deals with the theme of the Christian Apocalypse in the world of the 90s, written in the style of ‘English Humour’ typical of “*The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*”, Pratchett’s *Discworld* novels or Naylor and Grant’s “*Infinity Welcomes Careful Drivers*” that finds comedy in terrible situations by focusing on the insignificant, unrelated and through a stream of thought diversions. According to Thomas M. Doyle, the book is a prime example of an “anti-apocalyptic novel”, a subgenre of apocalyptic fiction that focuses on the deflection and ridicule of the Apocalypse and, in religious fiction, unlike the Bible praises earthly life.

According to the authors, the book’s main inspiration comes from *The Book of Revelation*, *The Omen* film and from the non-apocalyptic children’s *Just William* book series that Gaiman’s original 5000-word draft of *Good Omens*, “*William the Antichrist*”, built upon. (Gaiman, BBC NEWS) Based off of this alone, it can be assumed that the novel strays from the biblical prophecy and contains elements that distance it from a mere derivation of *Revelation*.

Another inspiration, according to Neil Gaiman in a 2014 BBC interview, was “*The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*” by Douglas Adams, a several part sci-fi novel about the Earth being destroyed by an alien race and a single human getting saved by his secretly alien friend who hitchhikes on spaceships. In 1987, shortly before beginning his joint work with Pratchett, Gaiman worked on a book about the comedic British sci-fi novel. According to him, the experience lead to him “learning that he could write in a style he thought of as Classic English Humour”. Noticing that Adams was doing comedic sci-fi and Pratchett comedic fantasy, he felt the need to make a funny horror as he said nobody was doing so. (Gaiman, BBC NEWS)

The story of *Good Omens* works with the scripture of *Revelation* in a rather futurist sense, treating it as a real prophecy of what is about to happen. It is however seen as very inaccurate within the novel and the aspects of John’s Apocalypse that are not present in the plot of the novel’s version of the Apocalypse, are not treated as symbolic but simply as wrong. As such, *Good Omens* does by no means depict every part of *John’s Apocalypse*, just certain famous elements, events, and notable characters, often heavily influenced by their depiction in popular media rather than in the Bible itself.

Good Omens is obviously not entirely unique in what it portrays, as fiction depicting the Christian Apocalypse or its motifs is not uncommon, though Christian apocalyptic fiction usually keeps a lot more from *Revelation* than this novel. Unlike most writings of the Christian and secular apocalyptic genre though, Pratchett and Gaiman's novel avoids the common themes of horror, damnation, violence, suffering and heavy religious themes as *Good Omens* instead focuses on humour and in a form of Burke's comic frame of rejection, uses the Apocalypse to show the absurdity of prophetic texts, and comments on humanity's role and place in history (Clemons 86-87).

The novel's depiction of the Apocalypse stands greatly on the idea of choosing humanity over religion and prophecy. It shows the rebellion of the Antichrist, refusing to begin the Apocalypse, instead getting rid of the Four Horsemen and stopping the progress for the foreseeable future, choosing his human life over his prophesised destiny.

According to Clemons, "*Good Omens* is seen as a mixture of revision and (meta)commentary" (87). As a revision it changes the texts it works with; *Revelation*, *The Omen* and the common aspects of the apocalyptic genre significantly, creating a comedic atmosphere while inviting the audience to take a tonal stance towards how future actions are depicted. As a (meta)commentary, *Good Omens* deconstructs the authenticity of end-of-days texts by its references to an 'ineffable' written plan for the universe, hoping to change the reader's beliefs about their fixed and unchangeable role in history and a deterministic view of the world. *Good Omens* rejects the blind acceptance of what cannot be known. (Clemons 88).

3.1 The Authors and Christianity

At the time *Good Omens* was written, both Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett already identified as atheists, which somewhat influenced the novel's stance towards Christianity and its messages. Terry Pratchett was brought up in a Church of England family but left organised religion early on in his life and went on to call himself an atheist and humanist. Pratchett never disliked religion, seeing some of its messages as important, and brought up his mixed thoughts about religion in many of his Discworld novels, neither dismissing nor praising it (Pratchett).

Unlike Pratchett who grew up in a Christian environment, Neil Gaiman's ties to Christianity are detached and mostly societal. His parents were originally Jewish and in his early youth converted to Scientology where his father rose to a high position. Neil himself left

Scientology early on and now shows agnostic atheist tendencies. Despite this, Neil's parts and characters in the novel, such as the Four Horsemen, are much more related to the original biblical text of Revelation than Pratchett's characters, such as the witch Agnes Nutter (Goodyear).

3.2 Novel Summary

Good Omens starts with a prologue of the angel Aziraphale and the demon Crowley meeting in the garden of Eden, watching Adam and Eve leave the Garden with Aziraphale's flaming sword after Crowley tempted the first humans to eat the forbidden fruit. They contemplate whether they did not accidentally each do the wrong thing, Crowley good by giving humans free will and Aziraphale bad by giving them a flaming sword.

The story then jumps 6000 years into the future to the birth and delivery of the Antichrist, starting Earth's countdown to the End times. Crowley receives a basket with the newly born Antichrist from two Dukes of Hell; Hastur and Ligur¹, and is told to deliver the child to a nearby religious hospital in Tadfield Manor, the base of the satanic Chattering Order of St. Beryl. Unfortunately, due to human miscommunication and misidentification, the nuns mix-up the new-borns, accidentally giving the Antichrist to the ordinary British family of the Youngs, who name him Adam, rather than to the wife of the American diplomat giving birth in a different room who was actually supposed to receive the Antichrist and instead receives the son of the Youngs.

