
Narrative Strategies and Authorial Intent in *Good Omens*: A Satirical Response to the Changing World

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Abstract

The paper examines the narrative strategies and authorial intent in Good Omens, a collaborative novel by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett, with a focus on how a text operates as a satirical response to a rapidly changing world. Published in 1990, at the cusp of the new millennium and amid post-Cold War anxieties, the novel engages deeply with themes of apocalypse, prophecy and human folly. Through a rich interweaving of biblical allusions, socio-historical commentary and literary satire, the paper aims to critique Good Omens. The collaborative authorship of Gaiman and Pratchett informs a distinctive narrative voice that merges Pratchett's satirical sharpness with Gaiman's mythic and metaphysical imagination. The paper explores how the authors leverage satire not solely for humour but as a deliberate tool for cultural, socio-historical and political analysis, drawing attention to the late-20th-century Western society.

Keywords: Narrative strategy, collaborative writing, socio-historical context, satire, authorial intent.

Introduction

Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett's *Good Omens* (1990) stands as a compelling example of collaborative authorship that merges humour, biblical influences and satire to critique socio-religious constructs and moral binaries. Set against the backdrop of an impending apocalypse, the novel playfully reimagines biblical prophecy while engaging in deep cultural commentary on institutions such as religion and media sensationalism. This paper explores the narrative strategies employed by Gaiman and Pratchett, focusing on how their distinctive voices blend to create a layered text. Through satire, *Good Omens* not only subverts traditional apocalyptic narratives but also reflects the anxieties and contradictions of the late 20th century. Framed within literary and cultural theory, this study explores how satire functions not merely for entertainment but as a deliberate tool for critique, allowing the novel to operate both as comic fiction and sharp social commentary.

The study situates itself within the theoretical framework of historicism, collaborative writing and narrative strategies to analyse the text as a satirical and collaborative literary text. This allows for an exploration of how Gaiman and Pratchett's distinct authorial voices merge to produce a cohesive yet polyphonic narrative. The collaborative and dialogic quality of the text will also be explored, emphasising the coexistence of multiple voices, styles and ideologies within a single text.

Authorial Collaboration: A Brief Overview

Gaiman and Pratchett first encountered each other in February of 1985. At the time, Gaiman was a young journalist, interviewing Pratchett after the publication of the second *Discworld*

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novel. Gaiman, in a BBC interview, recalls that he was the first journalist to interview Pratchett (BBC News). The initial concept of the book was put forth by Gaiman, who in 1987 typed the first five thousand words of *William the Antichrist*, which would evolve into *Good Omens*. It was first published on May 10th 1990, by Gollancz in the United Kingdom. The novel was a collaborative effort between two English authors, Sir Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman. Gaiman paused development on the project as his graphic novel *Sandman* moved towards its first issue in 1998. Nearly a year after the original draft of *William the Antichrist* was written, Pratchett expressed interest in further developing the project. He offered to either acquire the story or work alongside Gaiman. Gaiman opted to collaborate with Pratchett, stating “because I was not stupid, and because that was the nearest I was ever going to get to Michelangelo phoning to ask if I wanted to paint a ceiling with him.” (BBC News) The first draft, according to Gaiman, was written by them in nine weeks. The authors collaborated via daily telephone calls, after which they would proceed to write and mail each other floppy disks. The second draft of the novel was completed in four months, with Gaiman living with Pratchett during the final days of writing. The title was a collaborative effort as well, with Gaiman proposing *Good Omens*, and Pratchett suggesting ‘*The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*’, which led to the full title and subtitle.

It is estimated that Pratchett contributed to two-thirds of the novel, with around sixty thousand words in the first draft, Gaiman contributing roughly forty-five thousand to the same. Pratchett was ‘the Keeper of the Disks’, who was in charge of the master copy of the novel. He also took charge of the overall editing by agreement, as Pratchett was more experienced in the genre of novels, as opposed to Gaiman, whose domain at the time was graphic novels. However, both Gaiman and Pratchett would go on to state that the final draft of the novel was a composite entity, where both exerted equal influence.

