

# **Extended Essay**

## **English B HL**

Use of euphemism and humor in *The Good Place* to explore the theme  
of redemption

How does the TV show *The Good Place* use humor and euphemism to  
convey the theme of redemption in 21<sup>st</sup> century American Society?

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## **Introduction:**

The Theme of Redemption is a universal theme that appears in literature and represents the idea that people possess the ability to change and improve their moral character. However, through the use of the sitcom *The Good Place* created by Michael Schur in the year 2016, the theme of Redemption has been used in an entirely different manner that blends the idea of comedy and philosophy within the context of contemporary American culture to provide an easier-to-understand interpretation of difficult concepts related to the idea of Redemption through the theme of this sitcom.

The show takes place in the afterlife, where people are separated into the Good Place or the Bad Place according to the actions they committed on Earth, which are considered with a certain point system. This system is based on a highly simplified moral logic that seems fair at first but ultimately reveals the limitations of such a logic to address the complexities of the modern world. When Eleanor Shellstrop arrives in the Good Place by mistake, the story takes off. A self-centered, ethically questionable woman throughout her life on Earth, Eleanor knows quickly that she does not belong in this almost-perfect paradise. Terrified of being exposed and sent to the Bad Place, Eleanor seeks the help of Chidi Anagonye, a moral philosophy professor, to learn how to be good. Eleanor and the other characters follow a path of moral development that, in the end, will violate rigid systems of judgment and reflect contemporary American fears regarding fairness, accountability, and personal responsibility.

However, each of these individuals must go through their own processes of redemption, which fundamentally relates to each part of moral development. In that case, Eleanor, being

selfish and a liar, must transform to be empathetic and truthful. Chidi, being a moral philosophy lecturer, is an indecisive person, illustrating the challenges associated with applying moral philosophy principle in real life, Tahani, being a wealthy socialite, must overcome the extent of her fixation on status to understand that it is always better to have people and not be successful, Jason, being a good person but less-intellectually-abled, finally develops an understanding of his actions and their effects on people. In contrast, Michael, being the genius for their hell-side town, begins as a villain but manages to find redemption, developing from being an architect who takes actions through strict moral judgment to someone who can accept human flaws and personal improvement. Of these distinct storylines, there emerged one theme that indicates redemption as a process of learning from failure and attempting to be better.

One of the most significant ways that *The Good Place* presents these moral arguments can be appreciated is by the incorporation of the technique of humor. This is obviously seen throughout the series by the utilization of satire, ironies, and wordplay to break down these very complex philosophical ideas. An example of this is the joke about censored curse words, seen when the Good Place is forced to accept curse words, subbed by “forking shirtballs” (“Michael’s Gambit” Season 1, Episode 13). This is just a way to keep the mood light and entertaining when presenting very serious ideas. Beyond this point, the TV show criticizes the morality that is placed upon people, such as when Chidi is given the choice of what to do when faced with an extremely difficult moral decision to the point that he passes out from the psychological strain.

Another aspect that could be labeled an important element in *The Good Place* would be euphemism, particularly in relation to how it makes serious and unpleasant subjects more

interesting. The theme of eternal punishment, in religious and philosophical literature generally portrayed in an unpleasant and frightening way, is toned down by ridiculous accounts of the Bad Place, in which demons are engaged in inefficient and nonsensical methods of torturing people. Death, too, an unpleasant topic in reality, would be handled by simplistic solutions that lack the foreboding one would expect in replies to questions about what it means.

This essay will discuss the deployment of humor and euphemism in the transmission of the theme of redemption in *The Good Place*. It will also draw on the use of humor, satire, irony, and wordplay to express ideas of moral improvement while referring to 21<sup>st</sup> century American society. The combination of humor with heavy philosophical debates enables *The Good Place* to present a fresh and exciting explanation of what it really means to be “good”.

In this essay, I will trace through these stages to examine how *The Good Place* employs humor and euphemisms to analyze the concept of redemption. To begin with, I will watch this series and register language of the key scenes in the series. I will record the use of humor and euphemisms to make the moral concepts more accessible and understandable to the audience. Then, I will examine the use of humor and euphemisms by the key speakers and see how they change with the moral development of the speakers during the story.

In addition to viewing the show, I plan to research the theories associated with humor and euphemism in culture and refer to the research done by Allan and Burridge in their study of euphemism to gain an understanding of the way in which language use reflects and constructs moral and social norms. This will allow me to gain an understanding of the reasons why

certain words or phrases are used in the show and how the show constructs the viewers' understanding of the concept of redemption through the use of moral constructs in the show.

