

Narrative Framing Influencing Moral Judgement: A Comparative Textual Analysis of Anti-Heroes in Contemporary Supernatural Television

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Abstract- Contemporary television narratives increasingly depict counterproductive protagonists with ethical violations counterbalanced by emotional vulnerability, psychological depth and relational attachment. By examining how contemporary supernatural television narrative constructs moral sympathy towards counterproductive protagonists through narrative framing techniques; the study does so using qualitative textual analytic methodology through an analysis of selected scenes from supernatural television series The Vampire Diaries, Lucifer and The Originals that centre around characters Damon Salvatore (Vampire Diaries), Lucifer Morningstar (Lucifer) and Klaus Mikaelson (Originals). Specifically using the Narrative Framing Theory, the Moral Disengagement Theory and the Character Engagement Theory as theoretical frameworks for analysis, the study examines how dialogue, trauma, emotional vulnerability, confession, relational attachment and self-sacrifice are used as agents of rehabilitation of counterproductive protagonists. The results indicate that narrative framing is the primary method by which audiences are invited to negotiate emotionally morality and sympathise with ethically troubling Contrapositives (antiheroes). Emotional pain, shameful trauma, confession and relational intimacy are repeatedly employed to contextualise ethical transgression enabling audiences to understand violence/cruelty psychologically/emotionally rather than simply ethically. Finally, the study indicates that redemption in supernatural television is constructed relationally (through emotional accountability and recognition) rather than through a complete moral sanctioning of character behaviour. The study adds to the bodies of literature on antiheroes; television studies and media morality by revealing how emotionally connecting and psychologically complex contemporary supernatural television strategically reframes immoral acts through emotional engagement and psychological complexity.

Keywords: Narrative Framing, Anti-Hero, Moral Judgement, Supernatural Television, Textual Analysis, Moral Disengagement, Redemption, Emotional Framing.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The past twenty years have seen a significant change in how television storytelling depicts morality and characters. Present-day narratives move beyond a binary of good and evil, featuring protagonists who participate in violence, manipulation, cruelty, and immoral actions while simultaneously eliciting audience attachment and sympathy. Consequently, morality within television narratives has become a fluid, emotional, and strategically shaped construct.

One of the most prominent developments in contemporary television storytelling is the rise of the antihero. Unlike the traditional hero, who embodies moral certainty and ethical righteousness, the antihero is often flawed, unstable, and morally ambiguous. Despite these characteristics, audiences continue to identify with and support such characters, reflecting a shift toward psychological complexity, emotional vulnerability, and moral ambiguity in modern television narratives.

The growth of serialized television storytelling has further contributed to this transformation. Extended narratives allow audiences to spend prolonged periods immersed in characters' lives, gaining insight into their emotional struggles, interpersonal relationships, traumatic experiences, and internal conflicts. As a result, viewers often develop emotional attachments to characters who violate

conventional moral standards, prioritizing emotional understanding over strict moral judgment.

The supernatural television genre provides a particularly fertile space for the development of antihero narratives. Themes of guilt, monstrosity, redemption, loneliness, trauma, immortality, and moral conflict are frequently explored through supernatural figures such as vampires, demons, fallen angels, and immortal beings. These characters function as metaphors for human emotions and anxieties, enabling narratives to examine morality in complex and nuanced ways.

This study focuses on three supernatural antiheroes: Damon Salvatore from *The Vampire Diaries*, Klaus Mikaelson from *The Originals*, and Lucifer Morningstar from *Lucifer*. Although each character is initially portrayed as violent, manipulative, or morally questionable, audience sympathy is gradually cultivated through emotional vulnerability, confession, relational attachment, trauma, and sacrifice. Their narrative journeys provide valuable insight into how contemporary television constructs sympathy for morally problematic protagonists.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The increasing popularity of antihero protagonists in contemporary television raises important questions regarding morality, audience sympathy, and narrative influence. Characters who engage in violence, manipulation, and unethical behaviour are frequently presented through emotional frameworks that encourage understanding rather than condemnation. Trauma, loneliness, guilt, romantic relationships, and personal suffering are often used to contextualize immoral actions, prompting audiences to interpret characters through emotional and psychological perspectives.