Realising how much they do not want either Heaven or Hell to win or the world to end, Aziraphale and Crowley decide to influence the upbringing of the boy, hoping to neutralise his evil side. They do so as nannies, gardeners and tutors, entirely unaware of the accidental switch which goes undetected for years, until Warlock's eleventh birthday party where they realise that they have been raising the wrong child when a Hellhound does not show up, and the search for the true Antichrist begins.

The novel then intertwines and follows the storylines of several characters: Aziraphale, Crowley, Anathema Device, Newt Pulsifer, Adam and his gang of the Them, Sergeant Shadwell, Madame Tracy and each of the Four Horsemen.

¹ Both named after cryptids from H.P. Lovecraft's fiction

Aziraphale and Crowley frantically search for the Antichrist and on their way back from one of their searches, Crowley crashes his Bentley into Anathema, the “professional descendant” of Agnes Nutter, the only person to ever write a 100% accurate book of prophecies. Anathema, who is renting a house in Tadfield, is, also searching for the Antichrist as her ancestor’s prophecies have instructed her to do so. She accidentally leaves the prophecy book in the car and so it gets into the hands of Aziraphale.

Adam Young grows up in Lower Tadfield with his small gang of friends called The Them. Adam, unaffected by either Crowley and Aziraphale or the powerful family he was supposed to grow up with, uses his demonic powers strangely when they start coming in. After meeting Anathema, Adam starts bringing conspiracy theories from Anathema’s magazines to life, such as making Atlantis appear or replacing a nuclear reactor with a lemon drop to save the climate.

While Adam is bringing bizarre things into the world, the Four Horsemen slowly assemble. Except for Death, who exists everywhere and always, they live immortal but human-like lives and are assembled by receiving their tokens from a dedicated mailman— weights, a crown and a flaming sword, and meet up in a pub, meaning to head out to where the Apocalypse begins.

Meanwhile, Aziraphale spends an entire chapter deciphering Agnes’ text, discovering the Antichrist through using the number of the Beast as a telephone number. Trying to track Adam down in Tadfield, he sends a witch-hunter, Sergeant Shadwell, who instead sends his apprentice, Newt Pulsifer to investigate for him. After Newt meets the witch Anathema, Shadwell decides to help Pulsifer by going to Tadfield himself, but in need of travel money, pays a visit to Aziraphale first.

He stumbles upon Aziraphale in the middle of communicating with Heaven via a portal about the Antichrist. Mistaking him for a demon, Shadwell tries to exorcise the angel, accidentally driving him into the still open portal and disincorporating him.

While this is happening, Crowley, hunted by Hastur and Ligur who found out about the Antichrist’s misplacement, sets a holy water trap, kills Ligur, traps Hastur in an answerphone and rides towards Tadfield, turning his car into a flaming pile of rubber held together only by sheer will after driving through the newly on-fire M25.

Meanwhile, Aziraphale, now without a body, jumps around the Earth randomly possessing people in the hopes of getting close to London. In London he ends up possessing Madam Tracy, Shadwell's neighbour through whom he convinces the witch-hunter to try to kill the Antichrist.

All of them, including Adam, who realised he does not want to rule the world, end up meeting at an American military air base outside Tadfield where the Antichrist ends up refusing to start the Apocalypse and postpones the whole event indefinitely after mentally defeating the Horsemen and confusing Heaven and Hell without the help or influence of anyone, just his own free will. He then fixes all that the apocalypse changed or destroyed and goes on to live his idyllic human childhood.

As can be seen then, the plot of *Good Omens* differs quite greatly from the Apocalypse described by John of Patmos. It keeps certain elements, but a majority of characters and scenes are original or references to other media.

3.3 Narrative, Thematic and Symbolic Overlaps between *Good Omens* and *Revelation*

This subchapter scrutinizes some of the most pronounced themes, symbols, narrative elements, events, characters and scenes that feature in *Good Omens* and can be at least to some degree traced to *Revelation*.

3.3.1 The Antichrist

Upon hearing "*Book of Revelation*" or "Christian Apocalypse", it might be easy to associate the terms with the character of the Antichrist, due to the figure's prevalence in popular culture, perhaps most notably in horror fiction. Surprisingly, as much as he is seen as a central part of the final battle, an Antichrist does not directly appear in the *Book of Revelation* and is only mentioned five times overall in the entire *New Testament*. And even there, the term does not refer to a single figure, but rather to anyone who opposes the word of Christ. The idea of the Antichrist as the one singular figure who opposes Christ during the end of days is thought to have emerged in the middle ages through a combination and blurring the lines between several texts; the several mentions of antichrists in the books of John the apostle and John who share the name of John of Patmos, the ambiguous and uncertain character of the Beast in the

Book of Revelation and the “lawless one”, the adversary of Christ who appears in Thessalonians 2.1-12 (White):

“...3 Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. 4 He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God.

... 8 And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming. 9 The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, ...” (Thessalonians 2, emphasis added)

Current views on the single figure of the Antichrist also include a key aspect that was not as fixed in Christian society in the past as it is today: whether the Antichrist is the son of Satan or not. In the Bible, in *Thessalonians 2:3*, the Man of Sin who is presumed to be the Antichrist is called “the son of perdition”. Whether this claims him to be of Satan or simply evil like Satan, as the same phrase is used to describe Judas in *John 17:12*, or Satan himself in human form are debated and accepted differently from church to church. The idea that the Antichrist is the son of Satan and a whore became a popular myth amongst Christians after Adso of Montier-en-Der wrote about his idea of the Antichrist, being a near parodical version of Jesus Christ, in the tenth century. But with the release of *The Omen* trilogy, the idea that the Antichrist as the son of Satan, especially one that is raised by someone else, really caught on in popular culture (Lerner).

