What's the Afterlife Got to Do with It? A Comparison between Biblical and Contemporary Depictions of Heaven and Hell

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The concepts of Heaven and Hell have become perhaps two of the most iconic identifiers of the Christian faith. While the Old and New Testaments are often misrepresented as the origins of contemporary depictions of Heaven and Hell—white pearly gates and eternal fiery punishment—these cultural representations are instead culminations of centuries of theological and literary evolutions. While these differences and evolutions can be easily linked to notable texts and authors, explanations for these shifts and contradicting representations are few and far between. This essay serves to identify how contemporary cultural understandings of Heaven and Hell are not solely derived from biblical evidence, but are rather an amalgamation of biblical, literary, and cultural interpretations; by reviewing their presentation within the Old and New Testaments, identifying Dante Alighieri's Inferno as a defining literary depiction of modern interpretations of Hell, and exploring notable pop cultural depictions of these biblical afterlives, I will examine representations of Heaven and Hell throughout history, pinpointing significant cultural shifts and attempting to identify what these shifts might indicate for the culture overall.

Notably, neither Heaven nor Hell is mentioned by name in the Old Testament. Instead of two diametrically opposed afterlives, the Old Testament makes frequent reference to a singular afterlife: Sheol. Sheol is referred to as "the world of the dead," first mentioned in Genesis 37:35 (The Old Testament 85). Grieving his son Joseph, Jacob says, "For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning" (King James Version: The Old Testament, Gen. 37:35). The Norton Critical Edition of the Old Testament provides a relevant footnote for this passage, identifying "into the grave" to mean "to Sheol" (The Old Testament 85). Sheol never receives a physical description; however, more metaphorical and symbolic attributes have defined what existence in Sheol is like. In the Book of Ecclesiastes, the unknown prophet claims that "there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave," depicting Sheol as a place where one exists with no desires, motivations, or thought (King James Version: The Old Testament, Eccles. 9:10). Despite literary evidence that primarily points to Sheol as Heaven nor Hell, there are some passages within the Old Testament that describe God's connection and relationship to Sheol. The Song of Moses within the Book of Deuteronomy depicts a direct reference from God to Sheol: "For a fire is kindled in mine anger, and shall burn unto the lowest hell" (King James Version: The Old Testament Deut. 32:22). While this passage does explicitly use the word "hell," it is important to note that the phrase "lowest hell" was written in previous translations as "depths of Sheol" (The Old Testament 388). This passage could provide

literary evidence that Sheol is in closer comparison to our contemporary understanding of Hell: Sheol is burned by fire that directly stems from God's anger, indicating Sheol to be an afterlife meant for those who have angered God. However, Sheol is also written as a place for those who were righteous; in the Book of Isaiah, the faithful king Hezekiah proclaimed that he, "in the cutting off of [his] days… shall go to the gates of the grave" (King James Version: The Old Testament Isa. 38:10). Once again, the phrase "gates of the grave" had been previously written as "Sheol" (The Old Testament 1258). The brief mention that Hezekiah—a king known for his zealous commitment to God and his faith—would also pass on into Sheol confirms that Sheol is neither Heaven nor Hell, but an indiscriminate afterlife for both the wicked and the righteous to reside.

The New Testament, while it does directly refer to Heaven and Hell by name, is perhaps vaguer regarding the descriptions and definitions of the two afterlives than one might assume. The New Testament is notably very unclear when explaining what Heaven is supposed to be like, offering no concrete description nor visualization of the place. The Book of Revelation, however, provides a detailed description of "New Jerusalem," described in 2 Peter as an eternal place "wherein dwelleth righteousness" (King James Version: The New Testament 2 Pet. 3:13). It is important to note that New Jerusalem is referenced as heaven on Earth, differing from the concept of Heaven as an afterlife; regardless, the description of New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation exists as a primary foundation for the contemporary understanding of what Heaven might look like. John the Apostle describes New Jerusalem as an ethereal place, and "her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal" (King James Version: The New Testament Rev. 21:11). John continues, explaining that "the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass," and "had no need of the sun…for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof" (King James Version: The New Testament Rev. 21:18, 21:23). This description of New Jerusalem, regarded by many within the Christian faith to be representative of Heaven itself, paints a picture of the classic white clouds and pearly gates, providing biblical context and evidence that forms the classic contemporary understanding of Heaven.

