

To Pimp a Damned Butterfly: Is It Wickedness, Is its Weakness?

**Part 2: The Devil is a Lie—Revealing Structural Corruption & Capitalistic Exploitation
through Modern Symbolic Manifestations of the Devil**

By Stephen Pacheco

The metaphorization of Satan in the modern era—transformed from corporeal figure to conceptual symbol—has become so rote and commonplace that we often forget how problematic that thinly-veiled, cloven hooved rhetorical device can be. Satan is still a mainstream mainstay, yet he no longer has anything to do with religiosity: for he is not often seen as the quick-witted force of temptation wielding corruption and suffering as his weapon and operating from within the shadows of the human psyche that he once was. Instead, now, he is just a scapegoat for true corruption: a tidy, convenient receptacle for one to place the blame intended (and deserved) for them into, in order to divert attention and punishment and surrender agency. When conservative politicians claim that something was an “act of Satan,” it is almost exclusively not a red-fleshed horny devil peaking out from the crevices that they are referring to—it’s just them. It is their own failure, their own corruption, their own sin. The metaphorized “Satan” of our time is often nothing more than a means to allow “good, God-fearing Christians” to operate as anything but that. For behind most every misdirect of a cry for “Satan!” lies human wickedness and the reality that the real Devil is *us* and *our* actions, and not some distant, shadowy, intangible figure operating on us imperceptibly from an abstracted fiery throne. The symbolization of Satan for the most part has been nothing more than a way to avoid facing the real Devils of our society: us—our leaders, our brothers, our sisters—and our institutions.

And this is where Kendrick Lamar comes into play. For Kendrick’s entire discography acts as a rebuttal to the popularized symbolization of Satan as an abstract scapegoat—for through Kendrick’s lyrics, that abstraction is materialized, made concrete and explicit, and the retribution often attributed to an ethereal concept as a misdirect is *redirected* towards corporeal beings and capitalistic institutions of corruption. In other words, the Devil is not a concept—it is a corporeal or capitalistic constant, one we vote into office, allow to operate, agree to support, and do nothing to dismantle. For Kendrick knows the Devil: he’s looked him in the eye and recognized his lies, seen how he has ravaged his community and decimated his brothers through bigotry, politics, and the prison industrial complex, and heard him speaking through the mouthpiece of politicians and leaders, bankers and accountants and managers. Kendrick knows that he exists and where and how he operates, and uses his platform as an artist to concretize and call attention to him—to make him visible so that we may neither avoid him nor deny him. Kendrick forces us to look the real Devil in the eyes as he has, so that we must become accountable and may never again claim ignorance of him or his actions. Through his music, Kendrick makes us complicit in the corruption of our society’s Devils.

However, the tools that Kendrick utilizes to make this condemnation clear and our Satans seen are diverse and multi-dimensional, as he does not simply rely on one approach lyrically, rhetorically, or symbolically. In the same way that Ben Caldwell modernized and made manifest the real Devils of our society in “The King of Soul or The Devil and Otis Redding: A Musical Tragedy, A One-Act Play” (1974), Kendrick does so through a plethora of persuasive devices. But before I analyze and demarcate these, I must briefly explain the story of “The Devil and Otis Redding,” as it will act as the foundation for my examination of Kendrick’s lyrics. To begin, in “The Devil and Otis Redding,” a young Otis Redding is visited in his sleep by the Devil, who wants to make a deal with Otis to own his voice (and therefore, essentially his soul) in exchange for success and material riches—a deal which Otis semi-somnambulant and seemingly sarcastically agrees to. As the narrative continues, while Otis gains prominence and popularity, he continues to be visited by the Devil, who masquerades as a white A&R man, a white master of ceremonies, aircraft salesman, airport mechanic, and policeman respectively. The contract Otis signed with the Devil in the form of the white A&R man (“Devil: My name is Mr. Jacobs. I represent Antis Records. You have a beautiful sound, Otis. If you were singing somewhere besides church you could make a lot of money” (Caldwell, 179)) proves to be the ruin of him, as he essentially loses ownership of his own

voice, and with that—his soul (“For someone to *own* my voice is damn near as ridiculous as someone owning my sou...” (Caldwell, 182)). Therefore, the story functions as a sort of societal parable, where Satan is metaphorized (unlike the empty metaphorizations discussed previously) as capitalism, white supremacy, and greedy white record executives, in order to point out the real Devils that operate and exist in our society and the real work that they do to oppress, suppress, and exploit others—in almost the exact same manner that Kendrick works to expose these same institutions and individuals. Consequently, I will use the rest of this analysis to make comparisons between Kendrick’s discography and “The Devil and Otis Redding” in order to demonstrate the ways in which Satan is made manifest as a cultural commentary on where the true evil in society lies.

