

**DEGENDERING THE CISGENDER GOSPEL IN**

**ANGEL BY LAURA LEE**

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**Abstract**

*Jacque Derrida introduced the concept of 'Deconstruction' in his famous work Of Grammatology (1967). This concept is mainly a critical outlook concerned with the relationship between text and meaning which has opened endless possibilities when it comes to interpretation of various works and also life in general. Derrida further put forward the concept of 'free play' in his essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." In this essay, he speaks about the philosophical "event" which occurred to the historical foundation of structure. Before this mentioned "event," man was considered to be the center of all things; so therefore man became the yardstick to every comparison made. However, after the 'event' man could no longer be considered as the center of the universe. Without this centralised reference, what the world is left with is 'free play.'*

**Keywords:-** Deconstruction, philosophical, historical foundation, centralised

## DEGENERATING THE CISGENDER GOSPEL IN

### ANGEL BY LAURA LEE

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Jacque Derrida introduced the concept of 'Deconstruction' in his famous work *Of Grammatology* (1967). This concept is mainly a critical outlook concerned with the relationship between text and meaning which has opened endless possibilities when it comes to interpretation of various works and also life in general. Derrida further put forward the concept of 'free play' in his essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." In this essay, he speaks about the philosophical "event" which occurred to the historical foundation of structure. Before this mentioned "event," man was considered to be the center of all things; so therefore man became the yardstick to every comparison made. However, after the 'event' man could no longer be considered as the center of the universe. Without this centralised reference, what the world is left with is 'free play.'

Derrida thus wrote:

[U]p until the event which I wish to mark out and define, structure—or rather the structurality of structure—although it has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by the process of giving it a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the free play of the structure. No doubt that by orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of the structure permits the free play of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself. (351-352)

This concept makes possibility an alternate view of the Holy Bible from what is the normal acceptance. Taking this concept, this paper will aim to deconstruct the normative acceptance of the Bible in relation to the position of homosexuals however sacrilegious it may sound to an orthodox follower. The birth of postmodernism brought with it a possibility for everyone to have a wider perception into things which were deemed fixed and even taboo. In short it brought about a liminal space which shook the once thought fixed ideas and concepts.

What makes the issue of 'homosexuality' significant for the church is that some Christians have adopted a form of queer theory in the way they treat homosexual behaviour. Professing Christians who hold to this way of thinking often preach that Scripture's emphasis is on a couple's commitment and love for one another rather than any sexual misbehaviour. Pro-homosexual Bible scholars argued and re-interpreted the Scripture in order to justify homosexual behaviour. If their claims are accepted as true, they open the door to the acceptance of a variety of other biblically 'inappropriate' forms of sexuality. Ultimately, the influence of queer theory on Christian academics, the church, and the culture in general has led to the further diversion in the relationship between God's Word and human sexuality.

Looking into the selected text, one can see that Bible is indispensable when talking about Laura Lee's *Angel* (2011) as the Bible and the Church are very central to the lives of the protagonists of the story. The presence of this antagonistic relationship is very much there as the main protagonist, a 'heterosexual' church minister, Paul fell in love with another man much younger than him. If a minister falling in love with a man whom he initially thought was an angel is not queer enough, the fact that that 'angel' whom he love turning out to be an alcoholic and not having any trait of an angel takes on a higher level of rumminess. In the story, the minister Paul after meeting his 'angel' Ian began to question his job as a minister and his purpose and above all his sexuality. The 'sexuality' which he thought to be his birth right was deconstructed by the mere beauty of Ian. His whole notion about himself changed and it was like he was starting a new journey of a different life. The

angel or as a matter of fact homosexuality is like the mountain, beautiful and yet sublime. “The ministry was supposed to be a ‘calling.’ Why did it so often feel like a job?” (Lee, *Angel* 22)

In every possible way he tried to justify his ‘homosexual’ love for Ian and his appreciation of his beauty according to the Bible. Ian’s beauty possessed his whole being but the sense of guilt inside him and his fear of sinning made him reluctant to make advancements to quench his physical wants. Lee thus said:

His mind was invaded once again by the thought of his angel. It came back as a series of images. The way his hair fell onto his face. The way he moved when he walked, his head high, leading with his hips. The absolute perfection of his face. How shaking his hand made Paul feel as though all of the atoms in his body had aligned. The transcendent power of beauty. Moments of appreciating beauty. What did the Bible say about that? Most of the passages he managed to find did not have much to say about the appreciation of beauty. (ibid. 23)

The many conversations they had between themselves through the phone brought to light the difference of ideology they had regarding the relationship between the church and homosexuality:

Religion was frequently a topic of the evening phone calls. Ian had a great curiosity about the Christianity that Paul loved so much. He seemed to want to see the good in religion, but he had been burned. The church of his youth had damned him. Paul understood that Ian had abandoned religion for his own well-being. (ibid. 64)

In these conversations, even though Paul’s words reflect the general view of the church on homosexuality he did not take on the extremist stance. This view of him is justifiable as he, as a minister is expected to have a certain pre-conditioned view, even though that necessarily does not have to be his opinion on it.

Ian questioned the Christians being so hung up on sex as for him sex should have a greater purpose than just for procreation. For him sex should be all about giving pleasures to others which for him cannot be a bad cause compared to giving pain to others. He found it ironic that people who profess to be good Christians are making the lives of the homosexuals who are also humans miserable. He thus said:

Mary was a virgin, Jesus was a virgin. Why is that so important? The world is sexual...I never understood why it's supposed to be less like animals to have sex only for procreation. I mean, isn't that exactly what animals do? They go into heat, they have sex, make new little animals and go back about their business. That's being like animals. Being like a human is having sex because it feels good. I mean, why should you have to justify giving someone pleasure? Shouldn't you have to justify giving someone pain? Like these people who go around bashing gays because they're good Christians—that's fine. That's good. But heaven forbid you give a guy an orgasm. That's evil. (ibid. 64)

Through the voice of Ian one can see that the ideology relating to the Christian beliefs regarding homosexuality is not without fault. This shows clearly that the new generation are not simply having it and are searching for reasons and answers to how things are going. His voice clashed with that of the Church's which Paul somehow tried to protect but failed as he himself found reason to what Ian was talking about. Paul had no substantial answers to provide other than:

"Why is it important? Hmm...I guess because it helps to promote a stable society if people aren't so obsessed with sex. If they're not promiscuous. I think that is where it comes from." (ibid)

To which Ian commented:

“Is that what Jesus was about? Promoting stable society? I thought he was a guy who questioned the Pharisees and turned over the moneychangers’ tables and all that.” (ibid. 65)

As mentioned before, Paul had been so conditioned by the church that a sudden shift in his ideology is impossible in spite of the feelings he had for Ian. The root cause of the antagonistic attitude of the church toward homosexuality lies in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Bible, the incident which the church uses to justify their stance.

It has long been a general assumption that the Bible itself is the guide by which the Christian could measure and deal with homosexuality. Here, it is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah which the people who condemn Homosexuality call upon to prove that God Himself had made his judgment clear. Certainly, if God punished these two ancient cities on the ground of Homosexuality then they are no doubt fulfilling the will of God by supporting it. This led to the naming of one of the homosexual acts as ‘sodomy’. However, the possibility of examining this cannot be ignored.

D. S. Bailey in his book *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (1955) examines the scripture carefully and writes:

The story does not in the least demand the assumption that the sin of Sodom was sexual, let alone homosexual. Indeed, there is no evidence to show that vice of the latter kind was prevalent there. (5)

If this view of Bailey is correct, then how it is that mankind has made this association these many centuries? To this Bailey answers:

It is clear that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was an historical event, and that it was due to natural and not supernatural causes. The tradition that a Divine judgment fell upon the cities because of their wickedness may have been nothing more than a superstitious inference from the awful character of the disaster. If it had any foundation in fact, we still know nothing of the sin for which it was

believed that they had been punished; there is no reason to suppose that it was sexual, still less, that it was homosexual. (7)

This scholarly study of Bailey points out the confusion in the translation process and suggests that this has been the prime genesis of the widespread misunderstanding.