The New Testament is equally vague in its references to Hell as it is to Heaven. While there is no one identifiable passage that defines and details Hell, there are a handful of passages that provide references to what contemporary audiences may recognize as Hell-aligned ideologies and places. The Book of Matthew indicates that those who have strayed from God's teachings "shall be in danger of hell fire;" the phrase 'hell fire' is translated from the word 'Gehenna,' which refers to "the place where flames were supposed to torture the evil dead" (King James Version: The New Testament Matt. 5:22, Mark 9:43). Further in the Book of Matthew, Jesus proclaims that being born unto the nation of Israel is not enough to guarantee eternal life in the kingdom of heaven, stating that "the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth," perhaps describing a dark, violent Hell (King James Version: The New Testament Matt. 8:12). Another possible depiction of Hell is the Book of Revelation's mention of a "lake which burneth with fire and brimstone," into which "the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in" (King James Version: The New Testament Rev. 21:8). The concept of Hell as a fiery landscape was perhaps derived in part from this passage, describing a method of punishment for sinners that involves being cast into a burning lake. Despite this collection of Hell-aligned references, however, it is important to note that the New Testament never clearly defines any of these places or punishments

as Hell; only through speculation and interpretation have these passages provided the foundation for the contemporary understanding of Hell as it is defined by the Christian faith.

While the New Testament provides the necessary fundamentals of the contemporary understandings and depictions of Heaven, it can be argued that one literary work has shaped and influenced cultural understandings of Hell more so than any other: Dante Alighieri's Inferno. While Dante's Divine Comedy did include representations of Purgatory and Heaven, neither were as foundational and influential to cultural perceptions and representations of Purgatory and Heaven as Inferno was to Hell. This text, influenced by Christianity and discussing biblical stories and concepts, cemented itself as a crucial literary work, widely regarded as a masterful display of poetry and prose. Inferno follows Dante as he is led through Hell by Virgil, a Roman poet whom Dante notably idolized and frequently drew inspiration from. In his journey throughout Hell, Dante witnesses firsthand the Nine Circles of Hell, establishing a version of Hell that is frequently referenced to this day.

In Inferno, the Nine Circles of Hell progress downwards into increasing degrees of evil and sin. The First Circle is that of Limbo, a place of souls "blameless" of their sin, for "baptism was not theirs / The portal to thy faith" (Alighieri, Canto IV 31-34). The Second Circle holds those who have sinned with Lust, tormented by "the stormy blast of hell [that] with restless fury drives the spirits on," condemned to a fate that parallels the swaying of moral reason caused by Lust (Alighieri, Canto V 32-33). The Third Circle is home to the gluttonous, while the Fourth is home to the greedy. The Fifth Circle houses the wrathful, where damned souls "with their hands alone / Struck not, but with the head, the breast, the feet, / Cutting each other piecemeal with their fangs" (Alighieri, Canto VII 115-117). The Sixth Circle punishes heretics, trapped in "graves [with] scatter'd flames, / Wherewith intensely all throughout they burn'd, / That iron for no craft there hotter needs" (Alighieri, Canto IX 116-118).

The Seventh Circle houses the Violent, and is broken into three rings, each serving to punish a different kind of violence: violence against others, against the self, and against God, art, and nature. The first ring punishes those who have committed violence against others by subjecting them to eternity in a river of "boiling" blood (Alighieri, Canto XII 127). The second, punishing those who either attempted or committed suicide, turns souls into rough and knotted trees where "brute Harpies make their nest" (Alighieri, Canto XIII 11). The third and final ring punishes the Blasphemers, Sodomites, and Usurers, keeping them in a vast plain of sand over which "dilated flakes of fire… descending, solid flames" fall upon the land and the damned (Alighieri, Canto XIV 25-26). The Eighth Circle punishes Fraud, and has ten different layers for different categories of fraudulent sinners; these categories range from flatterers to thieves. Finally, the Ninth Circle, the lowest circle of Hell, serves to punish sinners guilty of treachery and betrayal. The Ninth Circle is "[a] lake, whose frozen surface liker seem'd / To glass than water," and those within this circle are frozen in this lake—some able to move their necks and heads, others completely restrained (Alighieri, Canto XXXII 24-25). These Circles provide exquisite examples and depictions of the horrors of Hell; while the New and Old Testaments vaguely refer to Hell as darkness, fire, and pain, Inferno expands upon these brief mentions, building a grotesque world of torture and punishment and providing detailed ideas of Hell that fill in the vague gaps left by biblical evidence.

With this, we gain a clearer picture of what Heaven and Hell have largely come to mean in contemporary art and culture. From the New Testament, we can pinpoint Heaven as light, ethereal, and precious; from Inferno—alongside

fundamental biblical depictions from both the Old and New Testaments—Hell is a brutal, violent, and terrifying punishment. With these broad descriptors operating as our understanding of the common cultural interpretation of Heaven and Hell, we can now examine how the two have been portrayed within popular culture, exploring the limitations of these defined interpretations and examining how they are referenced and rejected in media.

