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# Duality in Carnivàle: An Exploration of Light and Dark

Nathan Hittle

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

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DUALITY IN *CARNIVÀLE*:  
AN EXPLORATION OF LIGHT AND DARK

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
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by  
Nathan Hittle, BA  
Journalism  
College of Journalism and Mass Communication

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Faculty Mentor:  
Tamy Burnett, PhD  
English, Women's and Gender Studies

## Abstract

This paper explores themes of duality, subversion and humanity through a critical analysis of the first season of HBO's *Carnivàle*. Production elements like costuming and lighting serve as key points of examination, as does the show's writing through representation of various religious beliefs and faith in mystical, mythological forces, inspired by real-world ideologies yet unique to the world of *Carnivàle*. The three categories of costuming, lighting and religion demonstrate *Carnivàle*'s obsession with visual storytelling, apt for story told in a visual medium.

The analysis offered throughout this paper relies on an understanding of themes and motifs common in American film and television, as *Carnivàle*'s creators rely heavily on familiar tropes in order to subvert the expectations of its viewers. *Carnivàle* directly challenges assumptions such as, but not limited to: lawbreakers are evil, preachers are pure, sex workers are morally bereft, children who care for their parents are intrinsically good, a small stature makes for poor leadership, and more. Even in 2018, 15 years after *Carnivàle*'s premiere, these cultural prejudices are so ingrained they continue to serve creator Daniel Knauf's desire to keep his viewers in a perpetual state of up-endedness. Considered as a single epic story, *Carnivàle* provides commentary on the multi-faceted and complicated nature of humanity by asking its viewers to reconsider everything they think they know.

**Key Words:** *Carnivàle*, duality, religion, epic storytelling, television, lighting, costuming, Daniel Knauf, goodness, evil

**Duality in *Carnivàle*:**  
**An Exploration of Light and Dark**

Daniel Knauf's *Carnivàle* premiered September 7, 2003 on HBO. The series consisted of two seasons, short-lived primarily thanks to its large budget and low ratings (Adalian). By this time, shows like *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* helped cement HBO as a bona fide purveyor of quality television, offering rich and complex televisual goodness to its growing subscriber base. *Carnivàle* is absolutely of that cloth: literary, intentional and complex, but also sometimes meanderingly bland at Knauf's own admission (VanDerWerff). Regardless, the show's dense mythology is always interesting even if the plots constructed to explore it might feel plodding and dry. The production values are top notch, too, serving to realistically ground the series in Depression-era America. *Carnivàle*'s first season smartly juxtaposes lightness and darkness in nearly every aspect of its production, including costuming, lighting and religious representation, to highlight the flawed nature of preconceived notions and emphasize the duality of man and the inescapability of fate.

The series presents a dual narrative following the parallel tales of Ben Hawkins and Justin Crowe in 1934. Ben's story revolves around a carnival traveling through the southwestern United States during the Dust Bowl. Justin's story involves his work with poor migrants and his loss of faith in God.

Ben begins as a fugitive, a chain-gang runaway who returns to his mother in time to watch her die from respiratory problems caused by the rampant dust storms characteristic of the Dust Bowl. As he buries his mother, the carnival, run by the smooth-talking Samson and the mysterious, ever-elusive Management, rolls by Ben's small Oklahoma farm. Now alone and fearing the law, Ben joins the outfit of freaks, carnies and roustabouts. Meanwhile, Methodist

preacher Justin Crowe battles local politicians in Mintern, California, for the right to preach to dirt-poor families come to California looking for work. He and his sister Iris establish an orphanage for migrant children converted from Chin's, a Chinese brothel.

The show's complex mythology explains the need for two stories simultaneously unfolding that appear to have little relevance to one another. Outlined in the pitch document Knauff prepared for HBO and his writing staff, *Carnivàle*'s mythology draws heavily from Christianity and Hinduism, mysticism and monarchic hierarchies and ascendancies. At the center of this mythology are the Avatars, two beings—one the paragon of light, the other of dark—born to each generation and destined to battle. Brother Justin is the Creature of Dark while Ben serves as the Creature of Light (Knauf).

The Avatars each exhibit certain supernatural abilities. Ben, for example, has the ability to heal wounds and raise the dead (“Milfay”). Such acts require a sacrifice, however. Ben must “take life to give life” (“Tipton”). Brother Justin can force others to reveal their darkest secrets, fantasies and wrongdoings (“After the Ball is Over”) and, later, seemingly develops the ability to force others to act according to his will (“Lonnigan, Texas”). When using his powers, Justin's eyes turn ink-black, a sure televisual indication of evil incarnate if ever there was one.