While previous research has explored antiheroes, audience identification, fandom cultures, and genre studies, comparatively little attention has been devoted to the specific textual mechanisms that facilitate moral sympathy toward morally ambiguous supernatural protagonists. In particular, limited research has comparatively examined how narrative framing, emotional vulnerability, trauma narratives, confession, romance, and self-sacrifice function as

strategies that encourage moral rehabilitation and audience forgiveness. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how such narrative techniques operate within selected supernatural television narratives.

1.3 Research Gap

While previous research has explored antiheroes, audience identification, fandom cultures, and genre studies, comparatively little attention has been devoted to the specific textual mechanisms that facilitate moral sympathy toward morally ambiguous supernatural protagonists. In particular, limited research has comparatively examined how narrative framing, emotional vulnerability, trauma narratives, confession, romance, and self-sacrifice function as strategies that encourage moral rehabilitation and audience forgiveness. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how such narrative techniques operate within selected supernatural television narratives.

1.4 Objectives

1. To examine how narrative framing and dialogue contribute to the construction of moral sympathy toward antiheroes in contemporary supernatural television.
2. To explore how emotional vulnerability, trauma, and relational attachment are used to justify or contextualize morally questionable behaviour.
3. To analyze the role of confession, guilt, repentance, and self-sacrifice in the moral rehabilitation of supernatural antihero protagonists.
4. To compare the narrative framing strategies employed in *The Vampire Diaries*, *The Originals*, and *Lucifer*.

1.5 Scope, Delimitations, and Significance

This study contributes to Media and Communication Studies by examining how narrative framing shapes audience sympathy toward morally ambiguous protagonists. Focusing on Damon Salvatore, Klaus Mikaelson, and Lucifer Morningstar, it explores how emotional vulnerability, trauma, romance, confession, and sacrifice are used to encourage moral rehabilitation within supernatural television narratives. Using qualitative textual analysis of selected scenes from *The Vampire Diaries*, *The*

Originals, and Lucifer, the study contributes to discussions on antiheroes, morality, and audience engagement. The research is limited to textual analysis and does not include audience studies or quantitative methods.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Serialization in television takes this bond with characters to a new level. Modern critics are beginning to understand that audience affection for an amoral protagonist is built not through actions alone, but the telling of those actions through emotion and narrative. One significant finding from literature on antiheroics consistently identified is the importance of emotional vulnerability, psychological complexity, and framing in constructing sympathetic feelings towards the transgressive antihero.

The literature on audience sympathy and moral ambivalence confirms that audiences feel affection towards morally ambiguous protagonists despite their wrongdoing. Mri, Wirz, and Fahr (2023) identify emotional vulnerability, caring, attachment, and connection as much more influential than simple moral assessment in building the emotional connection between the audience and protagonist. Krakowiak (2015) noted that audiences are likely to enjoy antiheroes more if they are more tolerant to moral ambiguity because antiheroes can be more emotionally complex and uncertain. In support of these studies, Frazer and Moyer-Gus (2021) claim that the audience more easily identifies with a morally problematic character when there is emotional context around their wrongdoing.

The serialization of television adds another layer to this attachment to characters. Long-form narratives encourage audiences to build affective relationships with characters as they become progressively more emotionally involved by revealing trauma, vulnerability, and emotional vulnerability over long periods of time (Kroener, 2018). This prolonged investment in characters can lead to the development of parasocial relationships with antiheroes, even as they continue to exhibit morally problematic behavior. Studies on empathetic antiheroes support the idea that audiences are able to develop sentimental connection with morally questionable

characters once the motives behind their violence are explained by emotional experiences (trauma, loss, loneliness, or romance).

