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Highway to Masculinity

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ABSTRACT

The essay analyzes Erik Kripke's television show *Supernatural*, in which gender roles and relationships, archetypes, symbolism, and the inner psyche function to both promote and challenge hegemonic masculinity. Several sources were used to support findings, including the complexity of gender roles, the effects of showcasing hegemonic masculinity, and what we learn from such depictions. *Supernatural* presents a strong, bonded relationship between two heterosexual men. This representation is important because of the archetypes that the main characters portray. Since it is impossible for one man to be a perfect man, the brothers Sam and Dean represent the juxtaposition of complementary masculinities. I argue that the show depicts the importance of a durable friendship and the complicated workings of grief and trauma but it also addresses the ways men are supposed to process these emotions. Thus providing us with a helpful guideline.

Released in 2005 by Erik Kripke, the television show *Supernatural*, delves into the terrifying idea that monsters are real. The show keeps audience members on edge, fearing of the horror they will see; however, there are underlying meanings at play. The show follows two brothers: Dean and Sam Winchester, raised by their father John to fight evil after their mother is brutally murdered by a demon. The brothers are attractive men who have very distinct differences in not only their appearance but also in their personality. Though being exposed to all sorts of ghouls is an important feature of the show, the writers have also interwoven gender identity, character roles, symbolic artifacts, and vertical metaphors within. The show demonstrates the ways in which American society forces men into a narrow understanding of perfection that is neither attainable nor healthy, and suggests that gendered expectations should be changed into complementary oppositions. Allowing men to be both traditionally, feminine and masculine, without consequences.

In order to prove the exposed gender roles, I will discuss how Dean demonstrates hegemonic masculinity while Sam doesn't, and why this contrast is important, as well as the notion that neither of them are the "perfect" man and need each other to be complete. Then I will argue that, within the plot Dean is an antihero and Sam functions as the traditional her, but also as Dean's moral compass. In addition to characters, inanimate objects also play as an important element; Dean's car, the Impala is used as a symbol of independence and speed. The emotional complexity of the show will be analyzed through the psychoanalytic lens of the different levels of consciousness that are represented within the show.

To ensure that there is a clear understanding of what the show *Supernatural* is about, I will briefly discuss what happens in the first episode, the artifact I analyze. The show starts off building tension with a lowly lit house, and we are introduced to a beautiful blonde woman,

Mary, who is the mother to a small baby named Sam, and a young child named Dean. She is married to a tall and attractive man named John, and despite their cheeriness, there is a dark feeling to the show, with ominous orchestra music. This first scene ends with Mary murdered by an unknown evil and we see her burning on the ceiling, the first suggestion that this show will hold something supernatural. We flash-forward to the future where we see Sam all grown up and in college, where he is in a successful relationship with a beautiful woman named Jess. Dean surprises Sam and Jess with a late-night visit, telling them that their dad went on a hunting trip, which we later learn means something more than simply looking for deer. Through Sam discussing with Dean his problems with how they were raised, the audience learns that after the murder of their mother, their father John trained the brothers to fight demons and ghosts and everything in between, all for the purpose of finding the demon that killed their mother. Sam ends up going with his brother to look for their father who had gone missing for a few days, and they go to a town where John had been hunting, and while the brothers don't end up finding their father, they finish the case he was on. It is a ghost called "a lady in white" a vengeful spirit who had murdered her children and killed herself due to the mistreatment and cheating of her husband, and as a ghost she wanders on the road and tries to convince men who are in relationships to be with her, and if they agree she murders them. The episode ends with Sam and Dean putting the ghost to rest in peace once and for all. Then Sam's girlfriend, Jess, is brutally burned onto the ceiling by the same demon that killed his mother. This event makes Sam leave behind the life he had planned, to continue hunting with his brother, determined to kill the monsters that go bump in the night.

