



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 42
Number 2

Article 8

April 2024

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Anna Caterino
University of Milan

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Recommended Citation

Caterino, Anna (2024) "Hell on His Mind: Dean Winchester's Journey to Hell and Back," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 42: No. 2, Article 8. Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol42/iss2/8>

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August 2-5, 2024

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Abstract

Season three of *Supernatural* (2005-2020) closes with a shot of Dean Winchester (Jensen Ackles) in Hell. The place has no discernible features and resembles neither the long waiting line nor the gothic castle of later seasons. What it does resemble is a brain, with a labyrinth of ropes reminiscent of neurons, suggesting Hell is a place that exists first and foremost in Dean's head. The lack of establishing shots and the abstract terms used to discuss Hell, damnation, and Dean's experience present the viewer with a physical place into which all of Dean's fears and trauma converge. This essay analyzes *Supernatural's* first iteration of hell as the manifestation of the 'foundational drama' of post-9/11 America and, as such, as a place not too dissimilar to the microcosm that Dean already inhabits. Through the use of gender studies and queer studies, it highlights the importance of White hegemonic masculinity and queerness in Dean Winchester's damnation and salvation, as well as the role played by Hell in the deconstruction of the character.

Additional Keywords

Supernatural (television series)—Characters—Dean Winchester; Hell in fantasy literature

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Hell on his mind: Dean Winchester's Journey to Hell and Back¹

ANNA CATERINO

The pilot episode of Eric Kripke's *Supernatural* (2005-2020) opens with an iconic sequence centered on the destruction of the blissful and idyllic life of a White middle-class American family. The scene reprises the discourses that emerged in the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and exposes how the "national state of emergency and trauma reached into all levels of society" (Der Derian 234) through iconographically charged frames. However, notwithstanding the presence of what Faludi calls "the cumulative elements of a national fantasy" (14), Kripke does not approach the rhetoric of post-9/11 America uncritically. While it is true that *Supernatural* deals with White hegemonic masculinity and features damsels in distress and dangerous others (Bennett), these do not overlap entirely with the misogyny and xenophobia typical of the time period. The repeated associations of John Winchester (Jeffrey Dean Morgan) with the yellow-eyed demon Azazel (Fredric Lehne) displace danger, moving it from the backyard into the house. In doing so, the show ascribes new meanings to the darkness that threatens the peacefulness of everyday life. By presenting the manly American hero as the villain, Kripke shifts his attention to the downside of the "manly virtues" (Noonan) and of the "anxious preoccupations with affirming manhood" (Ducat ix) implemented at the beginning of the new millennium.

The deconstruction of these hypermasculine ideals, embodied by cultural symbols like the Lone Ranger and the Marlboro Man, makes for a story that is "rich, if not richer, than psychic children and demonic plans" (Kripke). Moreover, the underlying tensions that accompany the denigration of the "touchy-feely sensitive male" (McCombs) and the assertion of qualities embodied by "traditional, authoritarian masculinity" (George 143) set the foundations of the nightmarish microcosm in which the story takes place. Both America and the afterlife are shaped by the absent father who embodies manliness and the main "moral evil" (Beliveau and Bolf-Beliveau 118), which creates a suffocating environment from which Dean Winchester (Jensen Ackles) cannot escape. Thus, the focus remains on dysfunctional familial relationships and the trauma that derives from them, leading to the depiction of Hell as an

¹ Winner of the Alexei Kondratiev Student Paper Award, 2023.

abstract place that creates a continuum with life on Earth. For better or for worse, but a continuum nonetheless.

In *Supernatural's* early seasons, the afterworld is not based on religious cosmology. Neither is it a physical place from which the characters can come and go as they please. Heaven is "a place where you relive your greatest hits" ("Dark Side of the Moon" 08:39-08:43), regardless of the loneliness that may derive from it. Hell, on the other hand, is introduced as a space of extreme isolation and violence where pre-existing trauma reverberates *ad infinitum*. Set apart from later portrayals as, for example, the long waiting line in "The Man Who Would Be King" (6.20) and the gothic castle in season fifteen, Hell's first iteration reprises the Winchesters' traumatic childhood. It thus becomes a place in which the flickering lights, the dark silhouette standing in front of the crib in the dead of night, and a discombobulated Mary Winchester (Samantha Smith) saying "John?" ("Pilot" 01:42-01:43) echo the most. These writing choices finalize the previous exposition of rotting houses and violence behind closed doors, further dismantling the imagery that surrounds perfect suburban ideals. Physical danger spills over and starts coming from within the head also, poisoning life by negating peacefulness and self-acceptance.

Following this, the scope of this essay is to examine *Supernatural's* first iteration of Hell and its connection to the fake grandeur of "toxic masculinity, and masculine roles, and what a shitshow that's overall caused" (qtd. in Starkey), and the show's ongoing deconstruction of Dean Winchester's gender and sexuality. The first part of this essay looks at the depiction of Hell at the end of season three and Dean's role there. Focusing on the iconographic implications, the primary arguments will be that Hell exists exclusively in Dean Winchester's head and that this status disallows honest exchanges. The second part will analyze the connection between Hell and Dean in light of his relationship with his father and the demon Alastair. The last part will consider the journey back from Hell and the role played by queerness, highlighting the futile and precarious nature of salvation for as long as Dean Winchester does not accept himself, the Impala remains standing, and the ghosts of the past are not put to rest.