Finally, I will summarize all of the research and notes that I have compiled to form a solid argument. This essay will be broken up into sections that examine the utilization of humor and euphemism both separately and together to illustrate how the theme of redemption as an ongoing process of moral and personal growth is expressed throughout *The Good Place*. Once all of the ideas are fleshed out, the complete essay will be written. Because of the nature of the show, this particular essay will examine the following episodes of *The Good Place* as they are the most representative of the interplay between humor, euphemism, and the moral change of the characters: "The Eternal Shriek", "Michael's Gambit", "The Trolley Problem", "Janet and Michael", "Janet(s)", "You've Changed, Man", "Whenever You're Ready".

### **Characters and Redemption:**

*The Good Place* defined redemption as not being something that happens all at once, but as something that occurs over time through the process of growth and human interactions. Alternatively, by giving someone who isn't good the chance to be redeemed, this show proves that redemption can be attempted by anyone, even the bad guy. Such redemption narratives are indicative of modern-day American cultural practices, in which people's moral identifications are defined based on self-improvement, complexity, and the capability of redefining themselves despite limitations.

The most obvious one is the character of Eleanor Shellstrop. She is introduced as a rude, manipulative, and selfish person. However, as the story unfolds, the motive behind the character changes. She develops a sense of being good not as a selfish act but due to the relationship she forms with Chidi. This is due to the fact that she understands the significance of taking care of others. However, the character of Eleanor is not straightforward. She is not perfect and has problems such as lies and self-doubts. However, she works to improve these problems. At the end, she does the final good deed by leaving the Good Place so that others can improve. The character development of Eleanor is based on the uniquely American ideals of cultural reinvention, which center on the dynamic nature of identity and morality created through individual volition rather than social background.

Chidi Anagonye has a different kind of redemption arc. He is first of all a character who is theoretically adept at all things ethical but is incapable of making a decision. His anxiety and overthinking end up doing harm not only to himself but also to the people around him. For Chidi, the lesson he learns is that the possession of knowledge does not necessarily equate to a person being good; it's the doing when the going gets tough. His decision to help others in spite of the cost is one of the first truly ethical choices he has made. At the end of the series, Chidi is no longer the same guy who goes nuts at the idea of moral accountability.

Tahani Al-Jamil is redeemed because of her own fixation with status. Initially, she is defined by her associations and possessions. As a spirit, she is able to learn that there is more to life than superficial associations. This is because she learns to value authentic connections, as made clear through her new definition of what it means to be "impressive." While Tahani does not undergo such a drastic change compared to Eleanor and Chidi, she is still redeemed. Her change of heart is evident because she ends up doing good not as a means of increasing

her ego, but because she genuinely wants to make a difference. That's her own personal level of redemption, evident in the show.

Jason Mendoza is perhaps the most unexpected example of this concept of redemption and learning by heart. In the early stages of his journey, he comes across as a straightforward character; he is innocent and sweet, but at the same time very unaware and uninterested. Still, it becomes evident that Jason is a very emotional and passionate person once he bonds with his friends and develops his feelings for Janet; since it allows him to express deeper aspects of personality and emotions that, he wouldn't otherwise be able. Through Jason, it is clear that it does not really matter if people aren't intellectuals; if they can learn to love and care from the heart.

Michael's arc is different, as he is not even human to begin with. He is an immortal demon with a passion for torturing humans. His concept of morality is more like an equation to be solved. But after being with Eleanor and the rest, he starts having doubts. His character development embodies the notion that the “bad” ones can always turn into the “good” ones. Michael learns the concepts of empathy, curiosity, and humility, which he always considered to be weaknesses. His character development is more important, as it establishes the fact that redemption is not only reserved for humans. It is, in fact, universal. His transformation from being the creator of suffering to the one who is eager to understand and help other people is one of the most poignant moments in the show.

Together, these characters prove that the path of redemption does not appear the same for everyone. This is because everyone is different, and everyone struggles differently. Whether it



is Eleanor placing others before herself, Chidi learning how to behave, Tahani releasing her need for self-importance, Jason finding a quiet greatness within himself, or Michael finding his humanity, the bottom line is this: the possibility of redemption exists, and this is not always easy.

### **Language and Humor as Tools of Redemption:**

*The Good Place* is different from most other morality-based stories, it is comedic instead of being didactic. This is significant since *The Good Place* is able to make viewers enjoy themselves while still being morally informative. A significant part of this comes from the moral situations that the characters face, primarily through the journey of learning that Eleanor goes through. For instance, Chidi's extreme indecisiveness, which is rooted in his need to be perpetually morally sound. His struggle with making simple decisions, including lunch, is obviously excessive but not entirely inaccurate when attempting to represent everyday moral struggles. This element of *The Good Place* portrays that moral righteousness is achieved through trying and struggling, which is far from flawless.

