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1. Introduction

The average person in the United States will spend approximately 15 years of their life watching television. The characters whose lives they follow impact viewers significantly, influencing their career ideals, their hobby choices, and the books they read. With a daily increasing number of media disseminated via a consistently rising number of platforms and channels, its impact on its viewers and society in general becomes especially important to analyse in detail. In Allen Ginsberg's words, “[w]hoever controls the media, the images, controls the culture” (Albrecht 6). With the rise of TV show streaming, which encourages ‘binge-watching’, and the concurrent solidification of fan culture as a creative form of expression, viewers are deeply immersed in one world and follow one protagonist for an extended period of time. Shows are not merely consumed by fans but analysed, characters’ intentions discussed, and, occasionally, entire storylines rewritten. Because of that, academic character analysis is becoming increasingly popular (e.g. Stevens 2015; Saito 2020; Veisz 2017), which offers academic writers the possibility of sensitising a broader audience to the impact of media on culture and society, as this thesis intends to do by analysing Dean Winchester from The CW’s *Supernatural* (2005–20).

Created by Eric Kripke, *Supernatural* was broadcasted from 2005 until 2020, the first season on The WB and all its subsequent fourteen seasons on The CW. Starring Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles as the main characters Sam and Dean Winchester, this series revolves around two brothers who hunt supernatural beings for a living. With 15 seasons, 327 episodes, and a run time of over 14,600 minutes, the show holds the record as the longest-running sci fi/fantasy television series in the U.S. (Cancelled Sci Fi n.p.), internationally only beat by the BBC’s *Doctor Who* (2005-). During its run-time, the show has been directed by 59 different directors¹ and accumulated a variety of awards, including TV Guide Awards, Teen Choice Awards, SFX Awards, and People’s Choice Awards. Additionally, the show has garnered a devout and active fanbase. As of 2021, Dean Winchester is the most written about character on the fanfiction website *Archive of Our Own* (Archiveofourown n.p.) and the relationship between him and Castiel, commonly shortened to ‘Destiel’, is the most written about ‘ship’ with over 100,000 fanfictions on file on the site (Fanlore.org n.p.). For comparison, the second place in this metric² has accumulated around 67,000 works. While becoming less relevant over the years, *Supernatural* fans’ continuing social media presence and prevalence can be observed, e.g. in

¹ Most notably by Robert Singer (48 episodes) and Philip Sgriccia (45 episodes)

² the relationship between Sherlock Holmes and John Watson

the fact that, after the airing of season 15, episode 18 (“Despair”) on the 5th November 2020, which contains Castiel confessing his love for Dean, ‘Destiel’ trended worldwide on Twitter in first place, higher than the U.S. election (Getdaytrends n.p.). This continuing prevalence in contemporary online culture exemplifies the importance of analysing the messages within the show.

Especially with long-running tv shows such as *Supernatural*, their cultural impact indicates that media influences culture and vice versa, especially in connection to popular gender and sexuality stereotypes. The significance of this thesis’ approach lies in its qualitative nature that allows a detailed analysis of Dean’s gender and sexuality identity formation throughout all fifteen seasons of the show. Analysing the structural design of the character exposes the underlying popular cultural norms and assumptions of the show’s writing and production team as well as U.S. American society in general. The contextualisation and questioning of small details, subtext, visuals, and hints in individual pieces of media like *Supernatural* may prove invaluable to further explorations of popular media bias in television in general.

However, for the scope of this thesis, not all themes can be considered. Hence, this paper will focus primarily on the portrayal of masculinity, homosociality, and sexuality, while drawing connections to some of the show’s most relevant themes, such as family, trauma, free will, good vs. evil, othering, religion, and American idealism. Some of these themes, especially religion, offer too much material to be discussed to their full extent and will only be analysed where they overlap with the main foci of this paper. Nonetheless, the underlying framing of American life as a Protestant experience filled with biblical figures, both canonical and non-canonical, forms an essential contextual understanding for the show’s analysis. Protestant ideology is seemingly presented as the basic truth on which *Supernatural* builds its canon. Notably, alterations to Protestant conceptions are primarily in the form of addition, not contradiction³. However, due to the vast and varied implementation of Christian imagery in all seasons, much of it will be excluded from this analysis as not relevant to my specific research questions relating to Dean Winchester’s performance.

Inspired by the 1957 classic novel *On The Road* by Jack Kerouac (Zubernis, L. and Larsen K 5), *Supernatural* was originally pitched as “[t]his is X-Files meets Route 66” and already included the characterisation that Dean is supposed to appear as having “[c]ocky confidence masking a troubled soul” (Highfill n.p.). This statement solidifies this paper’s assumption that

³ i.e. that God has a sister, that Adam, the first human, has a new girlfriend after Eve, or that angels and demons have their own version of an afterlife.

Dean's performance is planned throughout. This is corroborated by the show's frequent meta references about the performativity and reception of their own show, a fact further elaborated in the subsequent chapters. Hence, all of Dean's actions will be analysed as 'executed as planned' rather than accidental. Like his performance, the name Dean Winchester is not random. His first name is taken directly from one of the main characters of Kerouac's novel, Dean Moriarty, after whom Dean Winchester is modelled, while evoking further images of masculinity via the character's suggestive reminiscence of James Dean. The last name Winchester is meant to refer to the popular Winchester guns as well as the mysterious legend behind Sarah Winchester and the Winchester Mystery House. The Winchester Repeating Arms Company is a successful gun business, especially known for the Winchester rifle Model 73 released in 1873, that is also known as "The Gun that Won the West" (Winchester Mystery House n.p.) because of how many Western settlers were using it. Hence, the name Winchester is intended for the audience to subconsciously connect the Winchester family on the show with the implicit connection between Winchester and power, success, and, more generally speaking for guns, masculinity. Additionally, the name evokes a sense of mystery due to the legend surrounding Sarah Winchester, who built the Winchester Mystery House in San José, California. This house, according to legends, was designed by Sarah under the pressure of, or to confuse and escape from, ghosts, depending on the source. Hence, Dean Winchester is named after a classic, red-blooded American protagonist and one of the most successful American-made guns, that, additionally, is connected to an unsolved mystery. Consequently, Dean's name foreshadows the essence of some of *Supernatural*'s main themes.

This thesis intends to expose the rich complexity of Dean's identity that, over the seasons of the show, expresses a nuanced character identity beyond his performativity of masculinity and heterosexuality. While analyses of this character have been conducted before (e.g. Chan 2010; Haas 2013; Silva 2010), they have primarily focussed on the show's horror and religious aspects. Additionally, most research was conducted during the show's airtime. However, I believe the show's conclusion in 2020 offers an opportunity for a more complete analysis of the popular character that is currently lacking in research and that this thesis intends to provide. Hence, this thesis centralises the following question: How is Dean's gender and sexuality constructed, portrayed, performed and what are the reasons for this specific depiction? With the help of theorists like Judith Butler, R.W. Connell, Sigmund Freud, or Steve Neale, I will be able to analyse Dean's masculine performance. Additionally, conceptualisations of homosociality, heteronormativity, and the Other, e.g. by Samuel A. Chambers, Brian Baker, or

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, will support an analysis of Dean's understanding of masculinity and sexuality.

In this thesis, I argue that Dean's portrayal of masculinity and sexuality transforms from a traditional, simplistic understanding of the white American hero into a fluid and complex interpretation of both. Additionally, I argue that this portrayal is due to extrinsic influences internalised by Dean who is characterised as a troubled person unable to develop a stable identity due to his upbringing, frequent traumatic experiences, and lack of free will. Throughout the series, Dean is allowed increasingly more character depth exploration that both questions and belies the outward performance of his masculinity and sexuality convictions. For this analysis, the writers' and producers' intentions are not incorporated beyond necessary contextualisation. Instead, the focus is primarily on Dean's notions of gender and sexuality, their possible sources and implications, as well as underlying desires that may be analysed. This thesis' findings describe the significant impact Dean's father John has on Dean's gender and sexuality ideals, how his unstable childhood and lack of role models force him to rely on stereotypes as ideals and how God functions to reinforce these ideals. Furthermore, this research shows the importance Dean's social circle has on his identity process and how the angel Castiel may be seen as the ultimate disruption of Dean's performativity envisioned by John and God. Lastly, this thesis addresses the culturally significant correlation between identity expression and suicidal tendencies and how this is acknowledged in *Supernatural*.

The following research is divided into five sections. First, Dean's childhood and his relationship with his parents will be explored. Then, in sections three to five, the character will be analysed in relation to the portrayal of his masculinity, homosociality, and sexuality respectively. While this thesis argues that there is a clear connection and contingency between masculinity, homosociality, and sexuality, these areas are subsequently divided into different sections to be analysed in more detail. Subsequently, a conclusion will be drawn, the research questions answered, and the findings' greater cultural implications discussed.

2. Like Father, Like Son – Family and upbringing

2.1. The Winchester Family Business

The importance of family and family values is a cornerstone of American culture. Hence, its interpretation in and implementation into popular culture are certainly of interest to analyse,

especially in *Supernatural*, which portrays family as the singular most important drive for most characters' actions. The protagonists' self-proclaimed job, which is to hunt evil and save innocents, is deeply rooted in the endeavour to follow their father's footsteps, who, in Dean's words, wants him and his brother to "pick up where he left off. You know, saving people, hunting things. The family business" (S01E02 26:08-26:15). By calling their heroic deeds a necessity of the family business, the show is drawing a direct connection between family values and self-sacrifice as well as underlining the understanding of heroism as a result of hard work. The connection of these qualities to masculinity have been drawn since the emergence of the concept of the 'Self-Made Man' in the 19th century, best described by Frederick Douglass in his speech "Self-Made Men".

Though a man of this class need not claim to be a hero or to be worshipped as such, there is genuine heroism in his struggle and something of sublimity and glory in his triumph. Every instance of such success is an example and a help to humanity. It, better than any mere assertion, gives us assurance of the latent powers and resources of simple and unaided manhood. It dignifies labor, honors application, lessens pain and depression, dispels gloom from the brow of the destitute and weariness from the heart of him about to faint, and enables man to take hold of the roughest and flintiest hardship incident to the battle of life, with a lighter heart, with higher hopes and a larger courage. (Douglass, F., et al 422)

As Douglass states, hard work itself may be seen as a form of heroism. The Self-Made Man succeeds in life without help from others, a fact that Douglass links to manhood. In fact, the Self-Made Man's power and masculinity derives from his endurance of pain and hard labour, which, is seen as payment for his success. The concept of the 'Winchester family business' indoctrinated Sam and Dean Winchester to rely on virtually no one except immediate family, to work without payment or recognition, and to be willing to endure pain and the high probability of their imminent deaths with every case they take on. These military teachings, rewarded with an affirmation of masculinity, fits this description of the Self-Made Man, which, in turn, reaffirms the success of the idealistic American dream, that supposedly everyone can achieve if they subscribe to the American work ethic.

The American work ethic can be described as a Protestant endeavour that stresses hard work with little time for relaxation, pride in one's job, and achievement-oriented work (Porter 537). This ascetic approach to work in the U.S. is emphasised throughout the show, introducing the viewers to the hunter lifestyle. Bobby, Sam and Dean's friend and father figure, explains this

to Dean in season 7, episode 9. “You’re not a person [...] You’re a hunter, meaning you’re whatever the job you’re doing today” (S07E09 27:15-27:20) implying that Dean is not allowed to be an individual with thoughts and feelings but a chameleonic tool, whose sole purpose is to fight monsters. In this case, being a hunter is not a job description but a state of being. This quote also exemplifies what Joanne Ciulla (2000) describes as going “beyond the work ethic” (6), denoting the idea of one’s job being one’s identity, which is a prevalent concept in the U.S. as well as on the show. As this thesis is centred around the protagonist Dean’s identity, analysing hunting as the job that builds the basis of his identity is essential.

In *Supernatural*, becoming a hunter is usually due to one of two reasons: either a monster attacks you or your loved ones, as is the case with John Winchester, or due to being raised by hunters, as is the case with Sam and Dean. On the show, being a hunter also means being part of the working class and being part of this class influences their lives significantly. June Deery and Andrea Press define a person’s class position as something that affects life expectancy, life style, education and care, interactions with law, experiences and opportunities, geographic and social locations, speech and visibility (Deery, J. and Press, A.L 3). For Dean, this is a transient lifestyle without permanent address. As seen in the earlier seasons, it means living on the road, with the exceptions of cheap motels, eating a diet consisting mainly of processed fast food and little income from pool hustling or credit card scams. It is portrayed as a life of neglect, characterised by a lack of proper education, moving schools frequently throughout the years and constantly running from the law as a result of their often-criminal actions, e.g. breaking and entering or grave desecration, in an endeavour to save lives. To do their jobs well, the Winchesters need to deceive people on a regular basis, as they are unable to tell anyone the truth to keep them safe. However, while hunters are portrayed as working class, the morally superior motive behind being a hunter, i.e. the heroic willingness to sacrifice themselves for the lives of the innocent American people, seemingly elevates them from the ‘ordinary’ American working class, that, according to Deery and Press, is usually portrayed as either criminal or comic, sometimes both, not particularly complex, and traditionally not displayed sympathetically (55). By equalling hunters to heroes, the producers allow an incredibly complex portrayal of the American working-class individual, whose petty crimes are portrayed as a necessary evil to fight the greater evil. Unlike Sam, who, before the beginning of the show, had quit hunting and matriculated into Stanford to study law for several years, Dean does not know a life outside the nomadic working-class hunter lifestyle⁴ and voices his distrust in the upper

⁴ After his mother dies; excluding two months he spends in a Boy’s Home when he is 16 and one year he spends with a his girlfriend Lisa between seasons five and six.

classes frequently, e.g. calling suits “monkey suits” (S01E04 17:12-17:14) or his general demeanour towards hunters that are paid, e.g. the British Men of Letters in season twelve or his alternative self from a different universe in season 15, episode 13 (“Destiny’s Child”). As will be discussed in the following sections, Dean dislikes being confronted with alternatives to what he sees as the prototypical way of life because it questions his already fragile trust in the life choices he copied from his father.

This prototypical heroic hunter figure is, despite some strong female hunter characters, predominantly male. While it is stated several times that hunting is a job for both men and women, the male/female ratio is somewhat lacking. Out of 106 hunters that appear on screen, only 29 are women, which is just over 27%. Additionally, most hunters seen on screen are white and presumably heterosexual. Hence, the prototypical hunter, much like the prototypical American, is male, white, working-class, heterosexual, brave, and strong. This typification is an anchor for Dean’s identity, which he, especially in the early seasons, does not dare to deviate from due to fear of judgment from other men, especially his father, who he sees as the prototypical and ideal man. Hence, to analyse Dean Winchester, it is essential to analyse John Winchester first.

John Eric Winchester, born in 1954, is a mechanic, a marine, and, following the death of his wife Mary, a hunter. Growing up in the 50s, John is introduced to and expected to emulate the concept of the ‘Fifties male’. Robert Bly, who is seen as the leader of the mythopoetic men’s movement, and advocated for men’s return to a pre-industrial understanding of masculinity before it had, according to him, been diminished by feminism and absent fathers, categorises this type of man as follows:

This sort of man didn’t see women’s souls well, but he appreciated their bodes; and his view of culture and America’s part in it was boyish and optimistic. Many of his qualities were strong and positive, but underneath the charm and bluff there was, and there remains, much isolation, deprivation, and passivity. Unless he has an enemy, he isn’t sure that he is alive. The Fifties man was supposed to like football, be aggressive, stick up for the United States, never cry, and always provide. But the receptive space or intimate space was missing [...]. The Fifties male had a clear vision of what a man was, and what male responsibilities were, but the isolation and one-sidedness of his vision were dangerous. (Bly 1–2)

This understanding of strength and aggression as the pillars of masculinity is accepted by John and pushed onto Dean as a young child. In a flashback scene in season one, episode 18, a young

Dean, approximately 9-10 years old, is left with a shotgun to take care of his little brother while his father leaves to kill a monster that attacks children. In this scene, it is made clear that this is a common occurrence for young Dean, who has been groomed as a protector for Sam ever since their mother died and has already memorised his father's teachings to "[s]hoot first, ask questions later" (S01E18 10:58-11:01). Like the Fifties male described by Bly, John always has an enemy to fight and a battle to prepare for, which quickly becomes the premise of Dean's life as well.

Throughout the 15 seasons of the show, the portrayal of John's personality and parenting-style have been altered significantly. While, in the beginning of the show, John is often portrayed as a tough but kind man who eventually gives his life for Dean's (S02E01), later seasons describe the father more negatively. For comparison, in season one, episode 16, John explains to Sam and Dean that he cannot work with them to find the demon that killed Mary, because "I don't want you caught in a crossfire. I don't want you hurt" and upon Sam's insistence that he would not have to worry about them, John asserts "[o]f course I do. I'm your father" (both S01E16 35:16-35:29). However, this characterisation as a caring father is retconned frequently in the form of stories or flashbacks, for example in season nine, episode seven. In this flashback, 16-year-old Dean is caught stealing peanut butter and bread, presumably for his brother to eat, and subsequently put into a boy's home. The deputy escorting Dean to the home tells the man owning the Boy's home that "[John Winchester] called. Once he found out what happened, he said let [Dean] rot in jail" (S09E07 07:12-07:16). These contradicting portrayals of the character lead to a rather complex depiction of a father figure that has impacted Dean's identity process significantly.

However, just as John's characterisation is being altered throughout the seasons, so is his backstory to fit the appropriate frame designed for him. While John is initially portrayed as a grieving husband with no connection to the supernatural apart from the demon that killed Mary, it is later revealed that John's father Henry was a member of a secret hunter society called the Men of Letters, whose work centred around the documentation of the supernatural. While Henry must leave John as a child because he is being hunted by a Knight of Hell⁵, this revelation functions as an example of a rather predominant theme throughout *Supernatural*: the concept of free will vs. determinism⁶.

⁵ a high-ranking demon breed trained by the biblical Cain

⁶ It functions as a great example because John's life was determined to be intertwined with the supernatural, hence all his actions would eventually lead to him becoming who he was supposed to be.

Hard determinism, especially biological determinism, is a concept that defines life as predetermined and, in a more philosophical sense, that free will is an illusion. Before the wider spread of Gregor Mendel's work on heredity in the 20th century, biological determinism was defined with the work of phrenology, which defined certain physical features or head shapes as indicators of certain personality traits or mental states (Allen n.p.). While this essential point of view, also implemented in late 19th – 20th century eugenics movements, cites the heredity as the predeterminer of human activity, there is also a theological approach, which defines as God as the one deciding everyone's destiny. Historically, this argument has been the most prevalent, following the question of how free will could possibly exist in the presence of an omnipotent and omniscient God (Willmott 2), a central dilemma in *Supernatural*.

The concept of free will is a major theme on the show and is frequently questioned, or sometimes fully disregarded as a naïve worldview under which lies the hidden deterministic fate of all beings. In season 5, episode 14, a cupid reveals to Sam and Dean that John and Mary's love was determined by heaven. "They couldn't stand each other at first. But when we were done with them, perfect couple [...] The orders were very clear. You and Sam needed to be born. Your parents were just, uh, meant to be. A match made in heaven" (S05E14 15:53-16:12). Within this story arc, Sam and Dean are vessels for the archangels Lucifer and Michael respectively and, as the *Supernatural* lore allows angels to only possess human bodies if they consent, season five is primarily about manipulating Dean and Sam into saying 'yes'. Following Willmott's line of questioning as stated above, the archangel Michael sees free will as an illusion.

Think of a million random acts of chance that let John and Mary be born, to meet, to fall in love, to have the two of you. Think of the million random choices that you make, and yet how each and every one of them brings you closer to your destiny. Do you know why that is? Because it's not random. It's not chance. It's a plan that is playing itself out perfectly. Free will's an illusion, Dean. (S05E13 35:39–36:26)

This idea of teleological heavenly interception, to the point of inception, is a concept that is thoroughly explored throughout all seasons of the show but becomes especially pervasive in the last season. Interestingly, in season five, his reaction to Michael's revelation that free will is an illusion, Dean remains defiant and even names him, Sam, and Castiel members of the "Team Free Will" (S05E13 35:33-35:35). In season 15, however, when Sam and Dean realise that God, who is revealed as the ultimate villain that needs to be defeated, has been designing

their lives solely for the purpose of his own entertainment, Dean struggles significantly more with what Adina Roskies calls the “challenge from above” (419).

Just when we thought we had a choice. You know, whenever we thought we had free will. We were just rats in a maze. Sure, we could go left. Sure, we could go right. But we were still in the damn maze. Just makes you think, if all of it... you know, everything that we’ve done... What did it even mean? (S15E01 38:35-38:57)

And, upon Castiel’s insistence an episode later that God’s interference does not necessarily mean that they did not make any of their own decisions, Dean states:

I’ll tell you what we do know. Nothing about our lives is real. Everything that we’ve lost, everything that we are is because of Chuck [God]. So maybe you can stick your head back in the sand, maybe you can pretend that we actually had a choice. I can’t. (S15E02 17:02-17:23)

As Dean states in the quotes above, if the show frames Sam and Dean’s lives as predetermined by God, all their actions would have to be questioned in terms of whether they are truly theirs or God’s. Hence, for the course of this thesis, I will argue for a compatible approach, which allows for a coexistence of determinism and free will (Willmott 3). As I will argue later in this paper, free will, while frequently oppressed, is still shown to succeed over heaven’s determinism occasionally and can therefore not be disregarded as an illusion. Nevertheless, this concept impacts the analysis of Dean’s identity, as information such as the one given by cupid fractures his concept of self. With God interfering in every aspect of their lives, it is important to analyse Dean from the very beginning, which starts in his early childhood – his upbringing, the traumatic experiences he lived through, and the lessons he has learnt from them.