"WELL, IT'S LIKE HELL": INDESCRIBABLE PLACES IN DEAN'S HEAD

At the end of *Supernatural's* third season, cut short by the 2007-2008 Writers Guild of America strike, life takes a toll on the show's hero as any other choice "would have been a cop-out" (qtd. in Wilkies). Dean Winchester is mauled by hellhounds and dragged to Hell, securing Lilith's victory and the Winchesters' defeat. After an entire season devoted to the Winchester brothers' attempts to prevent this, at the eleventh hour, the audience and the characters are struck with the realization that Dean never stood a chance. Regardless of his

change of heart in “Dream a Little Dream of Me” (3.10), an episode in which he recognizes his innocence and the unjust nature of the punishment that awaits him, the journey to Hell cannot come to a halt. The show exposes the false promises made by the demon Ruby (Katie Cassidy) and confirms Dean’s destiny to endure a hopeless and desolate future in the afterlife. There is no salvation, only “agonies [he] can’t even imagine” (“Malleus Maleficarum” 36:24-36:26) and the prospect of a slow, painful, and inevitable loss of humanity.

The show had previously tried to avoid on-screen depictions of Hell, favoring second-hand accounts instead. “No Rest for the Wicked” (3.16) detaches itself from this tradition. Season three ends with a thirty-five-second shot of Hell, which introduces the audience to Dean Winchester’s new life of eternal damnation. *Supernatural* provides a glimpse of the infernal landscape and commits to a physical portrayal of it. The limitations imposed by budget (Knight 101) and the screenwriters’ keenness to avoid voyeuristic violence dictate the place’s abstract look, and facilitate a coherent continuation of previous accounts too. Hell is “the worst hellhole— literally—ever” (qtd. in Rudolph), so terrifying and elusive to become unimaginable.

Already “Born Under a Bad Sign” (2.14) implements this idea in the audience’s mind. The episode delves deeper into the matter and presents the abode of damned souls as a place that even demons try to avoid. Here, a possessed Sam Winchester (Jared Padalecki) says:

You know when people want to describe the worst possible thing... They say it’s like Hell. Well, there’s a reason for that. Hell is like, um... Well, it’s like Hell. Even for demons. It’s a prison, made of bone and flesh and blood and fear. (“Born Under a Bad Sign” 36:40-37:04)

Sam’s words underline the indescribable nature of the place, which, in turn, does not allow verbal and visual renditions. The subjective nature of fear and torment, as well as the persistent transformations that they dictate, monomaniacally forbid a univocal portrayal that goes beyond the intricacies of “chains and people being ripped apart” (Knight 100). Consequently, the abstract and skeletal place that is shown to the audience at the end of season three is merely the bedrock of Hell. The insight offered by Dean’s broken and sparse recollection in conjunction with the audience’s projection of their feelings are of more importance insofar that they expand on what was shown, making it more terrifying.

It follows that the show’s first iteration of Hell is not molded after the “fiery lake of burning sulfur” mentioned in Revelation 20:10, which the audience may have expected given Ruby’s allusion to it in “Malleus Maleficarum” (3.09). Neither does it reprise classical impressions as, for example, Hieronymus Bosch’s paintings or Dante Alighieri’s *The Divine Comedy*. Any of these

possibilities appear overly elaborate and far from the writers' original plan of a "really nasty, bloody slaughterhouse" (Knight 100) or, as Kripke himself describes it, "a thousand-mile spider web of rusty chains. Sort of M.C. Escher meets *Hellraiser*" (qtd. in Rudolph). Despite the absence of dark shadows and a less mysterious atmosphere than intended, the final product is not too dissimilar from Kripke's initial vision. At the end of season three, Hell is characterized by dark clouds, bursts of lightning, and a labyrinthine twine of racks and chains. Unsurprisingly, it is also empty. Not because all the devils are on Earth, though, given the trajectory of the show, that would not be impossible, but because the focus on Dean never wavers.

Supernatural's fourth season deconstructs Dean Winchester's journey through "something that horrific" (qtd. in Rudolph). The end of the previous season already teases the centrality of Dean's time in Hell and the subsequent attempt at finding salvation. The camera transitions from Dean dying in a suburban living room in rural America to Dean in Hell, and zooms in on his eye. Then, as if passing through his optic nerve and moving forward toward his brain, it frames Dean with meat hangers piercing his flesh as he cries out for help. The imagery used within this "one epic glimpse" (Knight 100) creates the most important interconnection for the deconstruction of Dean Winchester's character and his connection to the infernal landscape. The setup of the scene, enhanced by the way it is filmed, is reminiscent of any illustration depicting the anatomy of the nervous system. Grouped together, the twist of chains takes on the form of a composition that is not too dissimilar from the photomicrographs or drawings of Golgi-stained neurons in human tissue of Nissl bodies featured in any biology textbook.

