

Could the Devil be Redeemed? Tracing Apocatastatic Strains in Netflix's *Lucifer*

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Abstract: Modern popular culture witnesses an increased interest in the varied perception and portrayal of the devil. Amidst a multitude of media that present the devil in an unconventional light, the one that strikes as different is the popular Netflix series, *Lucifer*. This paper attempts to explore how the show boldly defies the conventional views about Satan and the concept of salvation, how its ending experiments with the ancient theory of apocatastasis - the belief that everything and everyone will be saved in the end - by way of enabling the sinners in hell, including the devil, to be redeemed. *Lucifer* poses important questions of what effective and responsible justice, punishment and atonement actually look like; could evil ever cease to be and whether the devil could be redeemed. The opposition faced by the controversial show and its subsequent renewal on popular demand invites investigation into the relevance of these questions in the contemporary society and opinion that is clearly divided.

Keywords: Popular Culture, apocatastasis, devil, web series, Netflix

1. Introduction and Research problem

The discussion regarding Satan's possible restoration to grace has a long and complicated history. Innumerable works including the Bible have presented him as an eternally doomed entity, banished from heaven for committing the grave sin of waging war against God. However, the image of Satan or the devil has been evolving considerably: from being an abstraction of evil, he has often come to be seen as a being with his own set of emotional baggage. While this alternative view of Satan is limited to certain fictional works and opinions, the theory of apocatastasis that suggests universal salvation for every being, including Satan, has been advanced from time to time. Despite being a speculation, it has succeeded in garnering significant position in theology. This project would explore the way in which the Netflix show, *Lucifer* presents a radically unconventional devil that not only makes the viewer sympathize with him but also proves to be worthy of redemption. *Lucifer* is an urban fantasy show that aired from 2016 to 2021 and comprises of six seasons. Based on characters created for DC Comics' Vertigo by Neil Gaiman, Sam Kieth and Mike Dringenberg, the show revolves around Lucifer Morningstar, the devil under a human disguise. Bored of ruling hell, he arrives on earth seeking revelry and adventures but ends up inadvertently forming meaningful bonds and undergoes a major character development.

What makes *Lucifer*'s redemption more notable-apart from the fact that it's the devil's redemption in question! - is the manner of the event which appears to be borrowing from the tenets of the ancient theory of apocatastasis. The works of C.A. Patrides and Oana Raluca Mocean serve as valuable secondary resources in providing information about the fundamentals of the theory. An examination of their arguments and facts about apocatastasis help in deciphering its role in the ending of *Lucifer*. *Paradise Lost* by John Milton serves a comparative purpose, being one of the earliest and most influential works to provide Satan with a voice and playing a crucial role in forming a popular opinion about him. Many online journal and news articles containing interviews with the makers and leading cast of *Lucifer*, show

reviews and surveys regarding the potential ban on the series are also included. These enable better understanding of the intent and purpose behind the show's making and development and turn valuable in grasping the audience reaction as to how they relate with the sensitive issues it deals with.

The first section of the paper would briefly trace the literary evolution of the figure of the devil in the Old Testament, to its current portrayal in the popular media. It would bring to light various instances in which *Lucifer* proves to be revolutionary in the portrayal of the devil and in juxtaposing age-old concepts of gender, fate, atonement, with the modern twenty-first century viewpoint, causing a novel understanding of them. Tracing *Lucifer*'s character development enables him to be seen as worthy of redemption and suitable for the radical role assigned to him in the end. The next section would investigate how the series finale allows a symbolic salvation to Lucifer and suggests a possible apocatastatic salvation for all beings, including the sinners. The last section, by discussing the religious controversies surrounding the show and its audience reception, would demonstrate the relevance such issues still hold in contemporary times.