Frame analysis has emerged as perhaps one of the most crucial techniques through which moral sympathy is achieved. Frazer, Moyer-Gus, and Grizzard (2022) demonstrate that entertainment narratives often use frames of moral disengagement to lessen audience outrage at unethical acts. Wimmer, Grizzard, and Dillard (2022) argue that narrative perspective and the extent to which audiences are granted insight into the character's internal mental state and conflict significantly influence their morality judgement. In support, García (2022) claims that Serialized TV constructs "a structure of sympathy," that through prolonged emotional investment and interpersonal relationship leads to the transformation of morals from an ethical judgment to an psychological one.

Trauma and emotional vulnerability are another major recurring themes throughout literature on antiheroes. A psychoanalytic approach to Klaus Mikaelson shows the childhood abuse, emotional rejection, and lack of emotional security is the key reason for his violent and emotionally turbulent behavior (Khan, 2020). Damon Salvatore's violence and manipulation can be attributed to guilt, remorse, and affection for his brother and friends (Campbell, 2009). The monstrous vampire protagonist is becoming increasingly sympathetic by portraying him as lonely and searching for romance and emotional stability (Gomez Galisteo, 2017). Trauma serves as narrative device for placing audience expectations on how moral outrage is being re-mediated as character motivation.

Romantic attachment and emotional intimacy is another significant theme that encourages moral reinterpretation of characters. This finding has shown the romantic connection is a vehicle for antiheroes to become more emotionally relatable and develop more sympathy from their audiences. A romantic partner makes the male protagonists into more emotionally desiring figures (Gómez Galisteo, 2017) while familial connections, tenderness, and romantic attachment become the factors that cultivate empathy for the male antihero (García, 2022). In relation to

this, moral outrage and negative portrayal are reframed by the affective connections to these antiheroes.

Confession, emotional accountability and sacrifice become major themes in discussing redemption arcs of these morally problematic characters. Both Lucifer Morningstar (Maurice, 2023; Gaur, 2023) stories are shown to achieve rehabilitation and moral evolution through the act of confession, emotionally knowing and acknowledging the extent of their wrongdoing, and sacrificing themselves for the ones they love. Damon Salvatore and Klaus Mikaelson have their own unique but interconnected moral rehab through trauma, emotional confession, familiarly related intimacy and love and sacrifice (Chacherkar, D & Menon, 2023). Ultimately, they prove to be narratives of emotional, rather than moral redemption. Despite the focus on emotional engagement, moral ambiguity and audience sympathy, however, limited work has been done exploring the interaction between the narrative framings, emotional vulnerabilities, romantic attachment, confession, and sacrifice in developing moral rehab in supernatural television narratives together. Limited studies also have investigated the antiheroines Klaus Mikaelson, Damon Salvatore, and Lucifer Morningstar's moral rehab collectively. The current study attempts to explore this lack of information through a focus on the narrative framings, emotional context and antiheroes' moral rehab in the supernatural television genre.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine how contemporary supernatural television constructs moral sympathy toward morally ambiguous protagonists. The analysis focuses on Damon Salvatore from *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–2017), Klaus Mikaelson from *The Originals* (2013–2018), and Lucifer Morningstar from *Lucifer* (2016–2021). A qualitative approach was selected because the study seeks to interpret meaning, emotional framing, and moral positioning within narrative texts rather than measure or quantify content.

Textual analysis serves as the primary method of investigation. This approach enables an in-depth examination of dialogue, characterization, emotional disclosures, and narrative structures that contribute to audience perceptions of antihero characters. Unlike content analysis, which focuses on frequency and quantification, textual analysis emphasizes the interpretation of narrative and emotional elements that shape audience understanding.

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

The study employs purposive sampling to select scenes that directly address the research objectives. A total of twelve scenes were selected across the three-television series, with four scenes analyzed for each antihero. Selection was based on the presence of narrative framing, emotional vulnerability, trauma disclosure, relational attachment, confession, moral self-recognition, and self-sacrifice.