Throughout the first season, despite their ignorance of the other and the larger mythical machinations at play, Ben and Justin dream of one another and Avatars past. Ben and Justin are also prone to mystical walkabouts. In “Babylon,” for example, Ben follows an apparition of the most recent Creature of Dark, Henry Scudder, through a collapsed mine and into the trenches of World War I. In “The River,” Justin confronts childhood renditions of himself and his sister, Iris. They beat and taunt him, calling him evil. Thus, despite their physical distance from each other, Ben and Justin are intertwined. As the series progresses, they are called toward each other and

their distance closes. They are two sides of the same coin. Opposites. The light and dark of humanity embodied in two separate men.

### **Costuming**

The relationship between Justin and Ben is represented by their clothing. The first season of *Carnivàle* was costume designed by Terry Dresbach, who had previously worked on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and would later work on *Outlander*. *Carnivale* was praised for its authentic portrayal of life in the '30s, both in terms of look and feel, but *Carnivàle*'s costuming also serves the purpose of reinforcing its primary obsession with good versus evil, light versus dark.

A natural place to begin such analyses is “Milfay,” the series’ pilot. In “Milfay” we’re introduced to Ben, Justin and the rest of the season’s main players. As aforementioned, Ben’s story begins at his mother’s farm in Milfay, Oklahoma. We meet him in the get-up he’ll wear the majority of the season: an undone pair of denim overalls and a long-sleeved white henley tee. Ben’s fundamental nature is made apparent through his costuming—specifically his shirt—thanks to our cultural association of white with purity, goodness and innocence. Even as his mother rejects him on her deathbed, even as he bleeds from the chains wrapped round his ankles, Ben is a literal figure of lightness. As the season progresses and Ben begins to learn more about his powers, his shirt becomes dirty and worn. By the middle of the season, both sleeves are ripped up to his elbows and the shirt’s neckline is grimy and brown. Even as his sweat and the dust of 10,000 farms dirty his shirt, the lightness of the original fabric remains, never totally obscured. Of course, Ben is a poor carnie on the lam during the Great Depression. His wardrobe would never be extensive, and the grueling labor required of carnies—setting up rides and tents and big tops—would naturally result in a grubby appearance. A show like *Carnivàle*, though, is

always a bit smarter than that. Ben's dirtification occurs parallel to both the deepening of his understanding about his powers and his integration into the carnie community.

While *Carnivàle*'s obsession with religion could prime the viewer to make connections between whiteness and purity, the evolution of Ben's costuming also operates as a comment on the nature of growing up. In the west, childhood and innocence are conflated. It is through living and changing and deciding and loving and learning that innocence becomes, at best, complicated and, at worst, compromised. The birth of Ben's story begins at the series' start. Ben's internal changes are mirrored by his external ones.

From the outset, then, the viewer is primed to see Ben, a fugitive ex-con, as good. Brother Justin, on the other hand, a righteous preacher, is coded very clearly as bad. Justin dresses as most preachers might, in simple black garb. He is typically seen with the traditional white collar of religious clergy in Christianity, as well, save for the very first time the viewers glimpse him. He sits shrouded in black at the head of his congregation as they sing. The shot begins with his older sister Iris sitting to the side then pans until it reaches Justin. Behind them, the white walls and church decor pass by. The angle is such that once the camera rests, Justin is positioned directly in front of a single dark strip of wood. The drywall on either side is stark white. Justin, then, is but an inky shadow in a sea of light, righteous yet ignorant of his true nature. Further, his tendency to interpret things incorrectly is perhaps best demonstrated by his glasses. They aren't necessarily obstructive, but they do indicate to the viewer his perspective is filtered, both physically and, perhaps, mystically and emotionally.

Later, Justin is seen listening to the radio in his living room with Iris. He's wearing a white button-up t-shirt and suspenders. Here, we're seeing Justin as he sees himself—a benign domestic entity. As he enters a mystical walkabout, however, he tosses on a black suit coat,

obscuring the whiteness of his shirt as he engages in an Avataric experience. This obfuscation continues for Justin. His arc for the first few episodes involves converting a Chinese brothel that used children as sex slaves into a refuge for migrant orphans. He faces severe obstruction from the local government but succeeds in getting the place operational and houses a handful of children. Chin's burns down one night, however, and Justin arrives at the scene in his pajamas, distraught. In this scene he wears black pants and an open black night shirt covering a white undershirt. The white of Justin's wardrobe—like his metaphysical "lightness"—is *always* compromised, never fully expressed. His inner darkness clouds whatever light may be inside him.

Justin's physical darkness is echoed in the wardrobes of his supporting cast. Iris, for example, is first seen in a gray dress and white-rimmed black cloche ("Milfay"). Her clothing indicates two things. First, her association with Justin compromises her goodness, her proximity to evil corrupting her light. Second, Iris is eventually revealed to be dangerous and dark herself, of which her outfit serves as foreshadowing.

