

**Agata Łuksza**

University of Warsaw

## Boy Melodrama: Genre Negotiations and Gender-Bending in the *Supernatural* Series

### ABSTRACT

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For years *Supernatural* (CW, 2005–) has gained the status of a cult series as well as one of the most passionate and devoted fandoms that has ever emerged. Even though the main concept of the series indicates that *Supernatural* should appeal predominantly to young male viewers, in fact, the fandom is dominated by young women who are the target audience of the CW network. My research is couched in fan studies and audience studies methodological perspectives as it is impossible to understand the phenomenon of *Supernatural* without referring to its fandom and fan practices. However, it focuses on the series' structure in order to explain how this structure enables *Supernatural*'s viewers to challenge and revise prevailing gender roles. *Supernatural* combines elements of divergent TV genres, traditionally associated with either male or female audiences. It opens up to gender hybridity through genre hybridity: by interweaving melodrama with horror and other "masculine" genres the show provides a fascinating example of Gothic television which questions any simplistic gender identifications.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Supernatural* (CW, 2005–; henceforth *SPN*) is a multi-generic television show targeted at a young female audience and created in the Gothic mode, though outside the female Gothic tradition as it has been described by Tania Modleski. The series features two brothers on the road, Dean (Jensen Ackles) and Sam Winchester (Jared Padalecki), who selflessly hunt evil and save people, resigning from personal and professional lives of their own. Now entering its eleventh season, *SPN* has gained the status of a cult series and one of the most active, passionate and devoted fandoms that has ever emerged.<sup>1</sup> While this essay does not focus strictly on *SPN* fandom, fan studies and audience studies have shaped my way of thinking about the series. Research conducted by such scholars as John Fiske, Henry Jenkins or Matt Hills, inspired by the works of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies which understand the text as a cultural battlefield of meanings, has changed the way we study popular culture. The image of mass audience as a chaotic crowd of passive consumers, constructed by the Frankfurt School, has been discarded since audience studies prove the polysemy of cultural texts and reveal how those texts are used as a locus of resistance to the dominant order, even when they do not question its primacy (e.g., Radway).

It would be difficult to explain the phenomenon of *SPN* without invoking fan practices or the interdependencies between fandom and the creative team. The series is well-known for its metafictional strategies, including the most radical ones such as subtext messages, insider jokes or addressing viewers and fans directly (e.g., S05E22). The list of reflexive elements structuring *SPN* is impressive: juxtaposition of fictional and real worlds, coexistence of alternative realities, recurrent intertextuality, satire on television, the very self-awareness of the story (García 148). The first of many episodes with clear meta-elements—“Hollywood Babylon” (S02E18)—shows how the Winchesters investigate a haunting case on a horror movie set, but it is “French Mistake” (S06E15) which deserves to be called the most meta-episode of any television programme. In “French Mistake,” the boys, as the Winchester brothers are usually called, are thrown into “our” world and find themselves on the set of the *Supernatural* TV series in Vancouver where they pretend to be Jensen Ackles and Jared

<sup>1</sup> Larsen and Zubernis inform that by the beginning of 2013 the number of *Supernatural* conventions held all over the world exceeded 50 and fans from nearly 200 countries logged onto the *Supernatural Wiki*, the most exhaustive online source on *SPN* (Introduction 5). Moreover, *SPN* fandom tends to call itself the “Family”; the inspiration came from Jared Padalecki, who once said: “I have my family, my on-set family, and then our *Supernatural* family” (qtd. in Casper 78).

Padalecki. Most recently, in “Fan Fiction” (S10E05), the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary episode, in order to honour and thank the fandom, the creative team sends the Winchesters to an all-girl school where a musical adaptation of *Supernatural* books (introduced in S04E18) is being prepared. Taking into account how intensive and fruitful the relation between the *SPN* creative team and its fandom is and how deeply this relation influences the series itself, it seems necessary to refer to the methodological approach proposed by fan studies, if a well-grounded analysis of any social representations in *SPN* is to be conducted.

