Beyond "Despair": The Subversion of Masculinity and Heterosexuality in *Supernatural*'s Early Seasons

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Abstract.

Supernatural (2005-2020) is ongoingly accused of homophobia and condemned for uncritically portraying White hegemonic masculinity through its main character Dean Winchester (played by Jensen Ackles). However, a close reading of the show and a content analysis made using gender and sexuality studies seems to point in the opposite direction. Eric Kripke's horror show about two brothers who hunt monsters and save people, does not provide the audience with an independent Marlboro Man for the new millennium. Rather, despite being deeply rooted in the culture that emerged in post-9/11 America, it offers a deconstruction of toxic masculinity and heterosexuality. This warrants a reassessment of the show, highlighting the queer narrative that has been there long before the airing of "Despair" (S15x18) in 2020. What emerges is a show that tells one of the many iterations of the queer experience and while its depiction of it may not be deemed satisfying representation by a more contemporary audience, it approaches the topic with nuance and honesty despite never quite challenging the status quo and still adhering to a White and masculine point of view.

Keywords: gender studies, masculinities, Supernatural, queer studies

1. Introduction

Supernatural (2005-2020) seems to have entered popular culture as the queerbaiting show par excellence. Online fandom spaces proliferate with a large variety of jokes about Eric Kripke creating "cardboard cutout mens-magazine-cover dudebros" (bundibird, 2021) out of his male power fantasy. According to fans, the show repeatedly failed in its presumed attempts at glorifying toxic masculinity and the independent Marlboro Man. Furthermore, the introduction of angel Castiel (played by Misha Collins) in "Lazarus Rising" (S4x01) has long led part of the fandom to accuse the show of queerbaiting because of the subtextual depiction of Dean and Castiel's relationship at a time when LGBTQ representation grew from less than

2% to 9.1% (GLAAD, n.d.). While it is true that actors and producers did verge in "emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility" (Fathallah, 2014, p. 419) of queer elements, the discourse surrounding representation and *Supernatural* is complex. As a post-9/11 show, *Supernatural* features a violent and rather bleak aesthetic that highlights violence and masculinity on the background of "a post-apocalyptic setting that borrows elements from the Western genre" (Bennett, 2019). This, however, does not exclude themes such as "gender and sexuality, identity and transgression" (Tembo, 2020, p. 57) but rather poses questions on on-screen queer representation.

Supernatural tells the story of two brothers, Sam (played by Jared Padalecki) and Dean Winchester, as they travel across America "saving people, hunting things" (Kripke et al., 2005, 26:14) while looking for their missing father. The show's narrative is therefore two folded: on the one hand, the mythic and fantastical quest; on the other, the deconstruction of its characters, particularly Dean and his gender, sexuality, and otherness (Wright, 2016). The narrative, influenced by post-9/11 America, offers a story that is "as rich, if not richer, than psychic children and demonic plans" (Kripke, 2007, para. 9) as it explores White hegemonic masculinity. While Kripke attempted to "appeal to the coveted 18-49 male demographic" (Zubernis & Larsen, 2012, p. 2), extending the audience beyond the average WB/CW viewer, the show is not "a hypermasculine cw show [...] loved by US soldiers for its male power fantasy" (castiels-pussy, 2021) that ended up being queer on accident. It is true that the audience changed throughout the years (Zubernis & Larsen, 2012) but the producers' refusal to "make good on the same-sex subtext" (Cruz, 2013, para. 13) and any other paratextual element do not influence or alter the queercoded text.