Those who orbit Ben's world, however, tend to come dressed a bit brighter. Sofie, for example, Ben's first carnie friend, wears a white blouse throughout the pilot. Sofie and her catatonic mother Apollonia work as tarot card readers. In her white blouse, Sofie rides into town for gas and cigarettes during "Milfay." She's yanked aside by townies and almost raped when Ben intervenes and helps her fight the attackers off. On the ride home, we see that her attempted rapists tore her blouse; now, it dangles precariously from her shoulder. Ben, the paragon of good, saved Sofie from an indelibly awful experience. Sofie's wardrobe remains similarly light throughout the season with few exceptions. In "Hot and Bothered" she wears a black shirt paired with black pants. She also experiences her first foray into the Avataric mythology this episode.

Later episodes of the series reveal Sofie is actually the Omega, the predestined final Avatar who Justin refers to as the antichrist. Her dark clothing then serves as an indicator of her darkness.

Meanwhile, independent of his actions, Ben remains *visibly* good. All he's missing is a white hat. Paradoxically, despite Ben being good incarnate, he believes he's evil. A flashback in "Milfay" reveals Ben's mother scolding him for reviving his dead kitten. She tells him he's "marked by the beast" and drowns the cat. "You got no right. No right, boy. Lord takes what's his. Man don't take it back." This scolding profoundly shapes Ben's sense of himself, and likely leads to his eventual criminal activity and incarceration. Despite this, throughout the first season both the viewer and Ben himself must question their understanding of his essential nature. The audience must reconcile what they think they know with what he actually is.

The same is true for Samson, the carnival's boss. A man willing to do what needs to be done, his darkness and lightness coexist. An obvious example of Knauf's knack for subversion, Samson is also a little person. Respected, revered and loved by his fellow outcasts, Samson's personality and influence would outsize him even if he were an average height. As characters in *Carnivàle* come, Samson feels self-actualized and secure in his position. Perhaps that's why his dress is brown. Again, as Ben grows more comfortable in his own role, his white shirt becomes grimy, covered in dirt—the color of which, as we know, is brown. Brown, it seems, is the color of compromise and the resignation to destiny, the acceptance of the grand plan over which the characters of *Carnivàle* have no control.

The dichotomy between expectation and reality is clearly at play with the character of Justin as well. He's an intense preacher, steadfast in his devotion to his work and the Lord. Even so, he's pure, unadulterated evil and so very, *very* wrong about his role in the world. It seems Ben and Justin can run from their destinies—they just can't *outrun* them.

## Lighting

Along with costuming, lighting in *Carnivàle* tells the viewer who's good, who's bad, who's trustworthy and who's lying. *Carnivàle* operates on the thesis that goodness is illuminating. A cinematic show, *Carnivàle* is unafraid to place its narrative in dark settings. In the darkness, morally good characters emanate light while morally bad characters are externally lit or simply exist in the absence of light. Again, *Carnivàle* uses these opportunities to subvert viewer expectation.

Near the middle of the season, Justin abandons the church, his faith shattered. He spends time in a mental hospital but eventually gets released, recommitted to his religious mission to cleanse the world of sin, and makes his way back to Mintern. Once home, he immediately goes to wake Iris ("Hot and Bothered") in the dead of night, shrouded in darkness. This tells the viewer Justin's goals have dark, evil implications. His righteous mission is corrupted by his embrace of his powers and his erroneous belief that he is a prophet of God.

The same episode sees Sofie and Jonesy explore a festival in a Texas border town. After eating a suspicious tamale, Sofie excuses herself to a shady alley and vomits. It is here, in both light and dark, she has her very first Avataric vision of a man approaching her and offering her the following: "Every Prophet in her house." It makes sense Sofie, the Omega and the only character in *Carnivàle* without a prewritten fate, would take the first steps toward her destiny surrounded by both light and dark. The interplay between the sunlight and the shadow are reflective of the battle between good and evil for Sofie's identity.

In "The Day That Was The Day," Ben finally meets Management, who tells him that to save snake-charmer Ruthie's life after she dies from a vicious bite, Ben must kill another. Ben's previous miracles—fixing a lame girl's legs, healing strongman Gabe's broken arm—were the

work of a boy. Now, Management tells Ben, he must become a man. Frustrated and conflicted, Ben storms out of the trailer. It'd been a long night and now dawn is breaking. From Samson's perspective we see Ben against the rising sun, wholly black, silhouetted by the light. A perfect symbol for Ben's emotional state—uncertain and overwhelmed by the things his role as the Avatar of Light forces him to do. He's dwarfed by the image of the sun, an inky blob set against the burning star, and a reminder that, as one grows up, goodness can be complicated and compromised. In general, the show displays an obsession with symbolism surrounding celestial bodies. The sun in "The Day That Was The Day," of course, but also the carnival's logo, itself an image of a sun and crescent moon arranged in a manner reminiscent of the yin and yang symbol, juxtaposing the show's western Judeo-Christian themes against eastern spirituality. The leader of the Templar organization Samson and Ben visit for answers in "Hot and Bothered" is even named Frank Mooney. The Templars have a connection with the Avatars, meaning a name like Mooney is apt for a leader of an organization associated with them. In addition to being the sun's symbolic opposite, the moon itself is an entity of duality with one side always dark and the other always light.

