

“That's a page-turner!": *Supernatural*, God and Narrative Agency

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Volume 3, Number 2, January 2021

Supernatural – The End of the Road. A Reflection : Part Two. NOW

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1102496ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1102496ar>

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Publisher(s)

Montréal Monstrum Society

ISSN

2561-5629 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Hansen, R. (2021). “That's a page-turner!": *Supernatural*, God and Narrative Agency. *Monstrum*, 3(2), 43–50. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1102496ar>

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“That’s a page-turner!”:

***Supernatural*, God and Narrative Agency**

Regina Hansen

Sacred across many cultures, the myth of the creator who speaks the world into being is central to the *Supernatural* universe, as different showrunners have shaped the series’ mythology with their own words, their own stories. Through 15 seasons, the show’s writers have constructed a supernatural world inspired by global folklore and religious scripture (especially from the Abrahamic tradition). They have worked to make that world feel concrete and real – as if it actually exists – while at the same time attempting to subvert and deconstruct the foundational religious texts from which the series’ episodes and overarching narrative are derived. Woven through the entire run of the series has been a conversation, sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit, about the role of human agency within the narratives created by the series’ God-like writers/storytellers and by Chuck, the storytelling God who sets the rules of *Supernatural*’s world and directs the Winchesters’ lives even as they continually attempt to exert free will. In this way, Sam and Dean become humanist heroes who struggle for narrative agency in a story world filled with literalized embodiments of the religious and mythological “Lore” they consult each week. This conflict between human will and writerly/scriptural authority comes to a sort of resolution in the final episodes of Season 15, which also offers the series’ final conceptualization of humanity’s relationship to the infinite, the mystical, and all that is encompassed within the series’ title.

To do their work of “saving people, hunting things,” the Winchesters depend on stories, the Lore, which early in the series centered on non-religious supernatural beings, such as fairies, vampires, werewolves, wendigos and

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vengeful ghosts. *Supernatural* later introduced material from the Bible as well as allusions to other Jewish and Christian texts, such as the Talmud, the Book of Enoch, and (briefly) the work of Albertus Magnus and Medieval angelologists such as Pseudo-Dionysius. Spanning seasons 4 and 5, the series' first of many apocalyptic story lines casts Sam and Dean as the unwilling vessels of Lucifer and the Archangel Michael in then showrunner Eric Kripke's retelling of the Biblical Book of Revelation and Milton's *Paradise Lost*.¹

Throughout the series, the writers depart from scriptural or theological authority in their depiction of Biblical figures and concepts, picking and choosing which aspects of the Lore will inform their stories. *Supernatural*'s scripture-based storylines at first seem to reflect fundamentalist readings of the Bible. In "Are you there God? It's me, Dean Winchester," (4.2) the newly introduced angel Castiel calls on Biblical authority to argue for both the existence of angels and for the fact that they are, in Dean's words, 'dicks,' saying "Read the Bible. Angels are warriors of God. I'm a soldier." At the same time, as I have argued elsewhere, Jewish and Christian scripture as well as theological texts, portray angels not only as "soldiers"/ "dicks" but also as guardians and guides (Hansen 2014, 20), an interpretation that does not serve the writers' narrative purpose.

Biblical characters and events exist within the *Supernatural* universe as literal and factual, even those that many religious people experience as metaphorical. In "The Song Remains the Same" (5.13) the Archangel Michael insists the apocalyptic narrative must play out because Sam and Dean are in a "blood line stretching back to Cain and Abel." While, again, this representation appears fundamentalist, the series actually introduces characters and concepts from scripture and theology – eventually including Cain – in novel and subversive ways. Not only are Sam and Dean in Cain's family line, but Cain himself is portrayed in Seasons 9 and 10 as a Demon, once lord of the Knights of Hell (created for the series), who eventually transfers his mark (Gen 4:15) to Dean, so that he can kill Abaddon, known in The Book of Revelation, 9:11, as the "angel of the abyss" (NABRE) or the "angel of the bottomless pit." (KJV) Abaddon, in turn, is portrayed as a Knight of Hell and the main villain of season 9. In Season 6, viewers are introduced to Purgatory, a Catholic concept

¹ I have discussed Seasons 4 and 5 in an early essay, with which parts of this current work are in conversation. For the full analysis see Hansen, Regina, "Deconstructing the Apocalypse? *Supernatural*'s Postmodern Appropriation of Angelic Hierarchies." In *Supernatural Humanity, and the Soul: On the Highway to Hell and Back*, edited by Susan A. George and Regina M. Hansen, 13-26. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014.

describing a state of being in which souls awaiting Heaven are first purged of sin, but which *Supernatural* presents as a place, a prison for the Leviathans. These are inspired by the Biblical monster Leviathan who in the Bible is sometimes a serpent (Rev 20:2), sometimes many headed (Ps 74:14), and sometimes breathes fire. (Ps 18:8). Rather than engage with the Biblical origins of Leviathan, Season 7 portrays it/them as a metaphor for corporate greed, an evil corporate entity that Erin Giannini notes, wreaks “far more damage on the Winchesters, on both a practical and emotional level, by separating them from home [...], their identities [...], their remaining friends and associates, and finally, one another.” (2014, 83) Finally, even the Darkness that the Bible says existed before Creation is literalized and personified as Amara, God’s sister. All these characters are real within the world of the show while also transcending fundamentalist interpretations. In a sense, as is appropriate to a series which has been rewritten and reimagined over and over by fans, the writers create their own Biblical fanfiction universe in which they manipulate texts that are understood by many to be authoritative and unchangeable.