2.2. Childhood – Dean’s upbringing, trauma, and lessons

Dean Winchester is born in 1979 in Lawrence, Kansas, a city chosen by the creator Eric Kripke due to its proximity to Stull cemetery, which is famous for various urban legends involving the devil, and an apparent gateway to hell (TV Guide n.p.). Dean lives there with his family until his mother Mary is burned to death by the demon Azazel when he is four years old. Her death is among the most influential deaths throughout the entire series and is one of the hardest losses for Dean⁷. With his grieving father as a sole role model, Dean and his brother Sam begin their

⁷ This is only intensified when she is resurrected at the end of season eleven and dies again in season 14.

initiation into the nomadic hunter life shortly after Mary's death. According to John Clum, men⁸ often seem lost without a model after which they can design their own masculinity (xvii), which, in turn would mean that they tend to grasp to the few role models they have. Due to their solitary lifestyle, Dean only has one constant authoritative male figure in his life as a child, it seems logical for him to emulate John's versions of masculinity and sexuality, and to, furthermore, deem them successful. Chapters four and six of this thesis will deal with these versions of masculinity and sexuality that Dean performs as an adult respectively in more detail. First, however, it is essential to understand Dean's upbringing and how he learnt these lessons.

With John as Dean's only role model in terms of what it means to be a man, Dean is raised with the same ideals that Bly's Fifties man considers 'manly'. That, in addition to them being hunters and John being an army man, culminates in Dean being raised akin to a soldier. In the official *John Winchester's Journal* by Alexander Irvine (2009), John describes taking Dean shooting for the first time when he is six years old:

Took Dean shooting. If he's big enough to try to comfort me, he's big enough to start learning the tools of the trade. I only let him fire the .22, but he is a dead eye marksman. My drill sergeant would have taken him over me in a second. Times like this, I sure am proud of my boy. I have a feeling it'll be different with Sammy. Maybe he's just too young to show it, but I don't think he's got the same kind of killer instinct. (Irvine 22)

Interestingly, what John marks as the motivation to teach his son how to shoot is the fact that Dean tries to comfort John two weeks prior, at the anniversary of Mary's death. John sees Dean's empathic impulse as both a sign of maturity and a danger and seems to want to even it out with hunting. In fact, it is Dean's "killer instinct" and the fact that he is a "dead eye marksman" that makes John proud rather than his emotional intelligence. Dean's aptitude for shooting is a way for him to connect with his father, something that can be seen in Dean's account of the same moment that exemplifies the indescribable importance of John's approval for young Dean. "I was six or seven, and uh, he took me shooting for the first time. You know, bottles on a fence, that kind of thing. I bulls-eyed every one of them. **He gave me this smile, like... I don't know**" (S02E06 16:33-16:58 emphasis added). Leaving the sentence unfinished implies one of two things: either Dean genuinely does not know how his father could have felt, or he does not want to admit it. What Dean thinks becomes clearer when Jo, the person he is telling this story to, voices the implied understanding that "[h]e must have been proud" (S02E06

⁸ This likely affects women similarly but as the basis of this paper (and Clum's work) refers to men and masculinity, women's perspective is beyond the scope of this paper

17:04-17:07) at which Dean changes the topic. This exemplifies Dean's general approach to emotional situations and to being appraised positively, especially by his father. Dean fashions most of his life according to what would make John proud yet he seems unwilling to accept the possibility of ever having achieved it. The fact that John is most proud of Dean's violent side influences Dean's identity forming process significantly and shapes his understanding of what it means to be a man, a Winchester, and a hunter.

Chronologically speaking, the moment quoted above is the first moment in the canon of the show where Dean learns how to get his father's approval. As Sigmund Freud notes in his work *The Ego and the Id*, 'the boy', in this case Dean, consolidates his masculinity by identifying with the idealised father (32). However, according to R.W. Cornell, following this identification, the boy is left in "a constant state of anxiety and terror that what makes him a man can always be taken away from him" (*Masculinities* 143). For Dean, this results in a constant performance of John's idea of a man to construct an ideal ego in an endeavour not to lose his approval. However, building on Freud's understanding of the ego, Steve Neale argues that "[t]he construction of an ideal ego [...] is a process involving profound contradictions", since it "may be a 'model' with which the subject identifies and to which it aspires [but] may also be a source of further images and feelings of castration, inasmuch as that ideal is something to which the subject is never adequate" (both Neale 13). This essential issue that he may never fully reach the 'manliness' his father seeks in him, confronts Dean with cognitive dissonance that he tries to counteract by performing the intricacies of his idealised version of manhood to the best of his abilities and as meticulously as possible⁹. However, while theorists like Clum, Freud, or Neale certainly help understand men's psychological processes, they are analysing the average man who struggles with average problems and can therefore not entirely account for the extreme conditions of Dean's traumatic experiences as a child that may shape his identity, and how he allows himself to express it, drastically.

While Dean tries to emulate his father from a very early age, I would argue that a major shift happens off-screen between the ages of 16 and 18. As established, Dean spends several months at a Boy's home in 1995, where he is portrayed as an emotive 16 year old, who seems resigned at the notion of becoming a hunter, as can be seen in the following interaction Dean has while at the home.

Robin: What's your dad do?

Dean: Boring stuff.

⁹ This will be explored in more detail in section four

Robin: Do you like it?

Dean: **No, not really. But my dad expects me to follow in his footsteps. So I've kind of gotten used to it.**

Robin: Yeah. I get it. My pops wants me to take over the diner? But that's not happening. So, what do you really want to do? [...]

Dean: I want to be a rock star, but I also really like cars.

Robin: Being a mechanic seems rough.

Dean: What? No, no. Not at all. Cars are freaking cool as hell. Fixing them is like a puzzle, and **the best part is when you're done, they leave, and you're not responsible for them anymore.** (S09E07 27:56-29:00 emphasis added)

Despite the show's consistent characterisation of Dean having always embraced the hunter life, while Sam is seen as the child who does not want to be a part of it, this scene clearly argues differently. Hence, the major difference between Sam and Dean is not their love for hunting but rather Dean's inability to express his dislike to his father. Interestingly, Dean is drawn to his real desire, being a mechanic, because that entails less responsibility, which implies that Dean already feels an intense pressure from the responsibility of saving others and would like to escape it. However, at 16 years old, Dean is already resigned to his fate of being a hunter, as his father demands it, who possesses an absolute, divine power over Dean. This control likely contributes to Dean's eventual submission to and overt embrace of John's ideals, as can be seen in the excerpt below, taking place two years later¹⁰.

Dean: Come on, baby. She means nothing to me. Don't be mad.

Amanda: I'm not mad, Dean. I thought maybe underneath your whole "I could give a crap," bad-boy thing, that there was something more going on. I mean, like the way you are with your brother. But I was wrong. And you spend so much time trying to convince people that you're cool, but it's just an act. We both know that you're just a sad lonely little kid. And I feel sorry for you, Dean.

Dean: You feel sorry for me, huh? Don't feel sorry for me. You don't know anything about me. I save lives. I'm a hero. A hero! (S04E13 35:32-36:23)

¹⁰ There are some inconsistencies regarding the exact timeline of the episode "After School Special", however the most logical conclusion sets it in spring 1997, despite Sam mentioning it being November in the episode.

This portrayal of Dean is starkly different to the one in the prior excerpt. His girlfriend, who he is caught cheating on right before this exchange, recognises that Dean is performing, what she calls, his ‘I could give a crap, bad-boy thing’. However, while she sees his cheating as disproof to her assumption, I argue that this behaviour is part of his performance. John’s ideal man is, among other things, decisively heterosexual and a ‘womaniser’. While this trait does not seem to be present in 16-year-old Dean, it is overperformed in this episode, with the excerpt above being only one example.

While the show provides no further flashbacks for the time in-between “Bad Boys” and “After School Special”, John Winchester’s journal adds some interesting context that might help to explain this change in character, especially John’s entry regarding Dean’s 17th birthday in 1996.

Dean turns seventeen today. We went shooting. Then I sent him out on his first hunt. I’ve let him take the lead before, but I’ve always been there to back him up. This time he’s on his own. Partly it’s a test, and partly I wanted some time with Sammy. Should be no problem for Dean. Ghosts of two nuns haunting St. Stephen’s Indian Mission in Riverton, Wyoming. Simple salt-and-burn mission. Nuns in love with each other, then discovered. Killed themselves. [...] Dean took care of the nuns just like I thought he would, but I don’t think I’m going to be sending him on any more solos soon. That one was a little tense. (Irvine 126–27)

While framed as a reward, John essentially sends Dean away on his birthday to spend time with Sam alone, which likely impacted Dean greatly. However, this specific hunt has further implications, as Dean needs to hunt the ghosts of two women in love. While not stated explicitly, it can be argued that John chooses this hunt for Dean as a cautionary tale, reminding him of what happens to non-heterosexuals. The excerpt above may explain Dean’s heightened performative behaviour in “After School Special”, especially in terms of the expression of his sexuality. Additionally, for his 18th birthday, John gifts Dean his car, which is seen as a reward for performing according to John’s standards. “I gave Dean the Impala today for his eighteenth birthday.[...] He knows I’ll still be driving it, but he’s a man now, and since he’s already made his share of kills, this was the only rite of passage I could think of. He goddamn well better take care of it” (Irvine 137). Again, John judges Dean’s maturity by his ability to kill and rewards him with one of John’s masculine status symbols, reinforcing his doctrine that equals killer instinct to manhood and pride. In John’s desperate quest to avenge Mary’s death, he tries to raise his children akin to soldiers and contract killers to accompany him, despite their wishes.

When we go on a hunt together, they can bring their homework. That's what I wanted to talk to Sammy about. It's going to be hard enough getting his bullheaded self through adolescence without also having to fight every other day about how he wants to be Jimmy Normal. We can make this work if we do it together – but he's going to have to know that everyone pulls their weight. **Mary comes first.** (Irvine 126)

John's grief clearly impacts his ability to make decisions for his children's safety and sees his dead wife as more important than his children, which exemplifies a greater issue, namely that John's parenting can be characterised as abuse.

Children are dependent on their parents' ability to nurture a safe environment in which they may be allowed to learn, grow, and form their own identity. According to Claudia Black, children are born with a "Bill of Rights" (5), detailing their right to be loved for who they are, not who they are supposed to become; to be nurtured and parented rather than to make up for the parents' losses; to have consistency, security, warmth, and understanding; and to be protected from traumatic situations (5–6). Regarding this 'bill of rights', Douglas Carpenter adds that, should children not be granted these basic rights, it will impact their lifestyles and relationship towards themselves and others significantly (24). Throughout Dean's childhood and adolescence¹¹, his 'bill of rights' has been almost entirely disregarded. Instead of being loved as an individual, John raised Dean as both an imitation of himself and a replacement for Mary. As stated frequently throughout the seasons (c.f. S01E15; S02E21; S05E22; S09E16) young Dean is used primarily as Sam's babysitter or as John's foot soldier. John's singular most pervasive teaching was for Dean to follow John's every order without question, which taught him to prioritize others over himself, including other's worth over his own. Of course, this has an impact, as Carpenter stated, on all his relationships, especially the one with himself. John's failure to provide the right environment is what Rosana Norman et al. from the *PLOS Medicine* medical journal define as emotional and psychological abuse (2). Examples of this type of abuse are restriction of movement (not allowing Sam and Dean to leave a motel for extended periods while John is hunting; e.g. in S03E08), patterns of belittling (e.g. in S01E20 14:07-14:14), blaming (e.g. in S01E18 28:36-29:02), or frightening (e.g. in S05E16 16:20-16:36) (Norman R. et al 2). Additionally, Dean's childhood is also characterized as one of neglect, which, according to Norman et al., is described, among other definitions, as a failure to provide the following: proper health and nutrition (Dean having to steal food in "Bad Boys" or Dean going

¹¹ Most of this theory of the bill of rights, unless specifically mentioned otherwise, also refers to Sam's childhood to a great extent. However, as this thesis only deals with Dean's perspective, his individual experience is highlighted

hungry so Sam can eat in S01E18 14:05-14:40), education (switching school every couple of weeks; see S04E13), emotional development (see Irvine 22), shelter (c.f. their nomadic lifestyle sleeping in motels or in their car), and safe living conditions (see S01E18) (2). Especially his lack of proper shelter is significant, as it is only in season eight, when he is approximately 33 years old, that he can claim having his own room for the first time since he was four years old (S08E14 03:05-03:25). Considering these conditions, Dean may, for the course of this thesis, be considered a traumatised child. When considering Abraham Maslow's pyramid of needs, as seen below, this lack of shelter and safety means that Dean has not been able to live exceeding his basic needs for 29 years after his mother's death.

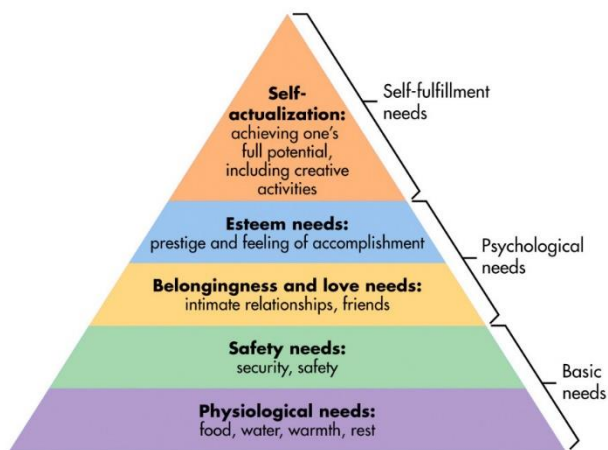


Figure 1 Maslow's pyramid of needs (The School Of Life n.p.)

As Maslow convincingly argues with this pyramid, the basic needs need to be met before being able to contemplate identity or self-actualisation. It is essential to note that, while much of this analysis may refer to Sam's upbringing as well, John treats his children differently. As this thesis only focuses on Dean's perspective, much of this difference is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the most important difference is that John tends to give Sam more lenience due to his younger age, while he does not extend that same consideration to Dean. The screenshot below exemplifies the difference in their relationships aptly.



Figure 2 John with Sam and Dean (S01E13) [image and contrast 40% brightened for visibility]

John's whole focus is on Sam in his arms, while Dean is sitting next to him, arms folded, merely leaning on his father for support. John does not acknowledge Dean in this scene at all, which is an apt introduction to their future interactions. At four years old, Dean learns that Sam's wellbeing is his father's first priority and that Dean must be content with less. In other words, when needed, Sam is given emotional support by John, while Dean must seek it out or live without it. This may be seen as the first of countless new rules that culminate in John raising his kids with the understanding that, at least until Mary's death is avenged, their basic needs are not important enough to be met, as can be seen in John's journal entry below.

I took the boys [...] and got the hell out of Lawrence. If I never go back, it'll be too soon. Not for Dean, though. The first thing he wanted to know was when we would go home. But **we don't have a home anymore, Dean**. The sooner you get used to that, the better. **We don't have a home until we find what killed your mother**. (Irvine 4–5)

This quote is also exemplary for how John turns his agenda, revenge, into a family business. Dean's individual need, a home, is immediately disregarded and John states his desire for Dean to mould his needs according to his highly idolised father's, a teaching Dean will internalise for the rest of his life.

2.3. Idols and Ideals – Father, God, and the masculine dream

While a variety of religions and gods are represented on the show (e.g. in S05E19), the Christian God is presented as *the* omniscient god of all creation, with the concept of Christian heaven and hell as physical places where all humans may spend their afterlives. For conceptualisation, the

show mirrors the common Christian understanding of God as the ultimate father, with angels and humans as his children. However, God, who is frequently referred to as Chuck on the show¹², is initially portrayed as a mysterious, untraceable being who has seemingly abandoned heaven and earth, including his angelic children. Combined with the knowledge that Dean and Sam are canonical mirrors for the archangels Michael and Lucifer respectively, God is a clear mirror for John Winchester and vice versa. This is textually confirmed in season five, when Dean likens God to his own father, calling him “just another deadbeat dad with a bunch of excuses” and that he is “used to that” (both S05E17 36:05 – 36:13). Dean also bonds with the angel Castiel via this mirror, assuring him that “I’ve been there. I’m a big expert on deadbeat dads. So... Yeah, I get it. I know how you feel” (S05E16 30:46 – 30:56) when the angel realises that God does not care about what happens on earth anymore. When Castiel, in return, asks Dean how he manages this feeling, Dean simply says that “[o]n a good day, you get to kill a whore” (S05E16 31:07 – 31:13)¹³, which also further exemplifies how Dean leans towards violence as an outlet for his emotions. This exchange clearly shows Dean’s inability, or unwillingness, to contextualise the differences between his father and God, which allows the viewer unique insight into Dean’s conceptualisation of his father.

Since the show accentuates the similarities between heaven and earth, especially in terms of family structure, it effectively naturalises this mirror image of God and John. However, Dean’s understanding of John as an omniscient and omnipotent father certainly impacts the construction of his identity. In other words, if John is always watching, Dean must always perform satisfactorily, forcing him to develop within a metaphorical panopticon state. In Michel Foucault’s work *Discipline and Punish* (1977), he states that the major effect of the panopticon is

to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary. (Foucault 201)

Hence, for Foucault, power functions best under the subject’s assumption of continuous surveillance. While usually described within the context of imprisonment, this theory can be extended to other areas, as Donell Holloway demonstrates in his work *The Panopticon Kitchen*:

¹² This is because God is initially introduced to be a prophet named Chuck in season five and is only revealed to be God in season eleven, after which Sam and Dean continue to use it regardless and God expresses his preference for his human name. In this paper, the names “God” and “Chuck” are interchangeable.

¹³ Referring to the biblical Whore of Babylon

The Materiality of Parental Surveillance in the Family Home (2017). In it, Holloway likens Foucault's theory of the panopticon to parental surveillance, especially concerning common spaces within a family's home (1). In Dean's case, without a stable home, he has no place to retreat. As his brother and him usually share a motel room with John while growing up, young Dean is constantly scrutinised, which connects with the concept of the panopticon, as it follows Bentham's concept of power's constant visibility yet non-verifiability (Foucault 201), which was adopted by Foucault. Considering this, Dean arguably lives his childhood as John's metaphorical prisoner in panopticon-like surroundings, who is forced to assume constant vigilance regarding his self-expression under the presumption of continuous observation, similar to the Christian concept of God's omniscience. God himself acknowledges his and John's similarities when warning Dean that "I know you had a complicated upbringing, Dean, but don't confuse me with your dad" (S11E21 06:14 – 06:23). Additionally, just like John, God's portrayal changes significantly throughout the seasons, primarily from absent (season four to ten) to benevolent (season eleven) to evil (season 14 and 15). Hence, if John and God are mirrors, God's storyline may be seen as a metaphor for an internal journey Dean is completing; a slow and continuous understanding of John's impact on him, especially in connection to the expression of his gender and sexuality. The following table shows the resulting metaphorical arcs, if following the conceptualisation outlined above.

	God's arc	Implications for Dean's journey
Season 1-3	Non-existent; purely hypothetical	Repression of extent of John's influence; acknowledgement covered by layer of fear
Season 4-10	Theoretical existence based primarily on faith and hearsay; introduction of heaven and angels; exploration of God-adjacent existence	Acknowledgment but ultimate dismissal of John's influence; exploration of desires beyond John's teachings; illusion of free will

Season 11	Physical introduction; proven omniscience; apathic but benevolent nature	Understanding of extent of John's impact; beginning of constant switch between sadness and search for justification;
Season 12-13	No arc	Remaining in unstable position between sadness and justification
Season 14-15	Villain reveal; full understanding of omniscience and omnipotence; intent to annihilate all creation; eventual failure	Break of cycle; understanding of mistreatment fuelling escape of unstable position; active fighting of John's doctrine; eventual success

Table 1 God's arc and its implications for Dean

Of course, as explained in the previous sections, Dean already starts voicing his discontent in season three. However, Dean does not allow himself to express his feelings towards others until seasons four and five, with the introduction of angels and heaven having a big impact. Especially Castiel, who will be further explored in sections five and six, and the resurrection of Dean's mother, who will be further analysed in section five, influence Dean's character development concerning his father's teachings. These realisations also lead to a, sometimes quite significant, change in personality and the occasional acknowledgement of the performativity of his behaviour. Season twelve and thirteen offer various insights into Dean's constant battle, most notably in season 12, episode 22, where he confronts his mother about his traumatic childhood.

You left us. Alone. 'Cause Dad was just a shell. His perfect wife? Gone. Our perfect Mom, the perfect family was gone. And I had to be more than just a brother. I had to be a father and I had to be a mother, to keep him safe. And that wasn't fair. And I couldn't do it. And you wanna know what that was like? They killed the girl that he loved. He got possessed by Lucifer. They tortured him in Hell. And he lost his soul. His soul. All because of you. (S12E22 28:49-30:04)

While Dean speaks uncharacteristically honestly about his childhood in his scene, there are still several indications that he has not yet fully understood John's impact on his childhood. Instead, he blames his mother's absence for his abusive childhood. This shows that Dean recognises his

father's fallibility but is not yet ready to conceptualise it and searches for another, overarching perpetrator. However, another interesting aspect of this quote is that Dean contextualises his traumatic past in terms of Sam's worst memories, with effectively both distances him and prioritises his brother's feelings, which is part of John's doctrine. Hence, while Dean is certainly starting to confront his constraints, he still adheres to parts of his performative identity.

This changes in season 14, episode 13, when Dean is confronted with an alternate reality where his father is revived for one episode. Here, John is portrayed as a kind father full of regrets, who repeatedly tells his children that he loves them and is proud of them (S14E13). In other words, he is portrayed as being content with Dean's personality and actions, similar to God stating that they are allowed to do what pleases them ("I'm hands-off. I built the sandbox. You play in it" (S14E20 15:19-15:24)). However, both John and God do not acknowledge their significant impact on and interference in Dean's life, which was meticulously intercepted by both to create the version of Dean they both desire him to be.