I claim that the way in which specific genres structure *SPN* strongly affects how gender is represented in the series and how the audience might decode this representation. However, *genre* has to be understood in terms of cultural multifaceted practice rather than simply as an isolated text. As Jason Mittel argues: “We need to look beyond the text as the locus for genre and instead locate genres within the complex interrelations among texts, industries, audiences, and historical contexts” (10). *Genres* should be analyzed as clusters of images, conventions, audience generic knowledge and expectations, inevitably entangled in questions of cultural value and prestige, and therefore, questions of class and gender (Neale; Tudor). In the case of *SPN*, it is important to establish how and why differently gendered genres are implemented by the creative team and interpreted by the audience. *SPN*’s cross-gendered genre hybridity resurfaces within *diegesis* in Dean’s interest in chosen texts of popular culture: on the one hand, Dean is a die-hard aficionado of rock music and an enthusiast of the Western (S06E18), both coded as masculine in their appeal; on the other, he turns out to be an avid viewer of a “feminine” soap opera *Dr. Sexy MD* (S05E08).

I apply a cultural perspective to research not only genres, but also gender representations in *SPN*, following Julie d’Acci’s advice:

Representations of gender . . . should not simply be equated with TV depictions of male/female or masculine/feminine characters or personalities. . . . we have to look at the position of characters in plots, at narrative structures as a whole, at genres, at the overall television enterprise. (381)

In other words, d’Acci opts for an “integrated approach,” pointing out that factors determining gender representation exist on various levels of production and reception of TV texts—in order to properly describe each particular gender representation, we need to define the social, historical, and economical contexts in which it functions. Furthermore, d’Acci claims that “Representations of the conventional binaries of male/female, masculinity/femininity, man/woman need to be studied not only for how

they get constructed, reproduced, and enforced, but also for how they already are and can continue to be broken apart” (381). Therefore, I will focus on the mechanisms and possibilities embedded in *SPN*'s generic form of questioning traditional gender paradigms, and traditional definition of manhood in particular.

### THE LITTLE SHOW THAT COULD

*SPN* premiered on September 13, 2005, on WB network, owned by Warner Bros., which merged with United Paramount Network owned by CBS the next year, thus creating the CW. The series survived a network merger, the writers' strike, as well as being scheduled on Thursday and Friday. The CW cannot be compared with CBS or NBC—it is a smaller network with fewer resources and the need to struggle for respect. The network is overtly targeted at young, rather affluent adults (18–34), especially young women, which means that its line-up consists mainly of the so-called post-feminist teen shows (Bridgeman 7), which are not held in high esteem and which, interestingly, often belong to the telefantasy genre.

For a decade *SPN* has maintained steady ratings of over 2 million viewers. According to Nielsen 2013–2014 TV season series ratings, 2.81 million people were watching *SPN*'s ninth season finale live, which means that after nine years on air *SPN* was the second most popular CW show, after *Arrow* (3.28 m), though, obviously, it could not compete with comedy hits (e.g., *Big Bang*: 19.96 m) or crime series (e.g., *NCIS*: 19.77 m) produced by the Big Four. For years critics have ignored *SPN* and it has spread mostly by word of mouth, without the help of either a wide-scale network promotional campaign or official social media presence. Gavia Baker-Whitelaw adds that “Over the course of its ninth season, *Supernatural*'s adult audience grew by 27 percent. . . . Honestly, *Supernatural* just doesn't feel like something that should be doing this well. And yet.” There is a reason why *SPN* is often referred to as “the Little Show That Could.”

Initially the series was conceived as a hybrid of the horror, western and road movie genres organized around the monster-of-the-week; however, it developed its own master narrative and evolved into a “flexi-narrative,” which combines self-contained episodes with an idiosyncratic and consistent mythology (Simmons 142). Larsen and Zubernis (*Fandom 2*) claim that the show was expected to appeal primarily to the 18–49 male demographic. Nonetheless, the network did remember about its primary audience—young females—and cast attractive actors in the roles of the protagonists. The results of the casting surprised the creative team. Eric Kripke, the show's creator, explains:

When we started out, we were going to make a horror movie every week. It was about the monsters, and it was about Hook Man and Bloody Mary and the urban legends. . . . I would say right around Episode 4 or 5 [of Season 1], Bob Singer [executive producer/director] and I were watching the episodes, and we just started saying, “God, those two guys and their chemistry is so much more interesting than the horror movies we’re showing.”