Biblical Influences

There were several works that Gaiman and Pratchett drew inspiration from when formulating their novel. One of the key textual influences of *Good Omens* is the Bible, specifically the Book of Revelation, the final book of the New Testament. Also known as the Book of the Apocalypse, it is the final book of the Christian Bible. Biblical adaptations have a long and varied history across all forms of media, with Revelations being one of the key sources of the Apocalypse Genre. Apocalypse literature is a genre that addresses the cataclysmic catastrophe of a supernatural nature, which leads to the end of the world. It is largely rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition and has over the last few decades become increasingly popular. As Baker notes in *Ambivalent Apocalypse*:

During the last half of the twentieth century, a new trend began to occur as writers and directors increasingly found the imagery of The Book of Revelation, the final book of the New Testament, to be a fitting trope for an age beset by the ever-growing possibilities of human destruction. (265)

Good Omens is one among the many adaptations of The Book of Revelation, taking a comic approach to the text. The book details the last eleven years of human history leading up to the ‘End of the World’, with the coming of the Antichrist. The novel also features key iconography of the Apocalypse, such as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, listed in Revelations as War, Famine, Pestilence and Death. In *Good Omens*, they are transposed into the Apocalyptic Horsepersons - War, Famine, Pollution and Death.

Good Omens not only draws from Revelations but also, as Clemons notes, from previous adaptations of Revelations. The most influential of such adaptations is *The Omen*, a 1976 film by Richard Donner. *The Omen* is a notable film of the late 60 - 70s era of Hollywood that saw a rise in films and television series based on the Biblical Apocalypse and portrayed the Antichrist, such as *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Exorcist* (1973).

'*The Omen*' tells the story of Damien, the son of Satan, adopted by the American Ambassador Robert Thorn. The child of Mr. Thorn seemingly dies at birth, and the Ambassador is convinced to discreetly adopt Damien, whose mother had died in childbirth. The boy grows up with the Thorns, witnessing politics and power, his father being close friends with the President and having future aspirations for the position. The ominous and tragic phenomena begin around Damien's sixth birthday as his nanny hangs herself at his sixth birthday party. She is suddenly replaced by a new foreboding nanny, who is accompanied by a threatening Rottweiler.

The initial premise of *Good Omens* noticeably draws on the film, with the forces of Hell planning to place the baby with the American Cultural Attaché and his wife, Mrs. Harriet Dowling. The birth is scheduled to take place in a small English countryside convent run by Satanic Nuns of the Chattering Order of St. Beryl. The Dowling child is meant to be swapped out with the Antichrist, unbeknownst to the parents. The plot in the novel, however, takes a turn early on, with the unexpected arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Young, another expecting couple in labour.

The satanic nuns place the child with the wrong family, with the Young child given to the Dowlings, and the Antichrist placed with the Youngs. The name Damien is suggested to Mr. Young, but is rejected for Adam, and the trajectory of the story is entirely altered. The novel, throughout the narrative, continues to reference '*The Omen*', incorporating the nanny in the form of Nanny Ashtoreth, who arrives with a grey dog. The novel, however, also jibes at the film at one point, stating, "Oh, yes. The American diplomat," said the angel. "Rather showy, one feels. As if Armageddon was some sort of cinematographic show that you wish to sell in as many countries as possible" (Gaiman and Pratchett 39). The novel is considered both an homage to and a parody of the film, as well as a satirisation of the previously mentioned Hollywood trend of adapting Revelations.

Socio-historical Echoes and the Authorial Intent

In addition to biblical and media influences, *Good Omens* was heavily influenced by the Cold War. The Cold War refers to the forty-five-year-long conflict between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). During World War II, the USA, along with France and the UK, formed a tentative alliance with the USSR against the Axis forces. After the fall of Nazi Germany in 1945, Germany was divided into West Germany, under the control of the Western Allies and East Germany, under the control of the Soviets. By 1948, tensions began to rise as the USSR established left-wing communist governments across Eastern Europe, and America began to fear a communist presence in Western Europe.