The selected pop cultural representations of Heaven can be divided into three categories: depictions that align with the New Testament fundamentals, depictions that are less structured than the black-and-white nature of Heaven and Hell, and depictions that question the very nature of Heaven. Aligning well with the New Testament fundamentals of Heaven is the CW television series Supernatural, an action fantasy series following two brothers who hunt demons, monsters, and other supernatural entities. Also called "The Attic," "The Penthouse," and "Paradise," Heaven is depicted in Supernatural as an ageless, ethereal holy realm created by God—a final resting place for souls worthy to reside there ("Byzantium"). Before the reformation of Heaven, those who ascended spent eternity occupying happy memories they experienced on Earth. However, this model of Heaven meant that individuals were kept in their own individual paradise; Heaven as a whole appeared as long, white hallways filled with doors, each leading to an individual's heaven ("Jack in the Box"). After the reformation of Heaven, the restricting hallways of Heaven were removed, leaving a replica of Earth for every heavenly soul to coexist with one another in the afterlife ("Carry On"). It is never specified what exactly constitutes a "worthy soul" within Supernatural's Heaven, although vague references throughout the show indicate that acceptance into Heaven is based on God's decision. Interestingly, however, the archangel Raphael states that being devout "trumps everything," explaining why a corrupt and fraudulent businessman had a spot in Heaven ("The Man Who Would Be King"). Supernatural, then, imagines a Heaven where righteousness is not the fundamental truth of acceptance; instead, devoutness is the scale on which a soul is weighed.

Another biblically-aligned depiction of Heaven—although aligned solely in the visual sense—can be found in South Park. Albeit a heavily satirized depiction of Heaven, South Park's Heaven mirrors much of the imagery described in the New Testament; Heaven has golden gates, blue skies, and white fluffy clouds (South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut). While this is a distinct modernization of the New Testament imagery, it maintains themes of ethereal beauty and pure light. That being said, there are significant attributes to South Park's Heaven that distinguish it from conventional cultural depictions of Heaven. Perhaps the most significant is the fact that, until the season nine episode "Best Friends Forever," the only people permitted entry into Heaven were Mormons; this only changed because God "[knew] that Hell was becoming much larger, [and] decided to let more people cross over so that he could build an army as well" ("Best Friends Forever"). Heaven being exclusive to Mormons wasn't a one-off bit, either; in the 2014 video game South Park: The Stick of Truth, players are shown a 'Game Over' screen upon dying that depicts three Mormons standing outside of the gates of Heaven, appearing to welcome the player in (South Park: The Stick of Truth). South Park defines itself as a deeply satirical commentary where nothing is off-limits, which invites a question regarding the visual similarities between their Heaven and the New Testament Heaven; is the similarity a jab of sorts? While one can easily pinpoint an unspoken religious commentary via the Mormon exclusivity, it is equally worthwhile to question if visual congruence with the New Testament is a form of subtle satirization, perhaps

taking a jab at the depiction itself. Of course, South Park's Heaven could easily align with the New Testament for the purposes of being recognizable, but questioning the intent behind the visual elements can provide interesting discussion and insights regarding the satirization of Christian beliefs.

The final piece of media that aligns with the New Testament fundamentals of Heaven is the television adaptation of Good Omens, a series created by Neil Gaiman based on his and Terry Pratchett's 1990 novel. Told through the unlikely friendship of an angel and a demon, Good Omens follows various biblical characters as they either try to aid or stop Armageddon. Heaven is a place where angels work and fulfill their "angelic duties," and is also where righteous souls ascend after death ("The Doomsday Option"). Heaven takes the form of a large open-plan high-rise office space; there are no individual rooms and no dividing walls. Everything is white—from the floors to the ceilings—and the full-glass walls provide a naturally bright setting; this whiteness and open-space setting provides a modernized (and even corporatized) take on the New Testament fundamentals of Heaven. The top floor of Heaven provides a view of the entire Earth, with small buildings and houses visible alongside significant notable landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower, Great Pyramids, and Empire State Building ("The Doomsday Operation"). Heaven and Hell can be accessed through the same lobby, which holds two escalators; one goes up and the other—you guessed it—goes down ("The Very Last Day of the Rest of Their Lives"). Not only does this provide a fun visual experience, but it also recontextualizes the relationship between Heaven and Hell; instead of diametrically opposed factions, the two operate in Good Omens as two different departments within the same company. Interestingly, Heaven in Good Omens—despite being a resting place for "good" souls—is never depicted as actually having any deceased inhabitants. Are there—like Dante's Inferno—perhaps layers to Good Omens' Heaven, and viewers have only witnessed the corporate office space level? Or is there something most sinister implied, and is there a reason why there are no souls in Heaven? While Good Omens provides no answers to this hypothetical, The Good Place just might.