The show's depiction of gender and sexuality may no longer be satisfying. It lacks the kind of explicit content that fans strive for and fails to "fulfil contemporary expectations" (McDermott, 2020, p. 849). Prompted by their desire to be granted "the full dignity and presence that heteronormative media disallows" (Boulware, 2017, p. 112), fans seemingly reject *Supernatural* because the show goes against the audience's wishes by never making "visible the invisible" (Dyer, 2002, p. 16), by denying the characters the "positive affects" (McDermott, 2020, p. 855) typical of more contemporary LGBTQ representation and instead reprises the "semantic charges" (Benshoff, 1997, p. 3) of the media coverage of the AIDS crisis. Many episodes are coded in shame and guilt and do not rely on happiness, thus they reprise the issue of vulnerability and the subsequent urge to "take cover, cover oneself" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 104). In doing so, however, the show resists the identity of the heterosexual macho male that fans ascribe onto its protagonist. Dean Winchester is presented as unmistakably queer since the pilot, allowing the show to point out the fictitious and self-defensive nature of gender and heterosexuality. Following this, the aim of this paper is to analyze a selected number of episodes of *Supernatural*'s early seasons in order to highlight the show's depiction of gender and sexuality. Using an interdisciplinary approach, particularly

through gender and sexuality studies and Judith Butler's theory of performativity while doing a close content analysis, this essay will reassess the show as decisively queer regardless of the canonization or lack thereof of its main slash paring and notwithstanding its ongoing reliance on heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity.

2. Theoretical Framework

LGBTQ representation in media is not always explicit. As argued by Martin (1998), queer literature can be seen as "literature of indirection" (p. 219) because of its reliance on coded references. Although Martin's view encapsulates the political optimism of the 1970s, it exposes one of the staple characteristics of a continuum that dates back to Ancient Greece. These codes are representative of the distinction and differentiation between heterosexual and homosexual media and, more importantly, become means by which to tell stories in which shame plays a significant role. After all, "sexual shame is such that exposing it taints a person no matter how moral or immoral the sex may otherwise be" (Warner, 2000, p. 17). This highlights the existence of stigmatized identities and social orders (Yingling, 1990, p. 2) that inevitably influence not only ordinary life but also mediatic representation of the LGBTQ community. Gay shame, then, as inward as it may be (Sedgwick, 1995, p. 136), not only acts through its "generative powers [and its] propensity to lure its devotees into violent, illuminating states of mind" (Stockton, 2007, p. 151) but also as adhesive. LGBTQ experiences may differ and change throughout time yet in most cases, as recognized by Sedgwick (2003), shame and otherness remain the common element to the point of seemingly being the only thing people have in common, the "permanent, structuring fact of identity" (p. 64). With the increase of LGBTQ narratives on page and on screen, the centrality of shame has seemingly been dismissed, particularly by audiences who now use happiness to evaluate good representation (McDermott, 2020). Nevertheless, the existence of shame and subsequent stigma remain in a heteronormative society even in the present day. They are unavoidable and can't be eliminated in their entirety and, as such, remain as a feature even in more contemporary media, regardless of whether or not they appear outdated and superfluous to any member of the audience. Thus, the use of codes is maintained also, particularly in the horror genre. Here, as noted by Benshoff (1997), the overlap between monster and the other reprises the rhetoric of sexual perversity leading to a convergence between the queer and the uncanny (Royle, 2003). Homoerotic relationships are also mediated notably through the homosocial-homosexual continuum (Sedgwick, 2014) or through violence (Britnall, 2004). The latter in particular is relevant for post-9/11 television because it allows films and TV shows to interrogate and deconstruct "prevailing gender norms and imagining different ways of organizing bodies, desire, and erotic attachment" (Britnall, 2004, p. 71). Through violence, the focus on masculinity in television programs that were created in the aftermath of the attack on the Twin Towers (Bennett, 2019) remains.

The fictional and hypermasculine identities of the early 2000s reprise old Hollywoodian stereotypes and depict men not only as the "prisoners of a masculinity coded in hopelessly contradictory ways" (Warshow, 1996, p. 173) but also as victims of emotional conflicts (Lusted, 1996). This ultimately causes male characters to remain trapped between identities that they cannot properly make theirs and such are subjected to them (Pye, 1996) with no possibility to escape and free themselves of the toll that such a condition takes. Furthermore, because American media often reprises the "foundational drama" (Faludi, 2008, p. 208) that emerged after 9/11 through the depiction of "male protective failures" (Faludi, 2208, p. 211), the situation is more muddled and restrictive than fans make it to be. The depiction of masculinity plays into a specific cultural moment that influences the final product regardless of whether or not it will later appear outdated or 'problematic.' It follows that the protagonists are men in need to take charge (Donald, 2011) but who cannot protect, especially women who are now depicted as frail and in need of saving (Bennett, 2019). On the one hand, this creates working-class male power fantasies rooted in survival, responsibility and protection (Glasgow, 2012); On the other, it does not exclude critical approaches to masculinity and heteronormativity. Consequently, enough space is left for feminist and/or queer readings (Nicol, 2014) as in the case of Eric Kripke's *Supernatural*.