The overarching patriarchal power of John and God hold undeniable power over Dean, who constantly seeks guidance for his identity and behaviour. Both God and John's concept of who Dean needs to be is absolute, prescriptive, and almost indistinguishable from each other. Both need Dean to be a heroic womaniser and strong soldier and whose killer instinct is infallible. The one major difference is that John intends Dean to have a strong sense of morals despite demanding him to blindly follow his orders and be someone who kills monsters and saves people, a true hero. God, however, wants Dean to lose this sense of morals and eventually become a monster himself. This is exemplified in the season 14 finale, when God reveals that he intends Dean to kill Jack, for whom Dean functions as a father figure. Dean refuses last minute, which causes God to become frustrated, explaining that "[t]his isn't how the story is supposed to end. [...] [T]he gathering storm, the gun, the father killing his own son. This is Abraham and Isaac. This is epic!" (S14E20 32:31 – 32:42). With this, God reveals that he not only wants Dean to kill Jack but also that Dean's entire life is 'written' as a teleological narrative leading to this moment as a tragic finale of Dean's life as a protagonist in God's story. This revelation of God using Dean as a tool for his story echoes John's treatment of Dean, which the show often refers to as Dean being "daddy's blunt little instrument" (e.g. S03E10 34:32 – 34:34). However, while John wants Dean to act morally justifiably, it is important to note that he would likely want Dean to kill Jack as well, as Jack is a supernatural being, which John sees as inherently evil. While John's intentions for Dean are indubitably less immoral, he does not want Dean to create his own moral compass but blindly accept John's. Hence, whether Dean

kills Jack does not signify a choice between God's and John's intentions for Dean but can be seen as a decision between God *and* John's will versus Dean's own, which is why Dean's refusal to comply is monumental, as he chooses his own path. While being severely punished for this demonstration of free will throughout season 15 and despite God's revelation severely fracturing Dean's identity, this scene can be seen as an allusion to Dean's eventual rejection and discard of these values in the show's penultimate episode, where God refers as "Dean Winchester, the ultimate killer" to which Dean replies that "that's not who I am" (both S15E19 31:25 – 32:03). Hence, Dean defeating God equals Dean discarding John's concept of the ideal man. This conclusion is corroborated by the fact that, in the final episode, there is a signed job listing on Dean's desk, indicating that after killing God/John, Dean feels free enough to pursue an ordinary job. With this contextual understanding of Dean's childhood, primary role models, and intended purpose for others relayed in this section, the following sections will analyse Dean's perception and performance of masculinity (3.), the homosocial space Dean is surrounded by (4.), and the complexity of his sexuality (5.), all while considering his constant internal struggle between who he is and who he is intended to be by John and God.

3. Real Men – Masculinity and performativity

3.1. *The Dean Winchester – The Hunter, The Hero, The Façade*

As explained in section 3.1., hunters are depicted as working class, self-made men, whose job is a central aspect of their personality. Hence, the male gender ideals derived from it are traditionally and hegemonically masculine and expected to be performed as such. As R.W. Connell states in their book *Masculinities* (2005), which is highly influential to this thesis, masculinity is often considered as a "discursive construction" that suggests that "men are not permanently committed to a particular pattern of masculinity. Rather, they make situationally specific choices from a cultural repertoire of masculine behaviour" (both xviii–xix). This concurs with Judith Butler's understanding of gender as an unfixed, cultural construct in their book *Gender Trouble* (2006, 8). In Dean's case, however, the cultural repertoire from which he may draw from is limited. The fact that the show depicts hunters as a subcategory of humans with a clear distinction between 'ordinary' people and hunters, decreases Dean's access to viable role models, with his father as his sole inspiration. Hence, Dean adopts a model of masculinity that, according to Connell, is often connected to the physical body, with hegemonic masculinity incorporating attributes such as "higher levels of injury [...], higher exposure to many forms of toxicity and stress, higher levels of drug dependency (most commonly,

alcoholism), higher levels of participation in sport and other outdoor activities” (248). As a hunter, Dean readily engages in high-risk behaviour which frequently exposes his body and mind to stress, strenuous activity, and injury to the extent of death. However, while most male hunters on the show perform some version of this form of masculinity, Dean’s performance is more extreme than others’, as can be seen in the fact that he has canonically died eight times on the show, excluding an episode where Dean dies 103 times as the result of being stuck in a universe where he is doomed to die in different ways every day (S03E11). In some of these instances, Dean readily commits suicide, albeit intended to be temporary, to talk to entities beyond the veil (S06E11; S11E17; S12E09). However, while usually not portrayed as suicide but as a heroic decision, one of these times Billie, the physical embodiment of death, exposes Dean’s true feelings.

Billie: You’ve changed. When you bargained with me just now, you could’ve asked to go back, to live.

Dean: Well, I figured with you in charge, there’s no getting back for me.

Billie: That doesn’t sound like the Dean Winchester I know and love. The man who has been dead so many times but it never seems to stick. Maybe you’re not that guy anymore, they guy who saves the world, the guy who always thinks he’ll win no matter what. You have changed. And you tell people it’s not a big deal. You tell people you’ll work through it but you know you won’t, you can’t and that scares the hell out of you. Or am I wrong?

Dean: What do you want me to say? Doesn’t matter. I don’t matter.

Billie: Don’t you?

Dean: I couldn’t save Mom. I couldn’t save Cas. I can’t even save a scared little kid. Sam keeps trying to fix it, but I just keep dragging him down. So I’m not going to beg. Okay, if it’s my time, it’s my time.

Billie: You really believe that. You wanna die.

(S13E05 32:08-33:43)

In this scene, it is revealed that Dean does not use suicide as a heroic method to save others but is suicidal and intends to sacrifice himself because he does not see his own worth. As Billie describes, he still performs what is expected of him but, due to trauma, is unable to return to this old version of himself that he has created. This exemplifies an important shift in Dean’s identity. In earlier seasons, Dean’s performance is a way of self-assurance and grounding, but as Dean evolves, the masculinity ideals that he uses to aid his construction of identity seemingly

become increasingly burdensome, e.g. his inability to express his emotions in depth. This concurs with current research that, when compared to women, men, who according to the CDC are four times as likely to commit suicide (n.p.), are less willing to seek help due to prevalent male gender roles, especially in Western societies (Sher 1). Men are expected to persevere regardless of their struggles, which often leads to unhealthy coping mechanism amongst men, such as substance abuse or increased aggression. As Connell states, “violence can become a way of claiming or asserting masculinity” (83), but this also means that it is needed to retain it. Dean fashions himself into being perceived as ‘the guy that saves the world’ and someone who remains optimistic despite seemingly unbeatable odds. Hence, a loss of this optimism results in a loss of his masculinity, which, in turn, results in a loss of identity.

Interestingly, while constantly performing his idealised version of himself, Dean does not like being confronted with being perceived by others. This can be seen, e.g. in “Celebrating the Life of Asa Fox”, when he seems embarrassed after being asked whether he is “*The Dean Winchester?*” (S12E06 10:33 – 10:38). Furthermore, due to the nature of the show, Dean is often confronted with other versions of himself, either from different universes or within a dream. In either scenario, Dean usually dislikes (e.g. S05E04) his alter egos or is embarrassed by how effeminate they are (S06E15; S15E13). In general terms, Dean seems uncomfortable with every version of himself, including his own. In season three, some of the reasons for his discomfort are textualized as Dean is confronted by a dream version of himself.

What are the things that you want? What are the things that you dream? I mean, your car? That’s Dad’s. Your favorite leather jacket? Dad’s. Your music? Dad’s. Do you even have an original thought? No. No, all there is is, “Watch out for Sammy. Look out for your little brother, boy!” You can still hear your Dad’s voice in your head, can’t you? Clear as a bell. (S03E10 33:43-34:09)

Dean’s dream alter ego taunts Dean’s construction of identity via his father’s ideals. Dean idealises his father’s masculinity to the point of replicating it exactly and uses these guidelines to secure his identity. For Dean, Cars, leather, and classic rock are the epitome of manliness and this is the first overt acknowledgement on the show that Dean is merely copying these traits. This is confirmed over the course of the show when Dean develops his own clothing style and expands his music taste. This undermining of stereotypes is further established in section four. In terms of Dean’s wardrobe, the screenshot below exemplifies this point.



Figure 3 Dean in leather jacket (S04E03 06:37)

The figure above shows Dean before he has a stable home apart from the car he is leaning on. He wears his father's leather jacket like armour. Moreover, the existence of the jacket solidifies John's lasting impact on Dean beyond death, as Dean wears it for years after John has passed away. With this, the show indicates John's prevalence in Dean's life despite of his physical absence. Hence, the decision to abandon it is important, which happens off-screen between the season five finale and the season six premiere. He eventually replaces John's leather jacket with a similar one in season seven but discards leather jackets completely after returning from purgatory in the season eight premiere. Considering the importance and implications of John's jacket, I am arguing that the jacket represents Dean's unquestioning and absolute subscription to John's masculinity. Considering this, the jacket's size becomes a highly interesting detail. Despite the actors being approximately the same height and weight, John's leather jacket is clearly too big for Dean. Metaphorically speaking, this clearly visualises Dean's inability to successfully imitate John, despite his endeavours, further confirming Neale's concept of the child's inadequacy to construct the parent's ideal ego (13), as explained in section three. Over the course of the first five seasons, the number of episodes in which Dean wears the jacket decreases noticeably.

Season	Number of episodes present/Total number of episodes per season	Percentage worn %
1	13/22	59%
2	10/22	45%
3	3/16	18%
4	6/22	27%

5	6/22	27%
6	0	0%
7	2/23 (new jacket)	8%

Figure 4 Leather jacket statistics

In season one, he is wearing the jacket in 13 out of 22 episodes, whereas in season five, he is only wearing it in six out of 22 episodes. Hence, I would argue that this visualises Dean slowly losing faith in John's ideals, especially in season three, which is when Dean talks to his dream alter ego about the jacket and what it represents. Since the overarching plot of season three revolves around trying to save Dean from going to hell because of a demon deal he makes in season two to save Sam, Dean's recognition of John's influence is due to a sense of resentment for how he was raised to sacrifice himself instinctively and heroically for Sam with no regard for his own life, as Dean expresses in the quote below while he is fighting his dream alter ego.

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 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! (S03E10 34:40-35:05)

Dean's uncharacteristic emotional honesty in this scene reveals feelings that are usually repressed by his performance of manhood. His understanding of self-sacrifice as heroic and heroism as inherently masculine is so deeply engrained in Dean that it silences his ability to express himself and his wishes, likely due to a fear of seeming selfish. While publicly pretending to love his dangerous, heroic job, there are several instances on the show where he expresses what he truly desires, usually when no one he cares about may hear him, as can be seen in the excerpt below, where Dean talks to a priest in a confessional in season ten.

You know, the life I live, the work I do...I pretty much just figured that that was all there was to me, you know? Tear around and jam the key in the ignition and haul ass until I ran out of gas. I guess I just thought sooner or later, I'd go out the same way that I live – pedal to the metal, and that would be it.[...]. Now, recent events make me think I might be closer to that than I really thought. And...I don't know. I mean, you know, there's – there's things, there's people, feelings that I want to experience differently than I have before, or maybe even for the first time. (S10E16 24:40-25:41)

This quote expresses Dean's defeatist acceptance of the façade he is maintaining throughout the first ten seasons, a façade he is so unhappy with that it sometimes causes him to be

ambivalent about his own survival, which further fuels his suicidal tendencies. However, in this scene, Dean expresses a wish to change the course of his life, which, while ultimately remaining unfulfilled, alters the perception of Dean's actions. This scene expresses what the absence of John's leather jacket symbolises, namely Dean's search for an identity beyond John's. The knowledge that Dean is deeply dissatisfied disrupts the illusion of the manly hero, who fears and lacks nothing. The abandonment of the leather jacket in season seven allows for the slow and continuous construction of a more complex character over the following seasons that show a distinct difference between Dean's masculine performance and who he is. This essential issue that he may never fully reach the 'manliness' his father seeks in him, confronts Dean with cognitive dissonance that he tries to counteract by performing the intricacies of his idealised version of manhood to the best of his abilities as meticulously as possible. This will be explored in more detail in the following section.

3.2. "Real men don't..." – Masculine stereotypes

Dean's masculinity can be seen as a continuous endeavour to ascribe himself to an essentialist prescriptive norm that allows him to be accepted by others, both by denying or suppressing certain desires or likes, and by trying to tell other men to do the same. This connects to Connell appealing to the importance of the relational aspect of masculinity, which concerns men's relationships with each other's masculinity (37). These relations function on the basis of policing other men via exclusion, inclusion, intimidation, or exploitation, among other techniques, to ensure a stable, masculine position (Connell 37). In these cases, stereotyping helps Dean to differentiate. While stereotypes, according to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, are often considered biased and one-sided ("Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The danger of a single story | TED"), they may also be used for the acquisition of prototypes and concepts (Fodor 150). Given Dean's confusion about what masculinity is supposed to entail, he relies heavily on stereotypes to acquire a prototype of masculinity. Hence, the part of Dean's performance that relies on policing and belittling other men with the help of stereotypes is done to secure his own masculinity. For him, there is only one acceptable version of manhood and deviation from the norm is highly discouraged. The meticulousness of these rules that Dean adheres to can be observed in comments on seemingly inconsequential situations, e.g. stating that "[r]eal men don't drink out of cups this small" (S10E06 04:21-04:24), when Sam hands him a small cup of flavoured coffee. Utterances like that indicate that Dean seems to judge situations in terms of their (un-)manliness and categorises them accordingly. Hence, Dean finds, e.g., pop music,

especially Taylor Swift, flavoured water, healthy food, exercise unmanly, but, e.g., dressing up as cowboys or watching doctor telenovelas are not. While some of his decisions may seem arbitrary, certain aversions are more obviously impacted by common masculine traditions, such as his reactions to the prospect of emotionally vulnerable conversations, especially when had with Sam. One example of this may be observed in the excerpt below.

Sam: I'm fine. Are you okay?

Dean: Me?

Sam: Yeah. Um, Cas dinged you up pretty good.

Dean: And?

Sam: And I just wanted to make sure you're okay.

Dean: What like my feelings?

Sam: If that's what you want to talk about, sure.

Dean: Okay. I'll tell you what. Why don't I go get some, uh, herbal tea.

Sam: Okay.

Dean: And you can find some Cowboy Junkies on the dial.

SAM: Eat me, Dean.

Dean: And you know what? We'll just talk it out. Good talk.

(S08E18 04:01-04:36)

It is important for Dean to declare his unwillingness to discuss his emotions and he usually does so by indicating his perceived femininity of the topic. By ridiculing the mere notion of voicing his feelings, he intends to subconsciously police other men to do the same. Considering his upbringing and constant vigilance concerning his masculine performance, this behaviour expresses Dean's confusion. He has been given strict rules of manhood by John and likely presumes these ideals to be unspoken rules understood by all men. Hence, men actively transgressing them leaves Dean in a state of cognitive dissonance where he is forced to consider these rules' validity by either recognising that they are not absolute or by categorising non-adhering men as not being 'real men'. As made evident with the quotes above, Dean usually chooses the latter. This understanding of manhood subscribes to a category that Connell describes as a "normative definition", which defines "what men ought to be" (both 70). As Connell further explains, this interpretation of masculinity treats it as "a social norm for the behaviour of essentialist definitions, as in Robert Brannon's widely quoted account of 'our culture's blueprint of manhood', which defines the four pillars of masculinity as "No Sissy Stuff, Be a Big Wheel, Be a Sturdy Oak, Give 'em Hell" (12). A social norm is precisely what

Dean seems to think of the portrayal of his masculinity, meaning there are certain expectations he needs to fulfil to belong to a certain group. However, even more interesting is Connell's mention of Brannon's quote, which seems perfectly aligned with Dean's interpretation of manhood to the extent of Dean quoting him almost directly. For example, one of the earliest mentions of Dean's unwillingness to express emotions on the show is his catchphrase "no chick-flick moments" (S01E13 27:33-27:35), echoing Brannon's idea of 'No Sissy Stuff', which Dean usually uses to prematurely end potentially emotional conversations. This concurs with Seidler's observation of the tendency for men to control their emotions and deny their sexualities while constructing their masculine identities, especially in Western societies (65–66). Moreover, just as Brannon's quote above describes, Dean also describes himself as having a "give-'em-hell attitude" (S05E01 38:20-38:21), which furthers the concept of Dean never conceding a fight, despite the fact that Dean certainly loses trust in his ability to succeed, even to the extent of suicidal ideation, as explained in the previous section. However, this raises a rather interesting point, namely the show's frequent demonstration of the incongruity of Dean's words and his actions or feelings.

One of the reasons the performativity of Dean's masculinity is easily observed is due to the show's deliberate portrayal of Dean as an unreliable narrator who frequently states his like or dislike for something only for the show to expose his lies at a later state, often within the same episode. The table below summarises just some examples of this behaviour.

Initial behaviour	Incongruent behaviour
Refusing to have 'chick-flick moments' (S01E01; S11E23)	Admitting to loving chick-flicks (S11E23)
Saying he would never wear shorts (S01E02)	Wearing shorts while washing his car (S11E04)
Pretending not to like soap operas like the show <i>Dr. Sexy, MD</i> (S05E08)	Revealing that he is an avid fan of the show (S05E08)
Pretending not to like anything but classic rock music (S07E06)	Singing along to All Out of Love by Air Supply (S07E06)
Talking about listening to Taylor Swift being embarrassing (S10E12)	Singing along to Shake It Off by Taylor Swift (S10E12)
Being disgusted by cucumber water and making fun of it (S12E07)	Drinking and liking the water when alone (S12E07)

Table 2 Dean's incongruent behaviour

As can be seen in the table above, some of Dean's most essential self-characterisations, such as his catchphrase 'no chick-flick moments' or his love for classic rock are undermined by his subsequent behaviour. Quotes and behaviour such as the ones above create a thorough understanding of Dean's mentality towards manhood. He seemingly designates specific likes as masculine, likely by imitating men who he deems 'real men' and uses them to create a safety net to ensure his perception by others as manly. However, the series purposefully includes scenes to communicate that Dean has more varied preferences beyond his advertised likes, to the point of being contradictory. Another example of this understanding is Dean's frequent insistence that he desires to die fighting, e.g. as he explains in the quote below.

Dean: I always thought we'd go out like *Butch and Sundance* style.

Sam: Yeah. Blaze of glory.

Dean: Blaze of glory. (S12E22 8:49-9:00)

The phrase 'blaze of glory' perfectly summarises Dean's ideals. Being raised by John who both mystified and glorified the hunting life for his children, the concept of the 'blaze of glory' certainly fits this doctrine. It denotes a dramatic and impressive end to a heroic life that intends to canonise their legacy amongst hunters. This phrase exemplifies Dean's need for appraisal and perfection of his manhood. With hunting as the ultimate masculine job, dying while fighting a monster seems the ultimate masculine death, hence Dean's publicly stated desire for it. However, Dean's consistent, even if not always explicit, search for a free and peaceful life expresses a deeper desire for a calm death following a long life. Yet, this desire seems suppressed by the fact that he thinks such a future impossible due to hunting, which connects to his suicidal tendencies explained above. Dean's self-worth is tied to his masculinity and for him, every inability or unwillingness to perform seems a failure. However, he also has desires that deviate from his chosen path, the unfulfillment of which likely adds to his negative state of mind. In other words, Dean lives in a constant state of cognitive dissonance, causing him to feel that achieving his masculine ideal (e.g. dying heroically in a fight) is as unsatisfying to him as not achieving it (e.g. dying of old age). Hence, his final death in the final episode of the show is rather interesting choice, as it can be seen as fulfilling neither desire. In season 15, episode 20, Dean and Sam fight a nest of vampires, where a vampire shoves Dean which causes him to be impaled on a rebar fixed to a wall, effectively killing him (S15E20). This fulfils neither desire because, while it is of course not peaceful, it is also not a heroic death. While he is fighting monsters, it may be characterised as one of the least dangerous monsters the brothers interact with over the years and Dean has been shown to kill entire nests by himself (e.g. S10E19).

Furthermore, in comparison to his other heroic deeds, such as killing Lucifer or succeeding over God, this hunt is rather simple. It can be argued that with each heroic deed, the previous, ‘lesser’ deeds become less important. Hence, his death suggests an almost civilian fallacy that certainly intends to disprove the previously established heroic myth of ‘*The Dean Winchester*’, who seemed virtually indestructible. However, it also turns the positive ending in episode 19 (S15E19), where Sam, Dean, and Jack defeat God, into a tragic ending of a character, whose upbringing forced a highly performative and emotionally unfulfilled existence, which lead to suicidal tendencies. Despite the show’s suggestion of afterlife in heaven being a happy ending, I argue that this ending is intended to be seen as tragic. This can be analysed in the show’s lighting, specifically the lighting they use for accenting fake happiness, as can be observed in the examples below.