As a consequence, the monster-of-the-week became less important than the relationship between the brothers and their familial issues. Moreover, it was soon discovered that *SPN* fandom consisted mainly of women. Nevertheless, this does not imply that *SPN* has no male viewers. As Bill Gorman’s research from April 2010 demonstrates, the difference in numbers between female and male viewers is much less impressive in the case of *SPN* (1.27) than, for example, in the case of *The Vampire Diaries* (2.00), another CW hit.<sup>2</sup> The ratio 1.27 actually suggests that *SPN*’s male audience is quite significant, especially if we take into account that women prevail across TV series audiences in general and the gender ratio is in men’s favour solely with regard to satiric cartoons, such as *Simpsons* (0.67) or *Family Guy* (0.68). *SPN* fandom is overwhelmingly female, yet Melissa N. Bruce argues that through negotiating television genres *SPN* “works to appeal to multiple audiences” and the above gender ratings confirm her claim.

### THE ODD STEP CHILD OF THE CW

Jensen Ackles’s thought-provoking statement that *SPN* is “the odd step child of the CW” and that “It’s not about Backstreet Boys driving around in a cool car” (qtd. in Larsen and Zubernis, *Fandom* 202–03) is a good point to start a detailed discussion on genre and gender negotiations in *SPN*. The best way to grasp the distinctiveness of *SPN* in CW broadcasts implied by Ackles is to compare the series with another CW long-run hit, *The Vampire Diaries* (2008–; henceforth *TVD*), whose both audience and fandom are mostly female.

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<sup>2</sup> Gorman’s research shows the ratio of the ratings for women 18–49 to men 18–49 for the airing of each show during one week in April 2010, for both repeats and original episodes. The research does not include Friday and Saturday shows due to the lack of gender data for those shows.

While the main characters in *SPN* are two brothers engaged in the “family business” of hunting all evil things they would meet on their way, in the centre of *TVD* universe there is a heroine (Elena) and two vampire brothers (Stefan and Damon Salvatore) that are romantically involved with her. The Winchesters are more interested in family than romantic relationships; and unlike Elena and the Salvatores, Sam and Dean function within all-male social groups. The characters’ goals differ substantially: in *TVD* the principal aim is to survive constantly resurfacing threats and fall happily in love (a personal goal); *SPN* is about sacrificing one’s own happiness for the survival of others and the world in general (a quest, though with a personal motivation). Consequently, *TVD* takes place mostly in private spaces, such as family homes (especially kitchens and personalized bedrooms), while *SPN* keeps changing locations, situating the Winchesters either in public or so-called liminal spaces (e.g., motels). However, what really deeply separates *SPN* from *TVD* and partially accounts for its masculine genre framework is the characters’ social class and the aesthetic style it entails.

In *TVD*, everybody and everything is exaggeratedly beautiful as the series represents post-feminist aesthetics and openly appeals to post-feminist female subjects. Almost all characters belong to the upper-middle class: they do not have to worry about money and do not have to work, and they still live in pretty houses, drive expensive cars, and wear fancy clothes. *SPN*, in contrast, casts its characters away from the American class system, making them steal, use fake credit cards or play poker to survive and continue their crusade. So-called “hunters” are dressed in boots and flannel shirts, wear the same jackets for years, keep all their stuff in the car, and exchange gas station gifts for Christmas (S03E08). They are presented as liminal figures, and thus, they become both monsters and heroes of American suburbs (Burnell 47–59). If Sam and Dean can save American suburbanites from their worst nightmares, it is because they possess the attributes of social outcasts: belonging nowhere and having nothing to lose, they can be violent and skilful at inflicting pain if the situation demands it. Such a social profile, which determines also the characters’ wardrobe and the artefacts they use, distinguishes *SPN* from other CW series and situates it in a generic and iconographic tradition encoded as masculine.

