Wayward Sons: Modern Mythology in *Supernatural*

“The core notion behind *Supernatural* was to make a series about urban legends. I think they’re this incredibly rich mythology about the United States,” show creator Eric Kripke said in an interview promoting the show’s two hundredth episode (“Supernatural” at 200”). Since 2005, the cult television show has grown to be something of an underground phenomenon, with legions of dedicated fans. The story of two brothers travelling the country in search of monsters, demons, and ghosts has taken viewers on a ten season long journey of emotional upheavals, social commentary, and dramatic storytelling. As explained by Kripke, the show is set in a world of mythology and urban legends. However, the use of and modification of these motifs leads to something different about *Supernatural*: it becomes a legend of its own, telling the tale of the Winchester brothers as heroes. Through its use of mythological and folkloric motifs and retellings, *Supernatural* creates its own mythology, reflecting old archetypes into an epic for a modern age.

“Dad wants us to pick up where he left off”: Character Archetypes in Two Heroes’ Journeys

Contrary to most heroic stories, the show focuses on two heroes, Sam and Dean Winchester. However, they are two very different types of heroes. Their stories start the same. Twenty-two years before the events of the show begin, the brothers’ mother, Mary, was killed in a mysterious fire in Sam’s nursery. Her death causes John Winchester, the boys’ father, to embark on a journey to discover what killed his wife and to get revenge. Dean and Sam are
raised on the road, learning how to fight monsters. As Sam reminds Dean, “we were raised like warriors,” as they spent their childhood melting down silver for bullets, training in combat skills, and learning how to survive (“Pilot”). Like many of the classic heroes in mythology, Sam and Dean did not have a normal upbringing, a fact that isolates them from others. They are set apart by their knowledge of the supernatural. Though the brothers, Sam especially, want to have a normal life, they find that they do not fit in with “normal” people. Like mythological heroes throughout the ages, the boys find that to be heroes, they must be different.

The first brother we meet, Sam, is a more traditional reluctant hero. When the viewer is first introduced to Sam in “Pilot”, he seems to be the average college student: he goes to Stanford, he has a steady girlfriend, and he is poised to go to law school. However, his life changes when his brother Dean arrives and asks for Sam’s help in finding their father, who has gone missing while hunting. Sam initially resists, but finally agrees, starting the brothers on their journey. The show adds another catalyst for Sam to leave his “home” and go on an adventure: his girlfriend, Jessica, is murdered the same way his mother was, and Sam joins Dean in hunting for the demon responsible. Sam is the archetype of “the innocent, the character whose…used neither guile nor brute force, [and has]…asked nothing” (House 68). Sam is shown as compassionate, empathetic, and kind. He questions the morality of the brothers’ jobs, and is the brother who is willing to offer sympathy to victims of supernatural occurrences. Sam sees the gray in many of the situations the brothers find themselves in. Despite his initial wish to have a normal life, Sam was meant to be a hero, and though he resists at first, he rises to every occasion. This intellectual hero is attractive to a society that prizes intelligence and curiosity, as well as struggling with the reality of moral gray areas.
Dean, on the other hand, is more of a complicated anti-hero. He can often be ruthless and comes across as a bit of a rogue with a prevalent wild side. In many ways, Dean fits into the archetype of “the trickster” with his “snubbing of the elite, distrust of authority and mockery of the intellectual” (House 66). Whether he is running credit card scams, teasing his more research-minded brother, or crashing fancy estate sales for the food, Dean lives by his own rules. In addition, Dean fits “the warrior archetype…the hero who does not flinch when facing the enemy, who willingly challenges what most of us would not,” while at the same time melding into the archetype of “the tough guy with the heart of gold” (House 66-67). When facing off with demons, ghosts, vampires, werewolves, any number of other monsters or even just humans who pose a threat, Dean is fearless. This is especially true when it comes to protecting people he considers members of his family. He runs into a burning room to save his brother, offers his own soul to save Sam, and will go into any dangerous circumstance to rescue anyone he considers a member of his family. He is also particularly kind to children. Though he comes across as a “tough guy,” Dean has a golden heart that causes him to risk himself to save others. This is an especially attractive hero in a society that prizes a balance of moral right and a strong exterior.

