

# **The Good, the Evil, and the Morally Ambiguous: The Demon Crowley in Terry Pratchett's and Neil Gaiman's Postmodern Fantasy *Good Omens* and Its Television Adaptation**

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## **Abstract**

In their postmodern fantasy novel *Good Omens*, Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman create a compelling case for a combination of good and evil in all their characters, but one character is of particular interest: the Demon Crowley. Moral ambiguity marks both the novel and its namesake television series *Good Omens*. I will examine the moral issues raised by the written and on-screen Crowleyes, and the overall understanding the reader or viewer gains of his character. I also examine the intertextual use of the name “Crowley” and its connotations, ending on the question of whether the television series is an effective adaptation of Pratchett's and Gaiman's novel and its morally ambiguous message.

**Keywords:** postmodern fantasy, moral ambiguity, intertextuality, adaptation

## INTRODUCTION

Good and evil are conventional binaries that do not usually coexist, either in a person or a moment in time, in our traditional understanding and view of the world. Since they are opposites, the question arises of who or what embodies good and who or what embodies evil, and whether these are mutually exclusive. In the novel *Good Omens*, Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman create a compelling case for a combination of these traits, upending assumptions of humans, angels, demons, Heaven, and Hell as black-and-white, and they construct the characters in a substantially morally ambiguous world.<sup>1</sup> Moral ambiguity permeates the novel, as well as the subsequent television series *Good Omens*, but to what end? What understanding will the reader or viewer gain from the combination of good and evil in the characters in the narrative? In examining the character of Crowley in the novel and the television series, directed by Douglas MacKinnon, I will explore issues raised by the written and on-screen Crowleys, and consider whether the novel has been successfully adapted to the screen to convey the ambiguity central to the character and his role. I will also examine the intertextual use of the name “Crowley” and its connection to the real-life Aleister Crowley (1875-1947).<sup>2</sup> Another question worth asking is whether the series is an effective adaptation of Pratchett’s and Gaiman’s postmodern fantasy in an age in which people are increasingly conditioned to a position of moral relativity (Gowans 2004, 2021).

## MORAL AMBIGUITY AND OUR CONFLICTING RESPONSES TO CROWLEY

In “Literature, Moral Reflection and Ambiguity,” Craig Taylor discusses texts that elicit conflicting responses in the reader and the moral understanding these responses aid in creating (80), on the premise that a piece of writing may construct more than one meaning and that it “may not tend to a definite conclusion, or, in other words, that it may be in the nature of a given work of art that its meaning or meanings may remain ambiguous at the same time as they convey truth” (76). Taylor argues that conflicting responses readers have to morally ambiguous texts do not conceal the overall meaning; rather, our responses tend to make the

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1 Gaiman developed a similar theme in *The Sandman* comic book series (1989-1996), later adapted into the television series *Lucifer* (2016-2022) and *The Sandman* (2022-).

2 Crowley has become an icon in modern culture. Ozzy Osbourne’s “Mr. Crowley” (1980), inspired by Aleister Crowley, was ranked the 23rd greatest heavy metal song of all time in a readers’ poll conducted by the Gibson guitar company (<http://www.gibson.com/News-Lifestyle/Features/en-us/top-50-metal-0318-2011.aspx>). Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page was so fascinated by Crowley’s life and work that he bought Crowley’s house (<https://www.boleskinehouse.org/jimmy-page>).

message clearer. In reading a morally ambiguous text “such understanding as we might gain from the work may be revealed through its ambiguity” (76). When readers delve into a narrative with an ambiguous twist ending (like Shirley Jackson’s short story “The Lottery”), or containing a morally ambiguous character like Crowley, we face the challenge of using “our own judgement in making sense for ourselves of our potentially conflicting responses to those characters and events” (79). In examining Crowley in the novel and the TV series, we wonder about the truths the character conveys, and whether the two versions of the character channel the same understanding of the theme. What *is* the overall message of Crowley’s character and his actions?