Furthermore, this social profile merges with the concept of monstrosity that exists within the series. The boys’ definition of a monster seems rather simplistic in the beginning of the show: in season one any non-human creature is categorized as a monster. However, the way in which the Winchesters understand and recognize monstrosity becomes more complex with every following episode as brothers encounter “monsters” which

refrain from hurting people and, most importantly, discover monstrosity within themselves. For instance, Sam finds out that his blood contains demonic blood (S02E21) and Dean has to deal with his memories from Hell, where he used to torture other souls (season four). These monstrous aspects of the Winchesters enhance their liminal status of characters forever relegated to live on the margins of American society. I would argue that because of this problematic class status of hunters in general, and Dean Winchester in particular, *SPN* becomes part of the history of the violent action/adventure genre, which is “really the history of modern masculinity” (Barna xi).

Although the Winchesters have to rise to epic challenges and heroically endure physical and emotional suffering for the common good, like a typical action hero they are not only unappreciated, but even persecuted by official authorities. Their everyday sacrifice, initially motivated by personal revenge and family ratio, remains unnoticed as the society is ignorant of the lurking evil and does not recognize their never-ending work which cannot be successfully carried out within the bounds of law. Every season finale starts with the Kansas song “Carry on My Wayward Son,” marking the Winchesters as tormented souls and social misfits. The conflict which runs deep in the action genre between a personal and an institutional code of behaviour, or in other words, between honourable outcasts of moral superiority and unfairly privileged white males becomes of pivotal importance in season seven, when the Winchesters fight with the leviathans, i.e. ancient evil creatures released from Purgatory which have taken over the most powerful corporation and intend to enslave humanity by treacherous means.

Barna asserts that “[m]ale heroes of the action genre are often lonely figures, their reason for existence becoming their crusades as families and lovers cast them by the wayside”; however, he adds that “ultimately, the genre is about aggression and the male capacity for it” (57). The question of violence, morally justified violence in particular, is a recurring one in *SPN* and it evolves into a leitmotiv in seasons nine and ten when Dean acquires the so-called Mark of Cain which increases his aggression. Throughout the series it is Dean who opts for black and white morality, and contrary to Sam, rarely has doubts about killing monsters (e.g., S02E17, S07E03) as he is most closely linked with the hyper-masculine action hero. However, with the Mark of Cain on his arm, Dean’s penchant for violence spins out of control, and he commits two massacres (S10E09, S10E22), which allows the series to simultaneously indulge in graphic violent scenes and question the issue of “righteous” violence, and therefore, invoke elements essential to the action genre. The

protagonists' class profile and their consequent approach towards violence account for *SPN* "oddity" against the CW's overall post-feminist and female-oriented broadcast strategy.

### *SUPERNATURAL* TIMELINE AND MASCULINE FRAMEWORK

I divide the *SPN* timeline into two major parts: seasons one to five, the so-called Kripke's Era, when he was in charge of the show, and further seasons broadly known as AK, meaning After Kripke (Kripke resigned from his position, but kept some influence on the show as an executive consultant.) During Kripke's Era the question of the Winchesters' unique destiny occupies a central position in the series' narrative and eventually resolves in the fifth season finale, which could easily have been the series' final episode. In addition to plot continuity, there is also a visible plot escalation: from finding John Winchester, the protagonists' father and killing one demon (the "yellow-eyed demon" responsible for the death of Mary Winchester, the protagonists' mother) in season one to preventing the Apocalypse in season five. Compared to Kripke's Era, seasons six to ten are definitely more self-contained, yet they all deal with the boys-prevented-the-Apocalypse effect. As a result of aborting God's plan for humanity written down in the Scriptures, chaos reigns in Hell and Heaven and, consequently, endangers people, forcing the Winchesters to confront brand new challenges in unknown surroundings and pick sides in fights for power.