Moving away from biblically aligned depictions of Heaven and towards less structured and traditional representations, The Good Place is a philosophical comedy series that asks the question: What if people stopped getting into Heaven? The Good Place renames Heaven and Hell as 'The Good Place' and 'The Bad Place,' respectively. When a person dies, their entrance into either the Good Place or the Bad Place is determined based on a point system that analyzes the individual's every action, identifying actions that resulted in positive consequences with "good points" and deducting said points for actions resulting in negative consequences ("The Book of Dougs"). Actions that may have had positive consequences but were motivated by selfish or "corrupt" reasons receive no points. A person's point total is calculated when they die, and there is a minimum requirement of "one million goodness points" to be granted entry to the Good Place; even if someone is just one point shy of this threshold, however, they are damned to the Bad Place ("The Book of Dougs"). Points can also be deducted for actions that resulted in unintended negative consequences; one character, Chidi Anagonye, was deducted a significant amount of goodness points and thus was sent to the Bad Place—his "indecisiveness," as a result of hyperfocusing on being ethical, annoyed everyone around him so profoundly that his commitment to being ethical was ultimately for nothing ("Michael's Gambit"). Unfortunately, this point system grew an astounding flaw: as human society grew and became more ethically complicated, the system deducted points for just about any action one could take. For

example, in the modern age, buying flowers for a relative resulted in point deductions via "indirect support of illegal pesticides, unfair labor, use of a cellphone made in a sweat shop (which also generated a large carbon footprint), and the money going to a sexist CEO" ("The Book of Dougs"). The Good Place, via an altered depiction of Heaven, provides a unique critique of industrialization and late-stage capitalism, ultimately arguing that there is no ethical lifestyle within the modern world. This flawed point system, however, meant that no one had been accepted into the Good Place since the year 1497.

To save humanity from eternal damnation, the four main characters of The Good Place revise the Afterlife, replacing the point system with 'The Test.' The test is designed and specified for each individual and their experiences on Earth and can take infinite forms—a false "Good Place," an example scenario taken directly from the individual's lived experiences, or a twisted version of the individual's life ("You've Changed, Man"). The difficulty of this test is determined based on the individual's point total, integrating the past system with the new. Only after an individual passes their test can they be admitted to the Good Place; if they fail, Afterlife Architects (designers of the tests) evaluate the individual's performance and reset the individual's memory, allowing them to retain a vague recollection of their previous actions and the feedback they received after failing, permitting gradual yet natural improvement. It is acknowledged that some may never pass their test, but at least everyone "gets a fair shot," curbing the terminal nature of the previous point system ("You've Changed Man"). However, fixing the point system only fixed the problem of unfair judgment; the Good Place remained a problematic realm.

Before its reformation, inhabitants of the Good Place were profoundly bored and lifeless—those who resided in the Good Place were described by one inhabitant as "mindless happiness zombies" ("Patty"). Upon learning this information, the Head Architect of the Good Place creates the Last Door, a passageway in the Good Place through which any inhabitant who feels ready may leave the afterlife. What is behind the Last Door is unknown—walking through the Door ends a person's existence as they've always known it and dissolves their essence, which spreads throughout the universe—but it is the finality of death, of an ending, that makes eternity worthwhile to experience. The Good Place imagines a Heaven that is as eternal as one wants it to be, addressing the potential drawbacks of a utopic afterlife. The Last Door provides humans with an ending, granting purpose and meaning to life after death.

Different in structure but similarly unique, Adventure Time offers an image of an afterlife beyond the two distinctions of Heaven and Hell; instead, the afterlife takes the form of Dead Worlds. Dead Worlds are places where individuals spend their afterlife upon death. Deceased people have a choice to be reincarnated to attempt to transcend to a higher Dead World, of which there are a known 50. The 50th Dead World seems to be equivalent to Heaven, but draws inspiration from the Buddhist concept of Nirvana instead of the Christian ideologies of faith and devotion to a higher being. To get to the 50th Dead World—reserved for only the purest of souls—one must be free of all desires, including the desire to enter the Dead World ("Together Again"). The 50th Dead World is a vast, spiraling structure that emits a soft, golden light; those who exist in the 50th Dead World can either take their mortal form (albeit with a golden glow and adorned in a white robe) or can present as a disembodied, orb-like presence that resembles a cartoon-ish sun ("Together Again"). Adventure Time's depiction of Heaven is brief but special, using the system to show how a character—after dying and entering the 37th Dead World—grieves their

brother who resides in the 50th, now devoid of a desire to have a relationship with them. Similar to The Good Place, the 50th Dead World forces us to wonder if true enlightenment and a utopic afterlife is all it's chalked up to be, for abandoning desire for monetary or physical goods forces us to abandon the desire for love and connection.

With this in mind, the third and final categorization of contemporary representations of Heaven is depictions that further question the very nature of Heaven, explicitly imagining Heaven as something undesirable. The Talking Heads song "Heaven" off their 1979 album Fear of Music imagines Heaven as "a place where nothing ever happens" (Talking Heads). Heaven is imagined as an utterly liminal space; every good thing happens repeatedly and identically, there is no variation, and the very idea of 'perfect' is called into question. The first stanza refers to Heaven as a bar, and explains that "[t]he band in Heaven plays my favorite song / They play it once again, they play it all night long" (Talking Heads). Later, the song describes both a party and a kiss; "everyone will leave [the party] at exactly the same time," and "when this kiss is over it will start again / It will not be any different, it will be exactly the same" (Talking Heads). These moments, typically categorized as joyful or precious, instead turn banal and bland. Desperately, David Byrne cries out the final lines of the second-to-last stanza: "It's hard to imagine that nothing at all / Could be so exciting, could be so much fun" (Talking Heads). And it is hard to imagine, because how could you? "Heaven" depicts a melancholy view of eternity, questioning the very concept of eternal happiness, and in many ways, paints Heaven as a sort of Hell.