Crowley’s actions undoubtedly cause conflicting reactions in readers and viewers. Taylor is “interested in the kind of case where, as we might put it, our conflicting emotional responses to the narrative really suggest different ways in which we might fill it in” (79). Crowley is a demon; he should be evil, like his fellow demons, Hastur and Ligur. Our moral response to Crowley depends on the idea that he is a demon; he should be the antagonist, but he is not. He is a relatively reasonable character who aids the angel Aziraphale in trying to prevent Armageddon; the ambiguity surrounding his character is caused by the way Heaven and Hell are portrayed in the novel. Through Crowley and Aziraphale, we come to see the mixing of good and evil in Heaven and Hell. This is Milton’s Lucifer problem: the attractiveness of the instigator, even when what he instigates is self-evidently evil. Margaret Johnson, in “Fallen Faith: Satan as Allegory in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*,” argues that Milton’s Satan is the archetype of moral ambiguity:

Milton offers readers the opportunity to see themselves not just in the human characters of Adam and Eve but in Satan as well. He creates the Satan character as a sympathetic one so his audience may readily identify with the turmoil he feels at having lost his faith. (2013, 157)

One way we can “fill in” the narrative is by understanding that Crowley is human-esque because he has been living on Earth for six thousand years. Other demons do not often visit Earth, but for Crowley, Earth is home. In his time here, he has observed humans, dealt with them, learned about their lives, empathized with them (to an extent), and centred his life around human behaviour. He has observed human behaviour and learned how to instigate bad actions and to quietly persuade those teetering on the edge of a bad decision to behave badly. Nevertheless, after spending so much time on the job, he sees that not everyone can be swayed every time they contemplate behaving badly. He has come to realize that humans are not inherently good or evil. This is one of the most important themes explored by theologians and philosophers throughout the history of human thought; Robin Douglass addresses “one of the age-old questions of human

nature: are we naturally good or evil?" (Douglass 2019). Crowley has seen many positive traits and wonderful accomplishments which have nudged his behaviour from what was supposed to be evil to something more human in its fusion of good and evil. The novel hints at this duality within Crowley (and Aziraphale) when Crowley is still the serpent Crawly.<sup>3</sup> During their discussion on the topic of man "learning the difference between good and evil" (Pratchett and Gaiman xi), Aziraphale says that this new knowledge must be evil, otherwise Crawly would not have been involved. Aziraphale does not believe it could be possible for Crawly to do good or for his actions to result in something good. The serpent's role is to convert free-floating evil into sin, which is "an offence against a personal Holy God" (Loke 2022, 39). This interaction is mirrored on the following page, when Crawly sarcastically returns the sentiment, saying, "I'm not sure it's actually possible for you to do evil" (xii). Since they are both involved in man's acquisition of this new knowledge, the knowledge must be both good and evil. Crowley's and Aziraphale's interaction sows doubt within the reader regarding the black-and-white nature of demons and angels, since they are both part of something that is born not of pure good or evil, but of a combination of the two.

Another way to "fill in" the narrative is to postulate that Crowley may be the way he is because of Aziraphale's influence. Crowley and Aziraphale are the only ones of their kind to live on Earth. The four horsemen (or in this case, motorcyclists) of the apocalypse are also beings of the order of angel and demon, but they do not appear in the story until the very end. Unlike humans, whose lifetimes pass by quickly compared to their otherworldly timelines, Crowley and Aziraphale are each other's only real company. In Crowley's mind, Aziraphale is "the Enemy, of course. But an enemy for six thousand years now, which made him a sort of friend" (Pratchett and Gaiman 25). The two are not supposed to mingle; they were given their separate tasks by Heaven and Hell, but they began to consort soon after arriving on Earth. In the six-part series, episode three stands out in this regard. The first half of the episode is dedicated to showing the viewer Crowley's and Aziraphale's joint history, the little inside jokes they have accumulated over time, their changing appearance, and their "Arrangement." Over the course of many major historical events, they have saved each other from awkward, even dangerous situations, such as their undercover stint during World War II. They witness the animals entering Noah's Ark, they discuss their understanding of the Crucifixion of Christ, and Crowley even helps Shakespeare with his rendition of Hamlet. At this point in their joint history, in the Globe Theatre, they discuss the upcoming jobs they have been given by Heaven and Hell and the locations of these jobs.