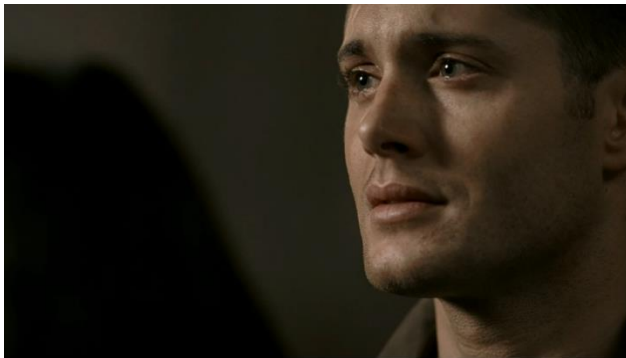


Figure 6 Dean in a Djinn dream (S02E20 36:52)

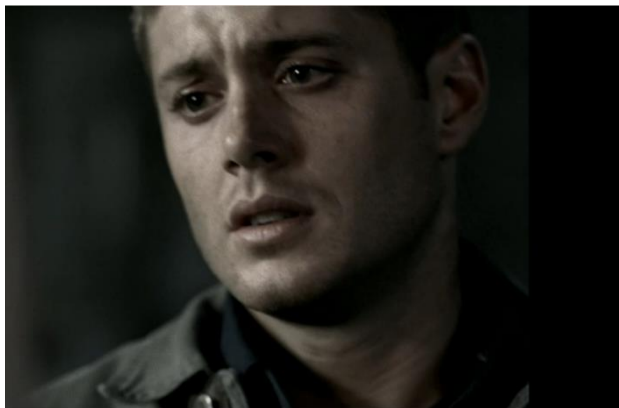


Figure 5 Dean back in reality (S02E20 38:52)

In the episode from the screenshots above, Dean is confronted with a fake reality created by a monster, a situation that asks him to choose between living happy, ordinary life in his head, while dying in real life, or returning to his ‘normal’ life. In figure 5, Dean is surrounded by the people of this dream world, whereas he has returned to his real life in figure 6. Figure 5 clearly shows the warm colours the show seems to use for the creation of this artificial happiness. This

is even more visible in the following screenshots from a similar situation happening in season four.



Figure 7 Dean in a fake reality (S04E17 38:38)

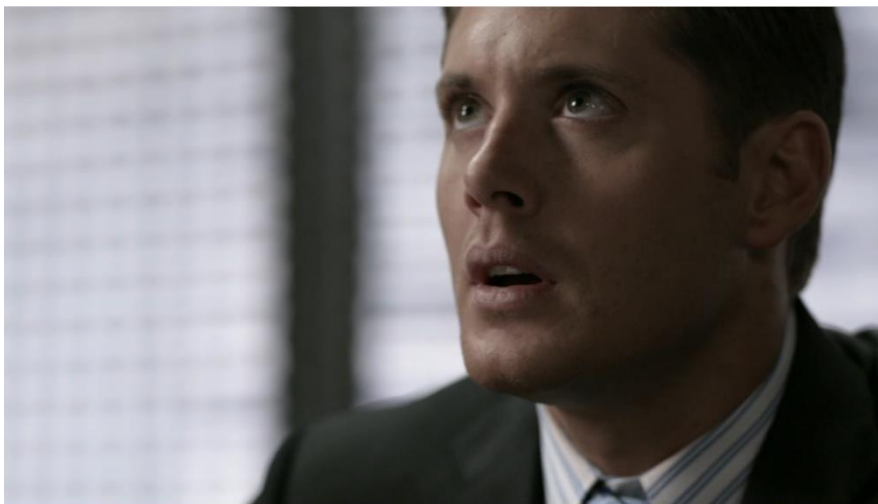


Figure 8 Dean back in his reality (S04E17 38:41)

Here, the effect is visible explicitly, with figure 7 and 8 being only three seconds apart. In this time frame, Dean is taken out of a fake reality created by an angel, which the removal of the warm coloured filter is intended to highlight. Again, the world in this episode offers an artificial happiness where Dean lives an ordinary and free life. Interestingly, this version of Dean seems completely void of the performative masculinity the character usually possesses. This Dean is very well groomed, non-threatening, takes care of his physical and mental health, does not like rock music, drives a Prius, and works at an office. In the episode, it is stated that it is the same Dean, merely without any of his memories, which further indicates that most of Dean's professed likes are due to his upbringing and that without these memories, Dean's performativity evaporates. While the fact that one's upbringing shapes one's likes and dislikes

is true for everyone, it does confirm the theories applied in this research concerning the lack of inherent masculine traits. Since this ‘other Dean’ seems significantly different from the original, much of Dean’s performative actions and traits may be seen as learnt, not inherent. However, like the episode analysed above, this world is not real and the warm-coloured filter indicates this well. This lighting follows a pattern that can be seen throughout the show and is only visible when in connection to an artificial feeling of happiness. Hence, the following screenshots from the show’s final episode are interesting to analyse.



Figure 9 Dean on earth (S15E20 05:23)



Figure 10 Dean in heaven (S15E20 31:51)

In figure 9, Dean is alive on earth while in figure 10, he is dead and in heaven. While both scenes frame Dean in warm light, the former is natural sunlight, whereas the latter is another warm coloured filter. After 15 seasons, this filter seems to be intended to subconsciously revoke the feeling of artificial happiness. However, unlike the previous examples, this episode does not offer a resolution that allows Dean’s return to his ‘real’ world but ends with Dean remaining in this state for eternity. It is important

to state that this lighting is not existent in any other scenes playing in Heaven, which implies this to be a conscious choice solely for this scene. Hence, I argue that, when taking the lighting into consideration, this ending essentially removes Dean's agency, leaving him in an unresolved position, that prematurely ended his search for an individual identity.

Another interesting aspect in regard to Dean's idealised death is his concept of the 'Butch and Sundance style'. With it, he is referencing the American Western film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (Hill 1969) that tells the story of two criminals who die in a famous gun fight with the U.S. police. While certainly possessing the masculine idea of Dean's envisioned end, this specific duo is an interesting choice, as their relationship has been frequently debated to be homosexual (e.g. Mellen (1978) or Pheasant-Kelly (2013)), which proposes a recurring dichotomy in Dean's life between masculinity and sexuality. However, despite Dean's insistence on dying 'Butch and Sundance style', his final death does not truly embody this hypermasculine vision, as can be seen in the screenshots below.



Figure 11 Blaze of glory "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" 1:49:07



Figure 12 Dean impaled on a rebar S15E20 17:57

In all these episodes mentioned in this section, it is made clear that Dean's highly idealised visions and his real desires are often incongruent due to his fear of being perceived as unmanly. Interestingly, all these instances also happen once John's leather jacket is less prevalent in or already gone from Dean's life, which further solidifies the connection between the existence of the jacket and Dean's subscription to John's ideals. However, this also effectively renders Dean's words less credible than his actions, something others on the show frequently realise, which leads to Dean's masculinity being questioned regularly, often in connection to his sexuality. While maintaining the assumption that Dean is ashamed of most of these perceived 'unmanly' traits mentioned in this section, it is important to acknowledge that hegemonic masculinity is not fixed and susceptible to change. Every example mentioned is only ever an example of Dean's perception of a, as Connell calls it, "currently accepted' strategy" and that, "[w]hen conditions for the defence of patriarchy change, the bases for the dominance of a

particular masculinity are eroded” (both 77). Hence, some of Dean’s incongruent behaviour may be explained by a change of taste due to a changing environment rather than a reveal of underlying true desires. However, I argue that, as many of these examples show inconsistent behaviour within a single episode, this is not the case for most of Dean’s habits.

In terms of the portrayal of his masculinity in general, other characters on the show tend to immediately see how fragile Dean’s confidence in his masculine performance is, which makes him vulnerable to criticism. For example, in the beginning of season six, after Dean has spent a year living an ordinary life without hunting, he gets teased frequently for choosing a ‘normal’ life over the hypermasculine hunter lifestyle. Comments like Dean not being a “professional” anymore or that he has “delicate features for a hunter” (S06E01 28:58-29:01; 19:26-19:30) succeed in disempowering him, often by reducing him to his looks. This seems especially successful when Dean is called ‘pretty’ instead of ‘handsome’, which Dean likely understands as a direct attack on his masculinity.



Figure 13 Dean after being called ‘pretty’ (S09E11 10:06)

In the screenshot above, Dean’s discomfort is clearly visible. He seems disappointed at his appraisal as ‘pretty’, even though he readily calls himself “handsome” (e.g. S01E06 26:34-26:36). ‘Pretty’, just as ‘delicate’, carries a feminine connotation that Dean’s fragile masculine performance cannot endure and hence needs to be rejected. As the negative image of masculinity, feminine traits are the destruction of masculine presentation and someone who performs his gender as meticulously as Dean may not allow himself to publicly portray any of these traits. However, this does not mean that Dean does not have traditionally feminine likes, as the next section will explain further.

3.3. Blurring the line – The ultimate killer vs. the homey caretaker

Despite Dean's insistence on the constant performance of masculinity, *Supernatural* offers a plethora of instances of Dean deviating from his personalised norms, breaking the established gender binary imparted on Dean. The gender binary, in simple terms, subscribes to the concept that one's biological sex¹⁴ determines one's gender, i.e. male or female. Importantly, these categories have social consequences and are not to be seen as merely descriptive, but also prescriptive (enforcing), and proscriptive (restricting) (Morgenroth 731). As established, Dean's understanding of masculinity follows this strict binary code and internalises concepts of a simplistic, greatly traditional, yet sometimes arbitrary division between what he considers masculine and feminine. As a result, Dean tends to publicly avoid, denounce, or ridicule feminine-coded hobbies, character traits, and lifestyles. The stereotypes described in the previous section are essential guidelines for Dean, without which his performance may not succeed. However, as his masculinity is performative, Dean is actively repressing desires he does not deem masculine enough for him to pursue, a concept explored frequently on the show. Furthermore, due to Dean's childhood trauma, some of Dean's primary personality traits, that likely developed out of necessity (e.g. functioning as a mother for his younger brother and as a replacement for Mary to John) are traditionally feminine. From a psychoanalytic point of view, the fact that Dean must replace the mother he would need to desire to resolve his Oedipus complex complicates Dean's relationship with his father even further, as he cannot consolidate his masculinity by identifying with John while in the position of John's wife. Hence, his identity is inherently incongruent, which essentially constricts him to remain in constant limbo, unable to either fully conform to his ideals or escape them. This leads to various moments of Dean being exposed for or having to justify himself for liking traditionally feminine things, as can be seen in table 1 of the previous section. However, in addition to being exposed, the show establishes a pattern of primarily putting Dean into situations that juxtapose his masculinity ideals, e.g. a pair of cursed ballet shoes bewitching Dean, giving him the extreme urge to wear them (S07E16), which seemingly embarrasses him, or being propositioned by men, which seemingly makes him uncomfortable (e.g. S04E12 14:01-14:30). These situations, which may often be regarded as comic relief, function with the essential understanding that they would not work with Sam as the protagonist of the scene instead of Dean. Sam is portrayed as an open-minded, emotionally available person who is secure in his masculinity and sexuality. Therefore, Dean's policing and ridicule regarding Sam's feminine traits merely highlight Dean's deflection

¹⁴ Excluding intersex people

and insecurity around these topics. In fact, despite Dean's endeavours to imitate his father, it is Sam who is more like John and while he is generally described as more sensitive and emotional, usually by Dean, Dean's emotional turmoil is shown on screen more frequently. Hence, Dean has to assert his masculinity and sexuality constantly (e.g. proclaiming that he is a "warrior" S07E22 20:20-20:22), likes to sleep with women, or that he "doesn't swing that way" (e.g. S02E09 15:39-15:41), whereas Sam's identity remains uncontested.

In general, Dean's endeavour to adhere to the gender binary is frequently juxtaposed by the show's portrayal of him, both by exposing Dean's 'feminine' traits to the viewer and by mirroring him almost exclusively via female characters, which further destabilises his masculinity. According to Laura Berk (530), stereotypically feminine traits include, among others, being considerate, devoting self to others, being emotional, gentle, home-oriented, kind, and liking children. While Dean does not seem to meet these standards on a surface level, a closer analysis reveals an underlying, less performative characterisation of Dean, where all these traits clearly fit the character. Due to his father's drills to become a hunter, which is characterised as a life devoted to prioritise others', and to look after his brother, Dean is portrayed as someone who ranks others' lives and wishes above his own. Despite his claims to the contrary, Dean is frequently seen as emotional, home-oriented, kind, and gentle to those in his care. Furthermore, out of the two brothers, Dean is portrayed as the one to take care of children and cases that involve them usually have Dean as the caretaker who develops a relationship with them. Additionally, if a case involves babies, Dean is the one who knows how to care for them, to the extent of Sam remarking that Dean is "father material" (S06E02 20:20-20:22). Also, Dean is, despite his endeavour to imitate the father figures in his life, frequently mirrored via female characters, usually either maternal figures or teenagers. For example, he is named after his grandmother Deanna, while Sam is named after their grandfather Samuel. Additionally, while John is a mirror for Sam, Dean is mirrored in his mother Mary, the similarity of them explicitly stated by his grandfather (S06E01) because Dean, like Mary, seemingly wants a 'normal' life that does not include hunting. Aside from maternal figures, Dean is also frequently mirrored in teenagers or young women, such as Claire Novak, Jo Harvelle, or Krissy Chambers. Like Dean, all of them have a complicated relationship with an absent father, who was taken from them by the supernatural and often mask their emotional pain with feigned confidence and comedic one-liners. The choice to mirror Dean in these characters exposes an interesting view on how Dean may perceive himself in relation to others around him, revealing that Dean seemingly sees himself as having continuously prove himself to be worthy of his

place in life. While most of his mirrors are female, Dean is also mirrored in male characters, primarily in the biblical character Cain and the archangel Michael.

One of the main male Dean mirrors throughout the series is Cain, Adam's firstborn son, which is meant to further establish the show's concept of the deterministic fate of all beings, with Dean being yet another incarnation of the older son who is intended to eventually defeat the younger. However, more specifically, this mirror follows a plot introduced in season nine, where Dean bears the Mark of Cain, which essentially turns him into a demon who is cursed to repeat Cain's mistakes. While Cain, as the "father of murder" (S10E14 03:21-03:23) and the first son, may be seen as the epitome of manhood, Dean's variation of him deviates from this in one rather interesting instance via another mirror. On the show, Cain had a wife, Colette, whom he killed, which is portrayed as his point of no return. For Dean, this plot point is incorporated as well but with Dean's friend Castiel assuming the role of Cain's wife. This is especially interesting given the fact that Cain does not have a wife in the bible, meaning their relationship was specifically designed for the show and then mirrored in Dean and Castiel. This choice certainly impacts the masculine portrayal of this entire plot line, as Dean's masculinity ideals are closely linked to the presumption of heterosexuality, which will be expanded on in subsequent chapters. Castiel's placement as Dean's metaphorical wife is therefore highly relevant to the analysis of his performance because it proposes the idea that, even when he is producing a decisively masculine performance, it will deviate from the endeavoured execution, nonetheless. Similarly, another significant mirror for Dean, the archangel Michael, is portrayed quite differently when using Dean's body in comparison to his other vessels.



*Figure 14 Michael incarnations
(from left to right: Michael as young John (S05E13 35:37), as Adam (S05E22 25:45), as apocalypse world Michael (S13E02 34:57), as Dean (S14E01 02:49)) [brightness +40%]*

In all of Michael's portrayals, except Dean's, Michael wears ordinary clothing, usually the one his vessel was wearing at the time of possession. However, when possessing Dean, Michael's wardrobe changes significantly, both from other incarnations of Michael and from Dean's previous clothing. Instead, Michael is exclusively wearing suits and appears well groomed. Furthermore, the use of Dean's body with only dubious consent given from Dean is a problem that, while unfortunately also beyond the scope of this paper, offers even more points for analysis as Michael removes Dean's ability to perform according to his own masculine norms. As Connell argues in their work, "the physical sense of maleness and femaleness is central to the cultural interpretation of gender" (52–53), a fact that Dean is seemingly aware of, as can be seen in the analyses of his actions above. This may be further exemplified in the following screenshots, taken before and after hearing his father's voice.



Figure 15 Dean before he hears John's voice (S05E13 12:05) [+20% brightness]



Figure 16 Dean after he hears John's voice (S05E13 12:07) [+20% brightness]

In the first figure, when Dean is talking to his mother, Dean appears friendly and inviting. In the second figure, after he hears his father clearing his throat, his demeanour changes significantly, assuming an almost soldier-like position as soon as John enters the scene. While not visible in the screenshot, he also, seemingly instinctively, takes a step back. This posture change indicates both that Dean likely has a learnt position that he assumes for John, which physically expresses a traditional masculinity it did not before, and that Dean is visibly uncomfortable with John joining their conversation and immediately withdraws physically as well as emotionally. This representation of Dean's physical portrayal of masculinity is in stark contrast to the Dean analysed in figures 7 and 8 of the previous subsection, which may be seen as a Dean without any of the trauma that shaped him. However, there is another relevant representation of Dean throughout the series, namely Dean when he slowly loses his memory in episode 11 of season 12. In this episode, Dean is portrayed as increasingly childlike, naïve, and not stereotypically masculine (S12E11). The fact that a non-performing Dean seemingly

reverts to childlike state may point towards his lack of resolution of his childhood trauma, but, most relevant to this research topic, connects to the fact that several of his mirrors on the show are not adults. Hence, it can be analysed that Dean may not feel stable in his position as an adult, which may be due to his unfinished identity formation process. According to Freud, mourning affects the ego's free expression and the melancholy following a loss, especially the loss of something idealised like Dean's loss of his idealised mother, results in the perception of the ego as worthless (Freud 245-46). As a result, Dean is stuck in a state of constant questioning and self-hatred, leaving him unable to define his own desires and wishes. His father's wishes are not achievable and his tentative expression of the desire to lead an ordinary life and have a family, like his mother had wanted to as well, is constantly interrupted by the supernatural and disregarded as unmanly. Interestingly, Dean copes with this limbo state of desires by committing to neither and instead forming a family with his hunting partners. However, this safe space he creates is predominantly homosocial, a fact that will be analysed in the next section.

4. Wayward Sons – Homosocial space and male bonding

4.1. Female characters and their relationships with Dean

Supernatural is a male-centric TV show where female characters primarily function in supporting roles: as victims in need of saving, as seemingly unimportant sex partners, or to add further pain to the male main characters via conflict or death. However, over the seasons, there have been several relevant female characters that bond with Dean. Those characters may be categorised in one of three categories: friends/family¹⁵, love interests, or enemies.

In the first category, the most notable female character that impacts Dean's identity is Mary Winchester. As Dean's mother, Mary Winchester is likely one of the most important female influences for his identity, though her impact is primarily defined by her absence. After her death, when her eldest son is four years old, Dean continuously seems to search for the life he had to abandon after hers ends. As analysed in the previous sections, Dean is not depicted as being content with being a hunter, a fact expressed, e.g., in a scene in season 2, episode 20, where he monologues at John's grave.

Your happiness for all those people's lives, no contest. Right? But why? Why is it my job to save these people? Why do I have to be some kind of hero? What about us, huh?

¹⁵ Friends and family are combined into one category as Dean tends to call friends 'family'

What, Mom's not supposed to live her life, Sammy's not supposed to get married? Why do we have to sacrifice everything, Dad? (S02E20 23:40-24:06)

In this episode, he is confronted with an alternate reality in which his mother is still alive and he and his brother are allowed to live normal lives, which further establishes the assumption that this is Dean's wish, as this reality was created by a Djinn, a being that transports people into fake realities that fuel their happiness. However, the mother who Dean needs is highly idealised by his father and, by extension, him. The Mary that is described before her resurrection at the end of season eleven is akin to the concept of the Virgin Mary from *The Bible* and described as maternal, passive, loving, and sacrificing. Hence, when this mythical concept of his mother is eventually disrupted by her resurrection, who introduces Dean to the 'real' Mary Winchester, Dean struggles heavily to combine the mother in front of him with the version created by John Winchester and Dean's own traumatised mind. This is exemplified on the show when Dean, shortly after Mary's return, spends his time sitting on the kitchen floor by himself, looking at old pictures of his mother.



Figure 17 Dean, while looking at pictures of his mother (S12E02 39:26) [brightness +40%]

This scene, which is accompanied by soft, slow indie-rock music¹⁶ track establishing a sad, melancholy mood, shows Dean as grieving rather than happy. As he is viewing old pictures and drinking alcohol while his brother is reconnecting with their mother, I argue that this scene is meant to imply that Dean is grieving the mother ideal that he has created in his mind. The contrast between Mary and the idealised image of her forces Dean to confront the unrealistic standard that he has created for her over the years. Additionally, the shock of this reveal may trigger other idealisations he has created, especially concerning his father or himself. The

¹⁶ Heart. "Lost Angel". *Jupiters Darling*. June 22, 2004

difference between the character Mary as seen in seasons 12-14 and the Mary previously established via Dean and John's stories further exposes Dean as an unreliable narrator. It also demonstrates Dean's ability to repress his emotional turmoil, as can be seen in the following excerpt, where Dean, for the first time, explicitly acknowledges the complexity of his feelings towards his mother.

All of it was because of you. I hate you. I hate you. And I love you. 'Cause I can't – I can't help it. You're my Mom. And I understand 'cause I have made deals to save the ones I love more than once. I forgive you. I forgive you. For all of it. Everything. On the other side of this, we can start over, okay? You, me, Sam. We can get it right this time. But I need you to fight. Right now, I need you to fight. I need you- I need you to look at me, Mom. I need you to really look at me and see me. Mom, I need you to see me. Please. (S12E22 30:14-32:21)

In this scene, Dean expresses his contradictory emotions to Mary, whom he blames for his family's misfortune (see section 3.3., p.18, for further context) after Mary's death. The absence of his idealised mother figure ("our perfect mom" (S12E22 29:04-29:06)) fractured Dean's concept of family, leaving him with only his father as a role model. Yet, his anger does not outweigh his driving desire for a 'normal' family, one in which he is perceived for who he is. Asking his mother to 'see him' states a psychological need of belonging and esteem, namely the acceptance he has been seeking from his father ever since Mary's death. Hence, I argue that this scene encapsulates not only his forgiveness of Mary's, actions leading up to her, death but also an uncharacteristic exposure of one of his deepest desires, which is to abandon his performance of himself. In fact, Dean seemingly offers Mary a trade of granted absolution: he will forgive everything she has done and is ready to finally see her for who she really is if Mary is willing to do the same for him¹⁷. However, this proposal is cut short by the intrusion of an antagonist and surprisingly never mentioned again. On the contrary, at the end of that episode, Dean quickly reverts to his established hero persona and dismisses Mary's admission of guilt by stating that "what you did, the deal, everything that's happened since has made us who we are. And who we are? We kick ass. We save the world" (S12E22 40:28-40:49). The reason for this is likely Dean's insecurities around stating his desires in the 'real' world. As established in the previous chapters, Dean is generally more emotionally vulnerable in spaces outside his established reality, likely due to the added level of distance it provides to his life. Hence, Dean

¹⁷ As this concept of acceptance 'as is' is also commonly connected with sexuality, it will be further elaborated on in chapter six.

is honest and open with his mother while in her head but does not pursue the continuation of the conversation when the moment is cut short. Therefore, even with his mother, he maintains a certain emotional distance that, as will be seen in the subsequent sections, he does not uphold with male characters. Even with female love interests, Dean retains a level of distance and performance.