In live performances, "Heaven" is performed with a heartbreaking tenderness, tapping into the loneliness that is in the very essence of the song. In their 1984 concert film Stop Making Sense, the Talking Heads perform "Heaven" on a nearly empty stage. It's important to note that Stop Making Sense progresses through its setlist in a physical manner; the concert's opening track, "Psycho Killer," is performed on a dark stage with a singular spotlight set on David Byrne. As the concert progresses, the stage becomes more lit, more band members are visible, and the energy of the songs generally ramps up. "Heaven" is the second track on the concert's setlist, and thus is performed on a dark stage, a spotlight resting only on David Byrne and Tina Weymouth (Stop Making Sense). The performance is isolating yet intimate, indicating another level to "Heaven" inaccessible when merely listened to: there is a longing for this banality, despite the knowledge that it is devastating. Another notable performance of "Heaven" comes from David Byrne's solo tour, Who is the Sky? This concert is performed on a stage made of screens; the floor, as well as the surrounding walls of the stage, are completely composed of screens, providing a unique and immersive visual experience alongside the auditory. Who is the Sky? begins with "Heaven," and is performed in a similarly isolating manner: Set on the surface of the Moon with the backdrop of empty space, David Byrne stands alone and performs "Heaven" for the crowd in a truly monochrome blue suit (Byrne). As the second chorus begins, four band members dressed in the exact same suits join Byrne on the stage, lending their voices and swelling the song; as they do so, Earth begins to rise in the screen of empty space behind Byrne. After the song concludes, Byrne addresses the audience as he turns to face the distant Earth: "There's our Heaven. It's the only one we've got" (Byrne). There's something more hopeful about this performance of "Heaven," less focused on portraying the boring nature of eternity and more intensely warning us that desiring eternity is pointless—we already have our Heaven.

The final depiction of Heaven that will be addressed is the Heaven presented in Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes by Tony Kushner. Angels in America is a two-

part play set in 1980s New York City, taking place at the height of the AIDS crisis. The story provides complex and symbolic representations of homosexuality and the impact AIDS had on the queer community, framing queer themes against a backdrop of biblical allusions and religious motifs. The text's primary goal is to highlight queer experiences and struggles, and the unique grief and despair that plagued the queer community during the AIDS crisis directly shape and contextualize the text's depiction of Heaven. Angels in America primarily focuses on a gay man named Prior Walter who has been diagnosed with AIDS, resulting in his partner abandoning him; after this diagnosis, followed by a rapid progression of the disease, Prior is visited by the Angel of America and is made a prophet. The Angel of America speaks directly with Prior, explaining that God, "Bored with His Angels, Bewitched by Humanity…Abandoned [the Angels] and did not return" (Kushner 170-171). The precise date of this abandonment is "April 18, 1906," the date of the Great San Francisco Earthquake (Kushner 171).

Before God abandoned the Angels, the Angel of America describes Heaven as "a City Much Like San Francisco," lively and sexual (Kushner 166). The Angel of America—a being who has witnessed and experienced Heaven—is not the only character who describes a Heaven reminiscent of San Francisco; Belize, a nurse and former drag queen—who has never been to Heaven—says that Heaven is "[l] ike San Francisco" when describing the realm to his dying patient, Roy Cohn (Kushner 222). Belize elaborates further, imagining Heaven as a "big city… overgrown with flowering weeds," with "piles of trash, but lapidary like rubies and obsidian, and diamond-colored cow-spit streamers in the wind… and voting booths" (Kushner 222). To Belize, the inhabitants of Heaven are all "in Balenciaga gowns with red corsages, and big dance palaces full of music and lights and racial impurity and gender confusion" (Kushner 223). Belize, a gay Black man, builds an idea of Heaven that not only seems to correctly elaborate on what we know Heaven to look like, but is the image of an afterlife that denounces the stereotypical white image of Heaven and caters towards POC and queer identity. Belize's image of Heaven is less impactful because it is correct; rather, it serves as a powerful reclamation of a peaceful afterlife that had, at the time, been denied to the queer community by white Christian nationalists.