3. Gender and Sexuality Deconstructed

Supernatural is not foreign to "feminist and/or queer readings" (Nicol, 2014, p. 165). Long before the airing of "Despair" (S15x20), which featured both "a homosexual declaration of love" (Hasnaa, 2020, 0:41) and an instance of the Bury Your Gays trope, the show resisted hegemonic masculinity through the introduction of non-masculine and non-heterosexual elements. Ever since its pilot, *Supernatural* discussed queerness in relation to the generational and cultural trauma (Knowles, 2016) at the heart of the show. In the first five seasons, queerness is linked to masculinity and its portrayal is sided by the deconstruction of White hegemonic masculinity and the myth of the independent Marlboro Man. Many of the show's episodes challenge the traditional masculine point of view that the show generally perpetrates (Beliveau & Bolf- Beliveau, 2014). Episodes such as "Dean in the Water" (S1x03), "Skin" (S1x06), "What Is and Should Never Be" (S2x20), and even more misogynistic ones like "Live Free or Twihard" (S6x05) all deviate from the seemingly rigid implementation of male privilege, lack of subversiveness, and the adamant refusal to challenge the status quo. Clifton (2009) argues that *Supernatural* "is self-consciously meticulous about defining the gender of its perspective" (p. 123) because the main characters are, from a very young age, trained in masculinity by their father John (played by Jeffrey Dean Morgan). John is depicted as the real embodiment of White hegemonic masculinity, yet his immediate and unromantic portrayal highlights the disruption caused by hypermasculine values revealing that "patriarchal authority is compromised" (Nicol, 2014, p. 156). Furthermore, it also exposes Dean Winchester's

performativity and his inability to conform to society's standards of masculinity. This way, *Supernatural* takes into consideration "socioeconomic class, racial and ethnic difference, and sexual orientation" (Katz, 2011, p. 261) and consequently presents all the "possible ways through which men can live out their maleness" (Cameron & Bernardes, 1998, p. 686). In doing so, the show reiterates emblems of masculinity but diversifies their meaning while playing on the qualities that are generally imposed on men by Western society (Canham, 2009).

The Winchesters reiterate what hooks defines as "crisis of longing" (hooks, 2004, p. 49). However, Dean Winchester's failure to occupy his father's space exposes the artificiality of gender and the idea of gender as performance (Nicol, 2014). According to Judith Butler, gender does not depend on a "stable identity" (Butler, 1988, p. 519) but rather presents itself as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (Salih, 2005, p. 55). The theory that sees gender not only as a product, but also as a social construct that is ascribed onto a person by the dominant culture since birth, is reprised by Kripke throughout the first five seasons of the show. In *Supernatural*, standardized sets of conducts and appearances are there to convey the duplicitous interpretation of "codes of masculine behavior […] the values of patriarchal authority" (Nicol, 2014, p. 157). This happens because masculinity is depicted as something that can be performed through the iteration of the masculine identities that are embedded in Western culture (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), especially through the production and reproduction of violence that serves to reinforce and reaffirm masculinity (Brod, 1987). This way, the show never stops "winking at gender stereotypes" (Hansen & George, 2014, p. 4) and consequently presents the imposition of gender norms as harmful for both sexes while also depicting the crossing of "the boundaries of stereotypical gender roles" (George, 2014, p. 151) as positive.