"Black Blizzard" also features a wealth of light play. The events of the episode occur en route to Babylon, Texas by way of Tipton, Oklahoma. Several of the series' key characters are out and about when a devastating dust storm—a "black blizzard"—hits, forcing them to take refuge around town. The carnival's supervisor, Samson, is visiting a sex worker, Jolene, just before the storm hits. He and a roustabout, Osgood, decide to wait the storm out at Jolene's home. Expectedly, power across the town fails, leaving the characters in the dark until they light candles and lanterns. In Samson's case, it's Jolene lighting a lamp. Samson criticizes her for her

work, demeaning her despite having just taken advantage of her services. Throughout, Jolene clearly maintains the moral high ground and eventually tells Samson never to seek her out again.

Through this, the audience's implicit biases are directly refuted. Jolene is *not* an evil character. If anything, she operates as a mechanism for revealing Samson's inner darkness by way of his prejudice regarding sex work. He is, of course, a product of less sexually liberated times, but as Jolene's customer he's still a hypocrite. The cultural trope that sex workers are bereft of morality plays an important role here. Western audiences are taught that prostitutes, strippers, etc. are "nasty women," to borrow an awful and timely phrase. Jolene flips this on its head. She's warm and smart, a skilled businesswoman carving a living during the Great Depression. She's a sex worker, sure, but that isn't *all* she is, and Samson suffers for succumbing to his misogynistic biases.

In contrast, Sofie has sex for the first time in "Black Blizzard" with a married man she meets at his diner. They sleep together by the light of a lantern. Here, Sofie serves not as a source of light but its subject. This hints at the darkness inside of her explored throughout the series and also parallels the relationship between the sun and the moon, with one body emitting light and the other reflecting it.

If the casting of light serves to symbolize goodness, surely its obfuscation should warn the viewer of impending doom. Consider "Babylon," the episode directly following "Black Blizzard." The dust storm has ended, making narrative room for the ghastly of the episode's runtime. "Babylon" takes place in a fictional Texas mining town of the same name. In "Black Blizzard," many of the carnies express an extreme aversion to the place, wanting to avoid it at all costs. Alas, the elusive Management commands Samson to lead his carnies onward. Once there, the outfit is greeted by a single man, and he's *leaving*. The town is otherwise deserted. Come

nightfall, however, a barman appears, as do some patrons, all male. Sofie and Libby Dreifuss, one of the carnival's strippers, visit the movie theatre, where the projectionist implies no one's been to the pictures for a long, long time. The town comes alive only at night.

For its stay in Babylon, the same is true for the carnival. After a completely dead day, the men of the town appear over the hill, headed for the lights, sounds and smells that await. Interestingly, they carry torches, sources of illumination themselves, suggesting their intentions are good. The miners play the games, ride the rides and excitedly head for the "cootch" show, where Libby, her mother, Rita Sue, and her sister, Dora Mae, make their living stripping for audiences across America. Interestingly, the family patriarch, Felix, is responsible for advertising the show. Although surprising to modern viewers, Knauf and the writers found historical evidence of entire families participating in such entertainment (VanDerWerff). Samson receives word from Management that the Dreifusses should avoid "the blowoff," referring to the end of the show when the girls remove their underwear, making the event a full-frontal affair. The all-male crowd is ecstatic, having seen neither hide nor hare of a woman in a dog's age, so Felix ignores Samson's warning and encourages his daughters to go ahead with the big finish. Libby is having her period so she refrains, leaving Dora Mae alone on stage. She handles the performance fine, a seasoned dancer by now, but the men are insatiable. They grab at her and drag the tent down. Felix can barely pull Dora Mae away before the miners rip her apart. Outside the tent, the carnies tend to her with comforting hugs and warm blankets. Later that night, Jonesy—Samson's right hand—drunkenly stumbles upon Dora Mae's dead body swinging from a tree branch, the word "HARLOT" carved brutally into her forehead.