By 1961, the situation had further deteriorated as the USSR began construction on the Berlin Wall. In 1962, the Cold War reached its most tense conflict. As the US Navy established a naval blockade around a newly communist Cuba, bringing tensions with the USSR to an all-time high. What followed was the Cuban Missile Crisis, a six-day confrontation between the

USA and the USSR, with the threat of nuclear war hanging over the horizon. The Cold War came to an end in 1989, following the demolition of the Berlin Wall, and was followed shortly by the fall of the USSR.

Pratchett was born in 1948, whereas Gaiman was born in 1960. The Cold War was a presence throughout their early lives. Additionally, in 1979, Pratchett became the press officer for the South West Region of the Central Electricity Generating Board, covering three nuclear power stations. Therefore, the Cold War and the threat of nuclear annihilation exert great influence on their writing in *Good Omens*, which was published only a year after the end of the Cold War. There are overt references to the war and the respective secret services at several points in the novel. The novel references St. James Park as a clandestine meeting spot for opposing agents:

The ducks in St. James' Park are so used to being fed bread by secret agents meeting clandestinely that they have developed their own Pavlovian reaction. Put a St. James' Park duck in a laboratory cage and show it a picture of two men—one usually wearing a coat with a fur collar, the other something sombre with a scarf—and it'll look up expectantly. The Russian cultural attaché's black bread is particularly sought after by the more discerning duck, while the head of MI9's soggy Hovis with Marmite is relished by the connoisseurs. (Gaiman and Pratchett 39)

In another scene, the novel details humorously the behaviour of clandestine agents with an absurd sense of commonality and normalcy:

They were in the cafeteria of the British Museum, another refuge for all weary foot soldiers of the Cold War. At the table to their left two ramrod- straight Americans in suits were surreptitiously handing over a briefcase full of deniable dollars to a small dark woman in sunglasses; at the table on their right the deputy head of MI7 and the local KGB section officer argued over who got to keep the receipt for the tea and buns. (Gaiman and Pratchett 60)

Through these tangential references, the novel draws an allusion to Crowley and Aziraphale as similar foot soldiers of opposing forces. They, too, take secret meetings in these locations, working together outside the knowledge of their respective 'head offices'. Another aspect that adds to this allusion is the 'Arrangement' between the two forces. The Arrangement refers to an understanding between Aziraphale and Crowley that each would not interfere with particular activities of the other, and maintain the status quo of net zero for either side. It is described as the kind of logical conclusion that "isolated agents, ... reach with their opposite number when they realize that they have more in common with their immediate opponents than their remote allies" (Gaiman and Pratchett 38). This description again brings to mind the imagery of the Cold War.

Additionally, Heaven and Hell are also characterised as the two ideological extremes of the war, which are Capitalism and Communism. The forces of Hell represent capitalism, a fast-paced organisation concerned with quick growth and expansion, whereas Heaven, with its bureaucracy and adherence to strict ideology, is a clear reference to communism. Hell directly contacts its representatives on Earth through whatever means available, a metaphor for the quick, if reckless, adaptability of capitalist structures. On the other hand, Heaven requires difficult and elaborate rituals for Aziraphale to contact them, mirroring the rigid top-down systems followed under communism.

Nuclear power is also a significant presence in the novel. Characters discuss the potential dangers of nuclear plants, although the dangers are exaggerated and presented in a humorous light. Despite the tone, the novel maintains an undercurrent of nuclear anxiety that was ever

present in the era of the Cold War. The possibility of Nuclear War as a catalyst for Armageddon is brought up conversationally by Crowley, and later confirmed as Heaven's plan by the angel Metatron, the voice of God: "What sort of initiating event will precipitate the war?" said Aziraphale. "We thought a multination nuclear exchange would be a nice start" (Gaiman and Pratchett 199).

By incorporating these elements *Good Omens* satirises the Cold War era politics, utilising stereotypical caricatures while emulating similar characteristics in Aziraphale and Crowley. Additionally the novel reflects the broader socio-cultural impacts of the era, criticising the practices of ideological extremism and institutional rigidity through its portrayal of Heaven and Hell as similar institutions.