Moreover, nearly all of the funniest parts of this show feature characters grappling with ideal moral dilemmas. The classic "Trolley Problem" episode ("The Trolley Problem" Season 2, Episode 6), carries on this tradition by taking an old classic moral idea experiment and turning it into horror that Chidi must "drive" the trolley. The dark humor brings the serious idea (sacrificing one life for many) from its high place back down to earth and makes it less fearsome.

Apart from the use of humor, *The Good Place* also incorporates euphemism, particularly when the characters discuss unpleasant subjects. Death, Hell, and punishment are often depicted as dreary and sad in most forms of media. In contrast, the characters in *The Good Place* encounter an element of ridiculousness that lessens the severity of these themes. For instance, the Bad Place is full of jokes about macabre tortures, such as being stuck listening to “The Eagles”.

Even the use of the methods of referring to death, such as “retirement” for Michael (“The Eternal Shriek” Season 1, Episode 7) and “marbleized” rather than “killed” (“Janet and Michael” Season 2, Episode 7) also helps to create this sense of distance. Euphemisms remove the seriousness associated with death and help the series to deal with these themes with curiosity and even humor rather than fear. It is euphemism that also helps to create the means of redemption here as well. Rather than sentences connected with failure, the heroes are urged to learn and become better in this more merciful world. Such euphemistic language reflects a broader 21<sup>st</sup> century American tendency to avoid direct confrontation with death and punishment, favoring emotional comfort.

One of the most iconic and memorable use of language in *The Good Place* is the censorship of curse words. When Eleanor tries to swear, her words are automatically censored with words like “forking”, “shirt” and “ashhole”. This is a function that is both a joke and a very symbolic representation. It shows how the afterlife is governed under an ethical moral framework, where even words must be ethical and pure. However, the censorship also serves as an ethical conditioning role. The limitation with which Eleanor is forced to navigate language reflects her initial unwillingness to be a good person. However, as she grows

mentally, she begins to use fewer curse words, showing that she is becoming a better ethical being. The filtering also reflects current American media culture, which often filters out offending words to allow individuals to better understand complex topics.

Wordplay of all kinds can also make philosophical concepts less opaque. For instance, Michael, the architect of the fake Good Place, relies on puns and unusual metaphors in order to explain big ideas about identity, ethics, and existence. Janet, the all-knowing assistant from the show, also does this; the complicated information she delivers is cheerful and oversimplified. These linguistic choices eliminate academic obstacles around moral theory and let the characters, as well as viewers, participate in the conversation. Rather than inviting viewers to read Kant or Aristotle, it provides those concepts through casual, witty conversation.

### **Character Interaction and Ethical Growth:**

Although personal development is important in *The Good Place*, it is through relations and interactions that the characters develop the most. The show illustrates that development, or redemption, is not something that people do alone but is a moral act that takes place in the presence of other people, in which they impact each other, critique each other's shortcomings, and help each other develop. The relations between the characters, particularly the ones between Eleanor and Chidi, Michael and the group, and the group in general, play a critical role in their development.

The relationship between Eleanor and Chidi is central to the moral narrative of *The Good Place*. Eleanor initially seeks Chidi's help to prevent herself from being transferred to the Bad Place, but eventually, the relationship that develops between the two of them is one that is characterized by their concern for each other's morality. As the ethics professor, Chidi introduces Eleanor to the concepts of morality, such as the principles of Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, and Aristotelian virtue ethics. Although Chidi finds it difficult to implement the principles of morality in his own life, his teachings make Eleanor realize her actions, while she, in turn, helps Chidi to move out of his indecisiveness and act. Their relationship shows that morality is not just a concept, but it is practiced in real life too, and this can be seen in Eleanor's decision to let Chidi go for the sake of all.

In the beginning of the story, Michael, as a demon architect, uses human beings for his own entertainment purposes, but after his association with them, he changes and learns the value of empathy. At the start, he treats them as his prey and acts as if he is guiding them, but later, he becomes their pupil, trying to grasp the moral problems of human beings. The interesting thing about Michael's transformation is that he undergoes his redemption not because he feels guilty about his acts, nor because he suffers any punishment, but simply because he has learned from the very people he was supposed to torture. The fact that human beings are ready to accept Michael, even after he reveals his true identity, is very important to his transformation ("The Trolley Problem" Season 2, Episode 6).

Throughout the series, the main characters, Eleanor, Chidi, Tahani, Jason, and later Michael and Janet, evolve to form the moral support group. Flaws are matched with strengths for the characters, and they learn to grow based on the failures and successes they experience. For

instance, the stupidity of Jason regularly helps the group realize moral truths, while the arrogance of Tahani is mitigated by the regular nudging of the group to remember the reality of true connection. Most importantly, however, they are brought together by the experience of the flawed point system, which pulls the focus of the group away from personal gains to the well-being of the entire group. Later on, however, they come together not to save themselves, but to ensure that the point system, which applies to all the souls, is fair.