Representative of this is the episode "Dream a Little Dream of Me" (S3x10), written by Sera Gamble, in which Dean Winchester's performativity is addressed explicitly. Here, Dean Winchester confronts a darker version of himself, originally supposed to be his father (Warnerchannel, n.d.), in a dream. By the end of the episode, the show's protagonist relinquishes the identity that was imposed on him from age four. The conversation between monster and other is centered around the absent father who, even after his death, haunts his son by offering masculine models to follow. Dark Dean taunts Dean Winchester and says "What are the things you want? What are the things you dream? I mean, your car? That's dad's. Your favorite leather jacket? Dad's. You're music? Dad's. Do you even have an original thought?" (Gamble et al., 2008, 33:49). His words mark Dean Winchester as a shadow of a person, "a good soldier and nothing else. Daddy's blunt little instrument" (Gamble et al., 2008, 34:35). Two things emerge from this interaction: firstly, the militaristic upbringing and the focus on protection; secondly, Dean Winchester's status as the disliked son despite his repeated attempts at emulating his father.

The issue of protection is central to the show and generally conveyed through the characters' occupation: they hunt monsters and protect civilians from supernatural threats. These monsters, however, are almost always masculine (Beliveau & Bolf-Beliveau, 2014) and representative of the characters' childhood trauma. In "Something Wicked" (S1x18), the issue is addressed directly. Here, Dean Winchester tells his brother that he failed him, and tangentially failed their father, when he put Sam's life at risk at the age of ten. Dean confesses "It never surfaced until now. You know, Dad never spoke about it again, I didn't ask. But he...ah...he looked at me different, you know? Which was worse. Not that I blame him. He gave me an order and I didn't listen, I almost got you killed" (Knauf & Ransick, 2006, 29:28). His brother justifies his failings, pointing out Dean's age at the time when the attack happened and yet, the "sense of obligation to protect his brother and the rest of humanity" (Robinson, 2014) that the character feels is perceived as an unsuccessful attempt at upholding the role of caregiver and protector. In doing so, the show condemns John Winchester's behavior, the audience supposedly finds itself agreeing that taking on a paternal role is not fit for a child. The narrative underlines Dean Winchester's sense of failure and the repercussions that his behavior had at the time. Due to his overall inability to protect Sam, both metaphorically and not (Hoover, 2015), he fails to perform a task imposed by hegemonic masculinity. In doing so, he shifts from being the supposed carbon copy of his father to being an *attempted* carbon copy of his father.

Everything about Dean Winchester is inherited and ascribed onto him, marking him as the victim of generational and cultural trauma strengthened by the "foundational drama" (Faludi, 2008, p. 208) of post-9/11 America and the excessive and harmful focus on masculinity (Bennett, 2019) and its crisis (Kimmel, 1987). What emerges is an opposition between Dean Winchester and his father, the latter representative of a "traditional, authoritarian masculinity" (George, 2014, p. 143), even though the two are united by generational codes. These take on different meanings when applied to either of those characters, ultimately allowing the show to create a stark contrast between each iteration. It is true that Dean Winchester is presented as a swaggering hero in a leather jacket, a lone ranger, a modern-day cowboy who travels across America. It is also true that he drinks beer, lives on fast-food, handles guns and knives on a daily basis. That he is a womanizer, takes risks, and drives a muscle car. However, while these recurrent iconographic symbols may be taken as the emblems of hegemonic masculinity, such an interpretation falls apart as "the construction of masculinity in the U.S. is scrutinized" (George, 2014, p. 143). Indeed, the original connotation is repeatedly lost as in the case of the iconic 1967 Chevrolet Impala. When driven by Dean Winchester, *Supernatural*'s muscle car is not equated to masculinity despite being an emblem of it: the car itself does not reinforce violent masculinity nor does it put Dean Winchester, the driver, in any position of control. If anything, the Winchesters' car is a stand-in for the gothic castle (Knowles, 2016) that traps the characters and prevents them from abandoning the familial seat, stalling them. It is the broken home that stinks of violence and alcohol, an inescapable place that takes control away rather

than granting it. In Dean's case, therefore, the car cannot in any way represent the means by which to escape women and, above all, domestic spaces (Fine, 2000; Jain, 2005) as in the case of his father (Howell, 2014) – an ex-marine who repeatedly neglects and abandons his sons.