Question 1: What is the Devil

(1) *“What you want you? A house or a car?*

Forty acres and a mule, a piano, a guitar?

Anythin’, see, my name is Uncle Sam, I’m your dog

Motherfucker, you can live at the mall”

-Kendrick Lamar, “Wesley’s Theory”

(2) *“What you want you? A house or a car?*

Forty acres and a mule? A piano, a guitar?

Anything, see my name is Lucy, I’m your dog

Motherfucker, you can live at the mall

I can see the evil, I can tell it, I know it’s illegal

I don’t think about it, I deposit every other zero

Get it all, you deserve it, Kendrick”

-Kendrick Lamar, “Alright”

(3) *“Devil: You can have all the things you want. Everything for your mother, and father, your brothers and sisters—see the world—you can leave this little town if you want to—buy a new house—a car! Give me your voice and I’ll get you everything you want!”*

- “The Devil & Otis Redding,” p. 180

(4) *“They part company. OTIS right. DEVIL left. The DEVIL hurriedly changes into his next costume of deception.”*

- “The Devil & Otis Redding,” p. 180

In both “Wesley’s Theory”—a song narrating the symbolic and titular “pimping of the butterfly,” meaning the exploitation of young black talent by popular culture and the entertainment industry—and “Alright”—a celebratory anthem claiming a higher calling and escape from oppression for black people everywhere—Kendrick illustrates Satan as both Uncle Sam and Lucy (an extended metaphor used throughout the album as a substitution for Lucifer, or the many temptations Kendrick faces as both a black man and a successful artist in the public eye) in passages that almost directly mirror that of “The Devil & Otis Redding,” where Otis is tempted with the offer of receiving everything he wants: a new house, a new car, security, and wealth. In all three examples, Satan is made manifest as a different iteration of a tangible societal evil—from capitalism

(“Uncle Sam”) to a record executive (“Give me your voice and I’ll get you everything you want!”) to the temptations of materialism (“Lucy”). And in both Kendrick’s lyrics (“I’m your dog”) and “Otis” narrative (“costume of deceit”), the Devil must take on disguises to tempt and tease his respective victims—with Kendrick’s disguise digging even deeper into the Satanic literary canon, hearkening back to *Faust*:

“For Kendrick, someone who details the juxtaposition between the vices and the bible in ‘Kush & Corinthians’ on 2011’s Section.80, he is introduced to this disguised figure the same as when he encountered ‘Lucy’ (short for Lucifer) on ‘To Pimp A Butterfly’, who at one point came to him in the form of a dog (‘Anything, see my name is Lucy, I’m your dog’). The latter meeting is a nod to the Johann Wolfgang von Goethe narrative ‘Faust,’ which is narrative that finds the devil taking on the form of a dog in an attempt to turn over one of the Lord’s servants to sin and evil” (Bristout, 2017).

Yet, whether Satan arrives in the form of a record executive or “from the perspective Uncle Sam - a character who represents capitalist America - describing how the caterpillar succumbs to American society’s ‘pimping of the butterfly’” (Bassil, 2015), Kendrick and Otis nonetheless fall for his deception every time. Even in “Alright,” a bold black anthem of empowerment and escape from oppression, there is one thing Kendrick still can’t escape: that of the Devil, in the form of temptation towards materialism and worldly pleasures. For even though he is cognizant of the Devil’s persuasion tactics (“I can see the evil, I can tell it, I know it’s illegal”), he *still* spurns the pulsating push of his moral compass in an embrace of the forbidden, the tempted, and the material (“I don’t think about it, I deposit every other zero”). Therefore, whether tempted by materialism, exploited by capitalism, or consumed by the entertainment industry, Kendrick and the character of Otis Redding function narratively as martyrs: everymen, who, despite their status and prominence, must lose their souls and sacrifice their integrity in order to reveal the Devil’s pernicious powers to us. To show us that he does exist, and that no one is immune to his moral toxicity.