Dora Mae's corpse is *hard* to look at but beautifully made up in all the worst ways ("Carnivale"). Aside from being tragically chilling, the discovery of Dora Mae's body is a work

of cinematographic genius. The tree from which she hangs is a good half mile from the carnival, barely illuminated by its lights. Though many of the characters express a desire to leave the carnival for better things, none leave without dying. For the carnies, freaks and rousties of Samson's outfit, the carnival is their home, the coworkers their family. In life, Dora Mae was protected by the light of the carnival; in death, she's divorced from its glow. There's no place for such horror in that dysfunctionally happy home-on-wheels. Ultimately, it's a place of goodness, but goodness from which one can be violently torn. The fate which befalls Dora Mae is rooted in violent misogyny and misplaced prejudice. She and her family are some of the most empathetic characters on the show. Again, the preloaded prejudice against sex workers that comes with being an American viewer is heavily challenged by this, and Dora Mae's death is tragedy incarnate.

The miners are ultimately revealed to be ghosts, apparitions which appear only by night. Perhaps this is why they are allowed to subvert the show's rules about light and dark. Everything about them defies expectation—their very presence is misleading because they're supposed to be dead. The previous generation's Avatar (and Ben's father) Henry Scudder visited once. His activities caused a cave in, and, ever since, anyone who dies in Babylon is doomed to stay there forever. The men of Babylon, then, are victims of Avataric activity in the same way Dora Mae is, given that Management is heavily implied to understand the Avataric mythology and urges the carnival toward Babylon anyway. Divorced from any involvement with Avatars, the miners and Dora Mae would still be alive. "Pick a Number" reveals Dora Mae's spirit is stuck in Babylon, too. She appears naked to Samson before being dragged back by the miners.

In addition to the harrowing Dora Mae events, "Babylon" features an intense sequence during which Ben is beckoned to enter the collapsed mine. Inside he has visions of Henry

Scudder and trench warfare in France. As he maneuvers the pitch dark space, he first lights his way with a match and then a lamp affixed to a helmet. Ben, the certifiable Creature of Goodness, becomes a literal beacon of light.

Using light as a storytelling device continues in the following episode. “Pick a Number” sees the carnies eager to exact vengeance for Dora Mae’s death. They invoke an old-time carnival tradition: carnival justice. Whether they can find the men who killed Dora Mae or not, the carnies mean to take a miner’s life in payment for Dora Mae’s. The events of “Pick a Number” can be divided into three sequences: the hunt, the sentencing and the execution. To conduct the hunt, the men of the carnival arm themselves and set out into the town. Cinema tradition dictates revenge is a dish best served at night, yet these carnies hunt for justice in broad daylight. Again, this subverts the viewer’s expectation and raises interesting questions regarding the ethics of carnival justice. If “light” in *Carnivàle* is equivalent to “good,” is their mission also good? Are justice and vengeance one in the same? “Pick a Number” ultimately answers “no.” The carnies, unable to find any of the miners—because they’re night ghosts—finally find the man they met leaving town at the beginning of “Babylon,” Stangler, Babylon’s barkeep. He’s almost certainly not guilty of Dora Mae’s death, but the carnies want blood. For Stangler’s sentencing, the carnies gather in the big top and form a circle around Stangler, ask him to pick a number between one and six, and aim a revolver at his head. Stangler survives, avoiding the single bullet in the revolver’s chamber, much to the carnie’s dismay. The entire sequence is very dark both emotionally and in terms of production. After the carnies have collected in the big top, Samson asks for the flap to be closed, sheathing the outfit in darkness as they conduct their “justice.”

It seems like *Carnivàle* is drawing a distinction between the hunt for justice and the potential for atrocity in its execution. Seeking justice is noble; the handsome Jonesy leads the cavalry into town at high noon like a righteous white-hatted gunslinger. Forcing an innocent man to gamble for his life at gunpoint, helpless? Not so righteous. Indeed, that Sangler survives suggests that this path toward justice is a corrupt one.

Enter Samson. He seems well-liked by his crew and is generally pleasant, kind and compassionate. (Ask anyone but Jolene.) However, Samson's lightness is visibly compromised, as shown by the brown vest he wears throughout the series. He fulfills that promise in "Pick a Number." After the carnies let Stangler free, Samson orders them to pack the carnival up so they can move on to the next town. Samson, though, follows Stangler back to his bar. Samson sits, has a drink. By the faint glow of sunlight struggling through grimy windows, Samson shoots Stangler dead. A dark figure doing dark dark deeds in dark places. That Samson exacts revenge for Dora Mae speaks to the qualities required of a carnival boss in the Great Depression. He cares deeply for his people, that much is certain ("The Day That Was The Day"). He's also willing to do what he believes needs to be done. However, Samson is almost immediately punished as, on his way back, he glimpses the ghost of Dora Mae, naked, vulnerable and scared. He may have found a scapegoat, but he is ultimately unable to protect or help Dora Mae, who remains eternally damned, a ghost doomed to repeated victimization by the ghosts who killed her.