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3 A literary antecedent of Crawly/Crowley is Sir Pitt Crawley, the lewd, lascivious, financially and morally bankrupt head of the aristocratic Crawley family in Thackeray's satire of Regency society, *Vanity Fair* (1847-8).

Since both were given tasks to accomplish in the same city, they decide that one of them should simply do both in order to save the other the time and the trip. Heaven and Hell will not know who does the jobs as long as they get done. This “Arrangement” (29), is an open invitation for both to do good and evil deeds. It is not only a case of Aziraphale’s influence on Crowley – Crowley also influences Aziraphale. They help each other, make each other’s lives easier, and seem to enjoy each other’s company, a perception that emerges with greater clarity in the series.

## SEEING OR IMAGINING?

Another aspect of Crowley’s character evident in the series is his changing appearance. He and Aziraphale change their clothing based on the time period they are in, but Crowley’s outfits and hairstyles are more adventurous: his style follows the times and he is much “cooler” than Aziraphale. Crowley follows historical trends in the series, but this aspect of his character is not highlighted to such an extent in the novel, where he lives in a modern apartment with all the modern luxuries, because “a sleek computer was the sort of thing Crowley felt that the sort of human he tried to be would have” (Pratchett and Gaiman 207). This indicates that Crowley does not see himself solely as a demon. Why follow Earthly trends unless you see yourself as belonging there? Crowley’s apartment, with all of his modern appliances, is not simply a demonic charade, since no human ever sets foot in it. He is not trying to trick humans into believing that he is human; he is following trends and furnishing his apartment with the latest technology in order to feel like he fits in – to make himself feel more human.

Aziraphale does not follow trends; he dresses in classic, old-fashioned outfits, but no human becomes suspicious of his old-fashioned ways. His fashion choices do not seem to register with humans as being at all odd. Crowley dresses in current fashion not out of necessity, but of his own wish, which makes him appear more human to viewers of the television series. On the other hand, Crowley’s seeming obsession with human fashion and the latest gadgets could indicate an undertone of vanity or greed, both negative traits emphasizing his and humans’ propensity for being, feeling, and behaving negatively.

In the novel and the series, Crowley talks to the plants in his apartment, whereby he puts “the fear of God into them. More precisely, the fear of Crowley” (207). In the novel, the narrator explains this to us; in the series, the voiceover of God explains it. However, in the series, the viewer can experience Crowley’s outbursts, seeing his expression, his demonic yellow eyes with black slits for pupils, hearing his high-pitched screaming and howling. In this way, the series gives a more vivid picture of Crowley’s moral duality. We see him missing Aziraphale and his company, and their time spent together is emphasized more in the series than in the

novel. In the novel, we know that Crowley is in human form in order to live on Earth, but we also know that he is really a demon in disguise. When reading, the human Crowley is just a shell, a husk wherein a demon resides, black and swirly, like smoke. Since we are not given a visual representation of his human form, his demonic essence is more prevalent than in the series. The on-screen Crowley is more human, his good and bad traits visually more foregrounded by actor David Tennant than they are described in the novel.

Crowley is human-like in his combination of good and evil because he has lived on Earth for six thousand years, and because of Aziraphale's influence. Does his human-ness result from a mix of the two? Does Crowley have the free will to choose moral ambivalence, or is it predetermined? His nature is supposed to be evil, but perhaps just being on Earth is enough to mix the two. Perhaps, insomuch as we see that Heaven is not purely good, what with Metatron and the Archangel wanting Armageddon to happen, and that Hell is not purely evil, since even the Antichrist is a compassionate little boy with a pet Hell Hound that is a cute, fuzzy dog, it makes sense that humans, demons, and angels also exhibit traces of both good and evil. Considering our conflicting moral responses to Crowley, as well as to all of the examples above, what moral understanding do we gain from this narrative?