Such a precise arrangement is iconographically charged because it links Hell to Dean's headspace and distances it from the theories of moral condemnation, all while questioning the effectiveness of infinite punishment. The deviation from famous and well-established iconography leads to a unique and timeless mythology in which Hell exists as something unrelated to "the sins of humanity" (Jacobs 333) and the cautionary tales of "the punishments-to-come if [people stay] on their sinful paths" (Ireland and James 43). After all, the Winchesters are not the bad guys, as some fans and critics continuously suggest (Stout). The monster-of-the-week narrative is not an extended metaphor for White supremacy and racism, but for the poison that drips from one generation to the other as members of a family find themselves trapped in vicious cycles of abuse and unable to break free from family, resentment, and conditioning. Because of this, Dean's sojourn in Hell is not the consequence of his moral failings but of his upbringing and the need to atone for his father's sins.

The show first introduces the idea of futile punishment in season two. Here, the demon Meg speaks through Sam and tells Dean:

All I had to hold onto, was that I would climb out one day, and that I was going to torture you. Nice and slow. Like pulling the wings off an insect. But whatever I do to you, it's nothing compared to what you do to yourself, is it? I can see it in your eyes, Dean. You're worthless. You couldn't save your dad, and deep down . . . you know that you can't save your brother. They'd have been better off without you. ("Born Under a Bad Sign" 37:26-37:57)

Meg's words not only anticipate the lack of distinction between life on Earth and life in Hell. They expose Dean's inability to fit in and the consequences of John Winchester's militaristic and hypermasculine upbringing. Any punishment that results from a zealously religious approach would be less severe than Dean's self-negating way of life. If, as *Supernatural* repeatedly suggests, the real monster is the violent father at the end of the corridor, the vitriolic self-loathing that stems from childhood trauma makes for a more compelling and effective punishment and ultimately embodies the 'real' Hell.

Dean Winchester's deal with a crossroad demon saves his brother's life and fulfills the duties imposed on him by his father. The final sacrifice, however, is not exclusively an act of devotion, home protection, and a demonstration of manhood. It is a suicide attempt, a desperate opt-out to escape his life, even at the risk of reinforcing its prison-like nature. It is therefore of no surprise that Hell ultimately takes on the form of Dean's trauma, condemning him to a life of traumatic experiences and emotions that are enhanced by the perpetual reliving of his own worst nightmares. These vicissitudes jeopardize any resistance. Furthermore, they make easy revenge more appealing, entrapping Dean Winchester in his life even more. To escape the relentless torture and cope, Dean ultimately joins the ranks of Hell's perpetrators out of self-preservation. However, unlike his first suicide attempt, Dean once more fails to embody the kind of masculinity represented by his father. Dean caves in. John Winchester does not. Subsequently, suffering becomes the base on which the relationships formed in Hell rest.

Hell is not a mere "pyramid scheme" or a "contractual agreement" (Hurst 70). Dean Winchester's decision to say 'yes' to Alastair and start working for him robs him of any agency he may have had. On a narrative level, the character's choice to work for his persecutor allows the writers to justify the jumpstart of the Apocalypse. On a symbolic one, things are less straightforward and more impactful than the heavenly war caused by petty family squabbles. Alastair's offer allows Dean to enter a revenge fantasy, which grants him the chance to reverse the roles of victim and abuser. After "all those years, all that pain. Finally getting to deal some out yourself" ("Family Remains" 41:07-41:13) appears like a dream or, at the very least, the easiest way out of daily torture. However, as revenge tragedies go, the satisfaction that comes from torturing

souls is merely temporary and prevents Dean from properly “[getting] rid of the terror, shame, and pain of the trauma” (Herman 189). In the long run, his relationship with Alastair and his work as the demon’s promising apprentice are nothing but a part of the punishment inflicted on him, adding up to all “the scars of others’ choices” (Torrey 54) that he already bears.

As argued by Wolfe, “Hell haunts [Dean] less because of what he went through and more because of what he did” (30). The two things are not mutually exclusive because they are byproducts of each other. Their respective origins trace back to the same moment in Dean Winchester’s life: a tragic night in Lawrence, Kansas, twenty-two years before the proper beginning of the show. Furthermore, their result is the same: they weaken Dean’s “claim on his own body” (Chan) to such an extent that dehumanization becomes a concrete possibility. Not like a demon, as Dean feared, but like a ghost stuck in the same place for all eternity and trapped in a liminal space, a vicious cycle of violence and unfinished business.