From its early origins as *William the Antichrist*, to its final form as *Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*, Gaiman and Pratchett's prominent collaborative novel was an amalgamation of many influences. While the first iteration was conceptualised by Gaiman, and Pratchett had a greater influence in later versions, both maintained the final book as a complete collective effort.

Literary Influences and the Narrative Design

Beyond authorial style, the work also drew from several literary influences. Following the rise of the apocalyptic fiction genre, the book is at its core an adaptation of *The Book of Revelation*. Specifically, it draws inspiration from and aims to satirise prominent genre films such as *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). It borrows the premise of *The Omen* (1976), referencing it in the title *Good Omens*, before deviating from the narrative to its own unique plot. The parodic tone of the novel humorously jabs at the sensationalism of Hollywood's portrayal of apocalyptic media.

Branching off from traditional Armageddon storylines, the novel incorporates nuclear anxiety as a key theme in the novel. This can be attributed to the significant influence of the Cold War on both authors. The novel also symbolically portrays the ideological conflict of the Cold War, that is, capitalism against communism, through Heaven and Hell, respectively. They represent extremist ideological institutions that are criticised for their rigidity. The enduring legacy of the novel is a testament to it being a product that is greater than the sum of its parts. Pratchett and Gaiman, working in tandem, pulled from a variety of influences to create a beloved and acclaimed work that has left its mark in popular and literary culture. The cultural weight and relevance of this narrative continues to be further extended by way of cross-medium adaptations.

The celebrated apocalyptic satire has had a complex journey from page to screen. Before its 2019 adaptation as the Amazon Prime mini-series, there were several attempts at adaptation in multiple media, to varying degrees of success. This section attempts to trace the adaptation journey of *Good Omens* across radio, stage, film and television. Unlike its tumultuous journey to the screen, *Good Omens* has had several successful audio adaptations. The novel's first successful transliteration was achieved in the form of an audiobook, narrated by Martin Jarvis, released in 2009. However, the first true audio adaptation of the novel can be credited to the BBC Radio 4 dramatisation. In 2014, BBC Radio 4 produced a six-part dramatisation of *Good Omens*, with Gaiman and Pratchett at the helm, starring Mark Heap as Aziraphale and Peter Serafinowicz as Crowley. The audio drama, adapted and co-directed by the award-

winning Dirk Maggs, garnered favourable reviews and was acclaimed for its take on the source material. Many credit the author's active involvement for the audio drama's success. In 2021, following the success of the show, a full cast Good Omens audiobook was released, retaining David Tennant and Michael Sheen in their leading roles, produced by Harper Audio.

Good Omens has also had stage adaptations. Dean Hoff, founder of Glasgow-based theatre company Cult Classic, adapted the novel for the stage. In 2013, this adaptation was performed by Cult Classic in Glasgow, Scotland. While the production was not officially affiliated with either Pratchett or Gaiman, it had the permission of both authors. In 2017, an Australia-based theatre company, Squabbalagic, staged a development reading of Good Omens: The Musical. The musical had a small workshop run, cut short by the pandemic, and featured an array of original songs. Despite its success as a novel, audio drama and stage play, Good Omens faced challenges with adaptations. Speaking to Jeffrey Morgan from Digital Spy, Gaiman said in an interview:

When the BBC, about 6 or 7 years ago, did their survey of the 100 best-loved books in the UK, Good Omens was on that list, which was only odd because all the other 99 had been adapted...There was either a film or a TV series of them, and then there was Good Omens, sitting there on its own. (Digital Spy)

Initially, Gaiman and Pratchett faced many roadblocks in trying to bring their novel to the screen. According to Gaiman, the book's satirical tone, rife with British humour and sensibilities, seemed absurd and unadaptable to Hollywood executives. Early attempts at gaining a production studio were met with an incomprehension of the novel's intent, and demands for changes that would completely change the trajectory of the narrative. The authors reportedly had to attempt, and Coggan writes,