In terms of female love interests, only one woman seems particularly relevant to Dean's concept of identity, namely his ex-girlfriend Lisa Braeden. After reconnecting¹⁸ with Lisa and her son Ben, who is hinted at possibly being Dean's too despite Lisa's denial on the matter, Dean seemingly starts to idealise the perfect, normal life he could have with them, which becomes a recurring theme from seasons three to six. As both Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in *Between Men* (1985, 698), and John Clum, in *He's All Man* (2002, xix), agree, the heterosexual family dynamic and marriage concept are essential to the upholding of the patriarchal concept of masculinity, which is arguably unconsciously driving Dean's behaviour. However, he does not pursue this dream until Sam formulates it as his dying wish before his death at the end of season five, asking Dean to "go find Lisa. You pray to god she's dumb enough to take you in, and you-you have barbecues and go to football games. You go live some normal, apple-pie life, Dean. Promise me" (S05E22 8:20-8:35). While Dean does not promise Sam, he does as his brother asks after Sam's death and lives with Lisa and her son for a year until his brother's return in season six. Arguably, however, Dean's ideal of the perfect family life with Lisa and Ben was likely a hypothetical concept he had idealised as part of the performance necessary to achieve manhood. It is important to note that this paper does not mean to imply that Dean does not love Lisa while with her. However, I argue that his time with her is intended to represent his opportunity to escape the hunter lifestyle while still maintaining a respectable masculine standard rather than Dean finding true love. This is made clear when Dean chooses his brother over Lisa once Sam returns from the dead. Like the realisation that Mary is not who he had idealised her to be, his breakup with Lisa may be seen as a moment of disillusionment. This idea is further enforced by Dean asking Castiel to remove Lisa and Ben's memories of him completely (S06E21), effectively annulling Dean and Lisa's entire relationship, which will remain his last serious romantic connection with a woman, excluding the complex relationship he shares with Amara.

¹⁸ Dean and Lisa first meet in 1998, spend one night together, and do not meet again before 2007, while Dean is on a case (S03E02).

The most relevant character of the final category, Dean's enemies, is Amara, God's sister. After Sam and Dean inadvertently release her at the end of season ten, she is portrayed as season eleven's main antagonist, who intends to destroy the world. Initially trapped in, or essentially being¹⁹, the Mark of Cain Dean is burdened with, Amara is intrigued by Dean immediately, stating that "[w]e're bound, Dean. We'll always be bound. We will always help each other" (S11E02 34:00-34:09). This bond is soon revealed to be intended as a romantic connection Amara seemingly forces on Dean, stating that she "can't be resisted" (S11E09 34:06-34:10) before kissing him without consent. When considering the context of the Mark of Cain and its implications, this is a very interesting choice. The Mark of Cain, which slowly turns Dean into a demon and curses him to follow Cain's footsteps as the father of murder, causes Dean to become more violent, less caring, and more prone to objectifying women. In other words, the Mark causes Dean to act more stereotypically male. The fact that this behaviour is due to an external force rather than an internal desire further exposes the performativity of the masculinity he feels expected to display, especially considering that the mark was created by God, the ultimate father figure. However, while Dean's behaviour during this time is not authentic, the nature of the curse offers Dean a sense of absolution due to a lack of choice. In other words, it is impossible for Dean to be himself, meaning he does not have to police himself as he usually would but is also unable to further his quest for an authentic identity. Therefore, while Dean seemingly welcomes this change, the main objective of season ten is to remove the Mark from Dean, which metaphorically states the need for Dean to free himself from his performative masculinity. Hence, the fact that the solution to this problem comes in the form of the Mark's return as a heterosexual love interest Dean is forced to consent to by a supernatural bond is highly significant. Amara may essentially be seen as a representation of Dean's inability to liberate himself from the masculine restraints of his performance. It may also further exemplify the concept of masculinity being defined through compulsory heterosexual desire (Butler 30) in an attempt to re-establish Dean's manhood despite the loss of the Mark of Cain's amplified masculine behaviour. Overall, Dean's connection with Amara, much like his relationship with Lisa, seems to be intended to further expose his issues with his masculinity rather than his romantic interests. With this topic as a constant underlying theme in his life, it is interesting to analyse the male-centric and homosocial space Dean has created in his life, which will be explored in the next section.

¹⁹ Amara is a physical representation of the darkness/nothing that 'existed' before creation, i.e. before God created the *Supernatural* multiverse. In order to be able to create, God needed to imprison Amara in the form of a mark that incarcerates Amara and curses its bearer to become a demon with an insatiable need to murder. As Cain is the first one to bear this curse, it is known as the Mark of Cain.

4.2. The homosocial space of Dean Winchester

The prevalence of male characters in *Supernatural* and their close connections to Dean lend themselves to an analysis of the possible underlying homosexual desire present in these relationships. The concept of homosocial desire describes the nature of bonds between people of the same sex. According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her work *Between Men* (1985), the term itself may be considered an oxymoron, as it is both created as a play on and meant to distinguish from the term ‘homosexual’ (1). Unlike homosexuality, homosocial desire is a purposefully vague term for Sedgwick, who theorises that it is meant to mend the hypothetical break of the connection in the male homosocial – homosexual continuum (Sedgwick 1–2). Due to homophobia, this continuum is disrupted, notably more so for men than for women. While feminism and lesbianism seem naturally connected and accepted by Western society, masculinity and homosexuality are essentially contrasted, highly influenced by the standards and expectations set by the patriarchal hegemony described in section four. What Butler calls “compulsory heterosexuality” in *Gender Trouble* (30), Sedgwick calls “obligatory heterosexuality” in her work (3), both drawing the same conclusion, namely society’s apparent need for strict regulation of desire to uphold certain ideals.

From the moment his mother dies until the moment of his own death, Dean is seemingly, either consciously or unconsciously, drawn to male companions rather than female ones. Hence, Dean is creating a primarily homosocial space that allows only close emotional relationships with men, excluding the few relationships he has with women discussed in the prior section. Interestingly, the male characters Dean interacts with seem equally drawn to him, resulting in Dean being the primary contact for most other male characters on screen. In comparison, Sam never seems to have a close emotional connection with another man on screen that exceeds the bond that character shares with Dean²⁰. In fact, the relationships between Dean and some of these characters frequently cause them to make drastic, and sometimes uncharacteristic, decisions in the endeavour to help, be with, or save Dean, for example committing suicide (e.g. Benny), abandoning their kingdom (e.g. Crowley), or abandoning the army they lead (e.g. Castiel). For Dean, this attention results in a constant battle between forming close connections

²⁰ There is one notable exception to this fact, namely Sam's relationship with Lucifer, with whom Sam is incarcerated in Hell for some time. Afterwards, Lucifer continuously mocks him about having tortured him, including sexual innuendos. As this is the only exception and its analysis beyond the scope of this paper, this fact will be disregarded for further analysis.

to men and subsequently denouncing them or fighting the men with whom he forms relationships to assure his heterosexuality.

Brian Baker, in his 2015 work *Contemporary Masculinities in Fiction, Film and Television*, describes the essence of homosocial relationships as “rituals of ‘male bonding’ [,] indicat[ing] both an anxiety about emotional closeness between men and an element of competitiveness or contestation that is built into homosociality to preserve an unproblematic emotional ‘distance’” (66). For Dean, these rituals primarily include the expression and endurance of physical violence, which in turn, Baker sees as implications of sexual desire (41), a notion congruent with John Clum’s understanding of violence as a mark of desire that makes it perceivable in the first place (18). Hence, within the patriarchal construction of the masculine ideal, a man’s seemingly ‘safest’ expression of desire without losing face is violence. As Dean is surrounded by men and in constant need of proving his masculinity, his life is shaped by violence both inflicted by and on him.

Because most of the male characters in Dean’s life are supernatural creatures who are initially introduced as enemies and with whom he forms tentative alliances out of necessity, the level of violence is normalised. In most seasons, Dean’s life is described as that of a soldier at constant war against an evil Other, a framing particularly relatable for a post 9/11 U.S. American population, especially in connection to the plethora of Christian imagery. The white, Christian, American defending his nation remains a popular trope for U.S. television, intending to reiterate the legitimacy of U.S. troops participating in foreign wars and conflicts. Hence, Dean’s close relationships with other men are portrayed as the bonds forged through battle and camaraderie against the greater evil. This narrative of the representation of soldier masculinity is frequently connected to trauma (Baker 32) and, in *Supernatural*, it allows Dean to form intimate relationships with other men with the explanation of being ‘brothers in arms’ rather than having to explore the complexity of homosocial desire. In fact, I would argue that the excessively performed masculinity present in soldier mentalities allows the presence of homosocial desire, meaning that the more masculine Dean expresses himself, the more lenience he is given when expressing homosocial, or even homosexual, desire. Hence, Dean at his most stereotypically masculine, e.g. when he is cursed with the Mark of Cain, is, contradictorily, also Dean at his freest in terms of expressing non-heteronormative desires. However, as stated in section 5.1., the Mark may be metaphorically seen as a suppression of his real self by the constraints of performative masculinity. Therefore, Dean cursed with the Mark of Cain is not truly free to express himself but rather is allowed an illusion of freedom because his excessive portrayal of

masculinity automatically negates the possibility of the existence of homosocial or homosexual desire. This parallels the U.S. perception of the military, that tends to frame being a soldier as an opportunity to be free, see the world, and help their nation, minimising the degree of expected obedience to their leaders and the suppression of LGBTQ+ expression that, despite legislative changes, still often relies on a 'don't ask, don't tell'²¹ principle. Due to the (perceived) inherent masculinity of being a soldier, everyone is presumed heterosexual. Similarly, Dean burdened with the Mark of Cain is considered too masculine to be perceived as homosexual, regardless of his words or actions. This may be seen, e.g., when Crowley hints at him and Dean having sexual intercourse with unspecified triplets ("We've done extraordinary things to triplets" (S10E01 27:20-27:22)) while spending months together when Dean is a demon, a fact never elaborated but it later referred to as Dean and Crowley's "summer of love" (S11E06 13:31-13:37) by Sam. While most likely merely a joke, Sam exposes the level of intimacy of Dean and Crowley's relationship with this quote, which is a good example for the difference in Dean's and Sam's connections to other men as Sam never has a relationship close to this intimate with another man besides Dean. Despite Sam and Dean generally sharing the same friends, the level of intensity and emotional connection between the brothers and their friends is notably different, as will be analysed in the following section.

4.3. Male Bonding – Sam, Castiel, Benny, Jack, Crowley, and their relationships with Dean

The bonds Dean shares with Sam, Castiel, Benny, Crowley, and Jack are the most important for the scope of this paper, except for his relationship with his father, which has already been discussed at length in previous chapters. To understand Dean's homosocial environment, it is important to analyse Dean's relationship with each one of these characters, who or what they represent for Dean and vice versa.

As Dean's younger brother and closest confidant, Sam functions as the most important person in Dean's life. Their bond, which builds the foundation of the show, is portrayed as seemingly inseverable and often referred to as "co-dependent" (e.g. S05E18 23:50-23:58). Co-dependency, which is described as "compulsive behavior where you are drawn into helping

²¹ 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Harass, Don't Pursue' was a policy concerning the service of homo- and bisexual people in the U.S. military from 1994-2011 that allowed non-heterosexual people to serve as long as they remained closeted while retaining the right to discharge openly homo- or bisexual people on account of their sexuality. With the policy, credible evidence for someone's homo- or bisexuality needed to be present to launch an investigation or discharge process.

take care of others at the expense of yourself to the point of detriment to both parties” (Tam 24) is considered learned behaviour and often found in dysfunctional families troubled by alcoholism or abuse (Mental Health America n.p.). Considering Sam and Dean’s abusive childhood outlined in section three and the consistent readiness to sacrifice themselves for each other, I would agree with the understanding that their relationship is co-dependent and, at times, severely detrimental to their mental health. Since Dean functions as Sam’s primary caregiver after Mary’s death, he essentially fills the role of Sam’s mother and is frequently described as raising Sam. Because of that, their relationship, while strong, is not equal because Dean’s main goal is Sam’s protection. Besides the influences of his father and the society in which he grows up, this is likely a contributing factor to Dean’s continuous performance of the masculine hero. By creating a version of himself that is perpetually indestructible and determined, Dean means to reassure Sam and remove some of the fear constantly present in their lives, especially since their absent father seemingly was not able to do the same, as Sam remarks in the pilot episode of the show.

Sam: When I told Dad I was scared of the thing in my closet, he gave me a .45.

Dean: Well, what was he supposed to do?

Sam: I was nine years old! He was supposed to say, don’t be afraid of the dark.

(S01E0108:53-09:04)

This dialogue further expresses John’s inability to emotionally connect with his children, even Sam, for whom he had more patience than Dean. It also states Dean’s readiness to defend John’s approach to parenting, which essentially intended them to become comfortable with the vagabond soldier lifestyle as quickly as possible, despite having suffered from it as well. Unlike Dean, however, his brother allows himself to reflect on his past more critically, distancing himself enough to recognise his father’s shortcomings. For Sam, John was not able to assure his safety in times of need, so Dean assumed that role, effectively becoming Sam’s mother and father figure. However, because Dean was focussed on endeavouring to protect Sam, he was not allowed the same luxury, which further contributes to his upholding of the hero persona, as he must not only convince Sam but also himself. This relationship allows Sam to adopt an approach to masculinity that Karla Elliott calls “caring masculinities” (240). This form of masculinity “embrace[s] the affective, relational, emotional, and interdependent qualities of care” (Elliott 252), which is how Sam is portrayed on the show, while rejecting domination (Elliott 252), something Dean is unable to do. The masculinity John displays and imparts on Dean is one popularised by public personalities like Marlon Brando or James Dean; a canonised

masculinity that is inherently dominant. This pressure to perform perfectly, even while still a child, leads to his reliance on his persona and making it his personality. In his work *Male Fantasies* (1989), Klaus Theweleit analyses the construction of the soldier ego, from a Freudian perspective, and argues that, unlike other men, soldiers are unable to create an ego internally but instead must adopt the models forced on them by others, including parents, teachers, superiors at work and military, and are required to equip a defensive armour that effectively becomes their ego (Theweleit 164). This concept further corroborates this research's assumption that Dean's identity is not a culmination of inherent traits but rather a combination of external influences forced on him that he cultivates into the performance of the perfect, heroic soldier. However, while Theweleit merely mentions external coercion, I would argue that, in *Supernatural*, Dean adapts to the coercing influences and internalises their doctrine, leading to Dean being pressured to perform by others as well as himself. Arguably his most quintessential character trait is caring for his younger brother, something that is both imposed on him by John but also an internal desire. Sam and Dean's exceptionally close relationship is, at times, portrayed to be Dean's sole purpose of existence, e.g. when Dean tells Sam that "[t]here ain't no me if there ain't no you" (S09E01 36:05-36:08), further solidifying the analysis of their relationship as co-dependent. However, while Sam is certainly dependent on Dean, neither his emotions nor his actions tend to be as extreme as Dean's and he is allowed more growth outside the two of them. For example, when Dean is transported to purgatory at the end of season seven, Sam does not try to find Dean and instead tries to live his life, which is what they had agreed to do previously. As Dean states upon his return, however, they had usually ignored that agreement because of their "deep, abiding love for each other" (S08E01 11:33-11:40). This unequal, yet co-dependent relationship often leads to physical altercations, following the to the common academic consensus that violence is an expression of masculinity and an acceptable outlet for men's emotions (e.g. Connell 83; Clum 18). Dean and Sam's relationship is characterised by the use of violence as a cathartic release of emotions and the subsequent dismissal of it (e.g. S02E03; S04S21; S07E03). In fact, they have over 40 physical altercations with one another throughout the seasons, though some of them may be disregarded as being under the influence of supernatural forces. Many of these altercations, however, stem from worry or rejection. Dean's perception of being solely responsible for others' (especially Sam's) wellbeing elevates his pressure to perform, further complicating the essence of the brothers' relationship. Arguably the first character that alleviates that feeling for Dean is Castiel.

Castiel is introduced at the beginning of season four as the angel that saves Dean from hell and as someone who is immediately able to discern Dean's lack of self-worth (S04E01 41:20-

41:40). As someone who constructed his ego on his ability to help others, being saved, especially by an angel, is uncomfortable for Dean. Considering his upbringing, Dean likely thinks that, if he is not able to save himself, he is not worth saving, a fact Castiel recognises. The masculinity Dean is trying to emulate relies on independence, strength, and endurance. He thinks of himself as a saviour rather than someone in need of saving and likely attributes needing to be saved as a personal failure. Considering that angels are commanded by God, there is an added layer of humiliation for Dean needing to be rescued by a father figure, because Dean likely assumes the helper to be disappointed in Dean's inability to manage on his own. Given that Dean constantly strives to be accepted, he likely already presumes the angel's disappointment in him. Castiel, as one of the only characters on the show, is seemingly able to see past Dean's performative masculinity immediately, disregard it, and connect with Dean beyond it. As a result, Dean is able to form a more equal relationship with Castiel than with Sam; one that allows him to occasionally reveal struggles and imperfections he does not share with his brother and one Castiel refers to as a "profound bond" (S06E03 15:39-15:45). Over the seasons, Castiel and Dean's relationship evolves from a tentative alliance to best friends. Castiel is continuously portrayed as prioritising Dean's wishes, safety, and needs over his own, a fact Castiel acknowledges in season five, merely one year after their first meeting. "I killed two angels this week. My brothers. I'm hunted. I rebelled. And I did it, all of it, for you" (S05E02 4:49-4:57). This is indicative of their relationship throughout the show, a fact frequently understood and abused by their enemies, e.g. by Metatron²² in season nine, after he kills Dean and talks to an incarcerated Castiel.

So Gadreel bites the dust. And the Angel tablet, arguably the most powerful instrument in the history of the universe, is in pieces, and for what again? Oh, that's right, to save Dean Winchester. That was your goal, right? I mean, you draped yourself in the flag of heaven, but ultimately, it was all about saving one human, right? (S09E23 33:53-34:27)

This quote shows that Metatron understands a quintessential truth about Castiel that Dean will only understand at the end of the series, namely that most of Castiel's actions are to protect Dean at all costs. Even trying to save heaven in season nine is ultimately only an excuse for Castiel, whose underlying cause will always be Dean's safety. This relationship dynamic parallels Sam and Dean's and is equally co-dependent, with Castiel mirroring Dean and Dean mirroring Sam. This willingness to sacrifice everything to save Dean, which is also the reason for Castiel's eventual final death in season 15, is inconsistent with the way Dean views himself

²² An angel and the Scribe of God who intends to become God in season nine.

and adds to his constant state of cognitive dissonance. Dean's low self-worth due to external pressure and inability to perform adequately result in the understanding that Dean is not worth saving yet Castiel is willing to sacrifice his own life for him. This is a monumental observation for Dean. While Sam and his father have acted similarly on occasion, Dean likely perceives this as a familial obligation rather than free will. Hence, Castiel's continuous care and interest in Dean and his wellbeing mark an important change in Dean's journey that, with the help of Castiel, eventually leads to his understanding that he is not the worthless soldier God intended him to be. Dean's bond with Castiel is likely the first time Dean experiences such unconditional care since his mother died.

In terms of the use of violence, Dean's relationship with Castiel is portrayed differently than his and Sam's. While pain is certainly a primary characteristic of Dean and Castiel's relationship, it is predominantly emotional pain caused by hurtful words and betrayal. Apart from one instance of Castiel physically assaulting Dean in season five, episode 18, because Dean surrenders to heaven's wishes after Castiel rebelled for him, the only two major physical altercations between Dean and Castiel happen in season eight, episode twelve, and in season ten, episode 22, with Castiel being mind-controlled in the former and Dean in the latter. These two scenes are relevant because they exemplify the nature and intensity of Dean and Castiel's bond. Both scenes follow the same narrative scheme, namely one man being compelled to kill the other under the influence of the supernatural but being able to overcome it at the last second.



Figure 18 Castiel assaulting Dean (S08E17 33:16)
[brightness +40%]



Figure 19 Castiel sparing Dean (S08E17 33:42)
[brightness +40%]



Figure 20 Dean assaulting Castiel (S10E22 41:11) [brightness +40%]



Figure 21 Dean sparing Castiel (S10E22 41:32) [brightness +40%]

While the scenes parallel each other, the camera angles contrast each other as both scenes favour Dean's perspective. While figure 20 is a low angle shot, intended to represent Castiel's dominance over Dean in this moment, figure 21's high angle shot expresses Castiel's vulnerability at Dean's hands, both impressions highlighting Dean's point of view due to their perspective over Dean's shoulder. Hence, the viewer is encouraged to relate to him, seeing Castiel being able to overcome mind control because of Dean in the first scene and not defending himself against Dean in the second scene. The dichotomy of their bleeding faces and the fact that they are holding onto each other's hands in figures 2 and 4 displays their complex relationship and signals the connection present despite their altercation. The lingering shot of the knife next to Castiel in figure 5 centralises the fact that, despite being cursed, Dean is not able to kill Castiel the same way Castiel is unable to kill Dean. In both scenes, their close bond eventually overcomes the external supernatural influences²³. This narrative of their relationship transcending the will of the supernatural, which will be further analysed in section six, exemplifies the willingness of many of Dean's inner social circle to sacrifice everything for him. Another example for this is Dean's relationship with Benny.