‘LIKE YOU KNOW WHAT HELL’S LIKE’: THE SUBVERSION OF AMERICAN GREATNESS

Half-way through “Lazarus Rising” (4.01), Pamela Barnes (Thunderbird Dinwiddie) remarks that coming back from Hell is like getting “out of the fire and back in the frying pan” (22:01-22:03). Her words secure the connection between Earth and the afterlife while enhancing the mystery that clouds Dean Winchester’s time in Hell. At the same time, because the show is straightforward about its exploration of patriarchal violence and trauma, the audience is encouraged to imagine the kind of horrors that are staged in Hell. The severity of abuse, too close-up and personal to be ever discussed without mediation, creates a persistent feeling of insularity. The audience, much like any of the characters around Dean, is never let in. Physically as well as metaphorically. Dean Winchester himself states:

I do remember everything that happened to me in the Pit. Everything. [...] I won’t lie to you anymore. But I’m not gonna talk about it. [...] Do you really think that a little heart-to-heart, some sharing and caring, is gonna change anything? Hmm? Somehow . . . heal me? I’m not talking about a bad day here. [...] The things I saw . . . there aren’t words. There is no forgetting. There’s no making it better. Because it is right here . . . forever. You wouldn’t understand. And I could never make you understand. So, I am sorry. (“Wishful Thinking” 38:08-39:38)

His words convey the kind of isolation that stems, on the one hand, from the private nature of his experience and, on the other hand, from the physical reality of the afterworld.

Hell is a place that cannot be accessed or left behind. In "I Know What You Did Last Summer" (4.09), Sam explains and comes clean about what he did during the four months Dean spent in Hell. When he does, he mentions an encounter with an unnamed crossroad demon and his desire to swap places with his brother. Aware that Lilith is after him, Sam believes it to be a fair exchange and is surprised to find out that the deal is dismissed with a flat 'no.' No, Sam cannot take his brother's place in Hell because Dean is destined to break the first of the sixty-six seals to free Lucifer. And no, he cannot take Dean's place because their experiences are diametrically opposite. Sam Winchester does not share the same trauma and self-loathing as his brother. He has no access to Dean's sorrows, nor did he go through the same hurt while growing up. If anything, he is, no matter how unconsciously, the embodiment of John Winchester's inheritance and, much like his father, Sam would never break. Therefore, even though the canon of the show previously revealed the existence of the Devil's Gate (a heavily warded door in Calvary Cemetery, Wyoming, that the Winchesters once failed to protect), the entry point to Hell is useless. Breaking through is exhibited as pointless, for those in Hell must remain there.

The locked and secluded nature of the place's original configuration becomes the means by which the differences between Sam and Dean Winchester emerge. These are representative of their relationship with the past as their experiences seem to be divided by a chasm. The show implies that the abuse endured by Dean extends beyond fatherly negligence and that only Dean Winchester found himself at the receiving end of physical violence. In "Family Remains" (4.11), for example, incestuous families and the dark side of domesticity are discussed more generally and encompass Dean's experiences as well. When Dean sympathizes with the girl who has been held captive by and subsequently killed her father/grandfather, his brother is astonished. Sam claims that the girl had no excuses because "sure her life was hell [...]. It doesn't mean she gets a free pass for murder" to which Dean replies, "like you know what Hell's like" (32:14-32:18). The wry and snappish comments are far from being the only occurrence of incest subtext, and force the audience to recontextualize Hell once more and recognize that Sam Winchester, unlike Dean, grew up somewhat sheltered and doted on, oblivious to the violence in his family.

These remarks augment the importance of the depiction of Hell and the way it is talked about, for they highlight the screenwriters' dismissal of the mediatic conventions of post-9/11 America. By bringing into question John Winchester's motivations and his relationship with his eldest son, *Supernatural* deviates from hegemonic discourses on the "dark-skinned non-Christian" (Faludi 208). Within the show, the peaceful life of any family in suburban America is threatened by heroic manly American men. This dismisses "the great myths of American Greatness" (Taylor xi) and American exceptionalism,

providing new meanings. The country's preoccupations (Gonnerman) and the lavish reality of nuclear families and domestic bliss are nothing but a front, as the conventions typical of the horror genre are used to portray the façade of respectability. The absence of unnamed strangers ready to destroy and conquer exposes the 'agonized cock of the matter' as Kerouac would call it, namely that the failings of fathers have severe repercussions on their children and the blind adherence to hypermasculine values creates more problems than it solves.

Clifton is not mistaken in arguing that the show is "self-consciously meticulous about defining the gender of its perspective" (123). Even so, to accuse Kripke of blindly adhering to White hegemonic masculinity and its magnification implies a superficial approach to the show and its storylines, which repeatedly explore how "patriarchal authority is compromised" (Nicol 156). John Winchester is the independent Marlboro Man. He is the Lone Ranger who travels across the country and escapes the family seat. As the embodiment of Western ideals of masculinity, John Winchester wants his sons to be 'real men.' Everything he does dictates the "highly rigid regulatory frame" (Salih 62) in which gender is actualized. The inability to comply with Western standards of masculinity, like "toughness, power, control, independence, differentiation from womanhood, restricted emotions, physical and sexual competence, assertiveness, and aggressiveness" (Canham 2), becomes motivation enough to justify indifference and dislike.