The presence and absence of light, therefore, serve to provide the viewer context about the righteousness of the events on screen. Expectations are subverted by the characters who are affected by light, either as sources or subjects, and who act in environments with highly specific lighting choices. In "The Day That Was The Day," Ben tries to find someone to kill in exchange

for Ruthie's life. He finds a washed-up drunkard in town and takes him to a secluded alley. He tries to strangle him but can't. As he tells Management, it's not his choice who lives and who dies. Ben leaves the man, running from the alley and back into the light. He abandons the "dark" choice, unable to act in conflict with his morals. Later, though, Management tells Ben it was Lodz who set Ruthie's snake up to bite her. Ben then impulsively strangles Lodz to death in the darkness of Management's trailer. This arguably vengeful act serves the purpose of reviving Ruthie but also reinforces the idea that, in *Carnivàle*, bad and dark are partners. Ben's willingness to kill for revenge suggests his proximity to Management and Lodz, figures of evil, corrupt his goodness. On the other hand, Ben killing Lodz, the blind seer, shows Ben taking control of his life and his destiny. Throughout the first season, Lodz serves as a mentor of sorts to Ben. Killing Lodz is Ben's first step toward becoming his own man. The act also serves as a reminder that, even though *Carnivàle* concerns itself heavily with clearly delineating good from evil, the human condition is more complicated. Good men do bad things. Shadows set next to light.

### **Religion**

*Carnivàle*'s dealings with religion perfectly exemplify Knauf's obsession with subverting expectation. Look no further than the fact that the most evil man in the world is a small-town Methodist preacher while the best is a convicted criminal. Typical western depictions of religious figures paint them as doers of good, paragons of light. They're the ones called in to exorcise the demon—they aren't the demon themselves. Knauf and co. smartly flip this trope on its head with the character of Brother Justin.

At the beginning of the season, Justin's faith is absolute. He believes himself a prophet with a direct line of communication to God. *Carnivàle*, however, comes down very harshly on

traditional religion. The most evil man on the planet is a preacher, after all. Justin's religious beliefs are challenged throughout the first season to the point he loses faith entirely. In "Tipton" Justin leads his congregation in a rousing rendition of "Old-Time Religion": "Oh give me that old time religion, it's good enough for me," Justin sings. Except it isn't, at least in the first half of the season. At the end of "Milfay," Justin experiences a vision of Chin's, the future location for the migrant orphanage. In the dream, snow falls, a rare occurrence for California. Hands outstretched, Justin basks. The cold flakes get heavier, wetter, then redder. Blood pours from the sky, the pure white precipitation becoming a graphic and grotesque deluge. By "Babylon" Justin's faith is entirely corrupted. With his dream for the migrant orphanage up in literal smoke, Justin steals away in the night, forsaking God and becoming a traveling hobo. His faith could not satisfactorily assuage his grief and sense of betrayal. The incident with the orphanage proves to the audience that Justin is the King Midas of evil. Everything he touches, even metaphysically, becomes compromised.

Knauf and co. seem to imply traditional religious beliefs blind people to the truth, just as Justin's need for glasses suggests his own blindness. By embracing Christianity, Justin falsely interprets his visions as messages from God when, in reality, they're Avataric dreams that communicate his inner darkness. He's devout in his belief he's doing good works when, in reality, he's driving people to suicide ("Tipton") and getting children killed ("Black Blizzard"). Justin is the ultimate metaphor for religious hypocrisy. Eric Bronson argues that *Carnivàle* operates as religious noir, saying that Justin ends up disenchanted with "the system" he once operated within.

Near the end of the season, Justin returns to California to begin again his religious activities. By using his powers to expose the deepest sin of the man who raised him, however,

Justin discovers Reverend Norman Balthus' gravest mistake was saving Justin's life as a boy ("The Day That Was The Day"). By mistakenly re-embracing the God he lost, by failing to recognize that he, in fact, was not meant for righteousness, Justin's true darkness is revealed.

Ben, on the other hand, has roundly rejected religion by the time the season begins. He tells Lodz that "he's had enough of that for one life" ("Tipton") thanks to the scathing treatment he received from his mother as a child. As he learns more about being an Avatar, Ben develops a level of faith in his abilities and himself. In other words, his Avataric faith replaces his Christian faith as he becomes comfortable with being his generation's pinnacle of goodness. Ben's religious agnosticism is, of course, played directly against Justin's devout faith. In "Day of the Dead" Ben has a vision of himself receiving Communion with Justin's congregation. Justin hands razor blades to each in line. Blood seeps from their lips as they chew. Come his turn, though, Ben refuses the blade. Struggling, Justin tells him the razor is the body of Christ. Ben fiercely rebukes him: "No it ain't."