Benny Lafitte is a vampire Dean meets and with whom he forms an alliance while stuck in purgatory, whose close bond, despite only physically appearing in seven episodes in season eight, is indicative of the close emotional bonds Dean forms with other men. As established, Dean portrays a soldierly masculinity that allows him to primarily connect closely with other men as brothers in arms. Despite Dean's prior insistence of monsters being exclusively and inherently evil, to the extent of Dean forcing his brother to kill a female werewolf Sam had started a romantic relationship with (S02E17), Dean and Benny quickly become friends and fight alongside each other to find Castiel and escape purgatory, which, among all different physical places introduced in the canon, may be seen as the most interesting for the scope of

²³ In the first scene, it is Dean telling Castiel that he needs him (S08E17 33:23-33:31) and in the second, Dean stops after Castiel says "please" (S10E22 41:10-41:13).

this paper and will be analysed in detail in section 6.2. In terms of bonding, however, Dean and Benny's bond further signifies Dean's growing defiance of John's ideals, who taught Dean a dichotomous worldview that clearly divides humans and supernatural beings in two categories, namely 'good' and 'evil' respectively. While Castiel may be seen as the first person to disrupt this binary thinking, Benny's friendship may, in some ways, be seen as more transgressive for Dean, due to the Christian idolatry of angels and angelic power that is conveyed on the show. Castiel's status as Angel of the Lord, while decisively non-human, elevates him in comparison to other creatures. Benny, however, is a prototypical example of what John considers 'Other'²⁴ and as deserving of being hunted. Contrary to John's concept of a vampire, Benny saves Dean's life repeatedly in purgatory, is insistent on remaining friends after their return to earth, and eventually agrees to let Dean kill him to help him²⁵. Hence, Dean and Benny's bond is not only exemplary of Dean forming relationships with other men as brothers in arms but also indicative of Dean's continuous process of rejecting John's doctrine. Another bond that forces Dean to reflect on John's imparted ideals is the one he shares with Jack.

Jack Kline, the son of the archangel Lucifer and the human Kelly Kline, is introduced in the season twelve finale and becomes a surrogate son for Dean, Sam, and Castiel. While only present in three seasons, Jack is part of the main cast and his and Dean's relationship is portrayed as complicated and unstable. Because Jack is the antichrist, Dean initially views him as inherently evil. This further establishes the concept of biological determinism that Dean has internalised as immutable fact. While relevant throughout the show, especially the later seasons are centred around the theme of determinism vs. free will, or, specifically in the case of Jack, nature vs. nurture. Hence, Jack's existence in their lives forces Dean to re-evaluate his approach and conceptualisation of fatherhood, which reveals the extent to which he has internalised and accepted a deterministic worldview. While previously portrayed as believing in free will and rejecting fate as a mere determinant of a person's life, Dean's relationship with Jack exposes a deeper-rooting acceptance of determinism. Jack's fate as the antichrist that is predetermined to bring on the end of the world is an insurmountable obstacle for Dean. Eventually, due to Sam and Castiel's insistence on nurture being more important, Dean gradually changes his point of view. However, it seems impossible for Dean to fully convert to Sam and Castiel's beliefs, remaining in an unstable position, where he believes in free will when they are physically safe but immediately reverts to deterministic thinking when stressed or attacked. This indicates an

²⁴ The concept of monsters as the Other will be analysed in full detail in section 6.2.

²⁵ Dean needs help to save his brother, who is stuck in purgatory. Benny agrees to let Dean kill him, which returns Benny to purgatory, where monsters go after their death, to help Sam (S08E19).

instability in Dean's belief system that is congruent with the understanding of Dean's constant internal journey of self-discovery and rejection of John's ideals outlined in section 3.3.. The cognitive dissonance Dean faces with Jack is due to his conviction that Jack must become like his father, which leads Dean to believe that he is destined to become like John, a fate he is trying to avoid. In the season 14 finale, Dean makes a significant decision towards rejecting the deterministic worldview John is subscribed to and God forces on him by refusing to shoot Jack, despite God's insistence (S14E20). This is a remarkable scene because Dean's choice is immediately nullified by God killing Jack himself after Dean refuses to do so, which resets Dean's belief system to an unstable position. Overall, Dean's relationship with Jack textualises his struggle with free will and determinism, the role of his father's imparted ideals, and Dean's concept of fatherhood. One of the few close relationships that does not force Dean to confront himself but rather allows him to embrace also his less-moral inclinations is his relationship with Crowley.

Crowley is a demon, the King of Hell, and, at the end of his life, an ally and close confidante to Dean. While initially introduced as a villain, Crowley is soon portrayed as a reluctant protagonist, who despite his insistence to the contrary, helps Dean, Sam, and Castiel consistently in the later seasons. Despite having a connection with all three, Crowley's connection with Dean is significantly stronger than with Sam or Castiel. While perceivable before season ten, Dean's time as a demon while bearing the Mark of Cain is a driving force in their relationship. This time solidifies Crowley's emotions towards Dean, with whom he intends to rule the world.

Think of it. The King of Hell, Dean Winchester by his side. Together we rule. Together we create the perfect hell. And all of this that's bloomed between us never ends. We're not ending the party. We're just moving the party. Out with the club circuit, in with the stadium tour. (S10E01 27:37-28:00)

Unlike Dean's other relationships, his bond with Crowley is not built on obligation or a common enemy but rather on the uninhibited expression of desires, likely alluding to 20th century occultist Aleister Crowley who lived according to similar principles. The fact that Crowley, as the king of hell, represents satanic temptation in a biblical sense, which is primarily a "situation in which one experiences a challenge to choose between fidelity and infidelity to one's obligations toward God" (Encyclopedia.com n.p.) adds to the religious undertones constantly present on the show. By embracing his demonic side, Dean actively chooses infidelity. In Freud's terms, Dean and Crowley's relationship is built on the temptation of an unconditional

expression of the Id, which is primarily comprised of passion and instinct (25). As Dean has been working towards the creation of the perfect ego, a super-ego imposed by John since his early childhood (see 3.2.), the escape of this constant state of perceived inadequacy likely seems highly alluring. Additionally, the Mark of Cain supernaturally heightens Dean's desire to release his Id, especially in connection to violence, and limits his ego's ability to control his actions. Crowley welcomes Dean's inclinations towards violence and accepts him even when he has killed people without trying to change him. As someone who primarily perceives love as conditional and contingent on his performance of masculinity, Dean is drawn to Crowley, who appreciates especially his most immoral actions. Interestingly, this is similar to Dean's bond with Castiel, with the difference being that Castiel appreciates Dean *despite* his most immoral actions. Nevertheless, like Castiel and Benny, Crowley cares for Dean to the extent of self-sacrifice, leaving his empire for months to spend time with Dean and eventually committing suicide to save Dean and Sam from Lucifer (S12E23).

Interestingly, most of Dean's closest connections are with supernatural beings. This further adds to the observation stated in 5.1., that Dean seems more emotionally available in spaces other than reality, and introduces the idea that Dean seemingly also feels safer to show his vulnerabilities and imperfections with non-human entities. Dean likely perceives demons, angels, or vampires as imperfect as himself, which alleviates some of the pressure to perform in front of them. Having explored the nature of Dean's upbringing, his masculinity, and his social surroundings, the following, and final, section of this thesis concerns itself with the portrayal of Dean's sexuality.

5. "They probably think you're overcompensating" – Sexuality and heteronormativity

5.1. "I don't swing that way" – homophobia and misunderstandings

While this analysis of Dean considers primarily the show itself, without considering the writers' intentions, it is important to note the contextual aspect concerning society's perception of sexuality at the time the show was aired. *Supernatural* is intended to be viewed as an alternate reality whose societal structures closely resemble the real world, as can be seen, e.g., in season 13, episode 23, when characters from another world enter Sam and Dean's, who educate the newcomers on current events. "Let me get this right. The ice caps are melting, a movie where a girl goes all the way with a fish wins best picture, and that damn fool idjit from *The Apprentice*

is president? And you call where we come from Apocalypse World?” (S13E23 01:49-02:09). As this quote demonstrates, *Supernatural* does not only resemble the real world but also comments on it in a manner reminiscent of metafiction, which, according to Patricia Waugh, defines writing that “self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact” (2). *Supernatural* consistently references real-life events, people, and eventually even reveals Sam and Dean’s entire lives to have been an ongoing story written by God²⁶. Despite this, I do not consider the show to be true metafiction from the beginning but rather fiction with a plethora of metafiction elements slowly becoming more prevalent. This is primarily because it relies in-world explanations for its similarities with the real world and even episodes like S06E15, season six, episode 15, where Sam and Dean enter a world where their lives are a tv show with actors and producers having the same names as they do in real life, will deviate enough to not fracture the fourth beyond repair. Season 15, however, changes this approach significantly by positioning God as the final and ultimate antagonist. By framing God, who has already been exposed as the writer of Sam and Dean’s story, as the opponent, the show, intentionally or unintentionally, frames the show runners and writers as the antagonist as well. With God as a metaphor for the writers, the show essentially forces its protagonists to rebel against their own creation, resulting in the understanding that both success and failure will result in their death. While all metafictional hints prior to season 15 are seemingly intended as comedic additions intended to be disregarded, the final season uses God to firmly establish Sam and Dean as characters to be handled and influenced by God at will. Despite retaining an amount of fictionality by merely using God as a metaphor, it reveals the show as an unreliable narrator that may rearrange time or lore according to story needs or societal ideals (e.g. S15E10). With that taken into consideration, I would propose the following model:

²⁶ Excerpts of God's story exist as books sold within the *Supernatural* universe by God under his pen name Carver Edlund.

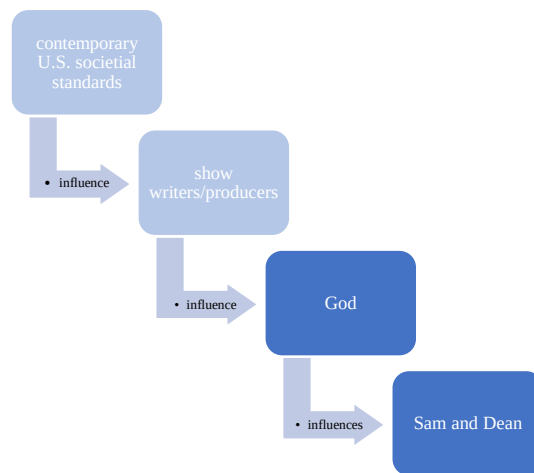


Figure 22 Influence model

As can be seen in the figure above, I would argue that the societal standards in place in the U.S. during the creation of the show implicitly impacted the show writers’/producers’ conception of God and the show itself. While the former two levels are only implicitly linked, God’s influence over Sam and Dean is, by the end of the series, explicitly stated. Additionally, this figure expresses that, despite being separated by several levels, this thesis finds a link between societal standards and Dean’s characterisation. Hence, the show’s view on sexuality and its expression is likely intended to mirror common hegemonic rhetoric in place in the U.S. at the same time, meaning that a certain extent of heteronormativity and homophobia is expected in the viewer and expressed in the canon.

Heteronormativity, a term introduced by Michael Warner (1991) that shares strong similarities with concepts published by feminist theorists such as Gayle Rubin, Judith Butler, or Monique Wittig, assumes heterosexuality, its practices, and its cultural traditions as the naturally dominant norm in society. According to Samuel Chambers, it can be seen as a “social and political force exercised through norms [and] structures”, which “[sustain] the social, political, and cultural worlds not just through its impact on ideas and beliefs, but also materially, in the way that it operates through institutions, laws, and daily practices” (both 66). Television may be seen as one of these ‘daily practices’. *Supernatural*, amongst countless other shows, expresses a specific political and cultural stance, which may influence fans and implores them to accept them as well. In addition to their religious motifs, the show also portrays a specific point of view on sexuality. Neale notes that

there is constant work to channel and regulate identification in relation to sexual division, [...] gender, sexuality, and social identity and authority marking patriarchal society. Every film tends both to assume and actively to work to renew those orders,

that division. Every film thus tends to specify identification in accordance with the socially defined and constructed categories of male and female. (Neale 11)

I agree with Neale but would go further to say that media, especially a TV show, does not only actively but also passively, sometimes even unconsciously, renew existing norms. Unlike other pieces of media, long running tv shows are more fluid as a cultural product due to their changing directors, writers, and editors who all impart their own ideals onto the show. Media and culture shape and cultivate each other, which means the society in which the production team lives shapes the construction of the show's society. Hence, especially the earlier seasons of *Supernatural* express certain homophobic tendencies that, while considered outdated from a contemporary point of view, are implemented as a form of comic relief that was popular at that time. However, if analysed from a queer theory perspective, many of these instances of homophobia also expose another layer of Dean's personality that is congruent with the understanding of Dean's masculinity detailed in the previous sections. This added layer may be characterised as a performative heterosexuality intended to mask same-sex desire. Notably, this is only clearly visible when analysing Dean, as most homosexual references and/or its negative perception on the show is expressed either towards or by Dean. In most of these cases, he is presumed to be homosexual or flirted with by men, both of which concern Dean significantly, as he expresses in the quote below.

Dean: Of course, the most troubling question is why do these people assume we're gay?

Sam: Well, you are kinda butch. Probably think you're overcompensating.

Dean: Right. (S02E11 9:25-9:37)

As established in the prior sections, Dean works meticulously and constantly on the perfection of his masculine persona. However, the quote above clarifies, both to Dean and to the viewer, that this endeavour does not go unnoticed by other characters and may in fact lead to the opposite of Dean's desired result: Dean is perceived as homosexual, which, for him, signifies a lack of manliness. While this scene, and others like it, may be discarded as intended comedic relief with homophobic undertones, I would argue that it is highly relevant to the construction and representation of Dean's sexuality both because of the delivery of the lines and the fact that this conversation ends the scene.

While Dean's initial question is posed with a certain sense of incredulity and ridicule, Sam's answer is not but is instead delivered in an explanatory, even tone that seemingly disarms Dean's proposed levity. With that in mind, Dean's simple reply and physical demeanour, i.e. looking down, imply insecurity. Furthermore, ending the scene with this conversation and

Dean's visible discomfort accentuates the topic for the viewer despite the hard cut introducing a new scene immediately after and might lead to questioning Dean's feelings on the topic. In general, Dean's outward reaction to being confronted with situations involving the assumption that he is not heterosexual is to become flustered and angry (S01E18 12:53-13:24; S10E05) whereas his reaction to being flirted with, usually by enemies, is immediate denial (e.g. "I don't swing that way" (S02E09 15:34-15:37). However, it is Dean's repeating insistence on his heterosexuality that compromises it, according to David Halperin. "[A]s all the world knows, there's no quicker or surer way to compromise your own heterosexuality than by proclaiming it. After all, if you were really straight, why would you have to say so?" (48). Chambers agrees with Halperin here, stating that "we need not ask, since everyone is always already presumed to be straight" (68). In the heteronormative world of *Supernatural*, where characters are presumed heterosexual unless stated otherwise, Dean's insistent proclamation that he is functions to repeatedly raise a seemingly unnecessary question. The generic viewer presumes Dean's heterosexuality, a presumption seemingly confirmed by Dean's exclusively female sex partners. In this case, Dean's continuous insistence that he is heterosexual adds confusion rather than confirmation, especially since most of these interactions are with enemies who merely intend to taunt him. Interestingly, the only time Dean is approached by a man who is not an enemy and is seemingly interested in him, Dean reacts differently.

Dean: Special Agent Bolan. [putting his badge on the table]

Adam: Oh, really? Wow. I thought you were like a headhunter or something.

Dean: This is the second, maybe third time I'm seeing you today? Why you following me, Gingerbread?

Adam: Oh, so we, um, we didn't have a thing back there, huh?

Dean: Back where? W-what, now?

Adam: I'm sorry, man. I – I thought – I thought we had a thing back at the quad, you know, a little eye magic moment, and I saw you here [Dean starts to slowly retract his badge] and I figured I'd wait until you were done with your meeting and then maybe we might, uh-

Dean: Yeah. Uh, okay, but no, uh, no moment. This is a... federal investigation.

Adam: Is that supposed to make you less interesting?

No. I – I'm sorry, man. I hope – I hope I didn't freak you out or anything.

Dean: No. No. I – I'm n-not freaked out. It's just a, you know, a federal thing. It's, uh, okay, citizen. As you were.

Adam: You have a good night.

Dean: You, you have a – [Dean bumping into tables while backing away] Okay.
(S08E13 15:17-16:33)

As soon as Adam voices his intention for following Dean, Dean's entire demeanour changes. Physically, he begins to fidget and becomes clumsy. As visible in the quote above, Dean's speech pattern changes drastically and he begins to stutter, which lasts throughout the entire scene. As none of these traits are characteristic for Dean, this encounter is clearly significant and indicates a certain anxiety usually not present when flirted with by others. I would argue that Dean is unsuspecting in this scene, which results in him dropping his persona, revealing a different version of him. Most interestingly, this version of Dean does not state that he does not 'swing that way' unlike all previous scenes where men flirt with Dean. Instead, Dean declines Adam's advances because he is in the middle of a case, which is an interesting choice because it leaves a theoretical possibility of pursuing Adam at a later point. With the knowledge revealed in subsequent scenes, that Adam is not interested in Dean but following him because they were looking into his grandfather's death, taken into consideration, the following screenshots from this conversation express an interesting nonverbal communication alongside their verbal one.



Figure 23 (S08E13 16:08) [+20% brightness]



Figure 24 (S08E13 16:09) [+20% brightness]



Figure 25 (S08E13 16:10) [+20% brightness]

In the first figure, Adam is asking if working for the FBI is supposed to make Dean less interesting, clearly flirting with him after Dean's initial, if somewhat unsure, rejection. However, Dean's lack of reply and confused, arguably pensive, look causes Adam to reconsider and change the course of the conversation. From this analysis' point of view, it is possible that Adam intended to flirt with Dean to be seen as a harmless, forgettable interaction but Dean's demeanour communicated an unexpected insecurity around, and perhaps willingness to continue, this conversation. Hence, Adam's flirtatious smile drops and he ends the conversation shortly after. Interestingly, Dean comments on Adam's advances later in the episode after it is revealed that they were insincere, stating that "[i]t was really good. You really had me there. It was very smooth" (S08E13 18:58-19:01), followed by the expression seen below.



Figure 26 (S08E13 19:01)

Confessing that Adam's ruse would work on him is rather uncharacteristic for Dean, who usually tends to deny or make jokes about being deceived by others. Instead, the sincere admission and the screenshot in the figure above seem to indicate regret, for allowing himself to be deceived, and perhaps a sense of rejection and introspection. While never remarked on again, Dean and Adam's interactions mark a stark contrast to the way Dean usually acts when confronted with the topic of homosexuality.

In the later seasons, there is a noticeable shift in Dean's outward approach to homosexuality over the seasons from being exaggeratedly disgusted, uncomfortable or angry (S04E12 13:51-14:30) to being confused, nonchalant, or reacting positively (S10E22; S11E19). Still, the show remains largely heteronormative and any subversions thereof are usually explicitly stated, which concurs with Chambers understanding that "[c]hallenges to heteronormativity must be foregrounded and acclaimed (even if they appear where least expected) to increase their chance of becoming successful subversions" (103). However, despite likely not being intended as challenges to heteronormativity, the show frequently questions Dean's sexuality both explicitly and implicitly with the help of the plot. For example, in season 4, episode 14, the brothers hunt a Siren, a creature that disguises itself as the perfect mate to lure men. While every connection between the siren and its victims is described to be of sexual nature and it usually presents as a beautiful woman, for Dean, the siren presents as a male FBI officer named Nick, who likes the same things as Dean (S04E14). While textually explained as Dean needing a little brother, I would argue that it exemplifies Dean's desire to connect deeply with another man, the same desire that helps create his homosocial space. However, the possibility of homosexual desire along his homosocial one does not fit the heteronormative structure of the show, hence its suppression. This fits Neale's understanding that "male homosexuality is constantly present as an undercurrent, as a potentially troubling aspect of many films and genres, but one that is dealt with obliquely, symptomatically, and that has to be repressed" (19). Textually, this symptomatic treatment of Dean's recurring confrontation with homosexuality results in episodic moments of confusion for both Dean and the viewer without resolution but rather the subsequent dismissal

of them. However, on a subtextual level, this issue is more frequent and offers metaphors otherwise overlooked, which will be analysed in the next section.

5.2. Subtext and the monstrous Other

Supernatural offers a plethora of subtext and metaphors to analyse regarding Dean's sexuality, the most important of which, for the course of this thesis, are heterotopic spaces, Othering, and visual or textual hints. A heterotopia, according to Michel Foucault, in his work *Of Other Spaces* (1986), describes places in society that have "the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (24). They are seen as being "outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" and in them, real places are "represented, contested, and inverted" (both Foucault 24). In other words, a heterotopia is distinctly separate from society and therefore allows an analysis of it. While sometimes disregarded as being too structuralist an approach (e.g. Saldanha 2008), i.e. too confining and absolute, which does not allow for the individuality, transience and complexity of society, the concept of heterotopia is well suited for the world of *Supernatural*, since spaces such as purgatory are clearly differentiated from the characters' 'normal' reality.