Dean Winchester is aware of his father's unfair treatment of him and subsequently provides an insight into his strikes. The issue dates back to an incident that occurred when Dean was a child. In "Something Wicked" (1.18), a young Dean is incapable of carrying out his father's orders and protecting his brother from a monster. In the aftermath, Dean explains, "Dad never spoke about it again, I didn't ask. But he . . . ah . . . he looked at me different, you know? Which was worse" 29:30-29:42). The failings of the father become the failings of the child, warranting punishment for the inability to comply with "the dominant, 'authentic' mode" (Do Rozario 126) defined first by masculinity and then by heterosexuality. Under such circumstances, authenticity becomes impossible to achieve. Even more so in the case of Dean, who finds himself at the receiving end of his father's hatred and, subtextually, always takes the blow. Furthermore, unlike Sam, whose arguments with the authoritative figure never fully escalate, Dean Winchester relinquishes his sense of self, his aspirations, and his desires in order to replace them with his utility and his "sense of obligation to protect his brother and the rest of humanity" (Robinson 204).

This urge to put 'hunting' and family first has a catch. On the one hand, Dean Winchester is at risk of increasing his self-loathing whenever he does not manage to perform his duty. On the other hand, life on the road creates a chronic state of isolation and does not bring any rewards. Not only "sooner or later,

everybody's gonna leave [him]" ("Skin" 25:00-25:03), but the kind of freedom that such a life entails does not touch him. It merely offers a false sense of security, enhanced by the draping in protection and violence. The performance—initiated the moment Dean took over the car, the leather jacket and the music—continues, yet Dean cannot make up for his mistakes nor, it seems, can he hide his real identity from his father and brother. There is no pleasing, notwithstanding his adherence to masculine codes of conduct, and, because of this, he will always be subjected to the "social and physical sanctions and penalties" (Ehrlich et al. 7) caused by a lack of compliance with the norm.

Even though, within *Supernatural*, parental abuse takes first and foremost the form of neglect, the line that separates it from violence is easily blurred. In "Nightmare," Sam refers to it as "a little more tequila and a little less demon hunting" (38:48-38:52) and hints at a different upbringing that could have been—a more normal one, perhaps, but decisively more violent. The youngest Winchester's perspective is undermined by the introduction of minor characters like Max Miller (Brendan Fletcher) and Bela Talbot (Lauren Cohan) as well as by episodes such as "Dark Side of the Moon" (5.16). Dean Winchester's point of view is much more skeptical, challenging the claim of having turned out fine. Indeed, Dean is anything but, as the Hell arc suggests. He is suicidal, unable to cope, and too wrapped up in the co-dependent relationship with his brother to be able to re-enter polite society.

John Winchester's ghost and the echo of his teachings haunt his son from beyond the grave. They are like an elephant in the room, still standing even after Dean finally acknowledges them. In "Dream a Little Dream of Me" Dean Winchester confronts a dream version of himself, though the latter was initially supposed to be his father ("Warnerchannel—Supernatural"). At the end of the interaction, which plays on Dean's fear of going to Hell and turning into a demon, he kills the dream and shouts:

My father was an obsessed bastard! All that crap he dumped on me about protecting Sam? That was his crap! He's the one who couldn't protect his family! He's . . . He's the one who let mom die . . . who wasn't there for Sam. I always was! He wasn't fair! I didn't deserve what he put on me! And I don't deserve to go to Hell! (34:45-35:09)

In an episode that deals with violent fathers and dissatisfied sons who are tipped over the edge by the need for revenge and the desire to be relieved from the pain inflicted on them, Dean's realization appears to be particularly striking. Even more so, because dream Dean then opens his eyes and promises, "You can't escape me, Dean. You're gonna die. And this? This is what you're gonna become!" (35:34-35:43). The scene makes clear that there is no fate worse than Hell and the subjugation to the will of the father.

Still, Dean falls into the same trappings once again. In Hell, he puts himself at the mercy of an older, violent man (Alastair) and allows him to shape him into something new. This transformation enables Dean to produce and reproduce violence without managing to reaffirm his masculine identity as culturally expected (Brod). Here too, Dean Winchester will act like “a good soldier and nothing else” (“Dream a Little Dream of Me” 34:34-34:35), and, as in life, his commitment reveals his inability to perform the role properly. Even at his worst and lowest, with a razor in his hand and ready to torture souls, Dean cannot fulfill his father’s expectations and societal standards of manhood by proxy. His vulnerability, the negative perception of which is symptomatic of post-9/11 “fear of masculine insufficiency” (Faludi 280) and effeminacy, knows no bounds in life as in death.

Supernatural herewith continues with its scrutiny of “masculinity in the U.S.” (George 143) and constructs Hell accordingly. If John Winchester, the demon Alastair, and Dean’s brother Sam are the same, the afterworld extends well beyond the chains and racks, spilling over into the American Midwest. There is no escape, no leaving. And under such severe conditions, even life on the road on the chase of a better place becomes useless, denying the kind of liberty and freedom that is warranted to those who embody “masculine coded heroism” (Roach 118) without fail.