## A BALANCING ACT

Crowley was sent to Earth to cause havoc, to make life difficult for humans, to make them react poorly, rashly, aggressively in everyday situations. Once he succeeds with a particular human, they are sent to Hell. His job is to send as many people there as he can. We should not sympathize with him, or wish him to succeed. As we dive deeper into the narrative, however, Crowley, though still a demon, accrues more positive traits which, in a way, liken him to Aziraphale, but overwhelmingly liken him to us. Although we see some of his actions as evil, we begin to perceive the balance that he and Aziraphale maintain. They may have begun as complete opposites, but each has taken on some of the other's characteristics. They have become friends, and their behaviour and morals have rubbed off on each other. No longer simply an angel and a demon, they are me, they are you, they are everybody. Crowley is "an Angel who did not so much Fall as Saunter Vaguely Downwards" (Pratchett and Gaiman xv). This description gives the reader the feeling that he is not inherently evil: he simply fell in with the wrong crowd. The most important detail leading us to relativize Heaven's and Hell's morality is that both "mostly-good" Aziraphale and "sometimes-evil" Crowley ultimately share the same mission: to save the human race from Armageddon. Our original grouping of good and bad characters shifts, and Crowley, Aziraphale, and

everyone on the side of saving the world become good, while Heaven and Hell, and their occupants, are now evil. The assumption that Angels, Demons, Heaven and Hell are good or evil is now a grey area, the poles of black and white replaced by a spectrum. Here we see Pratchett's and Gaiman's nod to the individual versus the corporate –individuals are generally good (as good as any human can be) and corporations, groups, Heaven and Hell are evil. The image emerges of evil conglomerates working against small actors. In this sense, Crowley is a small actor who, no matter how personally good or bad, is acting for the greater good of all people, demons, angels, and other citizens of the fantasy world of *Good Omens*.

## FICTIONAL, BIBLICAL, AND REAL-LIFE CROWLEYS

For readers and viewers, Crowley's morally ambiguous nature may become apparent before they perceive his characteristic mix of good and evil. *Good Omens* contains many intertextual references, including Crowley's name. At the beginning, when Crowley is still Crawly, we see the first reference when he makes an appearance as the snake in the Garden of Eden.<sup>4</sup> In terms of moral ambiguity, any reader who knows the story of Eden, the snake, and Adam and Eve will come to a conclusion regarding Crawly's character.

When Crawly the snake turns into Crowley, he changes his name and his form. The human Crowley in the narrative has a second intertextual connection, this one to the real-life Aleister Crowley, once “dubbed ‘the wickedest man in the world’” (Owen 99). Aleister Crowley founded the Order of the Silver Star in 1907, a magical order that dealt with the learning and application of ritual magic (99), after being blocked from ascending into the higher ranks of another magical order:

Crowley, Cambridge-educated, highly intelligent, and capable of great powers of concentration, advanced quickly through the Grades of the Outer Order of the Golden Dawn. He was contemptuous of the bourgeois mundanity of many of his fellow initiates, impatient with the slow, pedantic methods of the Order, and eager to access the secrets of the cherished Second Order. His advancement, however, was blocked by senior officers, Yeats foremost among them, who were scandalized by Crowley's wild, unpredictable behavior and questionable morals. Crowley subsequently became involved in a bitter power struggle within the Golden Dawn, abandoned it in 1900, went on to study with other teachers, and finally established his own Order of the Silver Star. (103)

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 3:14: “And the LORD God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou *art* cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life.”

Like the fictional Crowley, the real-life Crowley was intelligent, driven, contemptuous, impatient, curious, wild, unpredictable, and morally questionable, a man who has been portrayed as “the great outcast and enemy of mainstream modern society” (Urban 8). In his magic dealings, Crowley believed that he had encountered demons (Owen 104), an idea mirrored by Pratchett and Gaiman and transformed so that Crowley actually is a demon.