2. A Revolutionized Devil

Satan or the devil is traditionally understood as a fallen angel who under a great sense of hubris, rebelled against God and as a result got cast out of heaven, confined to hell. In The Old Testament, *Ezekiel* 28:14-18 and *Isaiah* 14:12-17, while in the New Testament, Luke 10:18 are the key Scripture passages that support this understanding of the devil. His character gradually evolved in the Western cultural landscape and innumerable literary works-religious and nonreligious- have since been composed around or about the devil. A discussion about few such widely recognized works would be essential in charting the evolution of this figure and in providing a basis for comparison with its current portrayal in modern media. Dante's *Divine Comedy* depicts Satan as a fearsome, three-headed beast who remains entrapped in a lake of his own tears, frozen by the frantic flapping of his

wings and consumes the greatest traitors in Christian and Italian history. Dante portrays him as an inverse of God, rightfully punished for his rebellion. Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* continues the evil portrayal of the devil who entices and appeals to a human's negative desires, granting favors in exchange for human souls that would be bound in eternal torment. In John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, however, Satan is given a magnetic personality and a voice which makes him an influential character. Through his monologues, he provides reasoning for his act of rebellion and reveals his personal thoughts and motivations. Though the depiction of his eternal suffering strikes a sympathetic chord with the readers, Milton makes clear that Satan is not the hero of his epic, reminding the readers of his darkness and evil intentions to ruin mankind. Philip Almond in his article notes that by the end of the nineteenth century, the demonic story of Satan had lost its central role in Western intellectual life and the Devil had largely become a figure of myth. However, in an ironic turn of events, the "marginalization of the Christian story of the Devil in the modern West and in liberal Christianity allowed for a proliferation of devils and demons in popular culture"(Almond).

The Netflix series *Lucifer* is a recent addition to this popular culture which succeeds in portraying the devil in a radically unconventional light. Lucifer Morningstar is the devil whose identity is not limited to just being a rebel or a sufferer of a divine punishment. He is the ruler of hell who possesses a certain level of autonomy in choosing the course of his life. Dissatisfied with his life in hell, he arrives on Earth in Los Angeles, under a human disguise. Here, he owns a night club and leads a life of careless revelry. Besides his avant-garde portrayal, the show retains certain key characteristics associated with the devil in order to maintain the connection with his traditional understanding. Lucifer has an ability to extract a person's deepest desires which he uses to his advantage; he loves granting favors to people in return for something that he wants; behind his charming exterior, exists a devil face and wings; and he harbors resentment against God which mostly accompanies a sense of parental abandonment. His role of punishing the sinners in hell, finds its way on Earth where after becoming a consultant for the LAPD, Lucifer aids the police in finding criminals and punishing them. Throughout his time on Earth, he forms deep bonds with some humans, falls in love with a detective and to his utmost surprise, comes to care and even sacrifice for the human race that he initially considered abhorrent. Lucifer is given the ability to self-actualize that enables him to gain perspective and develop new insights to finally become a truly evolved being:

LUCIFER. For millennia, I was down here, stuck in my own hell loop of sorts, thinking I deserved to be in charge of people's punishment. And then even when I left, I found myself in a cycle of selfishness and violence...but the point is that with the right guidance and the right help, I was able to change, to grow. To find true meaning in life.

("Partners Till the End" 49:14- 49:44)

3. An Apocatastatic Finale

The theory of apocatastasis entails universal salvation for all beings including the sinners in hell and the devil. C.A. Patrides points out that the proponents of apocatastasis sustain it on biblical precedents such as in "Acts 3:21, where reference is made to "the times of restitution of all things" (468). Indeed, the theory received great opposition from the traditional orthodoxy as well as the general public, but it succeeded in raising inquiries and holding a significant theological position. OanaRalucaMocean point towards an "increased interest of theologians in bringing arguments in favor of apocatastasis.... unlike during the XXth century when apocatastasis was mostly seen as a "hope for all", supporters of apocatastasis in the new millennium consider this issue in the direction of a dogmatization, revealing in their works and with an increased scientific rigour, the scripturist, traditional, rational, existential and philosophical support of this theological opinion" (12). *Paradise Lost* appears to hold the view that disobedient angels would be confined to Hell "without redemption, without end" (V. 615). Disregarding the possibility of apocatastasis, Milton makes Satan soliloquize thus:

But say I could repent and could obtained

By Act of Grace my former state; how soon

Would high
recall high
thoughts, how
soon unsay
What feignd
submission
swore: ease
would recant
Vows made in
pain, as violent
and void...