Now to examine the possible renditions of the Antichrist in the novel. Though Adam is referred to as the Beast of the deep, a character futurists believe to be the Antichrist, several times throughout the novel, namely by demons and nuns from the Chattering Order of St. Beryl, Adam bears little to no resemblance to the biblical creature. Apart from his rejection of the Beast’s role of ruling the Earth, the Beast is described as extremely inhuman in the prophecy, something the very human looking and acting Adam does not resemble. Adam’s human appearance is brought to attention though once at the beginning of the novel where sister Mary is surprised by Adam’s lack of beastly features, subtly pointing to the Beast’s description in the Bible. He also lacks an important identifier of the Beast - the mark from a sword, 666, often appearing on Antichrists in fiction, making Adam even more of an unrelated character.



The Antichrist, despite being a part of the Christian Apocalypse Pratchett and Gaiman received mostly from popular culture rather than the Bible itself, plays one of the most significant roles in the novel. The eleven-year-old Adam Young is one of the main characters, appearing in every chapter. He and especially his beginnings are written as a direct parody of the first *Omen* film rather than *Revelation*, in a sort of “second-tier adaptation” (Clemons 88) of the biblical prophecy making him a child who was supposed to replace an American Diplomat’s child born in a Satanic nunnery in Oxfordshire, but ended up being switched with the wrong baby, causing him to grow up where he was not supposed to.

Gaiman and Pratchett write this accidental misplacement that lands Adam with no money or actual connection to power, with the exception of being a leader of a gang of four eleven-year olds, and being brought up in a loving and normal household to have completely changed the Antichrist’s expected behaviour. While mischievous, Adam shows no signs of evil, instead being exceedingly concerned for the planet he is growing up on and full of love for his home.

The change in circumstances ultimately leads to the Antichrist completely rejecting the roles that were assigned to him through prophecy. He does not seek war, he does not desire power as he does not like the idea of that much responsibility, he removes his hellhound’s role in the war by not giving him a proper name, when he does get overwhelmed by humanity’s destructive nature he soon realises that his plan to wipe out everyone and reward each of his friends with a continent might not be the best or nicest thing to do and upon arriving at the Tadfield airbase where the Apocalypse is to begin, he has his friends mentally defeat the Horsemen and refuses to get talked into beginning the war by Heaven and Hell’s representatives.

...“Ah,” see Beelzebub, and he actually began to smile. “You wizzsh to rule the world. That’z more like thy Fath –”

“I thought about all that an’ I don’t want to,” said Adam, half turning and nodding encouragingly at the Them. “I mean, there’s some stuff could do with alt’rin, but then I expect people’d keep comin’ up to me and gettin’ me to sort out everythin’ the whole time and get rid of all the rubbish and make more trees for ‘em, and where’s the good in all that? It’s like havin’ to tide up people’s bedrooms for them.”(205)



The Omen, whose Antichrist Adam Young parodies, is referenced several times in the novel in relation to the Antichrist.

The most obvious is the Antichrist's birth scene where he is meant to have been given to the wife of an American diplomat, referencing Damien Thorn's upbringing as the son of an American diplomat in the UK. In a comedy of several levels of miscommunication Adam is instead given to the Youngs, starting from 1) Crowley, who misidentifies Mr. Young as someone who knows about the diplomat's wife and asks him for a room number, which he then instructs sister Mary, who he meets in the hall, to take the child to, 2) Mary who mistakes the Youngs for the diplomats which goes uncorrected during her many strange questions as Mr. Young just thinks she is surprisingly interested in his accountancy job and previous home, and 3) the miscommunication that happens through a wink signalling who the Antichrist is to another nun. It is one of the first glimpses after Aziraphale and Crowley's conversation on the wall of Eden into the novel's use of mistakes as plot devices to show the absurdity of the written ineffable.

Another reference is a few chapters later when Aziraphale and Crowley decide to mentor who they presume to be the Antichrist and have a demonic nanny, Nanny Ashtoreth who may or may not be Crowley himself, and her hellhound Rover take care of Warlock, referencing Damien's demon nanny Mrs. Baylock.

Also, Dog, Adam's poorly named mutt hellhound, is a reference to the rottweiler hellhound who appears for Damien and signals Damien's role as the Antichrist in *The Omen*. In *Good Omens* the hellhound is meant to appear on the Antichrist's 11th birthday and its naming is to bring the Antichrist into his full power as well as determine the role the hellhound will play in the Apocalypse. Adam, unaffected by the powerful upbringing he was meant to experience, proceeds to act out his role differently than expected. The hellhound expects to remain large and menacing and receive a name that would instil fear or aggression. Instead, he is met with overhearing that Adam does not desire a large dog, hoping for a small one, into which he changes, and who he upon meeting names simply Dog, removing any war-like role the hellhound expected and instead unknowingly giving him the role of a common animal that does not belong into the strict binary of good and evil.

Another, smaller reference to *The Omen* appears in a short throwaway line while Aziraphale, inhabiting Madam Tracy's body, asks Shadwell whether he has any weapons better than his hand in order to eliminate Adam, asking "Have you anything more, uh, substantial?"

How about the Golden Dagger of Megiddo? Or the Shiv of Kali?"(166). The Golden Dagger of Megiddo is a weapon from *The Omen*, one of seven mystical daggers given to the Antichrist's father in the hope that he will kill the demonic child, which he then refuses to do. The mention is possibly a foreshadowing of the later scene in the novel where Shadwell argues against shooting Adam at the airbase as he is still a child.

