

Decoding *Lucifer*: Challenging the Retro- Fittings in the History of Satan

Anupa Rose Babu

Assistant Professor, St. Mary's College, Manarcaud
(anuparoz@gmail.com)

Abstract:

Lucifer is a Television drama series developed by Tom Kapinos based on a comic book (The Sandman) character created by Neil Gaiman, Sam Kieth, and Mike Dringenberg. It was premiered on Fox on 25 January 2016. Satan/Lucifer, derived from the Christian myth has always been a misinterpreted figure. Satan is usually viewed as the embodiment of evil according to the religious myths. This paper attempts to decode Lucifer in order to study how this TV show challenges the popular myths revolving around the Lucifer/ Satan/ Devil figure. The series portrays Lucifer as an accuser/ punisher and not the embodiment of evil. Lucifer Morningstar used to be the Lord of Hell where his job was to punish the souls of the sinners before he decided to take a vacation in Los Angeles, USA. While in L.A, he continues his job as a punisher by associating himself with the LAPD. Another popular notion it challenges is the Devil as the tempter and the typical human behaviour to blame the devil thus attempting to escape accountability for our own mistakes/sins. Religious tradition teaches Satan as the most vicious living being in existence but the show purports the idea that even the Devil is not beyond redemption. The paper also envisages to analyse how Lucifer is rooted in Biblical and Miltonian Universes and how it subverts the same.

Keywords: *redemption, retro-fitting, censorship, evil etc.*

*Lucifer is a procedural drama series developed by Tom Kapinos which premiered on Fox television on 25 January 2016. The titular character is based on a supporting character by the name Lucifer Samael Morningstar in the comic book series titled *Sandman* which was written by Neil Gaiman and published by the Vertigo Imprint of DC Comics.*

The series consisted of three seasons with 13 episodes in the first season, 18 in the second and 26 in the third season when Fox cancelled this show after the airing of the twenty fourth episode which ended in a cliffhanger on 18 May 2018. After the cancellation, fans of the show staged a massive protest on the various social media platforms and the show was taken up by Netflix and the fourth season was aired in 2019.

It stars Tom Ellis as Lucifer Morningstar: who has decided to take a vacation from his duties as the Lord of Hell and is the owner of a Nightclub named 'Lux' in Los Angeles and later becomes a civilian consultant to the Los Angeles Police Division (L. A. P. D), Lauren German as Chloe Decker: homicide detective of the L.A.P. D and Lucifer's love-interest, Rachel Harris as Dr. Linda Martin: Lucifer's Psychotherapist and his confidante, Lesley-Ann Brandt as Mazikeen: a demon who followed Lucifer through the gates of hell and his powerful ally with a dark side, D. B. Woodside as Amenadiel, Lucifer's brother who is the eldest of his Angel- siblings and Tricia Helfer as Charlotte Richards: whose body is possessed by their "Mum" (in season 2) the Goddess who had been condemned to hell for eternity by their "Dad", God.

This research paper envisages to analyse this television series with special focus on its eponymous character Lucifer, once-God's favourite son who was casted out of heaven for disobeying Him and condemned to be the Lord of Hell for eternity. The following are the objectives behind this attempt: 1) to examine the historical evolution of the character Satan/ Lucifer derived from the Christian myth ranging from his portrayal in Bible to this TV show, 2) to analyse how the theme of the Devil's redemption is worked out in the series, 3) to look at the controversies circulating the show to examine the hue and cry for censorship and 4) to explore the political commitments of the series.

Henry Ansgar Kelly in his work *Satan: A Biography* argues that Satan is a figure who is largely misunderstood and the negative characterisation associated with this character is due to retro-fitting: "this interpretation has bedeviled the history of Satan, transforming him from a merely obnoxious functionary of the Divine Government into a personification of Evil - a personification that really exists as a person"(2). He states that Satan is not God's enemy in the New Testament but is the accuser of humankind by drawing references from the Bible. The Devil became the embodiment of evil in post-biblical interpretations of the Biblical texts. Thus, according to Kelly, the Bible does not postulate him as God's enemy but he is merely an employee under God's authority. It is the texts and works that came later that portray Satan as God's adversary.

'The Lucifer' in the TV series is located within this context; he is not God's enemy. He is God's estranged son, deeply troubled with psychological complexities, who proclaims to hate his father but underneath that exterior bravado the viewer wonders if that is truly the case. For instance, in the episode titled "God Johnson" (Season 2, Episode 16) we see Lucifer meeting with someone whom he believes to be God. Naturally, he begins by venting his fury upon this character, named God Johnson but later Lucifer works out his issues with him and decides to arrange a meeting with him and his mother who had escaped from hell and came to Earth and was trying to hatch a plan to return to heaven at any cost. The show's didacticism, ironic in one sense, seems to be trying to convey a message to the audience that one can always make peace with one's family members. Though both Lucifer and the Goddess state on multiple occasions that they can never forgive God, once they interact with each other, the previous differences that they had melt away when they apologise to each other.