By the end of the second season, we learn Sofie is actually the Omega, the final Avatar. Her fate is less prewritten than Ben's or Justin's, as she's got both dark *and* light in her, existing as a third vertex on the show's moral triangle. She also represents a completely different set of beliefs: she and her mother are the carnival fortune tellers. Sofie's mom, Apollonia, can see the past and future, read minds and move objects with her mind. The catatonic Apollonia communicates telepathically with Sofie throughout the the first season, telling Sofie their customers' fates so Sofie can express them. Sofie's devotion to the mysticism of *Carnivàle*'s world remains strong. Unlike Justin and Ben, the suffering she endures isn't tied to her beliefs. (Ben's suffering pertains to his initial rejection of his Avataric powers while Justin's suffering

pertains to his devotion to his supposed Christianity.) Sofie and Apollonia both see things more clearly than their peers because they understand the mythology of the *Carnivàle* universe.

The same is true for the character of Lodz. He's ultimately a character of evil but presents himself as a wise mentor to Ben. He wears a white shirt with a black vest, a hint toward his true nature. Lodz also believes fiercely in the Avataric mythology and, like Apollonia, has the ability to read minds. In fact, he's the carnival's mentalist. It's revealed in "Pick a Number" he swapped his eyesight for a supernatural sight, a trade he believes more than fair. He, like Apollonia and Sofie, sees more clearly than other characters in the show. That Lodz is both a seer and blind, again, underscores *Carnivàle*'s obsession with subversion: what you see is *not* what you get. With *Carnivàle*, the viewer *must* expect the unexpected.

Sophie's relevance in the Avataric mythology is underscored by the parallels made between her and Ben, specifically by their relationships with their mothers. Again, Ben grows up shunned and shamed by his mother for his powers. She spends her dying moments actively rejecting his healing touch ("Milfay"). Ben begs her—"Mama, please..."—but, clutching a wooden cross to herself, Flora won't let herself be corrupted by Ben's gifts, which she sees as God-forsaking, an affront to the natural order of things. She dies gasping for breath lit by a ray of dusty light. Flora also knows Ben's true parentage. Henry Scudder, the previous Avatar of Darkness, is his father and the progenitor of Ben's ability to revive the dead. Flora's knowledge of Scudder's true role is unknown, but she undoubtedly had some inclination of his inherent evil. Despite her fear of him, Ben seems to love his mother deeply.

Sofie and Apollonia have a complicated relationship as well. It's clear Sofie feels burdened by her catatonic mother. In "The River," Libby asks Sofie if she wants to run away to Hollywood. She does—anything to get out of the carnival—but cites her mother's care as the

reason why she can't leave. Even so, Sofie loves Apollonia. When she's found mysteriously slumped next to Ben's makeshift outdoor, under-truck bed, Sofie is livid and rips into him, demanding he stay away from both of them ("After The Ball"). Further, Sofie is also the child of an Avatar. Her father is actually Brother Justin, who raped Apollonia nearly twenty years prior to the beginning of the series ("Insomnia"). According to Knauf's pitch document, any daughters born to an Avatar are usually not Avatars themselves—only men can inherit that power—but Sofie's role as Omega mirrors that of the Alpha, both the only women in the Avataric line, the women who shall begin and end the lineage.

Apollonia comes to realize near the end of the season that Sofie's role as the Omega, the final Avatar, could spell doom for the world if she becomes corrupted by evil. After a painful romantic betrayal by Jonesy, Sofie is finally ready to leave the carnival and her mother for good. To stop her, Apollonia musters all her strength and lights the trailer on fire, clutching Sofie to stop her from escaping. Sofie is eventually rescued by Jonesy, but Apollonia dies in the fire. Her final act, meant to protect the world, sees her perish in an illuminating blaze. A parent killing their child is surely an evil act, yet Apollonia is engulfed in a bright blaze. Destroying Sofie, the prophesied antichrist, then, is an act of good. Already distraught from her mother's attempted murdering of her, Sofie must listen to Apollonia's mind scream as she burns to death ("The Day That Was The Day"). Apollonia also serves as another brilliant example of duality and subversion in *Carnivàle*. Mute, Apollonia's telepathy and precognition allow her to know and share the most information of any character. Motionless, Apollonia's telekinesis allows her to manipulate the objects and people around her. Her final actions are as drastic and dramatic as anyone else's.

The season, then, is bookended by the deaths of both mothers, Flora in “Milfay” and Apollonia in “The Day That Was The Day.” Each death serves as a catalyst for their respective children. For Ben, Flora’s death represents a death of “that old time religion.” He must forget everything he thinks he knows about the world and its forces. Apollonia’s death propels Sofie forward in her journey to realizing her role as the Omega, pushing her further into the tangled Avataric mythology. Justin, too, is changed when his faith dies, his fervor renewed after the stint in the psychiatric hospital.