All in all, it is safe to conclude that the renditions of the Antichrist figure in *The Good Omens* bounce off the original Antichrist lore spawned by the Book of Revelation, yet the bounce-off is a playful intertextual engagement, not a slavish homage.

3.3.2 The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Unlike Adam, who has very little in common with the Beast of the deep from the biblical prophecy and instead is a parody of a horror character and Antichrists in popular fiction, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse have much more in common with *Revelation*.

The Four Horsemen are the first four judgements released by the breaking of the seals on the scroll showed to John. They are beings of chaos, upon horses of specific colours, riding out to terrorise 1/3 of humanity.

Scholars who approach *Revelation* in a historicist, preterist or idealist manner, agree that the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are rather metaphorical depictions of deadly blows to humanity at bad times than actual beings in the *Book of Revelation* (Helyer 308) In a futurist manner, however, the Four Horsemen are thought to be literal and so, just like in a considerable bulk of Christian apocalyptic fiction that follows the futurist approach, the Four Horsemen take on physical human-like shapes in *Good Omens*, being present throughout humanity's history, walking through undetected.

All the typical symbols of the Horsemen are skewed to fit contemporary society - horses being replaced by motorcycles of the same colours leading to the Horsemen also being referred to as the Four Bikers of the Apocalypse, their tokens that unleash them are delivered by a FedEx like mail service, they use human names and spread their acts in modernised ways.

Three of the four characters are introduced in the novel as normal human characters, but their job descriptions and actions slowly make it increasingly clear that they are not in fact human, but three of the Four Horsemen as they gradually all receive their biblical tokens from the mailman.

War, otherwise also known as Red, is introduced on page thirty-three under the name of Scarlett, an arms seller whose mere presence causes a peaceful African city to turn into a war zone. She later changes her name to Carmine Zuigiber after deciding she is bored with her former job and becomes a journalist who is suspiciously capable at showing up where war has just broken out.

She is the first of the Four Horsemen to receive her token as it is in the Bible, Aziraphale's flaming sword, from the mailman while visiting a small Mediterranean island that suddenly became a place of conflict between three powers.

Famine is introduced on the same page as War, under the name of Dr Raven Sable. While on Earth he does not show the same spontaneous creation of famines wherever he goes as War does with conflicts, and instead spreads his chaos in a more hands-on way as he plays the role of an extremely successful dietician and businessman who writes literature for people who wish to lose weight, becoming a lead in the diet industry, causing many to become anorexic in the hopes of becoming beautiful. He patronises posh restaurants that serve comically small expensive food portions, owns a series of fast-food chains that create slimming fast-food - Chow, a food alternative that contains absolutely no nutritional value and his company enforces famines in Africa.

Famine's supernatural powers only start to visibly manifest towards the end of the failed Apocalypse after receiving his scales. Wherever he goes, people start feeling hungry.

Pollution, or White, is introduced as the only Horseman to not have a stable job. He is introduced as Chalky, a character who jumps from disaster to disaster, causing all sorts of pollution problems, from the nuclear explosion of Chernobyl, to oil spills from large vessels at sea. He also worked on helping develop products that cause pollution, such as the petrol engine or the ring-pull can.

Pollution receives his token, Pestilence's crown that turns tarnished in his hands, by a heavily polluted river in England that the mailman laments on as it was a favourite dating spot for him and his wife in the early days of their relationship.

The use of Pollution as opposed to Pestilence or Conquest, might come as a surprise, however, as the novel takes place in the current world in the 1990s, the depiction of the first rider as conquest is no longer common in popular culture and, as for pestilence, illnesses have become much more curable for humanity and do not pose the same threat they did in the past,

when plagues kept the human population and the average lifespan low. His replacement of the previous horseman is explained by a line stating that Pestilence retired in 1936 after the invention of penicillin (151), allowing Pollution to take his place.

Death, also known as the angel Azrael, is introduced in a different manner than the three Horsemen he leads. Death, unlike Pollution, War and Famine is ever-present and undefeatable and so does not take on a human form, instead he simply conceals his Grim Reaper appearance with a biker's helmet when it is time to ride out. Another difference is that he also shows no need to spread chaos like the other three do, being content simply reaping souls. To reach death, the mailman has to get hit by a passing lorry, and he does not deliver him a token, only the biblical phrase "Come and see", which is uttered in *Revelation* by each of the four beasts upon their seal breaking.

In *Revelation*, the Four Horsemen are released by the breaking of the seals upon the scroll. Though no scroll is present in *Good Omens*, the four Bikers are, in a way, also released by the breaking of seals – the seals of their parcels containing their tokens.

Throughout their passages in the novel, the Horsemen consistently mention *the Book of Revelation*, signing books with quotes from it or describing themselves through references. They're also written as the only characters who seem to be directly based off their biblical counterparts, sharing more characteristics than any other *Revelation* character or theme in *Good Omens*. Compared to other characters, the four seem much more convinced about *Revelation's* truthfulness and seem rather disgruntled when they realise that none of the judgements or locations foretold in the prophecy are accurate, especially when their main job turns out to be starting a nuclear war by messing with the computers at Tadfield's airbase.

"This isn't how I imagined it, chaps," said War. "I haven't been waiting for thousands of years just to fiddle around with bits of wire. It's not what you'd call dramatic. Albrecht Durer didn't waste his time doing woodcuts of the Four Button-Pressers of the Apocalypse, I do know that."

"I thought there'd be trumpets," said Pollution. (188-189)

As the Apocalypse draws near and the four work on their 'button-pressing' spread of chaos on the airbase's computers, the Horsemen slowly start losing their concrete human forms, becoming drowned out by static and oozy, slowly changing from beings to concepts. As such,

with their loss of form, Adam and the Them are able to mentally defeat the four, trapping all but Death in the human subconsciousness.