While primarily happening off-screen, Dean's time in purgatory²⁷ is highly relevant. Functioning as a liminal space Dean is stuck in, purgatory may be understood as a form of heterotopia that impacts Dean significantly. Being in purgatory offers insight into his psyche and his feelings on the society in which he lives. Hence, purgatory is portrayed as a lawless, perpetual battlefield. Dean, as the only human in it, is constantly fighting for his survival against a never-ending stream of monsters. Initially, this may indicate a metaphorical conception of Dean's apparent understanding of his life as a perpetual battle or even a simple portrayal of Dean's hatred of monsters. However, Dean refers to his time in purgatory as it being 'pure' (S08E01), seemingly framing purgatory as a metaphor for freedom, escapism, or perhaps even referencing a religious purification of the soul. According to Catholic Christian belief, purgatory is "the condition, process, or place of purification or temporary punishment in which [...] the souls of those who die in a state of grace are made ready for heaven" (Zaleski n.p.) and commonly perceived as the place people go to after death if they have committed venial, i.e. lesser, sins they have not yet repented. This is relevant because in *Supernatural*, the afterlife,

²⁷ It is important to note that Dean's presence in purgatory was entirely accidental and no human, including him, is supposed to enter the place.

similarly to Protestant Christian belief, does not offer this middle ground. Human souls are either good or bad and hence either go to heaven or hell respectively. Instead, purgatory is a place solely dedicated to monsters²⁸ after they die. This is an interesting fact because monsters may be perceived as a representation of the Other.

The concept of the 'Other' in opposition to the self is established by Simone De Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* (1997), though it incorporates and builds on earlier work from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's concept of the 'Master-Slave Dialectic' in his 1807 work *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1994) and is used and further defined by various theorists, such as Jacques Lacan or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In a contemporary setting, the Other is generally used to describe the distinct differentiation of the self and not-self, the norm and its disruption, or the 'us' and 'them'. In other words, Othering describes the stereotyping of specific subgroups of people, often based on race, gender, or sexuality. As, on the show, monsters are clearly viewed as the Other by most hunters, especially John, Dean emulates this binary thinking. However, this belief has certain connotations from a queer theory perspective due to the popular portrayal of the queer as the monstrous and evil in 20th century media that is still persistent in contemporary media, now often under the guise of the 'queer-coded villain' trope. Harry Benshoff remarks on this connotation in his work *The Monster and The Homosexual* (1996), stating that "monster is to 'normality' as homosexual is to heterosexuality" (117). Considering that Dean is repeatedly confronted with queer coded advances from male monsters, the monsters in *Supernatural* may be considered a metaphor for the monstrous, queer Other. Subsequently, if the monsters from the show are queer and go to purgatory after death, which, in Christianity, is seen as a place to be purged from sin, *Supernatural's* purgatory may be seen as a place that, metaphorically, is meant to cleanse its inhabitants from homosexuality. Within that context, Dean's time in purgatory is highly significant, especially considering that this is where he meets Benny Lafitte.

As a vampire in purgatory, Benny may be seen as a representation of the monstrous, queer Other. Unlike the other monsters Dean encounters in purgatory, Benny does not want to kill but rather become allies with Dean to escape purgatory together and return to earth. Metaphorically, this alliance and their subsequent friendship signifies Dean's acceptance of the Other as a part of him rather than his enemy to be murdered in perpetuity. This is supported by the fact that Benny needs to physically become a part of Dean via a spell to pass through a gateway (S08E07

²⁸ The term 'monsters', in this thesis, always excludes demons and angels, who are to be seen as separate beings. Additionally, when talking about purgatory, 'monsters' also excludes witches because they have human souls and will go to heaven or hell after death.

18:41-19:22), meaning Dean is consenting to the metaphorical Other entering Dean's body. Hence, while Christian purgatory is intended to purge sinners so they may eventually ascend to heaven, *Supernatural's* purgatory inverts this concept by letting Dean fuse with the metaphorical sin to release it on earth. An additional element relevant to this reading is the fact that Dean spends his entire time in purgatory searching for Castiel and makes this search a condition for Benny's escape, implicitly linking Dean's acceptance of homosexuality to the presence of Castiel. While Benny and Castiel are two of the more prominent examples of Dean's subtextual homosexual desire and the show textually questions Dean's sexuality repeatedly, there is also a plethora of textual and visual references that may be intended to question Dean's sexual preferences as well.

The importance of men in Dean's life is often portrayed visually, usually via the exclusion of women on screen or the subtext of the scene itself. In terms of the absence of women, section five already details the homosocial space Dean Winchester inhabits. However, it is not only his reality that is predominantly male but also his heaven. There are two versions of heaven in *Supernatural*, the original version and one re-imagined by Jack at the end of the series, which replaces the former. In the original heaven, a human soul may perpetually relive their favourite memories (e.g. S05E16), while the new version allows agency to the degree of effectively constituting a second earth with one major difference being complete absence of pain (S15E20). Interestingly, in both versions, Dean's heaven is portrayed as entirely male-populated, apart from his mother, which implies that women are seemingly not as important to Dean as may be indicated by the text. Additionally, text itself often seems to include subtextual hints towards homosexual desire. For example, season 11, episode 13 discusses Dean and Amara's relationship in a way that clearly imitates common coming out stories by framing their bond as something Dean is ashamed of but ultimately unable to ignore.

Amara: Who I am doesn't matter. The real question is who are you?

Dean: What do you mean who am I?

Amara: You're a mystery. I can see inside your heart. Feel the love you feel. Except it's cloaked in shame. When it comes to this, you can't help yourself, so why fight it. Just give in. (S11E13 34:27-35:10)

While about a supernatural and heterosexual relationship, Amara's description is quite similar to the common concept of homosexual love being cloaked in shame and denial. Asking who Dean truly is unintentionally foreshadows Dean and Mary's conversation in season 12, episode 22, mentioned in the previous section, where Dean begs Mary to see him for who he really is

(S12E22). Both these scenes imply that the Dean portrayed on screen is not his true self but rather a performance hiding the real him underneath; one that he seems both willing and unable to release. The reason Dean is hiding his true self is expressed in a later scene from season 11, episode 13, as can be seen below.

Dean: It was Amara.

Sam: That surprise you?

Dean: That doesn't surprise you?

Sam: Honestly?

Dean: Honestly? You seriously think the sister of God is my deepest darkest desire?

Sam: She isn't?

Dean: No! She can't be!

Sam: Why not?

Dean: Why? Because if she is that means that I'm...

Sam: Means you're what? Complicit? Weak? Evil?

Dean: For starters, yeah.

Sam: Dean. Do you honestly think you ever had a choice in the matter? She's the sister of God, and for some reason she picked you and that sucks, but if you think I'm gonna blame you or judge you...I'm not. (S11E13 38:22-39:14)

Similar to the quotes discussed above, this conversation functions on two levels. On a textual level, Sam consoles Dean about his inability to overcome his bond with Amara. On a subtextual level, however, this conversation mirrors talking about coming to terms with one's sexual orientation. Dean's conception of himself as evil because of circumstances beyond his control formulate the essence of Dean's self-worth, namely his understanding that he is inherently lacking and, hence, undeserving of a good life. On a subtextual level, this concurs with research on the impact of internalised homophobia on a person's life. Michael Cornish, in his work on internalised homophobia (2012), states that the negative attitude towards homosexuality that is learnt by the individual will, upon registration of their own homosexual inclinations, be directed towards oneself, which results in a loss of self-worth (23). Additionally, him and Alan Maylon (1982) agree that this internal contradiction leads to an "intrapsychic conflict [that] interferes with the individual's developmental processes" (Cornish 122). As stated in section 4.2., Dean is already in a constant state of cognitive dissonance because of his unachievable standard of masculinity. His textual bond with Amara and the subtextual implications of non-heteronormative desires add further instability and confusion for Dean. When combining the

concept of Othering, which reveals *Supernatural*'s monsters to be a metaphor for homosexuality, with Cornish's understanding of internalised homophobia, it can be argued that Dean's reaction to his and Amara's bond may be seen as a metaphorical representation of Dean's endeavour to suppress his homosexual desires. However, as established in section 5, Amara, as a beautiful woman, is also a representation of Dean's inability to escape his masculine performance. Hence, Dean is confronted with an, for him, unsolvable problem because accepting Amara's advances concurs with his masculine ideal but is incompatible with his concept of the Other as evil and vice versa. Dean's subsequent choice to kill Amara by sacrificing himself (S11E23) proves Dean's apparent inability to choose either option and further establishes his desperation due to his inadequate performance. Instead of this, however, Amara, as the insurmountable problem, is removed from the metaphorical chess board by disappearing with God and Dean's constant internal battle remains unaddressed. While the only woman, Amara is not the only supernatural character that is used to imply Dean's homosexual desire. In fact, Dean and his relationships with supernatural men, especially Castiel, are frequently paralleled and mirrored by heterosexual relationships, which will be discussed in the following section.

5.3. Parallels and Text – Dean and Castiel

In *Supernatural*, sexual identity, especially Dean's sexuality, is both never and constantly discussed, with every refusal to discuss it merely accentuating the need to do so. This aligns with how Chambers defines the existence of homosexuality in society, stating that "[t]he defining feature of gay identity in a heteronormative society can thereby be articulated as follows: if you are gay you must disclose your sexual identity and you must not disclose that identity" (34). This means that a non-normative sexuality is not present unless specifically and textually stated but also that it should not be disclosed at all. While I believe this approach to have changed to some extent since Chamber's definition in 2009, it does fit the first few seasons of *Supernatural*, where homosexuality was primarily implemented as comic relief and not as a normalised sexual identity allowed to be discussed. Moreover, Chamber's understanding of the expression of gay identity is similar to what Dean's understanding can be analysed to be as well. Hence, Dean's sexuality is primarily portrayed as explicitly normative and implicitly non-normative. However, arguably because of the slow but constant cultural change surrounding

the public's opinion of homosexuality during the show's airtime, the subtextual occasionally becomes textual despite remaining unaddressed. For Dean, this is primarily done via parallels, the creation of crypto-gay relationships and sub-plots, and the evolution of Dean and Castiel's relationship.

Mirroring and parallels are a frequently used tool on *Supernatural* and especially often employed to parallel Dean and, in most cases, Castiel to a heterosexual couple, usually Sam and a female love interest, in similar situations. The first time this can be seen on the show is in season four, when Dean and Castiel's relationship is compared with Sam's relationship with the demon Ruby. Despite Ruby and Castiel being diametrically opposed, Castiel being the angel who saved Dean from hell and Ruby the demon that leads Sam towards it, their storylines with the Winchester brothers are similar in terms of the supernatural beings gaining their trust. Eventually, however, Ruby is revealed as an enemy and her story line ended while Castiel remains by Dean's side. This is exemplary for all these parallels involving Dean and Castiel's relationship as Castiel's mirror character is repeatedly discarded while the angel is not. One of the most interesting mirrors that is not related to Sam is likely Dean and Castiel's parallel to Cain and his wife Colette, which has already been introduced in section 4.3. Colette accepting Cain's murderous past while asking him "for one thing. To stop" (S09E11 33:04-33:10) and eventually dying by Cain's hand is directly paralleled in Dean and Castiel's season ten story line, with the singular exception that Dean cannot murder Castiel after he asks him to stop. This is significant because it not only likens Dean's and Castiel's relationship to a romantic one but also frames their connection to be closer than that of a romantic relationship. In fact, the unique closeness of their relationship is frequently commented on in the show by other characters and even visually highlighted with a mark on Dean's shoulder in the form of Castiel's handprint, which Dean receives when Castiel raises him from hell.



Figure 27 Castiel's handprint (S04E01 5:25)

This handprint, though inexplicably absent in later seasons, represents Castiel's connection to Dean and visualises his influence on him. This connection results in a lack of female love

interests for Dean the longer Castiel remains by his side, with Amara in season 11 being the last possible female love interest and the beginning of season 13 the last time the show portrays Dean having a sexual encounter with a woman (S13E05). Instead, Castiel assumes the role of Dean's partner to parallel Sam's relationships with other women, such as Jessica or Eileen. This is often expressed via visual parallels and the way scenes are shot and executed, as can be seen below.



Figure 28 Jessica's death (S01E01 44:41)



Figure 29 Castiel's imminent death (S12E23 37:14)

Dean trying to save Castiel from certain death is shot and framed in clear similarity to Sam trying to do the same with Jessica twelve seasons prior. As Jessica's death may be seen as one of the most pivotal scenes in the series²⁹, referencing and paralleling it in season twelve puts Castiel firmly in the narrative position of Dean's significant other. This is even more significant when considering that Jessica's death scene is already a parallel to Mary's death portrayed in the beginning of the same episode. Hence, these scenic parallels connect John, Sam, and Dean via the loss of a loved one. Interestingly, Castiel functions as Dean's surrogate partner again in a similar setting in season 15.



Figure 30 Charlie losing her girlfriend (S15E18 12:55)



Figure 31 Sam losing his girlfriend (S15E18 19:13)



Figure 32 Dean losing Castiel (S15E18 40:39)

²⁹ Because it marks the true beginning of Sam and Dean's work together.

In episode 18 of the final season, when God evaporates everyone on earth³⁰, only three disappearances are shown individually. Two of them feature characters losing their significant other, the third one is Dean losing Castiel. Hence, while this episode signifies a shift in their relationship that will be analysed in further detail below, Castiel's function as a substitute for Dean's romantic partners likens them as something John Clum calls a "crypto-gay couple" (n.p.)

Dean and Castiel's relationship becomes increasingly close over the course of the show to the extent of both dismissing possible female love interests for Dean and placing Castiel in this role instead, likening them to a couple while retaining their presumed heterosexuality. A crypto-gay couple, according to John Clum, defines two men that are ostensibly heterosexual but seemingly desire each other (Clum pnd). Because this desire cannot be expressed due to cultural masculinity and sexuality norms, their desire is displaced in a homosocial environment where both men's storylines focus primarily on each other, excluding or neglecting possible heterosexual love interests. Markus Rheindorf, who applies this concept to two same-sex relationships in the TV shows *Nip/Tuck* and *Six Feet Under*, additionally theorises that the two men's masculinities are essentially contrasting in their portrayal (3), which, while not necessarily true for all crypto-gay couples, certainly applies to Dean and Castiel. While being portrayed by a male actor and seemingly comfortable with being labelled a man, Castiel, as an angel, is essentially agender and is initially portrayed as being without preference for any gender. In fact, he is seen to occupy female vessels on several occasions (e.g. S04E20; S12E10). However, as Castiel seemingly becomes attached to his male vessel and male pronouns without any statement to the contrary, I will, for the scope of this paper, analyse him as a male character. However, primarily due to his complex gender background, his portrayal of masculinity is entirely different from Dean's. In fact, Dean seemingly understands this, as he often tries to coach Castiel to become more masculine, especially by pushing him to have sexual encounters with women (e.g. S05E03; S12E12). Dean is not the only character to remark on Castiel's disregard of hegemonic masculinity and sexuality ideals. In fact, it is frequently hinted at by alluding to Castiel having romantic feelings towards Dean, e.g. when the angel Balthazar tells Dean that "[y]ou have me confused with the other angel, you know, the one in the dirty trenchcoat who's in love with you" (S06E17 18:48-18:53). This way, the narrative continuously emphasises Dean and Castiel's bond and reminds the viewer of Castiel's non-normative behaviour by repeatedly foregrounding its perception by others. Hence, while Dean and Castiel,

³⁰ except the Winchester brothers, Jack, Castiel, and Death, the latter two being taken by the Empty in the same episode.

as a crypto-gay couple, do not expressively state their desires but instead create an increasingly homosocial bond to displace these feelings, other characters continuously emphasise the failure of their endeavour by explicitly alluding to the romantic undertones of Dean and Castiel's relationship. Eventually, the narrative becomes too romantic to be dismissed as merely homosocial, resulting in the dissolution of the crypto-gay couple construction when Castiel confesses his love for Dean towards the end of the series, which may be regarded as one of the most influential impacts on Dean's identity. However, even before that, Dean and Castiel's relationship changes significantly throughout season 15. The aftermath of Mary and Jack's deaths causes a rupture leading to their separation in episode three.

Castiel: The plan changed, Dean. Something went wrong. You know this. Something always goes wrong.

Dean: Yeah, why does that something always seem to be you?

Castiel: You used to trust me, give me the benefit of the doubt. Now you can barely look at me. My powers are failing, and – and **I've tried to talk to you**, over and over, and you just don't want to hear it. **You don't care**. I'm dead to you. You still blame me for Mary.

Castiel: Well, I don't think there's anything left to say.

Dean: **Where you going?**

Castiel: Jack's dead. Chuck's gone. You and Sam have each other. I think **it's time for me to move on**. (S15E03 38:58-40:19; emphasis added)

Even though Dean, as Castiel references in the scene above, has told Castiel before this scene that he is 'dead to him', Castiel's announcement that he is going to leave surprises him. Despite these fights, Dean seemingly perceives Castiel as a permanent fixture in his life and asking where Castiel is going indicates this perfectly, which further implies the close bond they share. Additionally, this scene is framed similarly to a romantic couple's break-up, especially Castiel's side of the conversation stating his repeated tries to engage with Dean and eventual realisation that Dean has ceased to care about him. Furthermore, this dialogue exemplifies the fulfilment of their respective worst fears, Dean's fear of eventual abandonment by others and Castiel's fear of being unwanted and unloved. Dean's identity, as established, is not stable enough to feel confident in deserving love. Hence, he is constantly expecting to be abandoned by others in his life. As Castiel has been in his life for over ten years and Dean has seemingly started to feel a certain sense of security in their relationship that is otherwise only portrayed in Dean's relationship with Sam, this loss signifies a major setback for the stabilisation process of Dean's

identity. This, combined with Dean's already fragile sense of self due to the revelation of God's extent of manipulation throughout their lives likely contributes to Dean's subsequent erratic, at times un-characteristic, behaviour throughout the season, e.g. threatening to shoot Sam for stalling his plan to kill God (S15E17), a plan that seemingly becomes Dean's sole purpose of existence. Narratively speaking, this is emblematic of Dean's inability to escape John, as Dean's endeavour to kill God because he sees him as the evil that destroyed Dean's life is a direct mirror to John's hunt for Azazel for the same reason in the beginning of the series. Dean's return to John's narrative when he is at his lowest emphasises Dean's unstable self-worth that, upon the slightest push, quickly deteriorates back to his initial understanding of being nothing more than "daddy's blunt little instrument" (S03E10). This is true until Castiel confesses his love for Dean in episode 18 of the last season, which causes a significant shift.

Castiel: When Jack was dying, I made a deal to save him.

Dean: You what?

Castiel: The price was my life. When I experienced a moment of true happiness, the Empty would be summoned, and it would take me forever.

Dean: Why are you telling me this now?

Castiel: I always wondered, ever since I took that burden, that curse, I wondered what it could be? What my true happiness could even look like. I never found an answer because the one thing I want, it's something I know I can't have. But I think I know, I think I know now. Happiness isn't in the having, it's in just being. It's in just saying it.

Dean: What are you talking about, man?

Castiel: I know. I know how you see yourself, Dean. You see yourself the same way our enemies see you. You're destructive, and you're angry, and you're broken. You're "daddy's blunt instrument". And you think that hate and anger, that's, that's what drives you, that's who you are. It's not. And everyone who knows you sees it. Everything you have ever done, the good and the bad, you have done for love. You raised your little brother for love. You fought for this whole world for love. That is who you are. You're the most caring man on Earth. You are the most selfless, loving human being I will ever know. You know, ever since we met, ever since I pulled you out of Hell. Knowing you has changed me. Because you cared, I cared. I cared about you. I cared about Sam, I cared about Jack, I cared about the whole world because of you. You changed me, Dean.

Dean: Why does this sound like a goodbye?

Castiel: Because it is.
 Castiel: I love you.
 Dean: Don't do this, Cas.
 [The Empty appears]
 Dean: Cas?
 Castiel: Goodbye, Dean. (S15E18 35:11-38:37)

With this speech, Castiel explicitly states exactly what this thesis has analysed. Dean is neither who he thinks he is nor who he pretends to be. Despite his insistent portrayal as an aloof soldier and his understanding of being unworthy, Dean is, for the first time on screen, explicitly told how people who care about him see him in detail. By not only telling Dean how he perceives him but also how extensive his impact has been on Castiel, Dean learns that his vulnerability and emotionality that he perceives as flaws in his masculinity are, in Castiel's opinion, strengths and reasons to be loved. Arguably, this is the first time someone truly and fully understands, accepts, and loves Dean since his mother before her first death pre-series. In fact, I would argue that if Castiel were to have lived, this scene could have stabilised Dean's identity formation and likely caused a significant change in his portrayal of masculinity and sexuality. However, Dean is neither given this option, nor enough time to consciously process Castiel's speech's implications as analysed above. On the contrary, Castiel's speech functions as a trigger that allows the Empty to kill Castiel immediately after his confession. As a result, Dean is not given resolution but rather additional guilt for being responsible for Castiel's death. Hence, the implication of Dean being Castiel's true happiness and questions of whether Dean feels similarly remain undiscussed, which, like the scenes mentioned in 6.1., emphasises Dean's ambiguous sexuality more than if the show were to discuss them. Instead, Dean is shown as severely depressed after Castiel's death, which can be seen e.g. when Dean, uncharacteristically, ignores Sam's call after the angel's exit or in Dean drinking alcohol to the extent of falling asleep in their library after God refuses to bring back Castiel (S15E19). However, as stated above, Castiel's speech had a significant impact on Dean, even if the extent of it is certainly lessened by Castiel's death. This impact is clearly perceivable in episode 19, when Dean, Sam, and Jack eventually defeat God (Chuck).

Chuck: This is why you're my favourites. You know, for the first time, I have no idea what happens next. Is this where you kill me? I mean, I could never think of an ending where I lose. But this, after everything that I've done to you, to die at the hands of Sam Winchester, of **Dean Winchester, the ultimate killer**. It's kind of glorious.

Dean: Sorry, Chuck.

Chuck: What? What?

Dean: See, **that's not who I am.** (S15E19 30:54-32:03)

Until episode 18, Dean saw himself the way God intended him to be, namely a killer. However, Castiel's confession shifted Dean's self-worth substantially, allowing him to see the person Castiel saw. In fact, while I think it was detrimental to Dean's character development in the long run, in this scene, I would argue that Castiel's death might increase the impact his words have on Dean, as they were his last. Nevertheless, following this scene, Dean's storyline mirroring John's, even more so after Castiel's death, results in Dean losing his sole sense of purpose after God's defeat, which eventually leads to his death. John dies saving Dean, and, mirroring that, Dean dies saving his brother, a man he primarily raised himself. However, I would argue that, taken everything analysed in this thesis into consideration, Dean did not die as a sacrifice to save his brother but rather let himself be killed.