For Damon Salvatore, the selected episodes were "Founders Day" (Season 1, Episode 22), "Rose" (Season 2, Episode 8), "The Descent" (Season 2, Episode 12), and "Graduation" (Season 4, Episode 23). For Lucifer Morningstar, the selected episodes were "Favorite Son" (Season 1, Episode 6), "A Priest Walks Into a Bar" (Season 1, Episode 9), "Save Lucifer" (Season 6, Episode 9), and "Partners 'Til the End" (Season 6, Episode 10). For Klaus Mikaelson, the selected episodes were "Always and Forever" (Season 1, Episode 1), "Savior" (Season 5, Episode 8), "Haunter of Ruins" (Season 4, Episode 3), and "When the Saints Go Marching In" (Season 5, Episode 13).

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis integrates narrative analysis, thematic analysis, and character analysis. Narrative analysis is used to examine how serialized storytelling gradually reshapes audience perceptions of antihero protagonists through the progressive disclosure of emotional and psychological information. Thematic analysis identifies recurring themes such as trauma, loneliness, guilt, emotional recognition, confession, redemption, and sacrifice across the selected scenes. Character analysis focuses on dialogue, emotional expression, relationships, and self-reflection to understand how audience sympathy is generated.

Six analytical categories guided the study: narrative framing, emotional vulnerability, trauma, moral self-recognition, relational and romantic attachment, and self-sacrifice/redemption. These categories were derived from the theoretical framework and served as the basis for interpreting how morally transgressive actions are reframed through emotional and narrative contexts.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three complementary theoretical approaches: Narrative Framing Theory, Moral Disengagement Theory, and Character Engagement Theory.

Narrative Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) explains how media texts emphasize particular aspects of reality while downplaying others, thereby shaping audience interpretation. Within supernatural television, narrative framing operates through emotional disclosure, trauma narratives, confession, relational attachment, and sacrifice. These elements encourage audiences to interpret characters through psychological and emotional perspectives rather than solely through moral judgment. This framework is particularly relevant to Damon Salvatore, Klaus Mikaelson, and Lucifer Morningstar, whose harmful actions are consistently contextualized through experiences of suffering, vulnerability, and emotional connection.

Moral Disengagement Theory (Bandura, 1999) describes the cognitive processes through which individuals reconcile unethical behaviour with a positive moral self-image. Applied to television narratives, the theory helps explain how audiences become more accepting of antihero protagonists when immoral actions are framed through loneliness, trauma, guilt, emotional distress, or personal growth. While viewers may not condone such actions, these narrative elements reduce moral condemnation and facilitate sympathetic engagement.

Character Engagement Theory (Smith, 1995) examines how audiences develop emotional alliances and moral allegiances with fictional characters. Through prolonged exposure to characters' thoughts, emotions, relationships, and personal struggles, viewers form attachments that influence their

interpretation of behaviour. The serialized nature of contemporary supernatural television strengthens this engagement by allowing audiences to accompany characters across extended narrative arcs, thereby fostering emotional investment in morally ambiguous protagonists.

IV. DISCUSSION AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

4.1 Damon Salvatore: Emotional Vulnerability and Moral Rehabilitation

Damon Salvatore's redemption arc is primarily constructed through emotional vulnerability, loneliness, relational attachment, and self-recognition. Initially portrayed as violent, manipulative, impulsive, and emotionally detached, Damon functions as an antagonist whose actions frequently place him outside conventional moral boundaries. However, as the narrative progresses, viewers are gradually exposed to his emotional pain, loneliness, desire for acceptance, and capacity for love, reducing negative moral judgment and encouraging sympathy.

This process is evident in several key scenes. In "Founders Day" (Season 1, Episode 22), Damon admits that although he originally came to Mystic Falls intending to destroy it, he now wishes to protect it. This moment represents one of the earliest instances of moral self-reflection and reveals his surprise that anyone could view him as worthy of redemption. In "Rose" (Season 2, Episode 8), Damon confesses his love for Elena before compelling her to forget the encounter. Although initially appearing selfish, the scene is framed as an act of emotional restraint and self-sacrifice, highlighting his growing capacity for vulnerability.