After God's abandonment, however, Heaven "looks like San Francisco after the Great Quake: deserted streets, beautiful buildings in ruins, toppled telegraph poles, downed electrical cables, rubble strewn everywhere" (Kushner 262). San Francisco is frequently referred to as the 'gay capital of the United States,' earning this cultural title due to its rich queer history and demographic; this contextualization of San Francisco makes Heaven's depiction all the more significant. Angels in America utilizes Heaven—focusing particularly on the concept of Heaven as a joyous, safe, and free realm—as a form of queer liberation, taking the form of the queerest city in the United States. It equally, however, uses this established symbol of a queered afterlife to depict the immeasurable grief brought about by the AIDS crisis, opting to examine Heaven not as a solely religious afterlife, but as a display of queer defiance and resistance.

We have explored differing pop-cultural representations of Heaven, noting key groups of media that depict Heaven similarly to the conventional cultural image, as modified realms that exist in reimaginings of the structured nature of the afterlife, and as places that deliver symbolic and metaphorical ideas and questions concerning Heaven itself. While exploring the pop cultural representations of Hell, I will return to previously analyzed pieces of media that include a representation of Hell, and will similarly divide my examples into two distinct categories: Those that

follow the conventional contemporary idea of Hell as an evil place of punishment and torture, and those that challenge this idea of Hell and imagine a fundamentally different afterlife. Good Omens—following its depiction of Heaven—portrays Hell very similarly to conventional conceptions, imagining Hell as a dark, evil, and torturous place. There are some structural redesigns, of course, but the key defining traits of Hell are kept in mind and faithfully explored; Hell is a claustrophobic, narrow, and constricting place—not unsimilar to tight passages and alleyways ("The Doomsday Option"). Good Omens portrays the evil of Hell through claustrophobia, indicating a packed environment full of sinners with minimal light. Hell takes on a black and greenish color palette, reminiscent of filth and illness; adding insult to injury via set dressing, the walls of Hell are adorned with 'de-motivational posters,' fostering an environment of hate, apathy, and loathing. Examples of messages on these posters include: "YOU DON'T MATTER," "GIVE UP NOW," and "CHEER UP! Remember—the worst IS yet to come" ("Saturday Morning Funtime"). Hell shares its entrance with Heaven, mirroring Heaven's ascending escalator with an inverse, descending one; spatially, Hell is portrayed as "below" ("The Very Last Day of the Rest of Their Lives"). Although the torturous elements of Hell are watered down in Good Omens, as there are only references made to souls being tortured as opposed to visual examples, Supernatural fills in details about Hell that Good Omens shies away from.

Hell in Supernatural is the spiritual realm for punishment and pain, also referenced in the show as "The Fiery Pit," "The Netherworld," and "Hades" ("Born Under a Bad Sign"). The nickname "Hades" is particularly interesting, as the New Testament occasionally used the Greek word 'hades' to refer to what has since been translated to 'hell' (The New Testament 602). While the common cultural understanding of Hell imagines eternal punishment, the punishment in Supernatural's Hell is technically finite; human souls that are sent to Hell are tormented until their humanity is stripped away, an incredibly slow and arduous process that turns human souls into demons ("Malleus Maleficarum"). As a result, Hell is a place feared by demons, described by one as a prison of "flesh, and bone, and blood, and fear" ("Born Under a Bad Sign"). Hell is imagined as a fiery, scorching place that can "sizzle the flesh off of bones;" although the Ninth Circle of Dante's Hell is represented as a lake of ice, a combination of biblical references to hellfire and Dante's Sixth and Seventh Circles that contain fiery landscapes and punishments have created a contemporary belief that Hell is a hot, fiery place ("No Rest For the Wicked"). In another possible illusion to Dante's Inferno, Supernatural's Hell appears to have levels with varying landscapes, although it is unknown what the significance of these levels is ("On the Head of a Pin"). Uniquely, Supernatural integrates the idea of time as a form of punishment into its Hell, defining a 120:1 ratio of time that has passed in Hell to time that has passed on Earth—one character, missing from Earth for four months, was revealed to have spent 40 years tortured in Hell ("Family Remains"). While the concept of time is largely unexplored in the foundational depictions of Hell, the elongation of time serves as a unique torture device, perpetuating one's perception of the torture they experience. Wasting time is also explored as a punishment; in one episode, Crowley—the king of Hell—forces every soul in Hell to suffer in a "never-ending queue," in which they are sent to the back of the impossibly long line of "6,611,527,124" sinners immediately after reaching the front ("The Man Who Would Be King"). Boredom is reimagined as the perfect punishment, opting for pointless apathy over violent torture.

Supernatural also includes a representation of 'Limbo,' an afterlife condition in Catholic

theology and the First Circle of Dante's Inferno. In Supernatural, Limbo is a dark, desolate place built of bones; Crowley describes Limbo as "the furthest reaches of Hell, where [he sends] unruly souls for timeout" ("O Brother Where Art Thou?"). Supernatural's Limbo, however, greatly differs from Dante's Circle for blameless sinners, depicted instead as perhaps the most isolated part of Hell, meant instead for "unruly" and potentially problematic sinners—personally, I shudder to imagine what constitutes an "unruly" soul in Hell.