This brief timeline focuses on the protagonists' main quests developed in accordance with masculine genres which overtly structure the series: action/adventure, horror, western, and road movie. Before I further elaborate on the masculine framework of *SPN* (apparent in such elements as classic rock music, gore, weapons, etc.) and particular genres, the very issue of the gendered nature of genres demands at least a comment. Even though any research on gendered texts involves a risk of textual and audience essentialism (Duffet 193), we do know from ratings and audience studies that some genres are more or less popular with a female or male audience. The important thing is to remember that it does not mean we automatically understand how women and men are interpreting these cultural texts. There remains the question of how the audience decodes traditionally masculine or feminine narratives, especially if we acknowledge the fact that there is no simple causality between the gender of a viewer and the gender of the character that becomes the point of identification. For instance, Carol J. Clover shows that slash horror viewers, who are predominantly male, surprisingly often change their point of identification between a male monster and a female victim (21–64).



Therefore, I believe that using the concept of gendered television, as has been proposed by Fiske (181–225), might allow us to spot how both television shows and their audiences are actually negotiating and challenging prevailing models of masculinity and femininity.

The aforementioned road movie and western have their own clear signs within the *diegesis*: the 1967 black Chevy Impala, Dean's beloved car, stands for road movie, while the Colt, a legendary weapon which can kill every creature, represents the western. The brothers are in fact most of the time on the road riding through the western-originated space of so-called frontier masculinity, one devoid of both effective institutional justice and domesticity (Palmer 82). The Winchesters possess the unique skills and knowledge necessary to defeat the evil and they act according to their own code of values and sense of justice, much like quintessentially male western (and action) heroes (Neale 131). As for horror, it obviously lies at the bottom of the whole idea of the series and resurfaces in most of the episodes, provided that we point to the opposition between "normality" and the otherness as the core of the genre (Wood 31) and acknowledge narrative tension and monstrosity as basic generic audience expectations (Tudor 457). The premise of *SPN* is to show suspenseful encounters between the Winchesters and all kinds of monsters, including those who remain dormant in their own bodies and psyches.

Apart from referring to specific "masculine" genres, *SPN* also undertakes multiple themes and applies structuring rules typical for masculine genres in general. Basically, it is a story about Midwestern heroes pursuing their quest while dealing with traditionally male issues of sibling rivalry, an unresolved oedipal drama, and the abandonment by a father-like figure. There is a recurring question: where is dad (John)? Or, in seasons one to five, where is God? At the same time, in *AK* seasons there is only a strong conviction that God is gone, just as dad is dead, especially after Bobby Singer, a substitute father, dies in season seven, leaving the boys truly fatherless. Fiske argues that masculine texts write "three of the most significant cultural producers of the masculine identity—women, work, and marriage" out of its world (204). All three elements hardly exist in *SPN* framework: it's a men's world, free from social constraints. However, as in most masculine texts that deal with issues of independence and authority, there is still tension between the boys' individual dreams and needs, and their hunting quest, as well as their father's expectations of them. Furthermore, Fiske claims that in masculine texts there is a clearly defined hierarchy of main characters and subplots (219). Again *SPN* fulfils this criterion: the brothers remain the focus of the series and all secondary

characters, especially women, “will always have to exist on their [boys’] terms” (Calvert 104).

How is it then possible that a cultural text embedded in such a clearly masculine framework so strongly appeals to a female audience? I claim that the framework is disrupted with plot and structure elements marked as feminine, and thus masculine genres are simultaneously invoked and contested. In fact, it would be possible to describe a different timeline, one that would expose the bromance of Sam and Dean who ceaselessly suffer from trust issues and hidden agendas to die for each other. The latter obviously leads to many sentimental moments between the brothers and relationship cliff-hangers. Will Sam forgive Dean? Will Dean save Sam? Will either brother share with the other his secret burden? These are questions which belong to the realm of genres such as the soap opera seen as traditionally feminine because of its concern with family life, relationship’s turbulences, emotional conflicts and, broadly speaking, the personal. In the following section, I will disclose implicit “feminine” components of *SPN*, which I define as “melodramatic.”