Further emotional complexity is revealed in "The Descent" (Season 2, Episode 12), where Damon expresses his loneliness, identity crisis, and longing for his lost humanity. His confession reframes his violent behaviour as a response to emotional suffering rather than simple cruelty. Similarly, in "Graduation" (Season 4, Episode 23), Damon openly acknowledges his selfishness and emotional dependence on Elena without attempting to justify his flaws. By accepting responsibility for his actions, he

demonstrates emotional honesty rather than moral perfection.

Across these scenes, Damon's violence is consistently contextualized through grief, loneliness, fear of abandonment, and psychological struggle. Narrative framing encourages viewers to interpret his actions through empathy rather than condemnation. His redemption therefore emerges not through moral innocence but through emotional growth, self-awareness, and the development of meaningful relationships.

4.2 Lucifer Morningstar: Self-Hatred, Identity, and Emotional Accountability

Lucifer Morningstar's redemption is primarily framed through self-hatred, rejection, identity conflict, and emotional accountability. Throughout the series, the traditional image of the Devil as the embodiment of evil is gradually transformed into that of an emotionally wounded individual struggling with abandonment, guilt, shame, and isolation.

The foundations of Lucifer's emotional rehabilitation are established in "Favorite Son" (Season 1, Episode 6), where he rejects responsibility for humanity's sins and expresses resentment toward God for unfairly condemning him. Rather than portraying arrogance, the scene frames Lucifer's anger as a response to rejection and misunderstanding. This emotional framing continues in "A Priest Walks into a Bar" (Season 1, Episode 9), where the death of Father Frank exposes Lucifer's grief and vulnerability. His confrontation with God reveals deep feelings of abandonment and encourages audiences to interpret his rebellion as a consequence of emotional pain rather than inherent evil.

In "Save Lucifer" (Season 6, Episode 9), Lucifer's confession that "everything I touch I ruin" demonstrates profound self-loathing and insecurity. The narrative positions his greatest struggle not as external punishment but as his inability to forgive himself. This internal conflict reaches its resolution in "Partners 'Til the End" (Season 6, Episode 10), where Lucifer prevents Rory from repeating the cycle of anger and revenge that once defined his own life. Rather than retaliating, he chooses empathy and understanding.

Collectively, these scenes frame Lucifer's redemption as a process of emotional accountability and self-acceptance. The narrative transforms him from a symbol of evil into a deeply human character seeking healing, purpose, and belonging. Redemption is therefore achieved through emotional growth rather than moral purification.

4.3 Klaus Mikaelson: Trauma, Fatherhood, and Self-Sacrifice

Klaus Mikaelson's redemption differs significantly from those of Damon and Lucifer. His journey is primarily shaped by childhood trauma, identity suppression, emotional validation, fatherhood, and self-sacrifice. While Damon seeks acceptance and Lucifer struggles with self-hatred, Klaus's emotional wounds stem from abuse, rejection, and the denial of his true identity.

The origins of Klaus's emotional suffering are revealed in "Always and Forever" (Season 1, Episode 1), where flashbacks depict Mikael's abuse, the suppression of Klaus's werewolf identity, and his longing for love and acceptance. By presenting Klaus as a frightened and isolated child rather than solely as a feared villain, the narrative encourages audiences to interpret his later violence through the lens of trauma and abandonment.

Emotional validation becomes particularly significant through Klaus's relationship with Camille. In her death scene, he acknowledges that she brought out goodness within him and offered compassion where others responded with fear. This moment demonstrates the importance of emotional connection in reshaping Klaus's self-perception.

His emotional growth continues in "Haunter of Ruins" (Season 4, Episode 3), where fatherhood becomes a catalyst for change. Reflecting on his relationship with Hope, Klaus expresses a desire to be remembered as a protector rather than a monster. Fatherhood redirects his emotional intensity away from revenge and toward responsibility, vulnerability, and care for others.

This transformation reaches its culmination in "When the Saints Go Marching In" (Season 5, Episode 13), where Klaus openly acknowledges the value of love,

loyalty, and emotional support. His ultimate act of self-sacrifice demonstrates the extent of his growth and confirms his willingness to place the well-being of others above himself.