The show consequently takes "the supernatural out of the castle and into the average, ordinary homes" (Edmundson, 2014, p. 1) and adds it to the "failing fatherhood" (Hamad, 2011, p. 249). In doing so, it represents dysfunctional family dynamics that incentivize Dean Winchester's performative behavior and enhance the violent aesthetic of a show partly centered around familial abuse (Rosen, 2014). Under such grim and violent circumstances, representation of gender and sexuality remains coded through the uncanny (Royle, 2003) sealing them off from explicitness and happiness–contemporary indicators of good representation (McDermott, 2020). Nevertheless, it also allows the show to deviate from the "masculine heterosexuality [that] is always reasserted as the dominant, 'authentic' mode" (Do Rozario, 2014, p. 126) by inserting Dean Winchester into America's "culture of dominance" (hooks, 2004, p. 47). In doing so, *Supernatural* depicts both his appearance and behavior as a form of drag that repeatedly brings "into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original" (Butler, 1999, p. 31). The show points out Dean Winchester's need to uphold both masculinity and heterosexuality in several episodes and it does so by relying on the cultural context, leading to instances that are often perceived by fans as being homophobic jokes directed towards the audience (Zubernis & Larsen, 2012).

Several gay jokes are made in episodes such as "Something Wicked" (S1x18) and "Playthings" (S2x11), two episodes that highlight gender performance as reactions to "social sanction and taboo" (Butler, 1988, p.522) and therefore offer "a critique of the status quo" (McRae, 2022, p. 24). To dismiss these jokes as mere homophobia would be reductive, not only because they are representative of the socio-cultural moment the show is set in (Zubernis & Larsen, 2012) but also because the screenwriters of *Supernatural* often write in a reaction to those jokes. In "Playthings", for example, the two brothers are mistaken for a gay couple by the owner of the inn they are going to lodge in. The woman asks them whether they are "antiquing" (Witten & Beeson, 2007, 07:09), claiming that "they look the type" (Witten & Beeson, 2007, 7:17). The brief interaction leaves Dean visibly uncomfortable as if found out, his reactive survival instinct failed. The conversation is reprised in the following scene in which Dean muses "Of course, the most troubling question is why do these people assume we're gay?" (Witten & Beeson, 2007, 9:29). The question is answered matter-of-factly by his brother who points out "Well, you are kinda butch. Probably think you're overcompensating" (Witten & Beeson, 2007, 9:31). As warranted by the show's habit to expose its queer subtext (Tosenberg, 2008) Dean replies with a mocking laugh of acceptance and yet the camera lingers for a couple of seconds as Sam Winchester's words strike a chord and settle in. Queer readings of the show's main character are encouraged in moments like this, moments that present

queerness as lingering behind the "masculine coded heroism" (Roach, 2022, p. 118), behind the brothers' isolation, and behind their existence as latchkey heroes.

Kripke's bricolage (Wright, 2016) is also important because a queer reading of Dean Winchester is prompted by the show's existence as a horror adaptation of *On the Road*, a novel that misled "thousands of schoolboys for decades" (Ginsberg, 1972, p. 7). He owes his name to Dean Moriarty and James Dean, America's most famous bisexuals, and the show borrows the masculinities "aligned with working class, Middle America" (Do Rozario, 2014, p. 126). The ostentatious display of it and the awareness of a fundamental difference between Dean Winchester and the other men in his family, verge into Kripke's reprisal of the second homosexual archetype that was born in post-war America. The working-class realities and the focus on masculinity that the show promotes, are the same that took foot in the culture of America in the 1950s and 1960s of which James Dean, along with Marlon Brando and others, was representative of (Corn, 2009). *Supernatural* articulates its narrative "through muscle cars, classic rock, guns, bars, fast food, and life on the road" (Do Rozario, 2014, p. 126) and reprises the looks and attitudes of post-war America, ultimately dressing his hero like working-class homosexual men who dressed in "blue jeans, boots, denim, and leather jackets" (Corn, 2009, p. 43). In "Jump the Shark" (S4x19), Dean tells his brother that, despite all of his efforts to look like their father, the only person who really resembles him is Sam himself. Looks and appearances may be shared but, in *Supernatural* as in the real world, they take on different meanings.