Supernatural’s most overt subversion of scripture is to put the Winchesters at the center of their own Gospel. This deconstruction of scriptural narratives was born in Season 4 of then showrunner Eric Kripke’s desire to create an “intensely humanistic” (Ryan 2009) story that privileges love and family and humanity over religious doctrine. Seasons 4 and 5 transform Sam and Dean into scriptural figures. In “The Monster at the End of this Book” (4.18), the boys discover that their lives have been chronicled in series of novels, whose author, Chuck Shurley (Rob Benedict), is at first understood to be a prophet and evangelist with the power to foresee the destinies of his fictional creations, though as the series progresses he is revealed to be God. The angel Castiel calls these books “The Winchester Gospels” (4.18), and the connection to the actual Gospels is made clear in “In the Beginning” (4.3), when Mary Campbell’s deal with the demon Azazel both begins the Winchester family as we know it and sets in motion the apocalypse. The episode title is a reference to the Gospel of John – perhaps not coincidentally the name of the Winchester patriarch: “In the beginning was the word and the Word was God.” (John 1:1).

The verse’s allusion to Jesus, “the Word made flesh” (John 1:14), calls attention to his absence as a protagonist within *Supernatural*’s Gospel, centering Sam and Dean as the heroes of the series’ scriptural narrative. While they die and are reborn multiple times and their mother’s name is Mary, the Winchesters are not Christ figures *per se*. In fact, though he never appears in the series as a character – nor is he part of a Trinity with Chuck and the Holy Spirit – Jesus is

mentioned by name.² His importance to Christian believers is also often acknowledged with images and sacramentals such as crucifixes, including the one in the Church where the Archangel Michael takes refuge in “Inherit the Earth” (15.19). Still, despite Jesus’s existence within the *Supernatural* universe, his story is at most tangential to the series’ overarching narrative. The Winchester Gospels have replaced the story of Jesus. And unlike Jesus, who as the “Word”, both embodies and acquiesces to the New Testament narrative of death and resurrection (“...yet not as I will, but as you will”, Matthew 26:39), the Winchesters’ experience is one of continued resistance to the words that shape their destiny, spoken and written by God-like writers and writerly Gods.

At the end of Season 5, the Winchesters’ resistance to a fate based on scriptural precedents – and their overturning of that fate – secures their place as champions of human will over received wisdom. Still, while this short-lived triumph deconstructs a foundational Christian narrative, it does not restore the brothers’ agency. While Chuck is viewed positively at the end of Season 5 – for creating a story that allows the Winchesters to exercise free will, and for not seeming to force them to play out prescribed roles – the season’s outcome recalls a well-known religious conundrum: If God is all knowing, how can Free Will exist? After all, God always knows what we’ll do. Sam and Dean Winchester’s attempt to kill God/Chuck in season 15 is an acknowledgment of this conundrum and an attempt to overcome it, while the increasingly tyrannical characterization of Chuck reinforces the boys’ position as humanist heroes acting within in a metaphysical world.

The Winchesters’ struggle to exert free will and narrative agency persists no matter how many times they save the world from a supposedly inevitable Armageddon. In fact, “Swan Song’s” (R)evelation that Sam and Dean’s act of free will is actually foreseen/orchestrated by Chuck (5.22) will bear poisoned fruit in Season 15, even as Chuck spends most of the series as an absent father. Viewing the final season in the context of Kripke’s earlier story arc, we see an unfinished rebellion against narrative authority, whether God’s, the writers’ or some combination of writer/God. The final season sees the boys fighting to destroy God/Chuck before he destroys their world (one of many he has created for personal entertainment) and to finally free themselves from his story. Throughout the season, Chuck makes things worse and worse for Sam and Dean, and – with the-sometimes-willing help of Billie/Death, the Archangel Michael and others – undoes much of the good the boys have done throughout the series. As befits a character who was introduced as an introverted,

² See “A Very Supernatural Christmas” (3.8) and “... And Then There Were None” (6.16).

disheveled pulp writer, Chuck's compulsion to literally 'control the narrative' reveals a sense of personal failure masquerading as disdain. He says as much when confronted by Amara in "Unity" (15.17):

- AMARA: You want to evaporate every kernel of existence because the Winchesters won't do what you say.
- CHUCK: It's not about that. It's about everywhere I look, I'm reminded of my failures. Like why did I go with carbon-based life? Why not silicon? Or atrium? Zeroing out, starting fresh. That's what I need.
- AMARA: None of this was a failure. Not a tree, not a human.
- CHUCK: Humans! Aah. Humans are the worst! Lame, disappointing. They ruin everything they touch! And they're just so boring. I'm over them.