#### GENRE HYBRIDITY: HOW MELODRAMATIC ELEMENTS CHANGE MASCULINE FRAMEWORK

Until the 1970s and the emergence of studies on “family melodrama” encompassing a range of films from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s focused on family tensions undermining American society, often also referred to as “women’s films,” the term “melodrama” or “meller” had been used as a synonym of “thriller” due to its history on the stage (Neale 168–74). Nineteenth-century melodrama contributed many genres to cinema, including western or action/adventure, however, only romantic and family melodramas (or “melodramas of passion” to use Michael Walker’s term) deriving from “modified” or “domestic” stage melodrama maintained association with their melodramatic heritage (Byars 9). Therefore, despite well-grounded research on melodrama understood as a type of sensibility, an imaginative mode or a narrative system originated in modern Western societies (e.g., Brooks, Elsaesser, Gledhill), in this essay by “melodramatic” or “melodrama” I refer only to a feminized “melodrama of passion” which requires pathos and overwrought emotion to appeal to audience sentiments (hence terms such as a “weepy” or a “tearjerker.”)

Melodramatic characters suffer extreme emotional duress, which in turn provokes an overwhelming physical sensation (i.e. sensory excess) in the audience (Singer 39–40). Heart-wrenching scenes, particularly among the brothers, are *SPN*’s trademark, the best example being Dean crying

over Sam's dead body (S02E21) or Sam talking about letting Dean down and finally deciding to live for his brother instead of sacrificing himself for humanity (S08E23). Furthermore, the characters repeatedly find themselves in emotional deadlock-situations (Singer 41), when saving each other requires an impossibly high price. *SPN* also eagerly resorts to melodramatic repertoire, mostly by bringing on mysteries about the Winchesters' family and past.

Moreover, in *SPN* we can easily trace constitutive features of soap opera, a "prime televisual example of melodramatic genre" (Fiske 194), identified by Ien Ang in her research on *Dallas* (238–39). Firstly, soap opera situates personal life at the core of the narrative, and thus tells the story from the point of view of the personal. Not only is the Winchesters' quest to fight evil inspired by their personal experience, but it is also presented from their personal perspective and subordinate to their personal dramas. Secondly, soap opera lives on the state of a permanent crisis, which implies an ultimate lack of progress in the narrative. The premise of the series is to keep the brothers in a constant state of threat and emergency that can be lifted solely for a short time. Finally, Ang points to an excessive plot structure, which is crucial for *SPN*, just to mention such plot developments as Dean selling his soul to resurrect Sam (S02E22), Sam being locked in Hell with Lucifer and archangel Michael (S05E22) or Dean dying and transforming into a demon (S09E23).

There are also some mixed aspects of *SPN* structure resulting from merging differently gendered narrative strategies. Most of the episodes, especially in the early seasons, end in the boys' successful performance (which is considered to be typical for masculine texts) as they manage to deal with the case of the week in a satisfying way. However, like a classic soap opera, the series generally lacks narrative closure, because there is always something to hunt and therefore, the brothers' misfortune must continue. Moreover, *SPN* deprives its audience of successful resolution in the series finales, meaning that there is no successful performance in the long run. For instance, in the third season finale (S03E22), regardless of all efforts undertaken to save Dean, he does go to Hell; or, in the final episode of season eight (S08E22), the Winchesters abort their mission to close the gates to Hell in the very last moment. While there is no romance in *SPN*, there is also hardly any sex or one-night stands (except for season one). It is also hard to spot a shirtless Dean or Sam, even though such a form of male body objectification is already well-established in shows targeted at women, and the audience admiration for the brothers' bodies is unquestionable. And, lastly, there is the car: a Chevy Impala which "offers a visual space that is typically masculine,

yet the series uses it as a device through which to filter the more intensely emotional moments that characterize television melodrama and the Winchester brothers' relationship" (Bruce). Therefore, the Impala works as a negotiator of traditionally defined masculinity and male sensitivity borrowed from melodrama.