...to explain to the studio that actually it wasn't a romance between Julia Roberts as Anathema — who they kept pronouncing Atha-neema — and Tom Cruise as a witch finder, with a sort of 18-year-old Adam who's, like, hot for the witch but respects the witch finder. (EW.com)

The earliest attempts that gained some progress were in 1992 when Sovereign Pictures bought the rights to a cinematic adaptation. The company had commissioned Gaiman to develop a script with significant plot deviations. The script was not to the liking of either author, however, the Sovereign Pictures script never reached the development phase, as the company went bankrupt, and the rights were given back to Gaiman and Pratchett.

The most significant, although unsuccessful, attempt at a Good Omens Film was between the late 1990s and early 2000s. Renowned British comedian and filmmaker Terry Gilliam, known for his work on films such as *The Fisher King* (1991) and *12 Monkeys* (1995), was slated to direct a film adaptation of the text. Gilliam reportedly cast Robin Williams as Aziraphale and Johnny Depp as Crowley. According to Morgan's interview with Gaiman, the project had an outstanding line-up of cast and had acquired funding, it simply "needed a big Hollywood studio to step up" (DigitalSpy.com).

However, the project fell victim to unfortunate timing. On September 11 2001, four hijacked planes carried out a coordinated attack on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Virginia. The attack resulted in close to three thousand deaths and left an irreparable mark on the American consciousness. Gilliam flew to Hollywood in 2001 to secure a studio, confident in the value of the project; however, 9/11 caused a significant change in circumstances. Morgan further writes, "He went out to Hollywood expecting to choose

between which major studio... but nobody was interested in a funny thing about the end of the world” (Digital Spy). Thus, another attempted adaptation of Good Omens was stilted in development.

After nearly two decades of failed attempts at a screen adaptation of Good Omens, Amazon Prime, in partnership with the BBC, released a six-part mini-series on 31st May 2019. The work on the series began in 2014, with a request from Pratchett. Pratchett was diagnosed with Parkinson’s in 2007, and aware of his rapidly degenerating health, he wrote a letter to Gaiman in 2014 entrusting him to bring their novel to the screen.

Pratchett acknowledged that their initial plan had been to only work together for Good Omens but with his disease there was only Gaiman who could accomplish their dream, saying “you are the only person who has the same amount of passion and love for Good Omens that I do, and I want to see it [on the screen] before I die, so will you please write it and make it” (Morgan, Digital Spy). Gaiman began work on the script in February of 2015; however, in a tragic turn of circumstances, Pratchett succumbed to his disease and passed away on 12th March 2015. There, the project transformed into Pratchett’s last wish.

Gaiman’s efforts resulted in a six-part mini-series starring Michael Sheen as Aziraphale and David Tennant as Crowley. The show was written by Gaiman himself and directed by Douglas Mackinnon. It was received with favourable reviews from critics and fans alike and received nominations for various awards, winning prestigious accolades such as the Hugo Award for Best Dramatic Presentation, Long Form, in 2020. The show’s second season, premiering on 28th July 2023, was met with similar success.

Good Omens has had an arduous journey from page to screen. Due to several false starts and years of projects being abandoned in the nascent development stages, the authors seemed to have decided to shelve their ambition for a screen adaptation. At one point, they said of the potential adaptation, Coggan writes:

Neil likes to think that one day maybe there will, and Terry is certain that it will never happen. In either case, neither of them will believe it until they’re actually eating popcorn at the premiere. And even then, probably not. (EW.com)

Despite the decades of challenges and disappointments, Pratchett’s wish was fulfilled in 2019 in the form of Good Omens (2019), the series. The show was hailed both as an adaptation and an independent media entity.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates how the work Good Omens uses narrative strategies and a distinctive collaborative voice to subvert traditional apocalyptic storytelling. The interplay between Pratchett’s satire and Gaiman’s mythic tone produces a work that is both humorous and politically resonant. The collaborative authorship not only enriches the narrative style but also exemplifies how dual voices can coalesce to expand the thematic scope of a work.

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