Instead of having these characters remain true to these archetypes, however, the show changes the mythology of the hero. Traditionally, myths and legends present a rather static hero. However, throughout the seasons of Supernatural, both boys’ heroic archetypes get flipped on their heads, mixed together, and torn apart to create a new kind of hero that cannot be placed in the traditional hero categories. Sam, in desperation to save Dean and stop a looming apocalypse, will be led down dark paths by a demon, ignoring the gray areas when his priorities change. He will become the more self-sacrificing brother who deems his life worth less than those around him. Dean will give up on Sam, his job as a hunter, and will even doubt whether his risks are
truly worth the payoff. By complicating these characters, the show writers complicate the mythology and create a compelling story that keeps their audience enthralled. The characters become more relatable as they change and grow.

As in the traditional hero’s journey, the boys find help along the way. In the archetypal hero’s journey, the hero finds help from “the wise saint maintains the same simplicity of heart and values as the innocent, but his state is one arrived at after years of experience and acquired wisdom” (House 68). In Supernatural, this archetype is given a twist. The “wise saint” Sam and Dean often turn to is Bobby Singer. A rough around the edges, hardened man who owns a salvage yard, Bobby’s exterior hides a brilliant, experienced hunter who has more knowledge about supernatural creatures than nearly anyone else, and is often the Winchesters’ source for information. Unlike the traditional “wise saint,” however, Bobby is more than just a resource to the boys. The mentor archetype often is a kind of other-worldly figure that dispenses wisdom to the hero and then leaves. Bobby, however, is anything but ethereal, and he becomes a central figure in the brothers’ story. As Dean phrases it, “I’m not going to let you die, you’re like a father to me” (“Dream”). Bobby functions not only as the boys’ mentor, but also fill the role of adoptive father, especially after John’s death. Bobby has become a part of their family, not just their oracle of information. This more grounded source of wisdom makes the mentor archetype more accessible to an audience who is more likely to follow a mentor who lives by their advice.

The motif of a “damsel in distress” is also given a twist. Jo Harvelle is the daughter of one of Sam and Dean’s father’s fellow hunters. In an almost Rapunzel-esque fashion, Jo’s mother, Ellen, keeps her daughter at the roadhouse they own and refuses to let her follow in her father’s footsteps into the dangerous world and become a hunter. Despite Ellen’s efforts, Jo sneaks away to join Sam and Dean on a case, much to Dean chagrin; he doesn’t want to be
responsible for her. To the boys’ horror, Jo falls into the clutches of the spirit they are hunting, and Sam and Dean must save her. However, she is not helpless; in fact, she fights the spirit off in order to protect his other victims, and she uses herself as bait in order to trap the ghost (“No Exit”). Having proven herself, Jo sets off to hunt on her own, occasionally lending a hand to the Winchesters. In the end, Jo proves herself to be a true heroine; she sacrifices her life so Sam and Dean can escape (“Abandon All Hope”). Rather than being the helpless maiden in a tower, Jo takes action and sets herself free, even if it means putting her life in danger. This strong female character reflects the modern exploration of feminism.

The motif of divine help is also used. At the beginning of season four, we are introduced to Castiel, an angel who was sent to rescue Dean from Hell (“Lazarus Rising”). However, unlike the traditional divine archetype, Cas (as he is nicknamed by Dean) is not a completely good character. Though he possesses great power that he often uses to help the Winchesters and he always wants to do what is right, Cas does not always do the best thing. At one point, he teams up with a demon; he abandons Dean and Sam when they are in need; and at times, it is unclear whether he is on the heroes’ side at all. He even loses his powers, rendering him nearly useless to the brothers for a time. This fluidity of character keeps Cas from becoming a deus ex machina in the mythology of the show, but rather a dynamic character. For this reason, Cas is a more relatable character for the audience.