Parallelism has a strong standing in *Supernatural* first by applying semiotics; the sign, signified and signifier, or rather, the idea and image. The writers do so by using Dean, the rough

and tough appearance (signifier) and his independent and strong-headed traits (signified) to create the association of Dean being a manly symbol, and what being a man entails in this context (sign). This relates to the denotation analysis of Dean being just a guy, but the connotation is how we associate him with a classic masculine persona. Then we have synchronic patterns where there are distinct oppositions within scenes, such as the comparison of Sam's femininity to Dean's masculinity. Diachronic can be applied if you look at the whole episode, and even the later seasons to come in comparing the two main characters. I also use the paradigmatic notion to focus on the hidden pattern and how Dean's masculinity works as a mask for his emotions that are socially unacceptable to show. I also utilize a feminist analysis that delves into perceived gender and the different beliefs there are within stereotypes, and how using Sam and Dean together as a team may work to disrupt sexist media in a unique way.

Division of Unity as a Social Requirement

Gender is a complicated concept, that is more complicated than one might think, defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as "the physical and/or social condition of being male or female"(Cambridge Dictionary). The important element to this definition is the social aspect, people shape how others believe they should act when male or female; this can lead to stereotypes which are misleading and simplified representations of certain groups. Dean Winchester is the perfect example of a masculine stereotype: a strong fighter who enjoys women and booze. This is clear if we use his appearance as the signifier: rough, "classically" attractive: sharp jawline, straight nose, piercing eyes, and built physique (LaFrance). He is strong, and his signified traits of being emotionally closed off and bold equate Dean to a sign of masculinity in our culture. His brother Sam is quite the opposite, perceived in a more feminine light, with his

gentleness, and empathy; this idea is strengthened by synchronic comparisons of the two opposites within specific scenes throughout the episode.

When the audience first meets Dean, he is a little boy, who is responsible for taking his baby brother out of their burning house. As he races out of the house --Sam in tow--he follows his father's orders without question, showing his strong sense of duty. The next time we meet Dean is years later, this time breaking into Sam's apartment and fighting with him. He wins the fight and mocks his brother for being out of practice: both physical strength and mocking behavior are key to Dean's personality throughout the episode. When his brother asks what he is doing there, he simply answers, "Well I was looking for a beer" (*Supernatural*, 7:14).

While Dean is portrayed as a red-blooded American getting into a fight looking for a drink, Sam is introduced as shy and kind, his girlfriend flaunting his intelligence to their friends while he humbly accepts the praise. When Dean meets Sam's girlfriend, Jess, he instantly becomes charming, eyeing her over and commenting that she is too good for his little brother. It is of little surprise that Dean acts as a "womanizer": it is behavior that aligns with the image of the red-blooded American. Sam, on the other hand, is more respectful and kinder, presenting an empathetic image which is gendered as a more "feminine" trait in our society (LaFrance).

An additional consideration in masculinity is emotion, or rather, the ways a man is expected to deal with their emotions. Pleck states that, "Males are expected to show greater emotional control than women and are often described as being more alienated from their feelings; but at the same time, men appear to become angry or violent more easily than women..." (Pleck 156).

This is clearly shown when Dean lashes out in anger against Sam, who made a negative comment about their mother, pushing Sam back and becoming extremely aggressive. Sam's subsequent apology is met with Dean's reply: "No chick-flick moments" (*Supernatural* 27:33).

Although Dean obviously has emotions, he is either unable or not allowed--socially-- to discuss them with anyone, which leads to him lashing out in anger. Dean's emotional repression leads to violence and miscommunication often, but not always, with his brother, who is somehow able to decipher Dean's stunted emotional capacity, furthering the notion that, although opposites, they complement each other. Sam, as his counterpart, longs to discuss their family issues, upset about how they were raised as warriors and how their father never reassured them with love, and only instilled fear and strength in them. An interesting film that tackles emotion with the American male, *The Mask You Live In*, shows that from a young age, boys are taught not to talk about how they feel or, rather, the only acceptable emotions for them to portray are anger and happiness. Recording high school boys talking about these issues and even crying when confronted, the film reflects on the same cultural pressures regarding masculinity that are seen in *Supernatural*.