### **Transformation of Ethical Views:**

Indeed, the most interesting aspect of *The Good Place* is its critique and subversion of dogmatic moral structures. This is best captured in the show's fictional "point system," which is meant to be an objective way of evaluating moral worth through the accrual of points for every decision that an individual makes in life. Good choices add points, bad choices detract from them, and this determines whether an individual goes to the Good Place or the Bad Place. This system is later shown to be faulty and outdated.

As the characters learn more about the afterlife, they also find out that nobody has been able to get into the Good Place in over 500 years ("Janet(s)" Season 3, Episode 10). Even those actions that are seemingly good, such as giving your mother flowers, are fraught with unforeseen negative consequences, such as contributing to exploitative businesses or the creation of carbon emissions. The nature of modern-day life makes it impossible to achieve moral purity, and the only message that can be gleaned from this system is the impossibility of achieving moral perfection.

One of the most significant aspects of this movement is the emergence of The Judge, the cosmic judge who is in charge of the whole afterlife. Interestingly, this character is shown as someone who is full of divine power and is at the same time very comical and ridiculous. She is a binge TV viewer and has the habit of getting distracted very easily. She is handling the cases of the souls of humans as some sort of mundane paper work.

The Judge's efforts to reboot the Earth, offering a second chance to humanity (“You've Changed, Man” Season 4, Episode 10), turns out to be a moment of transformation per se. The idea of passing judgment gives way to process, transformation, learning, and improvement for the better. This, in short, summarizes the moral philosophy of *The Good Place*, that goodness, as a quality, is not a fixed thing but a continuous process of improvement through thought, compassion, and empathy.

This is the new definition of “goodness” that ultimately changes the afterlife system. By the final series, the old system of judgment is replaced in favor of the new system that allows humans to keep trying until they manage to improve. The series suggests that humans should be encouraged for trying and should not be judged for being imperfect. Redemption is now an experience that is available to all, for all of eternity.

By the fall of the point system, the satire of the Judge figure, and ultimately the embrace of the process of growth as the key to “goodness,” *The Good Place* forces the viewer to

reexamine moral assessment. This is the key to being good: not being good at everything, but wanting to be and persevering even after failing repeatedly.

### **Symbols and Ethical Representation:**

*The Good Place* uses an incredible arsenal of symbols to transmit its philosophical message and to challenge the simplifications of moral philosophy. These conceptual symbols enhance the story by reflecting the development in moral philosophy.

The Neighborhood is one of the most significant symbols. Initially, it is portrayed as a utopia created specifically for those who have lived a life of unimpeachable morals. However, this “cheerful” utopia is actually a torture device that is used as a part of a psychological experiment called the Bad Place. This apparent hypocrisy of the neighborhood is actually what represents the overriding message of the show: that appearances can be deceiving. Its subsequent use as a place of learning is actually reflective of that. As a symbol, the Neighborhood critiques American ideas of meritocracy by pointing out how these systems disregard complexity.

The Door, which appeared in the last season (“Whenever You’re Ready” Season 4, Episode 13), is a tremendous philosophical symbol. The Door gives souls who have finished their journey in self-improvement and self-fulfillment a way to leave the world of the living forever. This is a highly debatable concept (essentially the end of consciousness) that signifies

acceptance and peace. Instead of a heaven that lasts forever, the show indicates that a good ending, which is a choice, is the greatest freedom.

Janet, the omniscient assistant, who is non-human from a technological standpoint, represents power and development (“Sympathy for Janet”). With her increasing human-like qualities, such as love, empathy, and sadness, she learns what it is to be a human being. Her own capacity for learning and feeling reflects the human experience and supports the series' underlying thesis that moral value is determined through growth, rather than origins or categories.

Through the incorporation of philosophy into symbols such as the Neighborhood, the Door, and Janet, an intricate story is created in *The Good Place* that critiques simplified morality. These symbols appear in the narrative solely as devices but also as arguments in illustrations for ethical understanding based on empathy and change.

### **Conclusion:**

Through the analysis of *The Good Place*, this essay utilizes humor and euphemism as an effective tool in the exploration of philosophical concepts, specifically redemption. It is evident that being a good person is not something that occurs as the result of an immediate transformation and the use of perfect ethics, but rather as the result of growth and development. Through the use of the flawed and developing characters of the TV show, the



show presents a realistic and deeply human vision of redemption in contemporary American society.

Lastly, *The Good Place* is unique in that it combines elements of fun storytelling with very deep philosophical themes. It challenges us to understand what it means to be "good" in a society that calls us to be perfect yet does not allow us any opportunity for growth; yet it never forgets that living an ethical life does not have to be difficult or unattainable.

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