Adventure Time, similar to their treatment of Heaven, reconsiders the afterlife while still creating a recognizable Hell. Adventure Time does not provide a location that directly translates to the common depiction of Hell, but provides two realms that share similarities. The first is the Nightosphere; ruled by the powerful and deathless Hunson Abadeer, the Nightosphere is a red, fiery, underground dimension home to demons ("Return to the Nightosphere"). While the Nightosphere is not an afterlife, merely the dimension where demons come from, it heavily draws upon the stereotypical imagery of Hell and includes depictions of punishment—the recipients of these punishments, however, are not the souls of sinners but the native demon inhabitants. Nearly identical to Supernatural, the Nightosphere imagines Hell as a very long line; however, instead of being transported to the back upon getting to the front of the line, those who have waited receive direct counsel with the ruler of Hell, during which they are often deformed or brutally injured ("Return to the Nightosphere"). Although the Nightosphere emulates and operates as a sort of Hell, it does not exist as a place for deceased souls; perhaps a closer example within Adventure Time is the 1st Dead World. Supposedly intended for "the worst of the worst," the 1st Dead World is the lowest possible Dead World to enter after death; cavernous and dark, the 1st Dead World is utterly bleak ("Together Again"). Being subjected to eternity in the 1st Dead World includes becoming trapped in a pool of slime while being constantly attacked and tormented by monstrous creatures.

While the 1st Dead World is not a punishment catered to any particular sin, its surroundings include a direct reference to the forest of suicides in Dante's Seventh Circle of Hell; in the background of the 1st Dead World, viewers can spot trees with a mangled array of bodies as a substitute for leaves ("Together Again"). Adventure Time makes another reference to Inferno in the 53rd Issue of the Adventure Time comic book, in which an adventurer is sent to the 27th Dead World, a place incredibly reminiscent of Limbo. The 27th Dead World is an "infinite plane" for souls to wander infinitely; there is no punishment nor salvation, and this eternal sentence mirrors the idea of Limbo as a place for blameless sinners that neither offers heavenly retribution nor torments them for their sin (Wands). Adventure Time expands the concept of a dual-system afterlife, identifying the nuance of the mortal experience and thus arguing the limitations of categorizing all beings as either good or bad.

The Good Place similarly engages with the nuances of ethics, opting to explore and critique the ethics of the dual-system afterlife itself. Hell is referred to as "The Bad Place" and is not necessarily a damnation for evil, but rather a final destination for any soul whose point total was not enough for salvation in the Good Place. As previously mentioned, the Bad Place was eradicated when the afterlife was restructured using the Test, a system that infinitely puts an individual through a test of ethics until success, upon which they are admitted to the Good Place ("You've Changed, Man"). Before the restructuring of the afterlife, however, the Bad Place was a place of torture. Broken into "neighborhoods," the Bad Place punishments were typically random and non-specific to the sufferer's lived experiences: certain Bad Place punishments include the classic hell move of "burning people with fire," the violent

game of "busting humans open like a pinata," and the horrifyingly ambiguous "butthole spiders" ("Everything is Great!"). The Bad Place focuses less on punishing souls in ways related to their sins in their mortal lives, but instead imagines a Hell where demons punish for the sole purpose of enjoyment. Truly, the demons in the Bad Place derive joy from torture, and while punishments are handed out without relation to who is receiving them, the demons are immensely creative and form niche areas of punishment, splitting into departments for further refinement of categories of torture: "The Performative Wokeness Department," "The Spastic Dentistry Department," and the nine unique hot dog torture departments—including "making people into" and "stuffing people with"—imply a version of Hell that operates as a Heaven for those who run it ("Rhonda, Diana, Jake, and Trent"). Of course, all of these various departments and punishments were ultimately eradicated, a decision that ultimately eradicated The Good Place's version of Hell. However, despite the eradication of the Bad Place in favor of an afterlife ruled by a test of ethics, a third place remained: The Medium Place.

The Medium Place is The Good Place's version of Limbo, described as "eternal mediocrity" and created before the afterlife's reform for the singular purpose of housing Mindy St. Claire, a woman who sent the afterlife into chaos upon dying ("Mindy St. Claire"). While high on cocaine, Mindy had an epiphany that she needed to do something good with her life and drew up plans for a global charity foundation to aid children in need; the very next day, on her way to create the foundation, she was killed after falling on subway tracks and electrocuted ("Mindy St. Claire"). After dying, Mindy's sister found her plans and founded the "Mindy St. Claire Rescue Alliance," which became the largest relief aid charity in the world. The Good Place and Bad Place argued over whether Mindy should receive goodness points for the posthumously attributed charity, and ultimately compromised by creating the Medium Place. While Mindy can have nearly everything she desires (besides cocaine, something she truly loves), everything in the Medium Place is altered to bring her neither suffering nor bliss; for example, the Medium Place provides Mindy's favorite beer, but it is always warm. There is also a jukebox with every song ever sung, but only performed by The Eagles in live renditions, as well as some "spoken word poetry performed by William Shatner" ("Mindy St. Claire"). Similar to Adventure Time's 27th Dead World, the Medium Place provides neither suffering nor salvation, only providing mediocrity for all eternity.