‘DANCING CHEEK TO CHEEK’: WHAT IS SAVED AND WHAT IS LEFT BEHIND

On September 18, upon Heaven’s successful rescue of Dean Winchester’s soul, a message is sent out to all angels: “Dean Winchester is saved” (“I Know What You Did Last Summer” 17:09-17:11). The statement, however, is only partially true. One of Heaven’s garrisons did manage to lay siege to Hell, allowing Castiel (Misha Collins) to retrieve Dean’s soul and bring him back to life, yet proper freedom and salvation have not been achieved. Dean Winchester crawls out of his own grave, though he is not bestowed with a brand-new life. As soon as he is back on his feet, Dean Winchester is sucked back into the hunting life, into chasing his brother and trying to solve other people’s problems while ignoring his own. All in all, those around him legitimize his reluctance to accept that “good things do happen” (“Lazarus Rising” 41:30-41:33). His suspicions are proved true when the reaper Tessa (Lindsey McKeon) tells him, “A second chance. Really? ‘Cause I’m pretty sure, deep down, you know something nasty’s coming down the road. Trust your instincts, Dean. There’s no such things as miracles” (“Death Takes a Holiday” 39:00-39:21). Her words confirm the audience’s understanding that Dean’s resurrection was not an act of charity, further remarking on Heaven’s intention to use Dean for their own purposes.

Dean Winchester and Tessa are both right. The situation is so glaring that not even Dean Winchester's ever-growing infatuation with Castiel, who will also end up betraying Dean and abandoning him, manages to overshadow the doom looming on the horizon. The characters' ongoing remarks are instances of what Miller defines as "a complex tissue of repetitions and of repetitions within repetitions, or of repetitions linked in chain fashion to other repetitions" (2-3) that can be found in any piece of fiction. It is not unusual for *Supernatural*, a show in which the themes and premise prevent the plot from ever going beyond the original premise, to encourage the audience to safely assume that any hints are "significant" (Miller 2).

Miller's theories are particularly relevant in light of Dean's journey to Hell and back. Season four of *Supernatural* becomes a kaleidoscope that depicts symmetrical patterns due to the reflection enabled by mirrors. The same dynamics of abuse, exploitation, and discrimination are replicated anew every time new characters are introduced, whilst the microcosm inhabited by the Winchester brothers rearranges itself accordingly and becomes even more of a prison. People, demons, and agents of Heaven all intend to exploit Dean, influence his choices, and ultimately use him as a puppet by depriving him of any free will. Hence, the superior forces that 'saved' Dean Winchester—by sacrificing themselves in his place, by taking him off the rack, or by bringing him back to life—all aim to subjugate him to their own will and exercise complete control over him. As Castiel says, "I dragged you out of Hell. I can throw you back in" ("Are You There God? It's Me Dean Winchester" 39:37-39:41), underlining Dean's helplessness and the power of superior forces.

Castiel's comment clarifies that things that were saved can be immediately put in danger again. The show herewith subverts the audience's expectations and introduces the idea of angels as 'dicks with wings.' The twist is indicative of *Supernatural's* "debased Christian cosmos" in which "universal disorder" (Fore 42) reigns supreme. Moreover, it nullifies the distinction between good and evil and casts doubts on Heaven's intentions. Of course, the angels are straightforward about having a job for Dean, though the specifics are never fully unveiled, allowing the penny to drop with excruciating slowness.

Three-thirds into the season, Dean Winchester is cast as 'torturer-on-call' without having any say in it. In "On the Head of a Pin" (4.16), the post-Hell narrative finally reaches its climax. Uriel (Robert Wisdom) and Castiel force Dean Winchester to take the job as interrogator to extract information from Alastair (Christopher Heyerdahl) about the "demon with the juice to ice angels" (04:39-04:41). Castiel has some qualms about the whole ordeal mostly because he is starting to resist his orders and like Dean. But the plan must nevertheless come to fruition. It immediately becomes clear that Heaven is asking Dean the same things Hell did, only this time the business is clouded in righteousness.

They both manipulate Dean Winchester into obedience, counting on his pre-existing trauma and exploiting any lingering desire for futile revenge.

The introduction of Alastair and the insight into his relationship with Dean both serve as reminders of his queerness. The show entered the collective imagination as a pillar of queerbaiting, but this is not the case. Notably, Kripke's work is a gothic adaptation of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). Moreover, its hero bears the name of two bisexual icons: James Dean and Dean Moriarty. From the beginning, the show allowed "feminist and/or queer readings" (Nicol 165) that are unrelated to the slash ship Dean Winchester/Castiel (Destiel). The deconstruction of Dean Winchester's gender and sexuality remains consistent throughout the show (Wright) and is placed in opposition to the heteronormative and masculine environment in which the characters move.

On their own, the car, the leather jacket, and the music are symbols of masculinity. Dean's appropriation of his father's belongings inscribes new meanings on them, moving the character closer to the post-war homosexual archetype that he embodies. This archetype, that took hold in the American culture of the 1950s and 1960s, appears to be dressed in "working-class clothing like blue jeans, boots, and denim or leather jackets" (Corn 43), which are staples of Dean Winchester's wardrobe too. The coding, however, is not limited to the symbolic nature of his clothes. Episodes like "Skin" (1.06) depend on the idea of "barred contact" (Ahmed 165) which is part of some queer experiences. While episodes such as "Faith" (1.12) discuss queerness in terms of damnation and rely on the associations created by the 'miraculous heart transplant' that saved Dean's life and for which a gay gym teacher died.