In “The Sorcerer and His Apprentice: Aleister Crowley and the Exploration of Edwardian Subjectivity,” Alex Owen mentions Crowley’s propensity for disguise and changing his identity:

At Cambridge he had become an ardent Jacobite, changing his name from Alexander to Aleister (a misspelling of its Gaelic equivalent) and afterward adopted the spurious persona Boleskine, a Highland laird. Shortly after his initiation into Dawn, he had taken a flat in London under the name of Count Svareff and enjoyed posing as a young Russian nobleman. In 1904 Crowley decided to pass himself off as a Persian prince, Prince Chioa Khan. (116, 117)

Although it appears that Crowley changed identities for fun, it is also likely that he did so in order to escape his family connection to trade; he fantasized about coming from an aristocratic background (117). This changing of and playing with identity, appearance, and behaviour is another link between Aleister Crowley and the fictional Crowley. Readers and viewers of *Good Omens* will notice these connections, and will understand the fictional Crowley as the biblical snake and all of the connotations brought by that image, as Aleister Crowley and the undertone his image provides, and as a mix of the two.

## DO THE NOVEL AND THE SERIES CONVEY THE SAME MESSAGE?

*Good Omens* portrays Earth, Heaven, and Hell as grey or as a fragmented black-and-white; the question arises whether the medium of writing and that of the screen portray the same shade of grey, whether, in this sense, the adaptation remembers its source. The question is subjective in nature; the answer is likely to be subjective as well. In comparing novels to on-screen adaptations, Glenn Jellenik, in “The Task of the Adaptation Critic,” disputes the idea that “there are two texts but only one story” (254). An adaptation need not tell the same story as its source in order to succeed. In *Good Omens*, the adaptation retains the same storyline, but in a nuanced way, emphasizing slightly different aspects of Crowley’s character than the novel. Jellenik argues that, “in the end, adaptations are interpretations, not copies or translations. And those interpretations have lives of their own” (266).

The *Good Omens* series has had a life of its own apart from the novel.<sup>5</sup> The visual element adds a dimension to the written narrative – a dimension that in written form resides within the reader’s imagination. In the series, what the viewer sees is Crowley as imagined by the director, the producer, and David Tennant. This Crowley lives through the same events and conducts the same dialogue with other characters as in the novel, but his visual form, facial expressions, body language, and voice have lives of their own. Some viewers will have read the novel before watching the series, and others will not. Their understanding of the story and the moral ambiguity surrounding Crowley (and other characters) will be similar, even though their concept of Crowley and their imagined picture of him will differ.

Examining *Good Omens* through the lens of Linda Hutcheon’s ideas on adaptation reveals some other aspects of adaptation theory and how they affect our perceptions of the novel and the series. In “On the Art of Adaptation,” Hutcheon says, “while no medium is inherently good at doing one thing and not another, each medium (like each genre) has different means of expression and so can aim at certain things better than others” (109). In the series, one example that reflects this idea is Crowley’s changing appearance. Scenes that highlight Crowley’s changing appearance do not appear in the novel, but the detail of Crowley’s clothes and hair changing with the timeline quickly suggests to the viewer something human in his character. He is putting in more effort than is needed simply to fit in with the human population. He seems to enjoy visually fitting in – a human trait that other demons and Aziraphale do not share. The viewer can perceive these details within seconds, unlike character descriptions in writing, which take longer to process. The change in medium from novel to series offers the director a new avenue to explore the character of Crowley, emphasizing his human tendencies through visual means.

Hutcheon explores the similarities between literary adaptation and biological adaptation. In “On the Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Fidelity Discourse and ‘Success’—Biologically,” Hutcheon and Gary R. Bortolotti connect adaptations and biological adaptation with the term “homology,” by which they mean “a similarity in structure that is indicative of a common origin” (444). In *Good Omens*, this similarity manifests itself in multiple forms. The foremost similarity between the novel and the series is the narrator. In the novel, blocks of text are allotted to the narrator, while in the series, the narrator’s voice guides the viewer through the scenes as they appear on screen. Both narrative forms contain intertextual references to other texts, other historical figures and events, and other biblical figures and events, such as the character Crowley and Aleister Crowley, the serpent in the Garden of Eden, and the character Aziraphale and biblical Aziraphale. The

5 The series earned an Average Audience Score of 95% on Rotten Tomatoes ([https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/good\\_omens](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/good_omens)).

structure of the narrative surrounding the moral ambiguity of Crowley is present in both the novel and the series, and it holds an active presence in both media.