Nicknames further emphasize the power play between the two brothers, in the relationship they have. Although nicknames are often a sign of familiarity, they can also indicate power differential between characters: Dean often refers to Sam as "Sammy", using a diminutive that further lowers Sam's authority within the context of their relationship. In addition to diminutives, the terms they choose to address each other reveal the relationship with each other but also the gendered roles: Dean will call Sam "bitch" while Sam calls him "jerk". Typically, the word bitch is associated with a woman, or rather a show of cowardice; "stop being a bitch, and do it" is a phrase you hear often among men pressuring each other to engage in different activities. Jerk, on the other hand, is associated with a man; it is a term used to describe a male who is being inconsiderate. Although they call each other these words with a smile, they are unknowingly emphasizing the signs of Dean as a manly man and Sam as a more effeminate

character and reinforcing their gendered roles toward each other. The use of bitch and jerk reaffirms the complementary signs of masculinity and femininity between the brothers and their perceived character to the audience.

Despite Dean's inability to exhibit any emotions other than anger, he does clearly state multiple times throughout the episode that Sam should join him on the search for their father. When Sam is reluctant to come along, he is outraged, insulting Sam's dream of an "apple-pie life" (*Supernatural* 9:17). Dean's anger can be interpreted as a sign of loneliness: however, he is unable to express it because doing so would go against his masculine nature. Sam's wish for a stable job and a happy marriage; to settle down and raise a family, is not following the lines of being a sexual and powerful being as other men in American society strive for. Upon further thought, the opposition between Dean as the ideal man and Sam as his more delicate counterpart, is rooted only in media portrayals. Both Sam and Dean are flawed individuals who together make the "perfect" man or rather the new man has discussed in the article "Post-Princess Models of Gender: The New Man in Disney/Pixar," in which Gillan and Wooden consider a new man that is emerging in society, one who balances both the hegemonic masculinity, as well as the development of a lasting friendship with vulnerability. There is more at play than just gender roles, and that is how the brothers work together functioning with different moralities.

Reluctant Heroism and the Need for Teamwork

Gender roles are a key element to this show, but so is the opposition between archetypal characters that Sam and Dean represent. Although not a perfect fit, I argue that Dean is the antihero, or rather a hero in training while Sam acts as a gentle hero. An antihero "a protagonist who lacks the attributes that make a heroic figure, as nobility of mind and spirit, a life or attitude marked by action or purpose" (Fitch 2). Dean is a hunter who saves people, who fights ghosts

and demons and much more, but the way in which he does it makes us view him as anything but perfect: He provides comic relief in the show, constantly throwing in little jabs towards his brother and saying one-liners that aren't always appropriate (but they are funny). He and his father commit credit card fraud so that they can fund their mission; he also lacks a respect for authority and he even picked the lock on his handcuffs while he was at the police station. Although all of his actions are evidence that he is not the typical hero, viewers are still rooting for him, because we as the audience view an antihero as someone who can improve. We share characteristics with an antihero: like us, they are relatable, attainable, and malleable; and although he can act predictably, we are also more surprised or touched by moments that seem more genuine with this character.

Sam is a classic hero, who is perceived as having, “emotional, physical, and moral strength as well as charity and fortitude” (Fitch 2) with the key word being ‘moral’ Throughout the episode, Sam strives for morality. Before he quits school to join his brother at the end, he was studying to become a lawyer, someone who facilitates the rules governed by our society. The camera “determines” how we view him: the camera angles on Sam were coming from below, making us “look up” to him. By using angles such as those when he is discussing what he believes is unjust: like Dean and their father illegally obtaining credit cards, we see him as more in control, or powerful in that moment. When we are first reintroduced to Sam, he also disdainfully asked Dean if he and John were still using fraud as a means of making money and shamed him for doing so. Of course, Dean blames the companies who keep falling for it. When the ghost that they are hunting during the first episode, which I will discuss in more depth later in this essay, is attempting to kiss Sam, he says with stern eyes that he has never been unfaithful. Sam is driven by his morals and will not bend easily, only when necessary.

The opposition of the characters--in terms of gender and emotional development--is a critical feature of their complementarity: they grow as characters when they are together. Throughout the episode, we see Sam becoming bolder and more willing to assume responsibility, while he is also counseling Dean on what is right and wrong and how to be sensitive when approaching situations. The growth and change in their relationship is vital to show that men can have successful, familial relationships where they can depend on each other and even grow from these interactions. Often, media portrays men being on their own, but these brothers encourage a new approach to masculine relationships where there is room for growth and development. The relationship between the brothers confirms what was discussed in, "Post-Princess Models of Gender: The New Man in Disney/Pixar" relationships between men in media is necessary to see because these characters, "discover the necessary truths about their masculine strength only as they discover how much they need one another" (Gillam and Wooden 6). The new man that is being encouraged in *Supernatural* is one that succeeds with a healthy friendship, and an acceptance of emotions; while neither Dean nor Sam perfectly represent the new man, together they do so. As these brothers strive to become more developed and reliant on each other, they have an additional source to depend on-- their noble steed, the 1967 Impala.