With regards to the birth of 'homosexuality' as a category, Michel Foucault in the first volume of *History of Sexuality* (1978) said, "We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized ... the homosexual was now a species"(43). Along this line, one can say that Paul was deemed 'homosexual' by the other church leaders and members even before knowing their true relationship because of the categorising which Foucault talks about. It is no longer related to behaviour alone but an identity which society forced upon and condemned as a result of the widespread of confessional system. This confession is what Foucault criticised in many of his books. In relation to this James D. Faubion in a book he edited titled *Michel Foucault: Power* (2000) writes:

This form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word "subject": subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self- knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to." (331)

In the story, it was not so much of a confession for Paul but rather the question of self-acceptance in spite of the others' observations. Right from the initial stages, he believed that it was never about the issue of homosexuality when it comes to his relationship with Ian, and said it was more so about aesthetic appreciation and him meeting Ian was a divine appointment contrary to the beliefs of the church.

It wasn't sexual, he told himself. It couldn't be sexual. He was not gay. He had to be feeling something else. Inspiration, a pure appreciation of beauty. There was nothing wrong with admiring beauty where it existed, even in a male form. God had created it. It was divine energy. The guy needed a community, a church home. There was a reason God had sent him through that door right when Paul happened to be standing there. He felt the enormity of fate in the chance meeting. (Lee, *Angel* 12)

Therefore, his love for Ian does not carry any kind of homosexual labelling or categorizing despite what others think. In fact, he never truly associated or labelled himself as 'gay'. At times he had a hard time accepting himself as 'gay' even though his love for Ian could not diminish. This clearly shows the negative connotation and fear the society and more so the church instils on the word 'gay'. Paul was scared of the word 'gay' but had no problem building a relationship with Ian. He was confused by what he was feeling and the label the society and the church created.

His sexuality wasn't confusing or complicated at all, really. He had fallen in love with Sara, and he fell in love with Ian. Simple. It only became complicated when he tried to fit that reality into the shorthand of official categories. That these labels failed to describe how he felt about himself should not have troubled him much, but so many people had faith in the categories that he was inclined to believe the problem was with himself, and not the check boxes. That was where he became confused. (125)

When Ian's gay friend came to visit Ian at his place, the author thus said:

Andy was part of Ian's other world, a strange foreign place he inhabited that had never included Paul. (124)

At the church, when people were beginning to question their relationship and starting to gossip, Paul restrained himself from associating with Ian in the presence of others. He felt uncomfortable to be with Ian when he felt observed by others. With regards



to this Hans Bertens says, “We obey power, are loyal to it, even to the point of policing and repressing ourselves, because it makes us feel what we are” (Bertens, *Literary Theory* 153)

“Hi, Paul!” Julie said as he approached. “You two came together? You must be joined at the hip.” Ian smiled and laughed. “We’re not joined at the hip,” Paul snapped. “He just needed a ride because he doesn’t have a car.” Julie’s mouth fell open. Ian looked away. (128)

On the topic of sexuality, Judith Butler does not really rely much of her presentation on the Bible. However, while Butler ignored the Bible, two Bible scholars Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone in *Bible Trouble* (2011) have adopted biblical imagery to argue that heterosexuality is not the biblical standard—there are an “infinite number” of possible sexualities. Hornsby and Stone relate the idea of “queerness” to chaos and heterosexuality to creation, asking, “But is chaos entirely negative? More importantly, can it be avoided entirely? Should we even attempt to avoid it entirely?” (x) They conclude that the association with chaos is actually a positive aspect of queer theory.