This knows my punisher; therefore as far

From granting hee, as I from begging peace. (IV. 93-104)

Lucifer, thus, takes a radical stance in allowing redemption to the damned and a different kind of symbolic salvation to the devil. Nikos Kazantzakis, the Greek poet and novelist, presents the vision of a far-off divine event where "One day Lucifer will be the most glorious archangel standing next to God; not Michael, Gabriel, or Raphael-but Lucifer, after he has finally transubstantiated his terrible darkness into light" (qtd. in Patrides, 478). This vision finds resonance in *Lucifer* when Lucifer surpasses archangels such as Michael and Raphael and proves worthy of becoming God after reconciliation with his father. However, he refuses to ascend the throne upon realizing that his true purpose is not just limited to punishing sinners but to guide these lost souls in redeeming themselves. He asserts, "I know this is what I'm meant to do, and I know that it feels right. It's my calling" ("Partners Till the End" 33:00- 33:59).

Origen of Alexandria, considered to be the first to propose the theory of apocatastasis, suggested that the punishments

inflicted by God, including the pains of hell, are curative not penal, and pave the way for sinners to atone for their sins in order to be restored to their original state of purity (Patrides 469). This similar strain is shown in the finale of *Lucifer* but experimenting with the theory, in an unprecedented chain of events, Lucifer himself becomes the agent helping the sinners in gaining necessary perspective to break their hell loop and attain salvation. Patrides also notes that the hostile attitude of the Protestant Reformers toward apocatastasis was conditioned by their legalistic theory of the Atonement (471). However, *Lucifer* is careful to not ignore the necessity of atonement and grants redemption to the sinners only after they have atoned for their sins through the painful process of resolving their guilt.

Since the beginning, the show maintains the belief that is an individual's guilt that binds them to hell and its torments. Lucifer's awareness of the feelings of self-hatred and unworthiness enable him to fulfill the role of a therapist and in guiding the damned in coming to terms with their self-imposed guilt and enabling them to ascend to heaven. The show ends with Lucifer's declaration: "if the devil can be redeemed, then anyone can" ("Partners 'Til the End" 50:11-50:17).

4. Contemporary Relevance and Controversies

A journal article by Fay Watson illustrates how both the American Family Association and One Million Moms started petitions in order to cancel the series. The petition contended how the show "will glorify Satan as a caring, likable person in human flesh." However, an intense twitter campaign by a legion of fans demanding the renewal of the show clearly demonstrates the divided popular opinion on the subject and leads to the relevance that such religious issues still hold in contemporary times. In an interview co-show runner and executive producer Ildy Modrovich stated: "it really is a show about redemption...if the Devil can be redeemed and can be forgiven then anyone can, and that is the idea behind many religions, including Christianity" (Miller, personal interview). She further informs that the show is popular in more religious places like Brazil, where the religious community has embraced it because it does not try to glorify evil but emphasize on the existence of broken people, some of whom are allowed the chance at being forgiven and making up for their past wrongs (Miller, personal interview).

Placing the devil in a modern 21st century setting provides a distinct yet relatable understanding of him. Modrovich noted that the problems of Lucifer, God and his fellow, demons and angels are not all that lofty: These folks are "the highest, most powerful beings you can imagine. But they all are broken and dysfunctional. And that is relatable" (Ryan, personal interview). It is not just by presenting a revolutionized devil that *Lucifer* gains its fame as an unconventional show. The show not only tackles with the issues of police reform and Black Lives Movement but also daringly defies traditional gender roles through the character of Eve. Believed to be born out of Adam's rib, Eve has long been portrayed as a timid vulnerable being who got tempted by the devil, causing the ruin of mankind. Several

misogynistic strains are also seen in Milton's portrayal of Adam and Eve, but Lucifer provides great autonomy to Eve by empowering her to leave Adam and heaven in order to pursue her own desires.

5. Conclusion

Through Lucifer's search for his true purpose in the universe, the show in a way revolutionizes the traditional view about Satan, God, and explores the true nature of age-old concepts such as faith, salvation, evil and duty by juxtaposing them with the contemporary modern framework to provide a new perspective. It advocates the belief that fate and duty are not divinely sanctioned but depend on the choices one makes, and salvation could be achieved by anyone, given, they atone for their wrongs by going through a painful process of coming to terms with their guilt. The show being a fictional work, does not give any definite answers regarding whether evil could be eradicated or the devil could be redeemed but suggests that evil is not inherent by showing the devil as capable of change. The ending of the show effectively borrows from the tenets of apocatastasis, offering radical but probable answers to the questions regarding the devil's redemption.

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