As established in section 4.2., Dean's final fight preceding his eventual death indicates an almost civilian fallacy entirely uncharacteristic for Dean. On the one hand, this could arguably prove the death of Dean's portrayal of *The Dean Winchester*, on the other, it also suggests a lack of survival instinct that has been expressed on the show before. As described in section 4.1., Dean is portrayed as suicidal in several instances, primarily via explicit expressions of indifference towards his own life, similar to episode 20 of the final season, where he tells Sam that "[y]ou knew it was always gonna end like this for me. It was supposed to end like this, right? I mean, look at us. Saving people, hunting things, it's what we do" (S15E20 18:58-19:10). This statement indicates that, at some point between episode 19 and 20, Dean either deteriorates from his understanding of being more than what God intended him to be back to his old beliefs or decides that it is not worth fighting beyond God's defeat. For the course of this thesis, I believe it is the latter, because of the premise of Dean's enemies in the episode, namely vampires who cut out people's tongues to silence them.

Metaphorically speaking, implementing this plot line as Dean's last fight arguably indicates how Dean has been unable to voice his true desires throughout the series and that, despite being able to save the vampires' victims, which may be seen as Sam and Dean's success over God, they cannot kill the vampire's leader, who represents Dean's suppressors, namely masculinity and heteronormative sexuality ideals. Additionally, being killed by a vampire, i.e. the Other, indicates Dean's eventual inability to accept and properly confront non-normativity. In other words, while Dean helped to save the world by defeating God, it did not free him the way the

narrative had seemingly hinted at. The inability to escape a violent death refers to the concept of biological determinism established in section three. With Castiel being introduced as the angel that disrupted God's will and rebelled against heaven for Dean, he is arguably the show's manifestation of free will, perhaps even a representation of Dean's ability to believe in free will. Hence, Castiel's death may have contributed to Dean's state of mind leading up to his death, barring him from ever truly escaping God's narrative despite defeating him. In the end, Dean dies as the expendable soldier he perceived himself to be from the beginning and seemingly welcomes death after fulfilling his duties. Even his afterlife in heaven, as analysed in 4.2., is framed as invoking a feeling of fake happiness, which is furthered by the mention of Castiel's revival off-screen. When considering Castiel as a symbol of free will, the mention of him being alive but not present indicates that in Dean's heaven, free will only exists as an abstract concept not as a real possibility. Hence, even in the afterlife, Dean is not allowed to be himself.

Finally, Dean's death signifies his incapability to fully escape the narrative his father, God, society, and he himself have determined, doomed to repeat his predetermined patterns of performativity in silence. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick theorises 'closeted-ness' to be a performance in itself, which is "initiated as such by the speech act of a silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it" (3). While being in the closet is a specific situation that, despite the textual and subtextual allusions found in this analysis, cannot be said with surety to be a problem Dean is facing, I would argue that Sedgwick's quote also applies to the broader understanding of not being allowed to be oneself. Due to the pressure of performing a certain standard of masculinity, including heterosexuality, Dean is forced to repress his real self throughout his entire life. Given that Dean's last fight is with vampires who cut out people's tongues, his death may be considered a final act of silencing him.

6. Conclusion

This thesis concerned itself with the portrayal of masculinity and sexuality regarding the protagonist Dean Winchester from the popular tv show *Supernatural*. The main objective of this research was to analyse the degree and reason for Dean's supposed performativity regarding the display of both his masculinity and sexuality as well as to examine a presumptive change in this portrayal over the course of the 15-year airtime of the show. To do this, the

research was divided into four sections, analysing his childhood, the portrayal of his masculinity, his homosociality, and his sexuality respectively.

When analysing Dean's upbringing, this research found that the society (ideals) in which *Supernatural* is embedded, the show's concept of free will, Dean's father John, the parallel between him and God, and the abusive childhood Dean (and Sam) suffered because of John are the main sources for Dean's idealised concepts of masculinity and sexuality. *Supernatural* foregrounds and elevates traditional U.S. family values such as hard work, prioritising family, self-sufficiency, and living a job-oriented life by imbuing their main protagonists with them. The hunting lifestyle incorporates these values while adding further, traditionally masculine, characteristics, such as the need for physical strength, violence, and a lack of permanency (due to a transient lifestyle). The fact that Dean is not allowed to choose his job but still burdened with the expectation of performing accordingly is the first major infringement on Dean's authentic expression of self. Ensuring and pressuring Dean into this performance from a very young age is his father John, whose role models and contemporary ideals, like the concept of the 50s male, during his own upbringing significantly shape his expectations for his son. As Dean's only role model as a child, John quickly becomes Dean's metaphorical blueprint for the construction of the ideal man and tries to meticulously construct and retain a personality that John might reward with the pride Dean desperately seeks. Contradictorily, to gain John's love and respect, Dean needs to learn how to repress his emotional needs in favour of others', especially his brother's. Hence, Dean becomes a good soldier with a killer instinct that resigns himself to the hunter life despite a textual lack of intrinsic motivation for it, sacrificing self-actualisation for the deeper-seating emotional need for love. While this already signifies a lack of free will, from season five onwards, the show exposes a meta level to free will and establishes the characters' lives as predetermined by heaven and God, stating Dean's life and future as part of God's seemingly indestructible plan. With God as a direct parallel to John, this research exposes Dean's conception of his father as an omniscient and omnipotent being impossible to contradict, which is congruent with the analysis of Dean's life under constant panopticon-like surveillance due to his lack of places to retreat in a stream of one-bedroom motels that functioned as his family's temporary homes. Additionally, this lack of proper shelter, along with patterns of belittling and blaming, general neglect, a lack of safety, proper nutrition or education, are some of many aspects that qualify Dean's childhood as traumatic, and physically as well as emotionally abusive. The neglect experienced in his childhood likely contributes to Dean's intricate endeavours to perform adequately, which was analysed in sections four to six.

The limited repertoire of male role models results in Dean needing to replicate John to secure his identity. Tying his masculinity directly to his identity causes a loss of stability in his concept of self every time he fails to perform accordingly, empowering his suicidal tendencies when confronted with failure. Hence, performing as successfully as possible becomes both more essential and more burdensome for Dean, who is repeatedly faltering under the pressure of his father's internalised ideals. His conscious, continuous endeavour to adhere to the expected version of himself is controlled by, at times arbitrary, norms and prescriptive notions that Dean tries to not only comply with but also impart on others. The artificiality of this attempt is exposed, however, due to the show's repeated reveals of the incongruity of Dean's words and actions. This research found that Dean's underlying problem concerning masculinity and its expression seemingly lies in Dean's unawareness of what constitutes a 'real' man. This lack of understanding causes him to simply accumulate learnt traits to try to belong, which is likely also why he dislikes other versions of him being perceived by others. Creating his masculine persona is an intricate and meticulous endeavour for Dean and most other versions of him seen on the show do not conform to his standard and threaten to expose the performativity of his actions. Reiterating this constant struggle, especially in the earlier seasons, are constant references to Dean's father, either via text or visually, e.g. with Dean wearing John's leather jacket. The importance of the topic of masculinity in Dean's life is reinforced by the prevalence of male characters in Dean's life.

Apart from Lisa, Mary, and Amara, this paper found that Dean, despite his claims to the contrary, seeks and values the company of men over women. While Lisa is primarily used as a tool to establish Dean's inability to be content with a heteronormative, apple-pie life, Mary's and Amara's influences are more complex. Mary, who functions as a mirror for Dean, is, once resurrected, portrayed as different than previously established and far from the perfected ideal John had worshipped, implying that Dean is also being misrepresented. Amara is found to represent heterosexual and masculine normativity as well as the monstrous Other, further reinforcing Dean's inability to fulfil his internalised ideal. While an analysis of these female characters show what Dean does not and is not, the male characters analysed portray the opposite.

Dean's relationship with Sam is based on co-dependency, in which Dean, who functions as Sam's mother and father figure, views his self-worth according to his ability to protect Sam, which is one reason for the creation of his heroic persona. With Jack, Dean's understanding and struggle with fatherhood and its conceptions are revealed, exposing the extent of John's doctrine

concerning the ideas of nature vs. nurture, free will, and (un-)conditional love. The conducted analysis exposes Dean's fear to abandon John's restrictive and deterministic points of view while equally trying to defy subscribing to them, accounting for the unstable sense of self Dean portrays towards the end of the series.

Dean's relationships with Benny and Crowley reveal his true desires, namely the desire to accept non-conformity and be accepted for it respectively. Ultimately, this research finds that most of Dean's relationships expose the same need: a yearning for authenticity and self-expression despite his inability to commit to it. The only character who understands and supports this want, to the extent of becoming a metaphorical manifestation of Dean's free will, is Castiel. Analysing their relationship exposes the intricacies of Dean's emotions and the show's usage of Castiel to parallel romantic relationships with him and Dean uncovers the performativity of Dean's heterosexuality.

Dean, unlike other characters on the show, must constantly assert his masculinity and sexuality, contradictorily causing it to be questioned even further. Other characters recognise his insecurity concerning his identity and use it at regular intervals to successfully unsettle Dean. This research proves a further incongruency between Dean's words and actions, as he is portrayed to have a decidedly less performative reaction to being flirted with by Adam when unobserved. Additionally, the purgatory heterotopia visualises Dean's acceptance of the monstrous, queer Other, by befriending Benny and allowing him to physically enter Dean's body. This shows a metaphorical willingness to accept a non-normative part of him, a revelation that contributes to the slow construction of an authentic identity that his death ends prematurely. To summarise, this research found that Dean's portrayal of masculinity is highly influenced by external factors, especially by the ideals imparted by his father, who Dean, due to a traumatic childhood and a lack of other role models, relies on to secure his identity. However, given that John does not allow Dean to question these ideals, Dean is portrayed as following arbitrary rules imposed on him that result in his confusion on what masculinity is supposed to look like, which also impacts his perception on sexuality. To remain masculine, Dean recoils from any notion of non-normativity, leading to a hypersensitivity around any mention of homosexuality. Hence, his relationships with other men, especially Castiel, can be characterised by homosocial desire and its subsequent repression, with violence being the one of the only ways Dean feels safe to express his emotions. As a result, the conducted analysis proposes a correlation between homosociality and sexuality that would need to be investigated further in future analyses. Regardless, when analysing Dean Winchester, there is a clear connection between masculinity

and sexuality, with his construction of masculinity clearly dictating the expression of his sexuality and non-normative sexuality endangering this construction's stability. The supernatural nature of the show allows for a quite detailed analysis of Dean's inner turmoil via the inclusion of places outside Dean's reality, supernatural characters, and other versions of him, with which this research can identify Dean's cognitive dissonance as the consequence of an unfulfilled desire to express himself authentically without repercussions, both real and perceived.

A major limitation of this research is the inability to analyse every instance of Dean's behaviour in terms of his gender and sexuality fully due to the scope of this thesis. Additionally, it remains important to reiterate that this thesis does not and cannot include the various writers', actors', or directors' intentions behind the analysed material that could certainly impact its reading. However, if this were a larger project, it would certainly be of interest to include some of these people's statements regarding Dean's gender and sexuality. Additionally, the topic could be widened to analyse the plethora of religious notions that had to be disregarded in this thesis. Lastly, analysing the audience perception and the impact this show had on fandom culture could add significant insight to this research.

Finally, despite the fluidity of the show as a cultural product due to its ever-changing team and the ability to adapt to changing societal standards, Dean's characterisation in the final episode and his death signify an inability to truly derail from the perpetuated stereotype of the red-blooded, American, hero Dean is trying so hard to portray throughout his life. Like Dean, the show seems unable to fully release established cultural norms of masculinity and heteronormativity in favour of authenticity, leaving the viewer with a recognition of its performativity and perhaps wondering whether the most interesting details were, in fact, the chick-flick moments.

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Abstract

With this paper I propose the reasons, prevalence, and artificiality of Dean Winchester's performativity of gender and sexuality in the US television series *Supernatural*. While intended to be portrayed as a prototypical American hero, a thorough analysis of Dean's behaviour exposes a complex, unstable gender and sexual identity heavily influenced by his father, God, and a seemingly predetermined life. A significant amount of unprocessed childhood trauma, teleological heavenly interception, and the constantly present threat of death throughout the series all impair Dean's ability to express himself. This leaves Dean in an unstable position of constant cognitive dissonance which this study finds to contribute to an inconsistent performance, endeavouring to comply with arbitrary standards, and the exhibition of suicidal tendencies upon Dean's subsequent inability to succeed. With this thesis, it was possible to analyse the construction and expression of Dean's masculinity, the implications of his homosocial relationships, and the importance, prevalence, and pressure of heterosexuality in the construction of the ideal man, all of which have an undeniable impact on contemporary U.S. television conventions.

Diese Arbeit konkretisiert die Gründe, Häufigkeit und Inszenierung der Performativität von Dean Winchester in Bezug auf sein Geschlecht und seine Sexualität in der U.S.-Amerikanischen Serie *Supernatural*. Eine umfassende Analyse von Deans Verhalten offenbart eine, entgegen der intendierten Darstellung als prototypischer amerikanischer Held, komplexe und instabile sexuelle und Geschlechtsidentität, die stark von seinem Vater, Gott, und einem scheinbar vorbestimmten Leben geprägt ist. Signifikante Kindheitstraumata, teleologische, himmlische Intervention und die konstante Todesgefahr, die über die Serie hinweg präsent ist, beeinträchtigen Deans Fähigkeit, seine eigene Identität auszuleben.

Die durch diese instabile Position entstehende kognitive Dissonanz wird von dieser Studie als wichtiger Bestandteil seiner inkonsistenten Performanz gesehen, mit welcher Dean versucht, arbiträren Standards gerecht zu werden, und welche sich durch suizidale Tendenzen bei Nicht-Erfolg äußert. Mit dieser Arbeit war es möglich die Konstruktion und Expression von Deans Männlichkeit, die Implikationen seiner homosozialen Beziehungen und die Wichtigkeit, Prävalenz und den Druck von Heterosexualität bei der Konstruktion des idealen Bild des Mannes zu analysieren, welche alle einen unbestreitbaren Einfluss auf heutige U.S. amerikanische Fernsehkonventionen hat.

Appendix

Character Index

Sam Winchester (human)

Sam is Dean's younger brother, who grows up resentful of their father John and escapes the hunter life by enrolling at Stanford University to study law. In the pilot episode of the show Dean drives to Stanford to ask him to help find their missing father, after which they start travelling the U.S. to hunt monsters.

John Winchester (human)

John is Dean's father and is portrayed as a grieving man on a mission to find the demon that killed his wife, Mary. While doing so, he hunts other monsters he encounters in-between. He raises Sam and Dean as hunters and is characterised as a primarily absent and emotionally unavailable father. Regardless of his death in the first episode of season two due to a demon deal to save Dean, John's impact remains prevalent throughout all seasons, with several anecdotes and flashback scenes that characterise the character further.

Mary Winchester (human)

Mary is Dean's mother, who was killed by a demon pre-series. However, she is revived by God's sister Amara in the season finale of season eleven and is part of the main protagonists until her permanent death in season 14 by the hands of Jack.

Bobby Singer (human)

Bobby is an old friend of John's and becomes a father figure to Sam and Dean until his death in season seven.

Castiel (angel)

Castiel (often Cas or Cass for short) is an angel of the lord, Dean's best friend, and in love with him. Castiel introduces himself to Dean after rescuing him from hell at the beginning of season four and remains a major character until his death at the end of season 15.

Crowley (demon)

Crowley is introduced as king of the crossroads and eventually king of hell until his suicide in season 12, where he sacrifices himself for Sam and Dean. While initially seen as an antagonist, Crowley forms an alliance with the Winchester brothers and is especially close to Dean.

Jack Kline (antichrist/God)

Jack is introduced in the season finale of season twelve and is the child of Lucifer and the human Kelly Kline. However, Castiel, Dean, and Sam take Jack in and he sees all three of them as his fathers. At the end of season 15, Jack replaces Chuck as God.

Benny Lafitte (vampire)

Benny is a vampire Dean meets while stuck in purgatory in season 8 and they become close friends despite Benny being a vampire. In the same season, Benny willingly lets Dean kill him to return to purgatory to save Sam, after which Benny decides to stay in purgatory.

Claire Novak (human)

Claire is the daughter of Jimmy Novak, Castiel's earthly vessel. After a period of adjustment, Claire sees Castiel, and by extension, Dean, as father figures and becomes a hunter as well.

Lisa and Ben Braeden (human)

Lisa is a past love interest of Dean's, who is a single mother to Ben. Ben is hinted at to be Dean's child, despite Lisa denying it. Dean spends a year with them between season five and six, trying to live a 'normal' life but they eventually break up because Lisa and Ben become monster targets, after which Dean asks Castiel to remove their memories of him.

Lucifer (archangel)

Lucifer is the Christian devil and God's son. He hates humanity because God loves them more than him. Lucifer spends the first four seasons in a cage in hell, from which he is released in the season four finale and is eventually killed by Dean in the season 13 finale.

Michael (archangel)

Michael is an archangel and God's first son. Dean is designed to be his 'perfect vessel' (see 'Supernatural dictionary') and meant to mirror Dean. He is accidentally locked in Lucifer's cage with him in the season five finale but is eventually released in season 15, where he becomes the Winchester's ally, for which God kills him in episode 19.

Alastair (demon)

Alastair is the demon that tortures Dean during his 40 years in hell. After ten years of torture, he teaches Dean how to torture others for 30 more years. Their relationship is hinted at to have included sexually abusive elements.

Amara (God's sister)

Amara (also 'the Darkness') is God's sister and the main antagonist of season eleven. She takes a special interest in Dean and intends for him to become her partner. Despite a supernatural desire that binds them, Dean does not want to be with her and fights his attraction. After initially intending to kill God, she makes his peace with him. In season 15, God absorbs her and her power into his own body.

Beings index

All beings in supernatural may be categorised in one of the following four categories:

Species	Sub-species/main differentiations in the Supernatural universe
Human	Without (significant) supernatural abilities → Hunters, 'ordinary' people, 'special' children with psychic powers
Monster (corporeal)	either born as such or turned into one → Witches, vampires, werewolves, wendigos, 'lesser' gods (e.g. Odin, Ganesh, Kali, etc.)
Monster (not corporeal)	Used to be human → Ghosts, demons
Primordial being	Predate much/all of earth's existence → Christian God; God's sister; Archangels, Angels, Nephilim, Leviathans, Death, Horsemen, The Empty

Supernatural dictionary

Alpha	The first monsters of each species; created by Eve, the mother of all monsters
Antichrist	A human-demon hybrid; in later seasons primarily used to describe Jack Kline (Lucifer's child)
Apocalypse World	An alternative universe where the apocalypse that Sam and Dean averted in season five took place and Michael rules the world and plans to terminate all humans
Archangels	The first four angels created by God; more powerful and harder to kill than normal angels; Michael, Lucifer, Gabriel, Raphael
Crossroads	Any crossroad may be used to summon a demon to make a deal
Demon	A human soul sent to hell after their death; after years of torture and pain, the soul will eventually turn into a demon
Demon Deals	Giving up your soul in return for a wish; usually, a demon deal grants the human 10 years to live with their wish granted, after which a hellhound is sent to kill the person and send the soul to hell
Heaven	Home of all angels and 'good' human souls; every human has a personal heaven, usually reminiscent of their favourite memories on earth; in the series finale, this version of heaven is destroyed to create one heaven for all souls to share, similar to life on earth
Hell	Home of all demons and 'bad' human souls; the place demons are sent when exorcised; the place where Lucifer's cage is; Dean spends 40 years (in 'hell time') in hell
Knights of Hell	Powerful demons trained by the biblical Cain
Mark of Cain	Initially created as a seal to lock away Amara and put on Lucifer, who passed it on to Cain. The combination of the mark and a weapon called The First Blade is needed to kill a knight of hell. In season 9, the mark is passed on to Dean to kill the knight of hell Abaddon.

Men of Letters	A secret society of observers and chroniclers of the supernatural. They had knowledge of mysteries of the supernatural and many arcane arts like alchemy. They also considered hunters to be inferior to them. Sam and Dean are legacies of the U.S. Men of Letters.
Prince of Hell	The first generation of demons created by Lucifer after the creation of the first demon (Lilith)
Purgatory	The place where all monsters except demons, ghosts, and angels go after death. Dean spends one year in purgatory between season seven and eight.
The Empty	The place where all angels and demons go after their death, usually in eternal slumber; also the name of the creature that rules the empty
Vessel	Demons and angels need to possess a human 'vessel' to walk on earth; demons may possess any human they want but angels need their host's consent to enter their body; because archangels are especially powerful, not any human vessel is strong enough to hold their power, which is why some bloodlines are created as 'perfect vessels'; The Winchester bloodline is one of these bloodlines

	Characters*	Deceased*	LGBT+* (red - dead; green - alive)	
Season 1	151		0	
Season 2	113		1	♀
Season 3	83		1	♂
Season 4	124		1	♂
Season 5	128		2	♂ ♂
Season 6	137		1	♂
Season 7	155		1	♀
Season 8	172		3	♀ ♂ ♂
Season 9	169		0	
Season 10	144		2	♀ ♀
Season 11	133		5	4 alive 1 dead ♀♀ ♂♂♂
Season 12	166		1	♂
Season 13	147		3	2 alive 1 dead ♀♀ ♂
Season 14	66		4	3 alive 1 dead ♀♀♀ ♂
Season 15	65		1	♀
Overall	1953	1033	26	♀=13 ♂=13

=1.28 percent (1 in 78)

*including characters from different worlds if 'real' (not a dream)

Hunters 106 29 female