Some adaptation theorists believe we should compare certain aspects of an adaptation to its original and some do not. Brian McFarlane, in “Reading Film and Literature,” proposes that it may be “more helpful to consider what film and literature have in common than either to require film to ‘reproduce’ the experience of the book (however doomed an enterprise that might be) or to insist simply on the autonomy of the film” (19). Here, we return to Taylor’s ideas on moral ambiguity and the understanding we come to as readers (or viewers). Even though Crowley is presented differently in the series and the novel, the moral interpretation we construct from the narratives is similar. Crowley’s moral ambiguity reflects his humanity, and Pratchett’s and Gaiman’s overall idea of there being no black-and-white, no fully good or fully evil in the world. Both the novel and the series present the idea of moral ambiguity pertaining not only to Crowley as an individual, but also to a higher entity, here Heaven and Hell, or allegorically, to corporations and governments, placing emphasis on the idea of the corporation versus the individual. The series “remembers” and channels not only Crowley and his morally ambiguous character, but also the novel’s greater idea of this shift in morality which goes hand in hand with the trust, or lack thereof, in authority figures and groups in the real world.

## CONCLUSION

On the question of who is good and who is evil, who is morally ambiguous, and whether anyone is not, Pratchett and Gaiman create a compelling case for a combination of these traits. The main difference between the novel and the television series in terms of Crowley lies in his humanness and in our understanding of him as a demon. In the novel, Crowley’s bad deeds and his efforts to send humans to Hell originate from the Demon Crowley. He is and always will be a demon who has taken on some of Aziraphale’s traits, as well as some human traits, but he is still inherently “other.” In the series, Crowley has cat-like demon eyes, but he is otherwise visibly human; it is easy to forget that he is not actually human. Thus, the reader’s and the viewer’s reasoning for his moral duality may stem from different places of understanding, but the overall message and idea of the novel, its skepticism of ethical absolutism, remains the same within the two forms of narrative. The intertextual connections to the serpent and Aleister Crowley add their own flavours to the mix of Crowley, further emphasizing the character’s morally ambiguous nature. The means to the end is different in the novel and the series, but that comes down to the medium being used and the technological differences in each medium. In *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Julie Sanders captures this idea

of works provoking responses, no matter if they are adaptations: “adaptations and appropriations deserve to be seen as influential and agenda-setting in their own right, and in the process they acknowledge something fundamental about literature and art: that their impulse is to spark thoughts, associations, relationships, and stimulate emotional response” (212). This is a valuable point to end on, since adaptation theorists now strive to move away from fidelity discourse, and instead focus on other aspects of literature, film, and narrative in their exploration of adaptation. *Good Omens* and its namesake TV series thus both spark the same moral understanding of human nature in slightly different ways.

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## **Dobro, zlo in moralno dvoumno: demon Crowley v postmoderni fantaziji Terryja Pratchetta in Neila Gaimana *Dobra znamenja* in njeni televizijski priredbi**

Terry Pratchett in Neil Gaiman v svojem postmodernem fantazijskem romanu *Dobra znamenja* prepričljivo utemeljujeta kombinacijo dobrega in zla pri vseh svojih likih, vendar je en lik še posebej zanimiv: demon Crowley. Moralna dvoumnost zaznamuje tako roman kot istoimensko televizijsko serijo *Good Omens*. Preučil bom moralna vprašanja, ki jih odpirajo napisani in prikazani Crowleyji, ter splošno razumevanje, ki ga bralec ali gledalec pridobi o njegovem liku. Preučim tudi medbesedilno rabo imena "Crowley" in njegove konotacije ter zaključim z vprašanjem, ali je televizijska serija učinkovita priredba Pratchettovega in Gaimanovega romana in njegovega moralno dvoumnega sporočila.

**Ključne besede:** postmoderna fantazija, moralna dvoumnost, intertekstualnost, adaptacija