In this sense we can say that Lucifer is closer to Milton's Satan than any other depictions of him. Milton's *Paradise Lost* offers Satan's perspective on his rebellion with God. Book IV of *Paradise Lost* provides a psychological peek into the character: "Me miserable! Which way shall I fly/ Infinite wrath and infinite despair?/ Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell" (63). Tormented with guilt and sorrow he finally decides that it is "better to reign in Hell, than to serve in Heaven." Lucifer in the TV show is not a diabolical villain or an evil master-mind. When the show begins he is selfish, ruthless, deceptive and even cruel. He considers himself charming and is arrogant to the core. But ironically the devil is not devilish. He is even capable of inspiring people to do good. This is shown in the Pilot episode, when he inspires his long time acquaintance and film star Dalila to turn her life around from substance abuse. However, she gets killed in an encounter soon after and Lucifer decides to seek punishment for Dalila's killer.

His psychological transformation begins when he meets Chloe Decker, the homicide detective who investigates the murder of Dalila. He introduces himself as the devil and naturally she doesn't believe him. Lucifer has the power to draw out the "deep dark naughty little desires" (00:02:11- 12, Episode 1, Season 1) in people's minds. He can manipulate people by making eye contact with them. He describes this as a gift from God. But to his indignation, he finds that his powers do not work on Chloe. This leads him to develop an attraction towards her and initially he accompanies her on her

case to exact punishment for his friend's killer. Later he persuades the Lieutenant to officially appoint him as a civilian consultant to the L. A. P. D. Chloe is a good woman with explicit moral values. The essential goodness and the selflessness of this character influences Lucifer in such a way that he begins to accept her criticism of him in a positive light.

Another important factor which contributes in his psychological development is his sessions with Dr. Linda Martin. The inherent motto of the series, redemption is possible for everyone who makes an attempt at repentance and attaining goodness can be read in this character as well. Dr. Martin initially accepts payments from him as sexual favours but after meeting with Chloe she contemplates on her choices and decides to put an end to this unethical practise.

Each episode revolves around a murder case during the course of which Lucifer learns something valuable. In the second episode of the first season, though he denies initially that earth/ Chloe is changing him, he realises that he " tried to change, that's what's important" (00:36:48) and admits the same to Dr. Martin. We see that he is beginning to care about someone other than himself. He begins to care for humanity as such and tries to ensure that the innocent are not punished and the killers are, in the later episodes. More than that, as Dr. Martin tells him at the end of the third episode: "I think you don't just enjoy punishing the bad people. I think you are starting to enjoy seeking justice for the good ones" (00:41:40-41).

The seventh episode in the first season titled "Wingman" depicts a pivotal moment in Lucifer's transformation and the journey towards redemption. He had severed off his angel wings when he decided to stay on in L. A and never to return to hell. The severed wings were secretly enclosed in a container vehicle to be transported when the container goes missing and a homicide takes place during the theft. Episodes six and seven narrate Lucifer's quest for his wings. Lucifer tracks down the wings through a religious relic auction and realises that his brother Amanadiel orchestrated the theft in order to make him yearn for the wings and to generate in him the desire to return to Hell to resume his duties as it's Lord. He burns the wings in Amanadiel's presence and perhaps this is the most significant moment in his road to redemption. This is when he truly understands that he never wants to go back to hell and this realisation is not simply because of his desire to be with Chloe. It's much more than that; he is rejecting the destiny his father chose for him; he is embracing his own free will. Though it might seem confusing as to how rejecting God's command is an act of redemption, my analysis is that Lucifer is fighting so hard to jettison the image of himself as the prince of darkness and the embodiment of evil. He might have relished in this idea before but now he finds it problematic that others find him evil. It is also crucial to acknowledge that he doesn't consider himself evil. The burning of the wings is not merely the rejection of "the life dear old dad chose" (00:35:02) for him instead it is about embracing himself for who he is, Lucifer, but also Samael, the light-bringer.

The ninth episode "A Priest Walks into a Bar" showcases the idea that no one is beyond saving. Father Frank is a character who greatly influences Lucifer. He tries his level best to tempt him and expose his hypocrisy but to no avail. Frank tells Lucifer and Chloe about his own story of redemption, about how he turned to faith when he lost his family in a car accident. Lucifer finally accepts that there is inherent goodness in people and people with true faith remain incorruptible. It must be mentioned here that faith in the sense that is used here is not faith in any religion; its faith in an entity bigger than oneself.

Father Frank dies at the end of the episode in a cross- firing incident and Lucifer is devastated. Just before he dies, Frank tells him: "At first I didn't understand why God put you in my path. But then it hit me, maybe he put me in yours" (00:35:17-18) to which Lucifer replies: "I highly doubt it. He gave up on me a long time ago." Frank tells him that "You are wrong Lucifer. Your father has a, has a

plan” (00:35:21-38). This scene is momentous in two ways. Firstly, it investigates the possibility of the devil’s redemption. Secondly the priest who is portrayed here is somebody who truly believes in Christianity, not just the institutionalised version of it but in the true essence of it. What else proclaims God’s goodness than the fact that even the devil is redeemable? The last episode of the second season shows Lucifer waking up in the desert with his wings restored. This is symbolic of the fact that he has been redeemed by God. In this sense, the series is propagandist since it encourages the viewer to have faith and imparts a message that we are all capable of goodness and God is forgiving and by repentance and good deeds one can be redeemed. Here the series subverts the demonised portrayal of the devil by the Christian theology, by challenging the retro-fittings that represented the devil as the embodiment of evil and also demarcates between religion and spirituality. It challenges the ideologies of institutionalised religion and expostulates the radical notion that spirituality can exist even without religion. It separates God from religion.