The deviation from more contemporary expectations centered on the presence of "positive affect[s]" (McDermott 854) allows for more gritty and realistic narratives in line with the show's genre at risk of being dissatisfactory. If the gothic serves to display "the dark underside of humanity [...] with all its hate, greed, and prejudice laid bare" (Beville 42), the adherence to the rhetoric of the AIDS crisis and the centrality of the fear of being "disgusting, aberrant, and essentially unlovable" (Downs 12) mark the queer other and introduces the idea of monstrosity as derivative of sexuality. All of these storylines conflate in Dean's time in Hell as his queerness becomes a key aspect of his damnation and could-have-been salvation.

In "On the Head of a Pin," Dean and Alastair become the protagonists of a queer revenge tragedy. One that opens with Dean afraid and reluctant to take on Heaven's assignment and Alastair bound within a Devil's trap tauntingly singing Fred Astaire's "Cheek to Cheek." As Dean tortures his abuser with weapons that look distinctively like phallic symbols, Alastair discloses information about Dean's time in Hell without ever relying on graphic details. These vague recollections are cut short when Dean says, "I could still dream.

Even in Hell. And over and over and over, you know what I dreamt? I dreamt of this moment" ("On the Head of a Pin" 13:10-13:19). Once more, the show provides a glimpse into the unspeakable horrors suffered by the characters, which can never be made up for or made right.

There is no payback "for all the pokes and prods" ("On the Head of a Pin" 10:42-10:46) for as long as the power play is unaffected, making Dean's revenge entirely futile. When Alastair asks, "Do you really think this is gonna fix you? Give you closure?" ("On the Head of a Pin" 16:30-16:35), the show brings to light how "repetitive revenge fantasies actually increase [a victim's] torment" (Herman 198) rather than diminishing it. The memories of all the physical and sexual violence—for one must not forget about the insight offered by Dean in episodes like "Family Remains"—cannot be exorcized. Just as they could not be exorcized in Hell by taking one of the razors offered to him and breaking the first seal. No matter how valid Dean's choices may appear to the audience, his actions will always have the opposite effect than the one intended. Post-traumatic violence can turn people either into "shell-shocked wrecks or malefic spree-killers" (Fore 43). In moments such as Dean and Alastair's confrontation, the fine line that separates the two things fades, and provides a renewed sense of monstrosity to the victim-turned-perpetrator.

The violence that Dean inflicts on Alastair is sexually coded. Phallic objects, such as knives, penetrate the flesh or are pushed into open mouths, while the demon maintains a knowing look. Reprising the iconography that characterizes violence in male genres, it leads the audience to "[imagine] different ways of organizing bodies, desire, and erotic attachment" (Brintnall 71) and explore how sexual violence and queerness once more reduce Dean to nothing more than "daddy's little girl" ("On the Head of a Pin" 12:35-12:37). Dean Winchester the torturer is not himself, which creates an unsustainable environment that will always force him to break. Alastair "carved [him] into a new animal" (16:58-17:03), one more suitable for Alastair's purposes, which adds up to the pre-existing sense of shame and the awareness that he is not the man his father wanted him to be.

Although, as Halperin and Traub claim, "the risk of shame should not prevent us from experiencing any aspect of queer life, no matter how embarrassing or discreditable" (11), shame is what prevents Dean from ever developing "a strong sense of self" (Downs 24) and overcoming what Warner defines as the "burden of disclosure" (8). The consistent control of one hypermasculine figure or the other sets limits to Dean Winchester's authenticity, limits that are ongoingly renewed and continuously expand the concept of Hell. Alastair's death, much like John Winchester's, does nothing. The same can be said about Sam Winchester's death in "Swan Song" (5.22), whose legacy lives on and casts a long shadow over his brother's lives. By the end of season five, Sam

may find freedom in his autonomy, but he does not grant the same favor to Dean. On the contrary, he prompts his brother to go and find Lisa (Cindy Sampson), with whom Dean had a sexual escapade a decade earlier, and “pray to god she’s dumb enough to take [him] in” (“Swan Song” 08:22-08:25). Sam not only officially steps into his father’s footsteps and gives the impression that one angry man will always follow the other, but also forcefully ends Dean Winchester’s journey towards a place of belonging. The trip across America ends not because all monsters are laid to rest, but because family comes first and the Winchester’s legacy is impossible to escape. Despite the homoerotic relationship between Dean Winchester and Castiel, and probably because of Castiel’s final desertion, Dean follows his brother’s instructions and pursues the white-picket-fence apple-pie life that had previously been depicted as inaccessible (Wilhelm). In doing so, Dean enters a new kind of Hell that takes on the form of America’s suburbia, nuclear families, and soulless domesticity.