In a part of the novel, four extra human Horsemen in no way related to the Bible appear, four Hell's Angels bikers who decide to ride out with the real Hell's Angels after meeting them at the pub and realising who they are. The four bikers are Grievous Bodily Harm (Big Ted), Cruelty To Animals (Greaser), Embarrassing Personal Problems then Things Not Working Properly Even After You've Given Them A Good Thumping then Things Not Working Properly Even After You've Given Them A Good Thumping But Secretly No Alcohol Lager and finally People Covered In Fish (Skuzz) and Really Cool People (PigBog). Their inclusion in the novel is mostly comedic. The short gag shows the four trying to decide on what they represent, most deciding quickly, but Skuzz keeps changing his identity, possibly in relation to the way the white horseman in *Revelation* is, unlike the rest, interpreted in several different ways. The whole thing ends in all four crashing as their bikes cannot fly over a barrier and three of the bikers lose their life in the accident, a possible foreshadowing of three of the Four Horsemen getting defeated at the airbase.



It is also subtly hinted at that the Horsemen of the Apocalypse all seem to be mirrored in the Them, Adam's gang of friends. The four friends are analogous to the four, some more clearly than others according the behavioural or outside characteristics they share with each rider, yet they seem to mirror them in a healthy and earthly way rather than the destructive nature of the Four Horsemen.

Probably the most obvious case is Pepper who is portrayed as a feisty and aggressive redhead. She is known to seek out fights at times and stands directly against War, also a redhead, with her paper sword. She depicts a healthy anger, the kind that is there to protect loved ones or in self-defence, War is the extreme who goes from protection to destruction.

Brian, the grimeiest and messiest child of the gang, described as always looking dirty as if there was something "ground in" and has pockets full of empty crisp packets that create a trail wherever he goes, is a mirror of Pollution. He stands against him with his paper crown and represents the healthy childhood dirtiness.

Wensleydale, a character with the name of a food stands against Famine. Wensleydale does not appear to have much to do with physical hunger, but he is a child who hungers for knowledge - his favourite 'comic' is a 94-week scientific magazine called *Wonders of Nature and Science*. His hunger is healthy, and not extreme like Famine's.

Adam and Death are probably the least similar. Their only real connection is them being the most inhuman beings of both groups.

In summary, Pratchett's and Gaiman's literary rendition of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse seems to be a very obvious nod of acknowledgment to the Book of Revelation. Nevertheless, the novel seems to be deliberately turning this part of the Revelation into a relativist and culturally anachronistic pastiche. In doing so, Pratchett and Gaiman assert their literary independence and sovereignty.

3.3.3 Good, Evil, Heaven & Hell and the Battle.

In *the Book of Revelation* and the entire Bible there is a clear divide between good and evil, a sort of moral absolutism where neither side has anything in common with the other. They are complete opposites and there is no middle ground. There is the side of God and the side of Satan.

While *Good Omens* does keep the distinction between Heaven and Hell, the novel rejects the pure polarity of biblical good and evil, and *Good Omens* brings forth a focus on grey morality in both the supernatural and human characters belonging to either side.

One of the most important events in *Revelation* is the battle between the Archangel Michael and his armies, and Satan, and the Battle of Armageddon. In *Good Omens*, the final battle of Heaven and Hell and Armageddon seem to be merged into one. The battle is a vital plot point towards which the entire story heads and is halted by Hell's failed attempt at creating an Antichrist.

Beings of Heaven and Hell are shown to be similar throughout the novel. From their flaming, true form appearances (About Beelzebub appearing next to the gold flame figure of Metatron) "It was not greatly different to the other figure, except that its flames were blood-red." (204) or their wings "Contrary to popular belief, the wings of demons are the same as the wings of angels, although they're often better groomed."(210) , Heaven and Hell are shown to be more like two sides closer to gangs, as Adam says, comparing their need for a battle to his

rivalry with the Johnsonites gang, making clear that one side without the other will prove to simply not work as the battle is not good versus evil, it is Heaven versus Hell, two impure sides that need each other to work and will, in the event of the removal of one, lead to another split and another rivalry.

"I just don't see why everyone and everything has to be burned up and everything," Adam said. "Millions of fish an' whales an' trees an', an' sheep and stuff. An' not even for anything important. Jus' to see who's got the best gang. It's like us an' the Johnsonites. But even if you win, you can't really beat the other side, because you don't really want to. I mean, not for good. You'll just start all over again. You'll just keep on sending people like these two," he pointed to Crowley and Aziraphale, "to mess people around. It's hard enough bein' people as it is, without other people coming and messin' you around." (204)

Their lack of difference is also shown in the characters of Aziraphale and Crowley, two characters, an angel and a demon, one would expect to be antitheses of each other, two beacons of incorruptible good or evil.

Crowley is more mischievous than actually evil, creating a type of low level “evil” in the world that often ends up inconveniencing him too, such as cutting telephone lines when he needs to phone Aziraphale or creating the nuisance that is the M25, and absolutely hating the level of evil that humans themselves are able to come up with, the Spanish inquisition being one that had him drink himself numb. Instead, Crowley is shown as quite caring, being concerned for humanity and innocent animals in the upcoming war. His gift of free will to humanity in the Garden of Eden ends up being a good thing that helps Adam choose to not follow his prophesised destiny and at least temporarily save the world from the End..