The show also uses other motifs of the hero’s journey; “One widespread theme in the hero’s adventures is the father quest” (Garry 13). The variety that Supernatural most closely follows is that of the hero being separated from his father but draw to him because of his isolation. Though the Winchester brothers are raised by their father, at the beginning of the show, Sam and John have been estranged for two years and Dean has not seen his father for months.
However, after Jessica’s death, Sam feels a strong connection to his father that spurs him into the search. Dean, however, takes a different approach to this problem: “Dad wants us to pick up where he left off. You know, saving people, hunting things, the family business!” he tells Sam as they start their journey together (“Wendigo”). The brothers begin their journey in search of their father; after his death, they continue it to enact his revenge and to carry on his legacy.

Though it has been ten years, the brothers have yet to complete their journey. As in all myths, they are likely to be faced with more obstacles before they are done.

“So get this: the lore says…”: Using Established Mythology and Folklore

As *Supernatural* is based on legends and mythological elements, the examples of folklore in the show are nearly numberless; ten seasons of episodes with each episode arc focused around some kind of spirit, monster, or demon makes for several variations of nearly every motif, archetype, and tale imaginable. It is the way the show spins these elements, however, that gives it its own unique mythology.

The story of the Winchesters can be compared to the fairy tale type of the “Two Brothers.” *Supernatural* is less about the monsters and more about the brothers “who remain true to one another and rescue one another from death” (Zipes 2). As Dean says, “don’t you ever think there is anything…I would put in front of you!” (“Sacrifice”). The most compelling part of the show is the bond between the brothers. There is even an object that connects the two: an amulet that Sam gave to Dean for Christmas when they were kids, after Dean told Sam the truth about their mother’s death and their father’s job. Though the amulet has no real power that is shown in the show (though for a while, some characters believe it does), it is a symbol of the bond between the brothers, much as the knife or other token does in the “Two Brothers” tale (Zipes 1). In addition to this, “[t]here are touches of class struggle and familial strife” as the boys
find themselves looked down upon by the wealthy and familial disagreements abound. However, when it really comes down to it, the heart of the show is “the theme of brotherly love…while dragon slaying merely indicates the valor of the heroes” (Zipes 2).

The show expands beyond fairytales and mythology to include other classic folklore. One of the most common examples of this is the use of vampire legends. For the most part, Americans are familiar with legends of these nocturnal monsters that suck the blood of unfortunate victims. The most commonly known folk lore about these creatures says that “[v]ampires are believed to lie in their graves as undecaying corpses, leaving at midnight” to find their victims (Oinas 109). The folk lore also most commonly claims that the only way to kill a vampire is “to pierce the body with a sharpened stake”; however, a less commonly known legend claims that “[i]n more serious [cases] it is desirable to strike off the head with a single stroke” (Oinas 110). This is the method that Supernatural weaves into their mythology. Though not a dramatic twist, this does give some variety to vampire folk lore that most Americans would not be familiar with. As for vampires rising at midnight, the show chooses to change that detail to have the creatures be more active during the night, but still able to survive in sunlight and by no means limited to only finding victims after midnight. The details that the show writers use or change from folk lore to include in their story shapes a new kind of lore, building on the centuries old tradition.

The folk lore of the show is not contained to ancient tales; many more modern legends are included as well. One such example is that of “Bloody Mary.” This common urban legend surrounds the appearance of a bloody woman in a mirror who is summoned in the dark, usually in a bathroom, by the repetition of her name. This legend is popular among children and preteens, who dare each other to summon the figure for the frightening thrill. Many scholars
think the legends to be associated with children’s growing consciousness of their bodies and blood (Encyclopedia of American Folklore 41). In *Supernatural*, however, the legend is altered slightly as a vengeful spirit trapped in a mirror that, once summoned, enacts revenge on those who carry secrets, especially those that led to the death of another person. Instead of an awareness of the body, the legend becomes more focused on being aware of the price of keeping fatal secrets (“Bloody Mary”).