### GENDER HYBRIDITY: BODY AND PERSONALITY

In my opinion, the melodrama genre most intensively influences the portrayal of the brothers by "softening" traditional masculinity, and hence shattering any simplistic gender definitions within the series. Contrary to masculine genres, soap opera underlines the sensitivity of good men, retaining clear macho characteristics only for villains (Fiske 223). However, unlike in soap operas, the Winchesters' sensitivity is revealed within the context of a brotherhood, not a heterosexual romance. As Larsen and Zubernis point out, "Since Sam and Dean are brothers, the characters are given a pass for displays of emotion outside the cultural norms of masculinity" (*Fandom* 3). *SPN* often resorts to hurt/comfort story between men, explores the issues of men's emotions as well as shows men sharing feelings with each other, thus breaking boundaries which guard the traditional model of masculinity. In the episode "Mystery Spot" (S03E11), Trickster says to Sam: "Dean's your weakness. Bad guys know it, too." A few episodes later (S03E16), Dean openly acknowledges the feelings the brothers have for each other while talking to Sam: "You're my weak spot. And I'm yours." Such moments between the brothers which often occur while they are either sitting in the Impala or standing near it are especially cherished by the fandom and tellingly referred to as BM moments, i.e. Boy Melodrama.

The infusion of melodramatic components into a masculine framework is a major disrupting factor in the traditional paradigm of masculinity in *SPN*, yet there exist other tactics of gender-bending in the series. For instance, *SPN* plays with the gender structure of the horror genre, simultaneously situating the Winchesters in the narrative structure in both female and male positions. This is particularly clear with regard to possession stories in *SPN*, when the Winchesters' male bodies are turned into monstrous female bodies (Kies 22–33). While melodramatic elements within the horror genre challenge traditional masculinity by introducing male psychological and emotional sensitivity, such a reconfiguration of horror structure additionally questions the image of a male body. Clover shows that, typically, in possession films a female character is immobilized (physically and psychologically) by the very fact of being possessed, and a male character evolves by actively looking for a solution.

Even though the woman seems to be in the centre of the narrative, in fact she functions solely as a passive medium enabling the male hero's journey. Therefore, Clover concludes that "hers is an ABA story of restoration in which she emerges unaware of what has transpired, whereas his is an ABC story of revision or conversion in which he emerges a 'new man'" (98). In *SPN*, the possession scenario is time and again applied to principal male characters, especially to Sam. The younger Winchester is possessed by a female demon, Meg, already in season two (S02E14); and later in season five he becomes a vessel for Lucifer himself (S05E22), yet triggered by a toy from his childhood, he manages to overcome the fallen archangel for a second and execute his own free will. Dean successfully fights against being possessed by the archangel Michael, discarding the argument that becoming Michael's vessel is his destiny (seasons four and five); and throughout season ten Dean struggles not to yield to the demonic power of the Mark of Cain. Unlike female characters in typical possession horrors, the Winchesters sometimes do succeed in preventing the possession or keeping memories of being possessed which then allow them to learn from their possession experience and hence change an ABA story into an ABC story.

### SLASH FICTION: BROMANCE INSTEAD OF ROMANCE

As for actual female characters in *SPN*, we encounter a vast range of women in the series, but none of them survive for long or reach the position of a main character. Many female characters have been written out of the narrative due to poor fan reaction (e.g., Bella Talbot or Jo Harvell planned as love interests for Dean). The fandom rejects every female character that could possibly come between the brothers, while those women who do not pose such a danger because of their age, sexual orientation or clear enemy status are usually warmly received by fans (e.g., Meg, Ellen Harvell, Charlie Bradbury). Samantha Ferris, who played the beloved character of Ellen Harvell, explains: "I'm not a threat. . . . I'm mother figure to these guys" (qtd. in Larsen and Zubernis, *Fangasm* 113). Yet Ellen dies with her daughter in S05E10 in a highly emotional scene. Another beloved character, Charlie, forms a sibling relationship with the brothers, free of any sexual innuendos, as she is a declared lesbian. She is also an independent spirit, a genius hacker, Comic Con attendee and a fantasy genre fangirl distinguished by a great sense of humour and brilliant mind. Nonetheless, she dies (S10E21) while trying to help Sam save Dean from the effects of the Mark of Cain. Because her death devastates Dean and triggers his destructive fury, she is obviously reduced to a narrative tool (despite the fandom's fondness).

While none of the brothers' female love interests have gained fandom's acceptance, angel Castiel (introduced in S04E01), whose close and brotherly relationship with Dean elicits Sam's hidden jealousy, has immediately become the fans' favourite. The fandom has enthusiastically welcomed an alternative bromance, although it has uncompromisingly rebuffed all female characters who could distance the brothers from each other in any way. In response to fandom preferences, heterosexual romances have been marginalized, while male bonding, on the contrary, has been situated at the very heart of the narrative structure. As a result, *SPN* sets aside one of the primary components of traditional masculinity: unquestionable heterosexuality. These facts may become more understandable in view of the *SPN* fan fiction.