Aziraphale on the other hand is not as saintly as his angelic presence might suggest. He portrays several sins – he is quite glutenous, being portrayed as on the chubbier side, obsessed with restaurants and often seen eating, greedy – he hoards antique books in his bookshop that he then uses all means imaginable short of actual physical violence to stop customers from buying, he is selfish – he only agrees to help Crowley with the Antichrist’s upbringing after he is confronted with the fact that there are no sushi restaurants in Heaven and he cannot enjoy the music he likes as most composers ended up in Hell. The angel is also portrayed as someone who is perceived by all who meet him as a homosexual, something the Bible is not at all too open to. Not to mention that the angel also does something that is widely associated with

demons; he jumps around the world possessing people when he loses his own physical corporation. Ultimately, even his gift to humanity from the beginning, his flaming sword, ends up as an evil thing, becoming the sword wielded by the horseman of War.

And the two are no angelic or demonic exceptions, as Crowley would be the first to protest,

“most demons weren't deep down evil. In the great cosmic game they felt they occupied the same position as tax inspectors-doing an unpopular job, maybe, but essential to the overall operation of the whole thing. If it came to that, some angels weren't paragons of virtue; Crowley had met one or two who, when it came to righteously smiting the ungodly, smote a good deal harder than was strictly necessary. On the whole, everyone had a job to do, and just did it.

And on the other hand, you got people like Ligur and Hastur, who took such a dark delight in unpleasantness you might even have mistaken them for human.(139)”

The humans in the novel, working in positions that are generally seen as binary opposites, good and evil, also show an exceeding level of grey morality. The witches, Anathema and her ancestor Agnes, though occult, and Madam Tracy, a prostitute and con woman, are all rather nice, meanwhile, sergeant Shadwell, the righteous witch-hunter is one of the least likable characters in the novel, being openly racist, sexist, homophobic and otherwise bigoted.

The clearest rejection of good and evil is in the character of the Antichrist who, rejecting his role, does neither real good nor real evil, simply being a mischievous but environmentally concerned child. All this shows a false dichotomy between the two sides, a made-up division that is by no means binary and instead a spectrum, unlike in Biblical canon.



In a strongly humanist manner, along with its refusal to accept the ultimate truth of prophecies, the novel also discusses and rejects the “two kingdom theory”, refusing to allow the subordination of the human world to the spiritual world.

"Anyway, if you stopped tellin' people it's all sorted out after they're dead, they might try sorting it all out while they're alive.”(205)

With the grey morality and praise of earthly life, the notion of leaving things till after death is rejected, especially in connection to the chaos of the Four Horsemen. The Earth, unlike in the vast majority of apocalyptic fiction, has not become too damaged to exist before the apocalypse as demonstrated by Adam's line "The world is full of all sorts of brilliant stuff and I haven't found out all about it yet, so I don't want anyone messing it about or endin' it before I've had a chance to find out about it. So you can all just go away."(199), making the idea of an apocalypse and need for a better afterlife seem improbable.



The *Good Omens* novel is written in the late 80s and first year of the 90s, which is heavily reflected. Not only in the technology and setting, but also in constant allusions to the Cold War through the mention of spies and the way that Heaven and Hell are depicted.

Other than the angel and demon constantly meeting in places filled with international spies, there is a strong focus on how the Bible and the idea of definite and ultimate victorious Heaven, the Rapture and so on are no more than Heaven's propaganda channelled to prophets while obscuring information about the future in the *Good Omens* universe, closely resembling the ever-present propaganda of the USSR or USA, claiming themselves to be the future victors.

The influence of the Cold War on *Good Omens* is easily detectable but is especially obvious if compared to the 2019 six-episode TV show adaptation written and co-directed by Neil Gaiman in memory of Terry Pratchett. While the show stays mostly true to the book's original text, with the exception of the omission of certain minor characters, such as the four extra bikers, or scenes, like the televangelist, for budget reasons, there is one major change. It is set in the late 2010s as opposed to the early 1990s which changes the political climate. This resulted in a change in attitude of both Heaven and Hell. Instead of their rivalry and need for a battle having Cold War undertones, the show changed this to late stage capitalism, and a sort of war for corporate power, keeping with contemporary problems. Heaven and Hell are moved into a single office building, Heaven having the posh top floors and Hell being confined to the badly managed basement and their entire existence is run as if it were a heavily bureaucratic company. Also, the large role given to the Archangel Gabriel, who, in a short throwaway line in the novel is insinuated to be rather bureaucratic and here replaces the majority of Metatron's roles, further enforces this.

To summarise, Pratchett and Gaiman acknowledge the role of Heaven, Hell, good and evil in the biblical prophecy of *Revelation* and work with in in their literary rendition but proceed to entirely reject its binarity and use it to show the absurdity of the concept, asserting the independence of their novel from the source.

3.3.4 *The Book of Revelation and the Use of Prophecies*

The *Book of Revelation* is a prophetic text, one of many in the Bible, by futurist churches perceived as a true vision of the inevitable future. As such, prophecies, and *Revelation* itself play an important role in the apocalyptic *Good Omens*. But, despite the *Book of Revelation* being consistently mentioned and referred to throughout the novel, being the primary source of its biblical story, *Good Omens* establishes its stance towards the original apocalyptic text quite early on in the book when John of Patmos is mentioned while Aziraphale's collection of prophetic texts is introduced and Aziraphale says about its author that he was "a nice chap, if a bit too fond of odd mushrooms" (64), hinting that the text will not be taken seriously and the plot and biblical elements in the novel will differ from their *Revelation* counterparts.

This rejection of scripture is an important aspect of the book and is seen as a part of the overall "ineffability" that disregards the reality of The Great Plan, truth of prophecies and the strict binary of good and evil, and gives way to free will and the redeemability of humanity which allows for comedy to appear in a genre filled with catastrophic adaptations (Clemons 100).