The final pop cultural depiction of Hell that reimagines the traditional concept is the Hell of South Park. Equally as satirized as their depiction of Heaven, South Park's Hell is home to nearly all deceased people, as Heaven was only accessible for Mormons ("Best Friends Forever"). As a result—and to the dissatisfaction of certain viewers—notable celebrities and figures can be seen residing within Hell, such as Hitler, Tiny Tim, John F. Kennedy, Princess Diana, and Jeffrey Dahmer ("Do the Handicapped Go to Hell?"). While Hell is visually represented as the typical red and fiery domain, it is important to note that South Park's Hell is really...not that bad. Inhabitants are frequently seen existing in neighborhoods, building homes, and engaging in leisurely pastimes ("Do the Handicapped Go to Hell?"). Even Satan—referred to frequently as "The Evil One" or "Prince of Darkness"—is a reasonably easy-going guy; throughout the show, Satan is depicted as a sensitive individual often caught up in relationship drama, frequently hosting parties for the inhabitants of Hell ("Hell on Earth 2006"). Christmas is even celebrated in Hell, with lights, trees, and various decorations adorning the buildings and homes of Hell ("Mr. Hankey's Christmas Classics"). Although there are brief visuals of people chained for "punishment," even this can be easily interpreted as a satirical

representation more aligned with punishments of a sexual nature (South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut). In light of Heaven being heavily restricted and exclusive, South Park reinvents Hell as a place more aligned with the concept of Sheol: an indiscriminate afterlife for both sinners and saints—but never Mormons.

South Park also represents the theological concept of Purgatory, notably different from the representations of Limbo within previously explored media. Referenced as the "Plane of Purgatory," South Park's Purgatory is a realm where a dead person goes if they do not accept their death, differing from the Catholic depiction of Purgatory as a place for souls to be cleansed before entering Heaven. The Plane of Purgatory is an airplane that is missing the airplane, if you will; there are rows of seats, flight attendants, floors, and intercoms, but the external shell of an airplane is replaced by never-ending fog ("Dead Celebrities"). In the episode "Dead Celebrities," the Plane of Purgatory has been stuck for three months, carrying notable celebrities who died in 2009; only when Michael Jackson accepts his death is the Plane of Purgatory able to take off ("Dead Celebrities"). Although the Plane of Purgatory is played as a joke and is largely dissimilar to established theological descriptions of Purgatory, its representation addresses the liminality of existence between life and the afterlife; in fact, the perpetual delay of takeoff is similar to both Supernatural and Adventure Time's depictions of Hell as incredibly long lines.

Contemporary pop cultural depictions of Heaven and Hell have ranged from those that mirror and emulate the common contemporary cultural definitions of the afterlife to those that critique and alter the concept of the afterlife entirely; the question at the heart of this matter, however, is why? In certain religious circles, alternate depictions of Heaven and Hell that stray from accepted religious definitions of the two are considered sacrilegious, implying an idea of purity that must be upheld when referencing the afterlife. However, what is now considered by many as "biblical" depictions of Heaven and Hell are in fact definitions that have been inspired by numerous religious texts, officials, and various works of influential art. Now, however, it appears that pop cultural depictions of Heaven and Hell have shifted away from a theological focus, instead utilizing Heaven and Hell as symbols both for a means of communicating a broader idea and questioning pre-established cultural and religious beliefs. In Angels in America, Heaven is symbolic of the queer experience during the AIDS crisis; in The Good Place, the very idea of an afterlife is brought into question, communicating an ethical dilemma created by the notion of a black-and-white afterlife; in the Talking Heads' "Heaven," the idea of paradise is brought into question, instead portrayed as banal and heartbreaking; and in Adventure Time, the typical Hellish torture is completely reimagined as an egregiously long line, asking if eternal punishment can be more than merely fire and brimstone. Perhaps, in an age where religious non-affiliation is on the rise, Heaven and Hell now exist as something other than religious concepts; if this is the case, however, then why are they so frequently reached for as symbolic representations in media (DeRose)? What is so special about Heaven and Hell? It's human nature to die, and it is thus human nature to question what comes after; Heaven and Hell, for some, answer this question. For others, this answer is either incorrect or simply not enough. Heaven and Hell seem to now exist within contemporary pop culture as a means of exploration—exploring the afterlife, exploring the self, exploring the nature of human existence. Whether the two provide solace or questions—and regardless of how they are depicted—it seems that Heaven and Hell exist as plastic concepts, adapting to humanity throughout history as we adapt to the notion of life, death, and beyond.

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