Another radical notion is introduced later in the series when Amanadiel has an epiphany and asks Lucifer: “I am talking about the rules of heaven and hell, Luci. It’s all based on the human subconscious, what they think they deserve. What if it applies to us as well? ... What if He wants us to judge ourselves? My wings, your wings, your devil face, brother, what if we are the ones who control all of it? (Season 3, Episode 23, 00:12:08-10). This conversation is later given evidentiary support in the next episode where Amanadiel gets his wings back when he forgives himself for the mistakes he committed. The vision of hell depicted in the series also revolves around this concept of the self. Hell is a time loop where the guilty soul re-lives that one moment which has the capability to tear him or her apart over and over again.

This brings us to the question of censorship. When this series was announced by Fox “One Million Moms” a website by the American Family Association started a petition demanding Fox to cancel the show: “...because it supposedly paints the Prince of Darkness in a positive light and disrespects the Bible. . . . glorify Satan as a caring, likable person in human flesh,” (Suebsaeng). Another organisation titled America Needs Fatima also came forth with a petition called “Be Gone, Satan. Tell FOX to cancel Lucifer” (*America Needs Fatima*). Censorship has always been an obstacle to creativity and we can see that same is the case here. The very fact that freedom of expression is to be curbed, the idea that something is to be censored, inherently implies that the work in question has subverted or transgressed from the knowledge purported by the authority. Fundamentalists have assumed that they are doing ‘God’s work’ while condemning homosexuality, patriarchy, racism etc. They have used God and religion to legitimise their power positions. They have threatened believers with damnation and hell if conformity to their authority is questioned.

Lucifer challenges such notions especially the rigid puritan code and the excessive emphasis on morality. This does not mean it supports a rejection of morality, instead it merely dispenses the idea that the actions that are often branded sins, like homosexuality, for instance, are not to be viewed as sins. The idea of morality itself is problematised. We often find that the definitions of morality- what is right and wrong- contain hidden agendas to serve the interests of the powerful sources from which they are released.

Many groups have associated this series with Satan worship but the twelfth episode in the first season distinctly clarifies its positions on it. The high priest of a Satanic cult himself admits that the whole thing is a joke. Malcolm, the corrupt police officer after killing three people asks Lucifer if he isn’t impressed and happy by his actions. A deeply agitated Lucifer replies that he has never stood for killing people. “I am not evil, I am the devil”(00:37:46). Similarly the series also criticises the human tendency to blame the devil for their atrocities in an act of evading accountability for one’s own

crimes. “Why do they blame me for all their little failings, as if I had spent my days sitting on their shoulders forcing them to commit acts that they would otherwise find repulsive, ah the devil made me do it. I have never made any one of them do anything. Never.” (Season 1, Episode 6, 00:41:40-41)

The series is politically committed in the sense that it upholds feminist, gay, lesbian stances. It subverts patriarchy and questions the objectification of women. It places in its discourse a divine Goddess in variance with the Christian theology. *Lucifer* also undertakes to subvert Racism. In the series, God’s eldest born son Amanadiel is Black. This is in direct opposition to the popular cultural productions in which white symbolically stands for good and black for evil.

In conclusion, *Lucifer* de-mystifies religion and challenges the retro-fittings in the history of Satan as the embodiment of evil. Thus, the propaganda that operates underneath the show is ‘angelic’ rather than ungodly or foul, ironically. The series also deals with the themes of forgiveness, guilt and atonement. However, it is beyond the scope of a research paper to give weightage to all the themes explored within a series consisting of three seasons. Through this paper, the researcher has examined how the series challenges the notions which came about with the retro-fittings that occurred in the history of ‘satan’ that, Lucifer is the adversary of god and the epitome of evil are questioned.

Works Cited

America Needs Fatima, americaneedsfatima.org/Protests-Petitions/fox-lucifer-tv-protest.html

Kelly, Henry Ansgar. Introduction. *Satan: A Biography*, The Cambridge UP, 2006.

Lucifer. Created by Tom Kapinos, performance by Tom Ellis, *E Z TV*, eztv.ag/search/Lucifer.

Milton, John. ‘Book IV’. *Paradise Lost*, DjVu Editions E-books, 2001, <http://triggs.djvu.org/djvu-editions.com/MILTON/LOST/Download.pdf>.

Suebsaeng, Asawin. “One Million Moms Promise Devil of a Time for ‘Lucifer’ TV Show.” *Daily Beast*, 6 June 2015, thedailybeast.com/one-million-moms-promise-devil-of-a-time-for-lucifer-tv-show.