The Power of Freedom and Speed

The brothers need a reliable steed for their journey, one that is fast and strong, and that is the 1967 Chevy Impala. This sleek black classic is the ideal car for the two hunters on the road--not only because of its engine but also because of its name. The Impala--the antelope that roams Africa-- is a wildly graceful and fast creature that races partly for just the enjoyment. The same can be said about the two brothers who drive long distances of their own free will to help others. Their mighty vehicle acts as a symbol of freedom and aids Sam and Dean on their journey, and

also connects them to their father, John. The Impala was first John's car, and he gave it to Dean to use when hunting; with his disappearance, it acts as a link for the family.

Impalas share other characteristics with Sam and Dean: they use their speed and agility to avoid predation just as Sam and Dean must do when hunting running from a vengeful ghost. They [impalas] decrease their chances of attack when living in herds" ("Amazing Facts About Impalas"), this possibly connects to how badly Dean wants Sam to join him on finding their dad, maybe because he realizes the importance of collaboration, of being 'in a herd' despite the masculine norm of rugged individualism. In the beginning of the episode when Dean arrives to ask for help, Sam says that Dean can do it on his own; Dean admits that he can but does not want to because having someone along for the ride entails a safer journey for both. The impala is also known to be on high alert for any form of danger, because it is one of the most hunted antelope on African safaris; Sam and Dean who are within the vehicle are constantly watching for monsters and use the vehicle as a means of evasion and protection. They are the ones who fight evil, and therefore, they become the most hunted; just as the impalas, they face the risk of extinction.

The writer of the show, Kripke, originally pitched the Impala like another character to the show. The choice for this car was a strategic one: the Chevrolet Impala was designed to be safe and sleek, luxurious and powerful according to myclassicgarage.com and on caranddriver.com they discuss how the Impala was one of America's best sellers. It was an extremely popular car, seen as luxurious while remaining powerful. Dean and Sam do not have many luxurious items in their life, nor do they often enjoy expensive activities, but their ability to have a taste of class or excitement is with this classic American car. It's as if the Impala works as a way for Dean to facilitate or encourage a normal life for others, while he must fight demons and monsters, riding

in his stead, he makes it possible for others to live out a happy American life. While the Impala functions as a facilitator for normal life, Dean has not quite grasped his true emotions, and the trauma that he experienced as a child.

Buried Trauma and The Significance of Healing

As the show progresses, looking at the diachronic change across the episodes, we see the brothers achieving true consciousness while processing how their mother was murdered--burning on the ceiling. Terrill describes consciousness as the "highest level, represented by the sky" (Terrill 323), which in this series I will be using the ceiling as the highest level. When we are first introduced to the Winchester family, they are living what seems to be a happy and normal life. Before this event happened, they were living in a sort of dream world, a personal unconscious which "...consists firstly of all those contents that became unconscious either because they lost their intensity and were forgotten or because consciousness was withdrawn from them (repression)..." (Jung, 1971, p.38). This dream world is shattered when a dark figure enters their home and the mother, Mary is flush against the ceiling and enveloped in red flames. There is no way to save her; Dean and Sam's father, John, consumed with hatred for the thing that murdered his wife leads his children in a life of fighting and survival. Rather than repressing their feelings, it is more suppression for the Winchester family; they purposefully try to ignore something that they find painful, which I think is the reality of monsters and demons, a metaphor and projection of audience members own dark fears and desires. The family lived in a happy fairytale, until Mary is murdered and they are forced to look up towards the consciousness, the reality, of what is out there and what can happen.