So, in light of Butler’s and others’ belief that there is no defined standard for appropriate sexual conduct, why are homosexual behaviour, bisexual behaviour, bestiality, and others considered taboo? Once again, Butler draws on the ideas of Michel Foucault and the Panopticon, writing that people are forced to “perform” heterosexuality by the powers that be or face punishment:

It is a compulsory performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions. (Butler, *Imitation* 314–315)

Of course, the church has not been as receptive to the ideas of queer theory as the secular world has, but, as with feminism, queer theory has not been without its influence

on Christianity. However, the biblical standard for sexuality goes back to Genesis 1 in *The Holy Bible*:

So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Man in Genesis is explained as being created as “male and female.” These categories are not without purpose. God’s expectation for sex and marriage is set forth just one chapter later, in Genesis 2:24–25:

Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.

So, from what it is believed to be, God’s intention is that one man would marry one woman, and that they would share sexual intimacy only with one another, as the Bible’s repeated prohibitions against adultery and fornication would attest. And if there was any doubt about the veracity of these verses, Christ himself reaffirms the male and female division as well as God’s intention that marriage and therefore sex occur between one man and one woman:

But from the beginning of the creation, God “made them male and female.” “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. (*The Holy Bible* Mark 10:6–8)

Despite these and other biblical evidences that God’s standard for sex is that it occur within the confines of a marriage between one man and one woman, some Christian leaders and Bible scholars are having a hard time adhering to that view. They are justifiable because as Paul said, “Men wrote the Bible, but they were inspired by God” (Lee, *Angel* 32) and the modern form of Bible has gone through a lot of editing and alterations to make it more suitable for the society.

In a recent book titled *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate*, author Justin Lee walks readers through his own struggle with same-sex attraction. A professing Christian, Lee explains that he did not ask for or want to have a sexual attraction to other men—and he spent his teenage and beginning college years celibate and in counselling with pastors and ex-gay ministries, in the hope that the feelings would dissipate. They did not. So, Lee chooses to reinterpret Scripture in an attempt to justify homosexual behaviour. The latter part of his book walks readers through a series of pro-homosexual arguments that attempt to refute passages condemning homosexual behaviour as sin. Unwittingly or not, Lee reveals his own postmodern view of Scripture:

Because of Paul's teachings on grace and sin, and because of the way Jesus read and applied Scripture, I could no longer justify condemning a loving, committed, Christ-centered relationship based solely on gender. . . . The standards Jesus and Paul applied—the same standards that allowed me to put aside culture-based biblical rules about food or hair length or head coverings—didn't just *allow* me to do the same on this issue; they *required* it. To do otherwise was being inconsistent. (205-6)

Many Christians have adopted Lee's line of thinking, saying that there is an equivalent amount of love and Christ centeredness in same-sex relationships, and decided that there is nothing special about God's design for men and women after all.

Contrary to what the Bible said about homosexuality and contrary to what he himself perceived it saying that it is "not compatible with Christian teaching" (ibid. 127), Paul's life and his zeal and enthusiasm in the church changed for the better after he met Ian. Prior to his communion with Ian, life for him was boring and monotonous. Especially after the death of his wife, life for him had no colors and everything he did he felt was monotonous and his work seemed trivial to him. The day he met Ian, his angel was the day he started to have life back again. He started to dream again like a young teenager in love. At one point he even "pictured himself reaching out to him, touching his cheek" (Lee, *Angel*

16). In short, one can say that, “he brought Paul out of the clouds, back to the Earth” (ibid: 59).

Paul felt a sense of mission and purpose that he had not felt for years. Watching Ian returning to worship, Paul felt truly “called.” His ministry took on a new energy. The sermons were inspired and unique. Everything in life was taking on a new color, and Paul’s new enthusiasm for life spilled over into everything he did, the way he spoke to people, the care he took with every meeting. He could now feel congregants’ joys as deeply as he had previously felt their sorrows. People walked away from a meeting with the minister feeling revived and passed that along to each other. Attendance was growing. (ibid. 80)

The conversation which Paul and Ian had through the phone clearly shows that the Church is also facing a liminal phase where the old and the new are colliding producing uncertain ground of doubts. The minister, Paul himself also doubted the infallibility of the Bible. He said:

I hate it when people talk about it like it’s a neat little rule book for living, all clean and shiny. It’s full of every side of life. Good things happen to bad people, bad things happen to good people. People are awful to each other in the Bible. They’re murderous and vengeful and ugly. But sometimes they’re beautiful and compassionate. It is so rich. It’s the whole messy human experience. If it was just red-haired, blue eyed Jesus and pastel shepherds and the Ten Commandments, it wouldn’t be so relevant. A lot of people think they are living their lives according to the Bible, and they’ve never read it. Every time I read it, I’m seeing it with different eyes. I read it from a different place, and it speaks to me in a different way. (ibid. 57)

Just like his view and perception of the Bible, Paul also did not fail to see the fault in his angel, Ian. He knew Ian was imperfect just like the characters in the Bible but he had a beautiful soul and for him that is enough.

He was fleshing out the biography of “Ian the Angel.” Every new fact was interpreted in that light. This allowed him to see a side of Ian that others often missed, for all of this was true about him: he was a chain-smoking alcoholic who used coarse language and had sex with men without ever catching their names. He was also a beautiful soul, warm and positive, compassionate and bright, an innocent who longed to be loved. (ibid. 53)

In a true story by Leroy Aarons titled *Prayers for Bobby: A Mother Coming to Terms with the Suicide of her Gay Son* (1995), Mary deconstructs whatever she thought she knew about Homosexuality and began to have a new pair of eyes towards homosexuality and the Bible itself with the new interpretations after her homosexual son, Bobby committed suicide. The following passage sums up what this paper is trying to achieve:

Nobody takes Deuteronomy 22:18 seriously today. No one in his right mind would condone stoning a rebellious child to death. There were other biblical admonitions honoured totally in the breach these days: that lepers wear torn clothing and cry out, “Unclean, unclean!; that adultery with a neighbour’s wife be punished by death; that having intercourse with a menstruating woman be a capital offence; that no clothing of mixed fibres be worn; that bastards not be allowed in the synagogue; that a brother marry the wife of his dead sibling. So the church no longer recognized many things as being sinful or worthy of death. Why, then, wouldn’t her son’s homosexuality be among them? True, the Bible declares the death penalty for “men lying with men.” But she could see Moses instituting such a law in the name of procreation- to get the Jewish nation to grow. If one were to examine the Bible in the context of the period in which it was written, as a document authored by human interpreting God’s will, that left room for error. How much did Moses really know about human sexuality? (255-256)

In short, it can be said that the innovative speech made by Mary sums up the whole issue which has been dealt upon. She spoke for the queer all over the world and tried to

educate the people especially the Church on the problems faced by these people they considered 'abnormal' and 'mistakes.' She did this so that the others would not fall into the same ignorant situation she once fell into.

To sum up the paper, one can say that *Angel* by Laura Lee in every means tries to deconstruct whatever is believed to be true by the Christian church with regards to homosexuality. A minister of a church is expected to strictly follow the rules and regulations of the church and to abide by the words of the Bible no matter what. However, in the story one sees a deviation, a deconstruction of the gendered norms when the protagonist, the minister Paul falls in love with a young guy. For Paul, Ian's gender is insignificant and what is important for him is that he loves him.

The final decision of Paul in the story is fundamental and noteworthy as it shows the importance of personal happiness and that love transcends every other thing. In his last sermon Paul thus said:

"I've been blessed to have two loves in my life. I don't know why God chose to send them to me. But I'm grateful. Each one taught me so much. And one thing I learned is that sometimes...." His throat caught again, and he continued at a higher pitch, "Sometimes when you love something, you have to let it go. As hard as that may be. And I love this church, and this community, too much to stay and see it torn apart."

Paul cleared his throat and straightened his shoulders. "That's why I'm resigning as your minister, effective this Friday. This will be my last service in this church." (185)

He decided to leave the church which voted him out and which stands for homophobic tendencies. He followed his heart and moved towards Mount Rainer in the hope to reunite with his love, Ian.

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