Understandably, such an iteration of codes may be lost to the average audience, yet the show goes beyond its iconographic symbols notwithstanding its divergence from contemporary expectations and positive depiction of queer realities. Episodes such as "Skin", "Faith" (S1x12), "Heaven and Hell" (S4x10), and "Clap Your Hands if You Believe" (S6x09) all warrant a dismissal of a heterosexual norm because of the ongoing references made to "barred contact" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 165), shame, and guilt and "reconfigured masculinity" (McGillis, 2003, p. 97). Here, Dean Winchester becomes the monstrous other who deserves to die, and an abomination. The show portrays the character and his relationships as things that "are repeatedly queered" (Do Rozario, 2022, p. 126), often against his will while "the possibility of social forms that are not constrained by the form of the heterosexual couple" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 165) are repeatedly denied. Even the ongoing reliance on anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and the reprisal of the idea that religious teachings play a role in the beliefs surrounding homosexuality (Sheldon et al., 2015) are not representative of the show's homophobia but rather indicators of a cultural moment in which discourses of queerness were still influenced by the rhetoric of the AIDS crisis that discussed homosexuality in terms of criminalization and pathologies (Kagan, 2018). This also distances *Supernatural* from those shows that attempt to not come off as excessively queer (Brennan, 2019) because the lack of explicit content is, at least in the early seasons of the show, warranted by the cultural landscape of America in the early 2000.

Furthermore, because hunting is representative of childhood trauma, the show cannot cohesively and coherently depict out-and-out queerness and satisfy those fans who see "happiness" as fundamental in "their conception of positive or negative representation" (McDermott, 2020, p. 849). The lack of refusal, on behalf on the screenwriters, to do anything but conform to the genre and take a stance when catering to their mixed audience (Micarelli, 2021) may be criticized considering that the show aired for fifteen years, but *Supernatural* remains a show about brothers and until the toxic and dysfunctional relationship between Sam and Dean Winchester is resolved, there is no place to follow any of the indicators of good representation. Not when Dean Winchester's brother Sam embodies John Winchester's masculine and heterosexual legacy.

4. Conclusion

The accusations made against Eric Kripke's *Supernatural* are not always legitimate, particularly those that reference the show's supposed queerbaiting, homophobia and glorification of White hegemonic masculinity. While the show's early seasons are tied to the socio-cultural landscape of post-9/11 America, the narrative subverts gender and heterosexuality despite still adhering to the depiction of masculinity and violence that emerged in the early 2000s. It follows that the show does not create an independent Marlboro Man for a contemporary audience but, rather, offers a deconstruction of the myth and in doing so highlights the cultural and generational trauma caused by such norms. Representative of this, is Dean Winchester, the show's hero. His performativity and gender performance are repeatedly analyzed on screen notwithstanding that their depictions are mediated by the culture of early 2000s America and the world depicted by the show. Far from being a carbon copy of his father, Dean Winchester is an emulator who does not manage to move successfully in the heterosexual, masculine, and violent world he inhabits. His behavior stems from self-preservation but it takes a toll on the character's mental health. Throughout the course of the show, the audience perceives his alienation and witnesses his repeated attempts at cutting out those parts of himself that make him other as, for example, in "Skin."

The show's lack of confrontation and its depiction of queerness that owes a lot to the AIDS crisis and the culture that emerged in post-war America may not be satisfying for a more contemporary audience. After all, it deviates from more recent on-screen depictions of the queer experience and is tied to the original themes of family, trauma and abuse as well as to the working-class realities of the Midwest. Nevertheless, Kripke's approach to societal issues should not be discarded and while an analysis of all fifteen seasons of this show is beyond the scope of this paper, notwithstanding the possibilities of such a study, new approaches towards the show prompt a reassessment of it. Long before the airing of "Despair" and the increase in LGBTQ characters on mainstream television, *Supernatural* attempted to provide the depiction of *one* iteration of the queer experience rather than attempting to represent everyone. While it

may not be for everyone and leave part of the audience dissatisfied and highly critical, it is nevertheless there, hidden in a tale about monsters and the hypermasculine and violent father hiding at the end of the corridor.

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