Sam Winchester is not happy with the life they live in the conscious realm: the constant fear and discomfort that comes with knowing what others do not know and having to deal with it

was too much. Law school was a way for Sam to escape reality; he slipped back into the personal unconscious by trying to live a normal life and distancing himself from his family and past. Although he aids Dean on a hunt to find their missing father, he still insists on going back to his home where his girlfriend and job interview were waiting. Upon entering his happy ignorant world, he is content, lying back on his bed when he opens his eyes and finds his girlfriend Jess burning on the ceiling, murdered by the same monster that killed his mother. The red flames consume his love, and along with it his dream world; he is brought abruptly into consciousness. This event makes Sam realize that ignoring reality is not an option any longer: he cannot pretend that everything is normal, and with this epiphany the episode ends with the two brothers standing by their sturdy Impala and a determined Sam saying, "We got work to do" (*Supernatural* 42:33). Instead of expressing the trauma he has experienced with the two murders--his mother's and his girlfriend's--he instead chooses a vengeful path. Some may consider this approach as negative and unhelpful; I believe that the show takes a literal approach, claiming that in order to move on you must defeat your demons. Obviously, this may be hard for the everyday person to relate to, but in the context of the show it makes sense for Sam to leave school to go and fight what harms others, a physical defeat. While Sam could stay and work through his trauma personally, he chooses to join Dean in preventing the same evil from hurting others, and in a sense bettering society while slowly healing himself in a unique way. Sam and Dean are flawed in their own ways, and have much room for growth, but they constantly push to help others, even when it comes at the price of their own lives and those that they hold dear.

Conclusion

The show *Supernatural* at the surface seems to be a dark and adventurous tale of two attractive brothers on a mission to help others from the monsters that prey at night, but there is far

more at play. It is a show about complementary oppositions that challenge the ways in which we view men using the starkly different brothers; with Dean representing a classically masculine guy and Sam as feminine. Dean is strong and blunt, sexually powerful and overall emotionally distant, while Sam is empathetic, caring, and generally more kind. If all men must look at Dean as a role model, they might resort to anger more often, or feel as if they can't talk about their emotions, but seeing Sam as a main character who is *still* a strong man, while balancing emotions, may serve as a stepping stone for young boys and men. Showing the oppositions between the two brothers provides audience with a different idea of what a man is. The relationship between the two brothers is also vital, showing that Dean is an antihero who is uncharacteristically a savior but needs his brother Sam as a moral compass and hero himself. Both characters are sturdy men, but together they are much stronger, the balance of forceful and gentle as well as brash and thoughtful makes them a well-rounded team. Throughout their quest, the characters are helped by their Impala; bringing the brothers agility and speed as well as a way to support the American dream and allow others to live peacefully. The burning of women within the show is dark but important to show the levels of consciousness that are vital to the development of the psyche. Dean and Sam have a lot of emotional damage to unpack, with their inability to save the women they love in life, or possibly be the cause of their downfall, and what they do in order to cope with that is important for us as the viewers to see. Or rather, as the audience we can understand what it is like to not be able to save some people, or simply help others. Sometimes, it is impossible to do so, no matter how hard you try, and that is a difficult concept to accept, and we can work through those feelings by watching Dean and Sam on their journey. The show was originally targeted towards men, because they figured what guy wouldn't enjoy fighting monsters and cool guys, but what the writers didn't anticipate was the large female audience. Men do watch *Supernatural*, but the number of women

who watch is slightly higher, maybe it is a way for women to see men in a different light. To show the connection and emotional development is a rare sight to see in popular media and representing these types of men who need one another to thrive is an exciting deviance from the norm of individualism. While some may think that a show can do little to change the real world and people in it, the book “Men, Media and Masculinity” by Edward LaFrance says otherwise. LaFrance says, “...television communicates not only information and entertainment. Along with those two it also communicates attitudes, values, customs, and expectations” (LaFrance, 19 something, p. 54). The way that Sam and Dean interact with each other, is teaching those who are viewing, which is brings about the interesting insinuation that there is no “perfect” man, or rather, it takes two men to make one functional man. What are the implications behind that? Or is it encouraging men that they should embrace the identities of both Sam and Dean? The show *Supernatural* literally fights demons, but also represents the demons that we face in our day to day life, as well as tackles the different ways to deal with emotional trauma. The audience can see that the heroes of this show are flawed, they fight, and worry, and struggle to get by, but with each other they are a force to be reckoned with, and that having someone to stand by gives us all a chance to fight the monsters that lurk around each corner.

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