Fan fiction is one of the most creative, controversial and potentially subversive fan practices, which has fascinated scholars from the very beginning of fan studies (e.g., Green, Jenkins and Jenkins). Larsen and Zubernis, aca-fans and fan fiction writers themselves, claim that the fan fiction community is "largely a community of women" and it creates a space where "women feel safe to express their sexual fantasies" (*Fandom* 94). Probably the most popular, but also the most disputed, fan fiction genre in *SPN* fandom is slash fiction, which presents two men in an erotic, romantic, or sexual relationship. Fans engage in Wincest stories (Sam and Dean), or Destiel fantasies (Castiel and Dean), but they also produce real person slash (RPS) called J2 or J-Squared in the case of *SPN* because of the actors' names: Jensen and Jared. The authors of slash fiction are prevalently female and heterosexual, hence Mirna Cicioni argues that "slash writing reflects some of the ambiguities that characterize the position of women with respect to heterosexuality" (154). She also claims that although slash focuses on men, it "gives voice to some women's desires which are outside the dominant notions of acceptable love relationships" (175). Mark Duffet writes in the same vein that slash is viewed as "an expression of desire in all senses, and an unpoliticized, uncensored forum for female networking" (177). In my opinion, it is justifiable to say that slash serves as a means of rewriting manhood and heterosexuality. *SPN* provides rich, mostly subtext material for slash writers because it questions the traditional paradigm of masculinity on multiple levels, and thus encourages its audience to engage in gender plays.

In fact the show openly acknowledges slash fiction, incorporates its fandom practices, as well as consistently explores all aspects of bromances, and even alludes to their sexual dimension as there are references to Wincest or Destiel in many visual moments, dialogues, and storylines.

The extreme closeness between Sam and Dean is commented on by other characters on several occasions, just to mention the angel Zachariah's remark that the brothers are "psychotically, irrationally, erotically codependent on each other" (S05E16) and every so often they are mistaken for a gay couple by strangers (e.g., S01E08, S02E11, S08E04). In S05E09 Sam and Dean arrive at a convention dedicated to *Supernatural* books which features a panel on "The homoerotic subtext of *Supernatural*." Moreover, the Winchesters meet there two fanboys who role play them and turn out to be a gay couple. Numerous jokes hint at Destiel relation, and Castiel asked by Sam if he likes Dean better, states straightforwardly that they "do share a more profound bond" (S06E03). In S10E05, a fan-centric episode, Dean explicitly discusses Wincest and Destiel with a fan-girl and later with Sam.

While throughout the series Sam is rather amused with the slash concept, Dean feels uncomfortable about it; as a character more indebted to a classic action hero than his brother, he is particularly sensitive about his masculinity (identified with coarse behaviour and heterosexuality). Therefore, in accordance with *SPN*'s gender politics, he is the one who emerges as the locus of disrupting such a traditional model of manhood by engaging in emotional bromance dramas not only with Sam and Castiel, but also with other male characters, i.e. demon Crowley and vampire Benny. Thus Dean connects action genre with melodrama and plays out the contrast between the definitions of masculinity inscribed in differently gendered genres.

To conclude, *SPN* may be distinguished as an example of an entertaining television show which, by infusing traditionally masculine genres with melodramatic elements marked as feminine, has been offering its audience a special type of a gender-bending text for more than ten years. Although at first this offer was rather unintentional, thanks to genre hybridity it gradually led to gender hybridity that turned out to particularly appeal to female viewers. The case of *SPN* discloses the ideological nature of generic forms and illustrates how it may be transformed within the text itself, but necessarily with regard to audience practices. It demonstrates the subversive power of a broadly understood hybridity as incongruent elements activate the process of negotiating the cultural norms, especially gender definitions. It seems suitable that a revised model of masculinity is tested in the realm of the Gothic, which provides space for all that is oppressed and repressed in a society.


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