Ultimately, the answer to Knowles’s question, “Is the remade Impala the same car that was wrecked by the truck?” (31) appears to be ‘yes’ even though the imagery of the car as a house/prison extends beyond the Impala itself. The 1967 Chevrolet Impala reminds Dean of his failure to comply with his father’s ideology and coerces him into doing more. For as long as the car stands, salvation is not possible. Its existence prevents authenticity and stalls any development, favoring an endless repetition of abuse instead. Incapable of escaping the dysfunctional and codependent relationship with his brother Sam, Dean Winchester remains trapped in Hell regardless of the semblance the place takes on.

CONCLUSIONS

The depiction of *Supernatural*’s first iteration of Hell exploits the show’s genre, its focus on dysfunctional familial relationships and abuse, and the deconstruction of Dean Winchester’s gender and sexuality. As opposed to later season’s portrayals of the afterlife, which appear to be excessively dependent on the show’s mythology, the place is depicted as abstract and mundane. The details are scarce and, because of this, ever more terrifying: Hell is a place inside Dean Winchester’s head, constructed and enriched as the season progresses. The details that are added to it are never shown through visual flashbacks: the audience must fill the gaps on their own based on what Dean implies and what he refuses to say.

This stratagem, most likely the result of a low budget, allows Kripke to tap into the “dark side of what could be termed our collective unconscious” (Beville 42) by playing with the idea that life on Earth and life in Hell are one and the same. The continuum that this approach creates becomes irrefutable the more season four progresses. It also creates an endless funhouse in which the

ghost of John Winchester reigns supreme. The psychological downside of the education he imparted on his son takes the form of Dean Winchester's clear lack of self-esteem and sense of self beyond his job and family. The visceral self-loathing and shame make him travel faster towards damnation and enhance his feelings of isolation, trapping him forever in a cycle of abuse, White hegemonic masculinity, and the heterosexual norm imposed by society. For as much as the players change, Dean Winchester cannot discard his role as pawn. Everyone, it seems, has a job for him and expects something that he can never properly provide. He is not a 'manly American man' and even revenge fantasies turn against him to the point of further exposing his weakness.

These conditions disallow salvation and take him back to the traumatic events of his childhood, to the dark shadows in empty bedrooms, and the eviscerated woman in white burning on the ceiling. The past and the Winchesters' legacy cannot easily be escaped as history repeats itself. Trauma runs deep and in the aftermath of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, damnation becomes appealing. If only to save one self. If only to escape the kind of despair that comes from being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. As Dean Winchester passes from the hands of one angry man to the next, one infernal landscape replaces the other and creates a blur of unimaginable violence and incommunicable sorrow. In the long run, an altogether better and happier life is only possible if the past is burned down in an attempt to exorcise it of all the ghosts.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

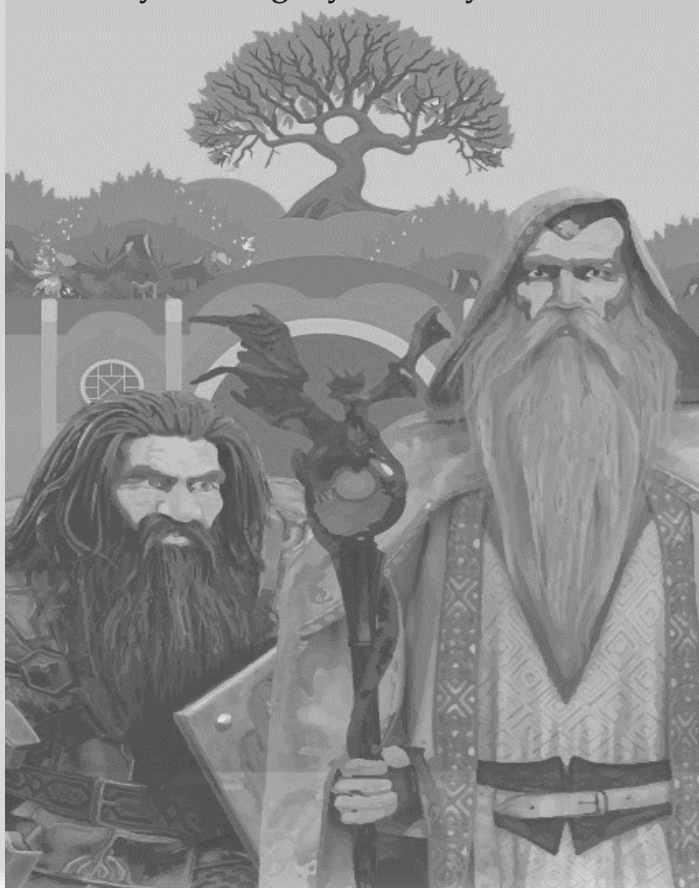
ANNA CATERINO is a PhD candidate in Languages, Literatures, Cultures and Mediation at the University of Milan. She is currently working on a thesis on early modern medial diatribes and their influence on drama. Her non-Shakespearean research interests include fandom studies, audience and reception studies, and Eric Kripke's *Supernatural*.



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