(continued on the next page)

Question 2: What the Devil Says

(1) “I can see the baller in you, I can see the dollar in
you
Little white lies, but it's no white-collar in you
But it's whatever though because I'm still followin' you
Because you make me live forever, baby
Count it all together, baby
Then hit the register and make me feel better, baby”
-Kendrick Lamar, “Wesley’s Theory”

(2) “I remember what you said too, you said
My name is Lucy, Kendrick...
Lucy give you no worries
Lucy got million stories
About these rappers that I came after when they was
boring
Lucy gon' fill your pockets
Lucy gon' move your mama out of Compton
Inside the gigantic mansion like I promised
Lucy just want your trust and loyalty
I want you to know that Lucy got you
All your life I watched you
And now you all grown up to sign this contract, if
that's possible”
-Kendrick Lamar, “For Sale (Interlude)”

(3) “I want your soul. Truthfully, I don't have one.
And that's the only weight that will hold me here.”
-“The Devil and Otis Redding,” p. 177

(4) “You want a lot of things for your family—for
yourself...to move them out of this old house and into
a new one. You want all kinds of things that you think
will make you and your family happier, right?”
-“The Devil and Otis Redding,” p. 177

(5) “I'm gonna have to work hard to sell you to the
public, but we're both gonna make a lot of money.
Here's the deal. Our contract will state that after
you've made (He says this slowly to make the figures
sound more impressive.) one million dollars, all rights
and royalties to your singing belong to me!”
-“The Devil and Otis Redding,” p. 180

(6) “To me, the real value of the things you've done
comes after you're gone... What I have will be all
that's left of you.”
-“The Devil and Otis Redding,” p. 182

Additionally, whether in the form of a temptress, seductress, overt manipulator, or slick persuader, Satan latches onto the innermost desires of Kendrick and Otis Redding in an attempt to manipulate their perspective and prey upon their insecurities. While the immediate connections should be obvious—Satan tempts Kendrick and Otis both with financial security, material goods, monetary familial protection, general contentment, the satisfaction of desires, and career-oriented success—the racial undertones in some areas are more subtle. For, the Devil in “Wesley’s Theory” mentions sarcastically and symbolically the “little white lies” that he utilizes to pull the strings of Kendrick’s soul (*sarcastic* because his methods involve overt deception and heavy-handed exploitation, not “little white lies,” and *symbolic* because they are the lies of the *white* man, wielding his power and position over Kendrick) and that Kendrick has “no white-collar in [him],” while the racial implications in “The Devil and Otis Redding” are less subdued:

“Anytime a Black man start doing something for his people whitey kill ‘im—one way or another!...They tryin’ like hell to kill him! Financially! They cut-off his livelihood! And tryin’ to put him in jail! They tryinb’ to kill his strong, proud Black image! They tried to make it look like the white man giveth, and the white man taketh away” (“The Devil and Otis Redding,” p. 186).

As many writers and artists have expressed before—including W.E.B Du Bois, Malcolm X, James Baldwin, and Ta Nehisi Coates—and will and should continue to express in the future, one thing is certain: white men everywhere use their power and position to oppress, stifle, exploit, and challenge the worth and legitimacy of black men, whether institutionally (Kendrick’s “Uncle Sam”) or individually (Otis’ A&R man), conscious or subconscious. As Kendrick himself said in a 2015 interview with Mass Appeal Magazine following the release of his album:

“It’s the American dream because everybody wanna feel like they’re in control of their success. We’re puppets in so many different places [in our lives]. To pimp out something from a negative place and take it to a positive place, that’s what everybody wanna do...We’re in a society where we definitely are baited to pump fear and keep the negativity going. To keep the cycle continuing, y’know? It’s a pimp situation” (Alvarez, 2015).

The titular “pimping of the butterfly” is in and of itself a metaphor for the exploitation of the black entertainer, a metaphor in which Satan takes the form of the white oppressor. But another manifestation of Satan also exists *ideologically*, divorced—but nonetheless stemming—from the corporeal manifestation of the white oppressor. For the Bu Boisian concept of “double-consciousness” (the burden a black man must carry in always having his identity torn asunder between two warring ideals and lenses at once—that of the black man and that of an American—never comfortable in either of the bodies housed within the same skeleton) is also present—and perniciously so—in Kendrick’s discourse. Throughout the album, Kendrick continues to ask, “Is it wickedness. Is it weakness?” Which part of his identity is damning him? Which part is Satan able to prey upon and exploit? Which body is blessed, and which is damned to suffer? In other words, as Rodney Carmichael posed in his 2017 article on “The Prophetic Struggle of Kendrick Lamar’s *DAMN.*”: “*is it the inherent wickedness of America's racialized politics or our weakness as a people that we must overcome? Or is our faith predicated on a false binary that only feels like free will while leaving us judged by our nation and cursed by our God?*” (Carmichael, 2017). Kendrick may never find the answer to this question—and he knows that. But until he does, his conflicted self is left vulnerable to the deceit and temptation of the various manifestations of Satan operating within society: actively looking to destroy his credibility as an artist, complicate and challenge his identity as a man, and exploit him for his worth as an entertainer. Yet, in the face of this warring duality, Kendrick will continue writing from the fissures in between his identities, in the space where he is allowed to exist—until he and all black people are allowed to exist in *all* spaces.