Each of these characters and their relationships with religion explain *Carnivàle*’s perspective on religion. The man who leaves God behind, Ben, graduates to a different dogma presented by the show’s mythology as true. Justin’s faith in God is proved to be not only misplaced but entirely baseless. His devotion blinds him while Sofie’s respect of the mystical forces actually allow her to make a living. Knowing and embracing the truth is survival.

Ultimately, *Carnivàle* uses the age old theme of good vs. evil to reveal the duality and dichotomy of man. Knauf and co. violently smash contradictory visuals, elements, messages and themes to instill in the viewer a sense of uneasiness. For a viewer to find their footing in *Carnivàle*, they must first lose your balance. Through attentive viewing, the audience should, ultimately, find some sort of balance while navigating the murky waters of the series. It’s reflective of Knauf’s mission statement for the show. Fate can be delayed but not outright avoided. Closing one door on destiny just means it’s waiting for you somewhere else. His perspective on fate is best explained by Knauf himself:

The way the universe makes sense to me is that I can’t imagine the universe turning on a dime, like there’s two entire, separate futures because I decided to have donuts this morning instead of an Egg McMuffin. That universe makes no sense to me. How can you

have precognition in there? How can you have an instinct of what's going to happen next, if the entire thing changes because a butterfly got squashed on a windshield or some bullshit like that? I think the whole thing is just written out pretty much like a book.

(VanDerWerff)

Knauf's belief in inevitability and predestination clearly guide the plotting and character work of *Carnivàle*. Again, this is best demonstrated with the show's leads. Ben and Justin are fated for things neither believe is true to their essential nature. Ben believes he's worthless, a criminal and an affront to God. Justin believes he *talks* to God. The universe, however, has something drastically different in store for both for them and, regardless of their efforts, it *will* bend them to its will.

In the finale, Management explicitly tells Ben things happen because they're *meant* to. When told to take one life to save another, Ben curtly refuses by saying it isn't his place, echoing the time Flora chastised him for reviving his pet kitten. Management refutes that idea, though, telling Ben, "If that were true, my friend, then why is such a choice possible?" Here, even the concept of choice is stained with inevitability. As Management says, "It is your place, Ben Hawkins. It cannot be escaped. It can only be accepted."

By killing Lodz, Ben does demonstrate a certain acceptance of fate's inescapability. Ben's Avatar role propels him into action, seeking answers about his gifts and trying to save Ruthie's life. This more active, interesting Ben is a far cry from the version viewers get earlier in the series, to whom it mostly seems things happen. In attempting to avoid his startling and upsetting Avatar dreams, for example, Ben spends a handful of episodes trying desperately to stay awake, all culminating in his having sex with Ruthie and finally falling asleep ("Insomnia"). Sleep, like fate, always comes. There is no avoiding it. Not even for the Avatar.

While the season ends with Ben coming to a sort-of-terms with his role, the finale sees Brother Justin charging forward with seemingly total acceptance of his position as the Creature of Dark. After finally realizing his evil nature through revealing Reverend Balthus' greatest sin, Justin militarizes his congregation and delivers a furious sermon, declaring war on the impurities of society ("The Day That Was The Day").

Perhaps it was the revelation that Iris, his live-in sister whom he deeply loves, set his migrant orphanage alight that finally allows Justin to reconcile his well-intentioned mission with his despicable nature. Or the simple fact that Reverend Balthus' vision indisputably proved his evilness. Regardless, in his speech, Justin embraces himself for what he is, ending with, "I am an evil man. I am a sinful man." ("Hot and Bothered"). His congregation is moved, thinking, of course, think he is speaking metaphorically. Not one among them might truly believe Justin is *evil*. But when Justin demands Reverend Balthus baptize him again—confused, Balthus reminds him he was baptized as a child—the holy water on Justin's forehead turns to blood. Justin demands Balthus finish, creating a red crucifix reminiscent of the symbol used by the Templars.

Such visual cues abound throughout *Carnivàle*, where costuming, lighting and shot composition serve the viewer in their navigation of the show. Every frame of the first season feels crafted and constructed, reinforcing the show's themes and mythology to even the most casual viewer. The writing, too, is rife with metaphor and symbolism, all meant to underscore Knauf's mission statement for the show—that the human experience is one of duality. Light and dark coexist. Family and friendship can thrive in even the harshest economic situations. Life can spring from death and dearth. Question everything—the man who seems the kindest can be the most evil. The daughter who cares for her catatonic mother could destroy the world. Stories about humanity can be pessimistic, and while it has its hopeless moments, *Carnivàle* ultimately

reminds us that even though the world can be scary and contradictory, there's lightness and hope to balance things out.

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