Though the show uses a variety of different folklore and legends, for the most part, it focuses on those best known in America or that are uniquely American. One such myth is that of Croatoan, or the Lost Colony. In 1590, the founder of a colony in North Carolina returned to the colony he had left three years earlier to find it entirely deserted, with only the word “Croatoan” carved on a post left. Historically, it was believed that the word was indicative of an island not far away from the settlement (Horn). However, the show gives a different explanation for the word: it becomes the name of a frightening supernatural virus that infects a town, leaving it desolate. By weaving this historical mystery and the legends around it into the show, the writers effectively tie their story to what could be thought of as the overall mythology of America. In fact, in this case, they could even be said to be expanding American mythology with their own explanation for the mysterious last message of the lost colonists.

Though these examples only scratch the surface of the plethora of folklore that *Supernatural* is built around, they still illustrate how the show has gathered all different threads of lore to weave a unique mythological story of the Winchester brothers.

“I ain’t gonna let him die alone”: Death, Resurrection, and Journeys to the Underworld

It seems that no mythological hero’s story would be complete without a journey to and return from the underworld. *Supernatural* is no exception. Though both brothers descend at some
point in their journey, Dean’s follows the traditional pattern more closely, and is therefore the journey presented here.

At the end of season two, Sam is stabbed in the back and subsequently dies. Desperate to save Sam, Dean makes a deal with a demon, trading his soul for his brother’s life. Like the Greek Odysseus, the only way Dean can fulfill the desire of his heart is to face certain death and prepare to travel the dark road to the underworld. Like Orpheus, Dean is willing to descend into hell to save the person he loves the most, though in this case it is his brother, not a woman (Powell 307). However, once there, Dean has difficult choices to make. He is condemned to be tortured for eternity unless he agrees to torture other souls. Indeed, the words spoken to Odysseus in the *Odyssey* are applicable in Dean’s situation: “What harder task can you dream of?” (qtd. in Powell 303). This episode in his journey is formative of Dean’s character. He finds himself racked with guilt for his decisions and unable to forgive himself. This guilt is the motivating factor behind many of his future decisions. As Garry explains, “the descent into hell is a necessary stage…for…psychological and spiritual development” (15). It is at this point that Dean’s character starts to become multifaceted and even more complex, making him a more compelling character that the audience feels emotionally connected to.

In the typical return from the underworld myths, the hero brings himself out. Odysseus and his crew are able to row themselves out of the underworld. Orpheus used his enchanting music to escape. In *Supernatural*, the hero is helpless to save himself. Dean is only rescued from Hell by Castiel because, as the angel later tells him, he has a divine purpose. This adds an interesting twist to this mythological motif. The hero himself is not able to bring himself back from death. It is only through the help of others and the fact that he has a journey to complete
that he is able to return. This adds an element of humanity to the character that makes Dean more relatable to the audience.

Conclusion

Near the end of *Supernatural*’s 200th tribute episode, Sam asks the Greek Muse Calliope (the antagonist of this particular episode), “Why this story? Why *Supernatural*?” She replies, “*Supernatural* has everything. Life, death, resurrection, redemption…but above all, family…It isn’t some meandering piece of genre dreck. It’s…epic.” (“Fan Fiction”). Following in the timeless tradition that has brought us the myths, legends, and folk tales we are familiar with today, *Supernatural* pieces together thematic elements and motifs to form a new kind of mythology for a new age. At the heart of the show are the same ideals that have been passed down through ancient tales: family, love, courage, sacrifice, and fighting for good. *Supernatural* is, indeed, a new kind of epic.
Works Cited