Klaus's redemption is therefore not achieved through moral innocence but through emotional healing, meaningful relationships, and self-sacrifice. The narrative gradually transforms him from a feared antagonist into a sympathetic antihero whose actions are interpreted through trauma, love, and personal growth.

4.5 Comparative Analysis

Although Damon Salvatore, Lucifer Morningstar, and Klaus Mikaelson follow different narrative paths, all three characters are redeemed through similar framing strategies. Emotional vulnerability, confession, trauma, relational attachment, and self-sacrifice consistently function as mechanisms that encourage audience sympathy. Damon's redemption is rooted in loneliness and emotional honesty, Lucifer's in self-acceptance and accountability, and Klaus's in trauma recovery and fatherhood. Despite their continued moral ambiguity, narrative framing encourages viewers to prioritize emotional understanding over ethical condemnation. These findings demonstrate how contemporary supernatural television employs emotional storytelling to transform morally problematic characters into sympathetic protagonists.

V. CONCLUSION

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined the role of narrative framing in constructing moral sympathy toward antihero protagonists in contemporary supernatural television. Through a qualitative textual analysis of selected scenes from *The Vampire Diaries*, *Lucifer*, and *The Originals*, the study explored how emotional vulnerability, trauma, relational attachment, confession, and self-sacrifice function as mechanisms of antihero rehabilitation. The findings demonstrate that redemption in contemporary supernatural television is achieved primarily through emotional accessibility and psychological complexity rather than through moral purification.

The analysis revealed that narrative framing plays a significant role in shaping audience perceptions of morally transgressive characters. Across the three series, emotional suffering, trauma disclosure, confessional dialogue, and interpersonal relationships consistently encouraged viewers to interpret antihero behaviour through emotional and psychological frameworks rather than purely ethical ones. Damon Salvatore's redemption was framed through loneliness, vulnerability, and romantic attachment; Lucifer Morningstar's through rejection, self-hatred, and emotional accountability; and Klaus Mikaelson's through childhood trauma, fatherhood, emotional validation, and sacrifice.

The study further found that confession, self-awareness, and emotional transparency are central to the rehabilitation of antihero protagonists. Rather than absolving characters of responsibility, these narrative strategies encourage audience empathy while maintaining awareness of their moral flaws. Similarly, romantic, familial, and interpersonal relationships serve as important mechanisms through which antiheroes become emotionally accessible and demonstrate care, vulnerability, and responsibility toward others.

The findings support the relevance of Narrative Framing Theory, Moral Disengagement Theory, and Character Engagement Theory in understanding antihero narratives. Together, these theories explain how audiences are encouraged to negotiate moral ambiguity through emotional engagement, resulting in greater sympathy toward characters whose actions would otherwise invite condemnation.

5.2 Implications of the Study

The findings contribute to Media Studies, Television Studies, and Narrative Theory by demonstrating how contemporary supernatural television utilizes emotional framing as a strategy for generating audience sympathy. The study highlights how trauma, emotional vulnerability, confession, relational attachment, and sacrifice function as recurring narrative devices that reshape audience perceptions of morally ambiguous characters.

The research also suggests that contemporary television increasingly presents redemption as a

process of emotional accountability rather than moral transformation. Antihero narratives emphasize self-awareness, emotional growth, relational responsibility, and sacrifice over complete moral reform.

5.3 Future Research

Future studies may expand this research by examining audience reception and viewer interpretations of antihero narratives through interviews, surveys, or focus groups. Such approaches would provide insight into how audiences actively negotiate morality, sympathy, and emotional engagement when consuming antihero-centred television narratives.

Further research may also explore antihero representations across other genres such as crime dramas, fantasy series, psychological thrillers, and science fiction television. Comparative studies involving different cultural contexts, streaming platforms, or international television productions may reveal how narrative framing strategies vary across media environments.

Finally, future scholarship may investigate additional narrative mechanisms such as humor, nostalgia, visual framing, and parasocial relationships in shaping audience sympathy toward morally ambiguous protagonists. Such research would contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolving relationship between television narratives, emotional engagement, and moral judgment.

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