"...In a sense, then, the novel's insistence on a "comic frame of rejection" ultimately provides a necessary response to the rhetorical situation it finds itself in. By rejecting the entire system of Revelation in its own revelatory way, *Good Omens* undoes the genre it borrows from to reflect on what it means when we choose to see our human drama as tragedy instead of comedy" (Clemons 100)

As Clemons points out, the entire text is filled with characters commenting on the complexities of prophecy, planning the future from an ineffable text and the strange rhetorical strategies of warning (Clemons 86).

As *Good Omens* serves as a commentary on the absurdity of prophecy and a set future, books of prophecies are central in the *Good Omens* novel and their very nature is heavily

satirised. They are treated as bestsellers, accurate ones being less sought after than inaccurate ones, Aziraphale even owning a signed copy of Nostradamus and calling the *Book of Revelation* which he owns the original copy of, the “all-time best seller” (64).

To show the absurdity, *Good Omens* creates its own end-of-days prophecy book, “*The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*” which is the only 100% accurate book of prophecies as the novel claims. Being the novel’s replacement for *Revelation*, *Good Omens* uses it to parody the nature of prophecies the best it can. Firstly, the book includes words of recommendation from another prophetic author, Ursula Shipton, calling the book “Reminiscent of Nostradamus at his best” (65) as if prophecies were modern novels, trying to sell as many copies as possible.

The way prophecies are written is also heavily satirised. All the prophetic authors are said to have been taking something to blur out their prophetic visions, making their texts strange and mystical, and even Agnes Nutter’s ‘entirely accurate’ texts are revealed to have been written in such an indecipherable way that they have been misinterpreted several times throughout history and can technically be applied to many things, an observation clearly making fun of the way fanatic futurist and historicist Christians frantically apply parts of *Revelation* to anything that is happening in the world that could be interpreted as a judgement due to *Revelation*’s ambiguous texts.

Alongside the written *Nice and Accurate Prophecies*, there is also the prophetic Great Plan, a text that is not physically present in the novel, but is meant to be the written plan, a prophecy from God, for how and when the world is to end that Heaven and Hell abide by. God’s real plan for the universe came in the form of an ‘Ineffable Plan’, an unspoken plan that no one knew the specifics of as it could not be written but both celestial sides assumed was near identical to the written Great Plan.

Of course, neither side has any proof of their claim and once faced with questions whether they are sure if the Apocalypse from the Great Plan, is also featured in the main, Ineffable Plan and if Adam’s rebellion was not meant all along, both Heaven and Hell find themselves unable to answer and leave the battlefield.

““So you're not one hundred percent clear on this?" said Aziraphale.

"It's not given to us to understand the ineffable Plan," said the Metatron, "but of course the Great Plan-"

"But the Great Plan can only be a tiny part of the overall ineffability," said Crowley. "You can't be certain that what's happening right now isn't exactly right, from an ineffable point of view."

"It izz written!" bellowed Beelzebub.

"But it might be written differently somewhere else," said Crowley." (206)

All in all, *Good Omens* acknowledges prophecies and the *Book of Revelation* but treats them as texts that cannot be trusted, further enforcing the novel as self-standing.

3.3.5 Use of Biblical Numerology – Number of the Beast

It is widely presumed that virtually all the numbers that appear in the Bible bear specific meaning. Three is the trinity, Three and a half symbolise a midway, Six is the number of Man, Seven symbolises perfection in the Bible, Eight is associated with resurrection, Ten is totality, but not necessarily good, Twelve tends to be associated with the twelve months and apostles, symbolising the completeness under God, and forty a generation. (Slick 1-3)

In the *Book of Revelation*, several numbers stand out: seven - seven churches of Asia, seven trumpets, seven seals, seven vials, seven heads of the Beast, seven stars, seven horns and eyes of the Lamb, seven thunders of the angel's voice and the seven kings; twelve – twelve angels at twelve gates with twelve names of the apostles inscribed upon them, twelve fruits on the tree of life and New Jerusalem measuring twelve thousand stadia on each side; and six hundred and sixty six – the number of the Beast.

"This calls for wisdom. Let the one who understands calculate the number of the Beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six" (Rev 13:18)

The number 666 has been almost religiously adopted by horror fiction, satanic imagery and dark mysticism, all who treat it as a deep symbol as it is described as being the number that the Beast forces people to wear on their arm or forehead if they wish to be allowed to buy and sell. As John says that it is a number of a person, throughout history there have been many attempts to calculate the number, assigning it to several tyrannical historical figures, the most famous interpretation being the Roman Emperor Nero, the Pope during Martin Luther's reformation or Napoleon Bonaparte (Helyer 218).

In *Good Omens*, important numbers are used in a way that removes all the mysticism of possible codes or relations to living beings, and instead takes “the number of the Beast” quite literally in its 90s setting. Instead of making it a birthmark or scar on the Antichrist as is customary in Antichrist focused horrors, such as the aforementioned *The Omen*, *Good Omens* decides to take the phrase “for it is the number of a person” (Rev 13:18) and instead make it the rather anticlimactic last three digits of the Young household telephone number, following the Tadfield area code.

It is however used one more time in *Good Omens* in a slightly more symbolic manner. Sable, the horseman Famine, is introduced in a bar in New York called Top of the Sixes that is adorned with three large red sixes on all four sides, its street number.

One of the other numbers that does appear is the number seven, once in relation to Heaven when Aziraphale lights seven candles while opening a communication portal to speak with the Metatron. It is implied that the seven candles, just like the incense he lights afterwards is not necessary for communication, but it does add atmosphere.