Chuck's frustration with human beings (he disingenuously calls it boredom) accounts for the progressively preposterous machinations he goes through to get the Winchesters – as representatives and champions of humanity - to surrender to his will, and to fulfill his narrative by killing each other.

Even when they do surrender, after Chuck has disintegrated everyone on Earth except the Winchesters and their ward Jack ("Inherit the Earth," 15.19), Chuck changes the story again, sentencing them to live out their lives in an empty world. He says, "I'm kind of enjoying this story now", calling it a "page turner." (15.19) This plot twist suggests that Chuck sees himself as both author and reader of their story and reflects a not-so-hidden admiration for the Winchesters, whom he calls his "favorites." (15.19) The boys' insistence that, in Sam's words, "We always have a choice" ("Drag Me Away (From You)" 15.16), allows them to continue their resistance. In the penultimate episode, Sam and Dean – with Jack's help – revise Chuck's ending of the Winchester Gospels, by exploiting his narcissism and related weakness as a writer, the fact that as he himself says, "I can never think of an ending where I don't win." (15.19) Still, they end up not killing God after all, but rather manipulate the narrative so that his powers are absorbed by Jack. Dean's final words to Chuck, who expects to die at the hands of "Dean Winchester, the ultimate killer," (15.19) make clear that the boys now control their own story: "That's not who I am", Dean says. "That's not who we are." The title of the episode, "Inherit the Earth", is a reference to the Beatitudes spoken by Jesus during the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:5), and reinforces the idea of the Winchesters as Gospel protagonists, whose role in scripture is coming to a conclusion.

The sense of *Supernatural* as a revised Gospel is further embodied in Jack, the son of the Archangel Lucifer and the human woman Kelly, who transforms himself from would-be Antichrist to savior and re-Creator of the world. Jack never outright calls himself God, but when asked, his answer, “I’m me” (15.19) recalls the way God refers to himself in Exodus 3:14: “I AM.” Unlike his predecessor deity, Jack chooses to let the Winchesters – and all humans – create their own narratives, recognizing that Chuck’s error was to “put himself in the story.” (15.19) Jack’s decision not to be “hands on” (15.19) also suggests a fascinating possibility, that in resisting Chuck’s authorial control, the Winchesters – along with their allies – not only regained narrative agency but helped to write a new God into the story. Jack himself suggests as much: “I learned from you and my mother and Cas that when people have to be their best, they can be.” (15.19)

While the Winchester Gospels end with the series’ penultimate episode, the finale “Carry On” (15.20) provides a coda in which we witness the brothers’ living their lives as people rather than protagonists. While the boys living “normal” lives was prefigured in “The Heroes Journey” (15.10), in which they experience toothache, car trouble and the consequences of Dean’s terrible diet, that experience was all part of Chuck’s narrative plan, an attempt to weaken them into submitting to his will. In “Carry On”, the boys’ lives are of their own making, not imposed from without. The viewer glimpses the Winchesters’ day-to-day life in the bunker, then moves to a “monster of the week” vampire episode followed by Dean’s basically accidental death, and arrival in Heaven, while paralleled by Sam’s life without him, through grief, raising a son, old age and natural death. The less defined, somewhat choppy pace of the episode gives the effect of a series of events just happening one after the other, instead of a narrative that has been written and imposed upon the brothers. Although, the manner of Dean’s death was a disappointment to many fans, it also reflects the fact that the brothers’ lives and wills really are no longer subject to a deity’s narrative machinations, or even the desires of the fans – and even the writers – who have loved these characters and never wanted them to die.

Free of their Gospel and its imposed narrative, the brothers still receive the scriptures’ promised reward, Heaven. Dean is greeted on his arrival by Bobby Singer who notes that Jack and Castiel have helped fashion an afterlife filled “with everything you could ever want, or need, or dream” (15.20) Moreover, it is a Heaven of shared story, inhabited by Bobby, Rufus, John and Mary Winchester and (we are to imagine) any loved ones who have gone before: “Everyone happy. Everyone together.” (15.20) He also notes that “Time here ... it’s different,” suggesting a lack of linearity that, like the irregular arc of the

episode – whether purposeful or not – exemplifies a world in which narrative is not imposed from above.

As with the continued existence of a Creator – and of angels and vampires for that matter – the episode’s vision of Heaven is an attempt to reconcile the series’ title and subject matter, *Supernatural*, with its humanist sensibility. An afterlife exists, Heaven “up here” (as Bobby calls it) and Jack and Cas (a benevolent God and an angel) have had a hand in crafting it, but *Supernatural*’s Heaven, though created by metaphysical beings, seems to be inhabited only by people. Like the human writer/gods who created and sustained the series, *Supernatural* resolves the relationship between the Winchesters and the strange world they inhabit by allowing them to pick and choose. They choose each other.

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- 2020/2021 -

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