An unconfirmed yet possible other use of biblical numerology in *Good Omens* comes through its excessive use of the number six that appears twenty-eight times throughout the novel, not counting its appearance in six thousand referring to the Earth’s age or Aziraphale and Crowley’s time on it. The use of six more than any number in the novel might be unintentional and a mere coincidence or a nod to the number of the Beast, but its usage might also be related to its supposed biblical meaning where six is the number of Man (Slick 2). As *Good Omens* is heavily focused on “humanity, now and earthly life over Heaven, Hell and a set future”, the use of humanity’s number could be used to further push its message. However, there are no interviews with either of the writers to confirm this.

In summary, Pratchett and Gaiman’s literary interpretation does not focus much on biblical numerology but where it is present, its meaning or use is parodied and twisted in a way that, while still alluding to its origin in *Revelation*, removes its mystical roles in such a way that asserts the novel’s sovereignty.

3.4 Non-Biblical Inspirations

The book of Revelation is ostensibly the novel's primary source of inspiration, yet it is not derived solely from that prophecy. It borrows from many other pieces of media, in smaller and bigger doses, which deal with the Christian apocalypse but also from non-apocalyptic and non-Christian media.

Throughout the entire book, the novel is filled with references to popular media of the 80s and 90s, classical literature and historical events that have very little or nothing in common with the *Book of Revelation*, but were added to distance the story from the prophetic text, set the time period and further the authors' anti-prophecy message.

The most obvious indirect biblical inspiration is the aforementioned horror film trilogy *The Omen*, that, while working with elements from *Revelation*, is already technically a second-tier adaptation itself, borrowing from other Christian apocalyptic and horror fiction. For Adam and his friends, inspiration also comes from the *Just William* novels from which Neil Gaiman apparently developed his first draft, *William the Antichrist*. While the entire novel was changed and inspiration and references from other media were added, Adam's mannerisms and his gang rivalry remained from its original inspiration (Gaiman, BBC NEWS).

In a nod to dystopian fiction, another close to apocalyptic and horror genre, the final paragraph of *Good Omens* is a direct homage to Orwell's novel *1984*, "And if you want to imagine the future, imagine a boot... no, imagine a trainer, laces trailing, kicking a pebble"(225) bringing a brighter and less hateful view of humanity than apocalyptic and dystopian literature offers in changing the boot stomping on a human's face to the shoe of a child playing, further enforcing the novel's humanistic tendencies and refusal to paint humanity and society as something that should be eliminated and cleansed according to a certain ideal.

Apart from references to other media, of which there are many more such as a short nod to Yeats' *Second Coming* with a phrase of the Beast "Slouching hopefully towards Tadfield"(225) or H. P. Lovecraft's novels in the names of certain demons or the appearance of a book called the *Necrotelecomicon*, *Good Omens* is full of references to real life people and events, such as Agnes Nutter being named after a combination of two British "witches" who were executed during the witch trials in the 17th century. Witches and witch-hunters were added into the novel as another, non-biblical example of traditional good and evil that turns out to be much more complex than two morally absolute sides, instead being morally grey as is central in the novel, and quite the opposite of their expected alignment at many times.

It can be argued that these intertextual pairings, albeit not biblically induced, further strengthen the status of *Good Omens* as an independent and self-contained work of art, not a derivative riff-off.

4 CONCLUSION

“*Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*”, while bearing a similarity to the majority of Christian apocalyptic fiction through its choice of subject, took a vastly different path in portraying John’s Apocalypse to the point where *Revelation* is closer to being referenced than being what the novel derives from. From its rejection of horror, violence and damnation to its implementation of humour, it is set to satirise the overly serious genre.

To satirise the genre, the *Book of Revelation* and specific pieces of media that draw from the prophetic text and implement prophecies as a vital plot point, *Good Omens* took several of the major famous apocalyptic elements; the Antichrist, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the battle of Heaven and Hell and books of prophecy themselves, plus several smaller allusions to the prophecy, and changed them in a way that parodies and comments on *Revelation* and the nature of prophetic texts in general.

The figures and elements from *Good Omens* have varying levels of relation to *Revelation*. The figure of the Antichrist has very little in common with the Beast from the prophecy, instead being a parody of *The Omen*’s Damien Thorne Antichrist character and of William from the *Just William* novels. The Four Horsemen, on the other hand, are much closer to the biblical text, as they can be readily perceived as direct parodies of the mysterious beings from *Revelation*. They are however changed to fit contemporary society and modern-day anxieties, with Pestilence or Conquest even being replaced with the Horseman of Pollution. Heaven and Hell in the novel are portrayed in a way that removes the biblical moral absolutism of good Heaven and bad Hell, instead making them nearly indistinguishable. Also, humans are portrayed as more virtuous or evil than either side could be, given that they exercise their own free will. It also distrusts predestination and future scenarios chiselled in stone, as these interfere with human free will, and rejects the need for human redemption after death and after a celestial battle, encouraging humans not to wait for a judgement day and instead fix their problems here and now.

Good Omens, grounded in the atheist view of both of its authors, rejects blind adherence to religion, the rejection of humanity, the good and evil binary and the idea of a set and unchangeable future and creates an engaging and funny text, enjoyable for both non-Christians and Christians critical of blind faith.

Thus, in conclusion, *Good Omens* is by all means, while retaining the basics of a book inspired by John's apocalypse, so unique and different from its source material through its many references to popular media, Christian and secular, and use of non-traditional stances towards prophecy and horror fiction, that it can be perceived not as a mere derivation but as its own piece of art and understood even by those unfamiliar with the biblical text it borrows from and intertextually alludes to.

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