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“ON A GOOD DAY, YOU GET TO KILL A WHORE”:

NARRATIVE MISOGYNY AND FEMALE AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT IN

SUPERNATURAL

A Thesis Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in the Department of Sociology
The University of Mississippi

By

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I attempt to analyze the function of gender messages in media texts and the engagement of audiences with these messages. I adopt an interdisciplinary approach, applying theoretical and methodological concepts from both film studies and audience studies, in order to develop a new model through which to study media texts and fans. I apply this model to an analysis of female characters in the television program *Supernatural* and to self-identified female fans of *Supernatural*. Throughout the paper, I contend that such an interdisciplinary model is necessary for understanding media texts and audiences, and I conclude that media fans act as academics in their reading and interpretation of media texts.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Two men sit on a dark sidewalk, commiserating about absent fathers. One, miserable, asks the other, "How do you manage it?" To which his friend replies, "On a good day, you get to kill a whore."

This exchange, heard in the *Supernatural* season five episode, "99 Problems", written by Julie Siege, is not between two villains or a pair of murderous antagonists. It is between two of the series' principal characters, two heroes, and is, presumably, meant to be humorous. Context is clarifying, here, as the "whore" in question is the biblical Whore of Babylon, but there is a sense of casual misogyny in it that cannot be ignored.

Watching "99 Problems", as a fan, in April of 2010, I heard the sentence "On a good day, you get to kill a whore" come out of my hero's mouth, and my jaw hit the floor, too shocked to be angry. That moment of offhanded, violent sexism soured what was otherwise an excellent episode, and it underscored what I had come to see as a persistent and unsettling problem in my favorite television show.

If we understand gender to be defined primarily through actions and interactions (West & Zimmerman, 1987), then we must consider that the average American watches 153 hours of television every month (Nielson quarterly report, 2009), and that much of that television programming is likely to involve gendered interactions of some kind. An understanding of how gender is constructed within media texts, therefore, is crucial to an understanding of how gender

functions in a mediated society. However, I contend that an examination of gendered media is incomplete without a corresponding examination of how audiences receive and interpret that media. It is with this understanding that I have undertaken a feminist analysis of the television program *Supernatural* and of the engagement practices of *Supernatural* fans.

This study was designed with the intent to address two questions. First, how does *Supernatural*, as a media text, construct gendered interactions and, specifically, represent female characters? To approach the first question, I conducted a content analysis of the first five seasons of *Supernatural*, with emphasis on the first two seasons. I found that the deaths of female characters were likely to be portrayed in radically different ways than the deaths of male characters, and that representations of women within the narrative typically fell into the categories of "women as victims", "women as objects", and "women as props". I believe my findings support an assessment of *Supernatural* as basically, if latently, misogynistic.

My second question, then, is how do women viewing *Supernatural* engage with the program's gender ideology and representations of women? To address this question, I submitted a written, online survey to self-identified fans of *Supernatural*, asking questions about their viewing habits and what aspects of the program they liked and disliked. I received responses from 94 fans, the vast majority of whom were women, and their reactions and opinions varied widely. There was generally little consensus on the subject of female characters, and comments on female characters ranged from excitedly supportive to actively violent. A number of female respondents said that they related closely to the male characters, without mention of female characters. Despite its sexist ideology, fans said that they continued to watch *Supernatural* because of its content and suggested a strong sense of visceral engagement, as well as extensive boundary work within the fan community. Ultimately, I found fans' readings of the program to

by complex and highly contextualized, and that they are actively interpreting media messages according to their own understandings and ideologies, rather than simply receiving those messages.

Since its inception in the 1930s, commercial television has played an important role in shaping Western culture, disseminating images and ideas to the general population in ways previously unachievable through radio or print media. Media texts are in a position to both reinforce and challenge existing ideologies of the dominant culture, and audiences are, through their engagement with those texts, in a position to do the same. Through my analysis of *Supernatural* and its surrounding fan base, I hope to contribute to the understanding of exactly how media texts perform this process of challenge and reinforcement, specifically with regard to gender roles and representations. I also hope to develop a working theory with regard to the mental tactics used by audiences in their engagement with those texts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

For this study, I have employed an inter-disciplinary theoretical foundation, drawing on both film analysis and audience studies. Because *Supernatural* fits, ostensibly, into the "horror" genre, I have chosen to focus on film studies literature dealing with presentations of women in horror films, a large portion of which employs a psychoanalytic approach to genre constructions of gender.

Barbara Creed (1996), for instance, uses Julia Kristeva's notion of 'abjection' to discuss the concept of the "monstrous-feminine" in horror films and how boundary violation is used cinematically to evoke both horror and fascination. For Kristeva, the process of subjectivity is threatened by anything that crosses or transcends barriers, especially physical barriers. The disruption of boundaries causes physical disgust and distress, a response Kristeva calls abjection. (Mansfield, 2000). Drawing on Kristeva's own readings of horror in literature (Creed, 1996), Creed enumerates those things which cause simultaneous revulsion and attraction in films, saying:

> definitions of the monstrous as constructed in the modern horror text are grounded in ancient religious and historical notions of abjection – particularly in relation to the following religious "abominations": sexual immorality and perversions; corporeal

alteration, decay, and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body; and incest (1996: 37).

Creed calls up various tropes common to the genre, conjuring images of the corpse, the reanimated and ethereal dead, werewolves, and the preponderance of blood, vomit, organs, and other internal bodily fluids and parts. All of these, Creed says, are symbols of abjection and are employed by filmmakers in the interest of creating that disgusted enthrallment which Kristeva claims necessarily accompanies confrontation by the abject.

Of particular interest to Creed, however, is Kristeva's description of the abject mother and the recurring appearance of this idea within the horror genre. According to Kristeva, the child's attempt to break away from maternal authority and to enter the paternal system of order makes the mother abject. Creed offers examples of films, such as *Psycho* and *Carrie*, in which the attachment of a possessive mother is positioned as the ultimate cause of the ensuing violence. She also discusses the film *The Exorcist* as a narrative in which the male order, represented by the figure of the priest, is pitted against feminine/satanic *dis*order as represented by a female body which is violated both physically - as it is rotting - and "spiritually" - as it is possessed by a demonic force.

Creed summons the image of the female victim in slasher films and the threat this image presents to male viewers, saying, "Woman's body is slashed and mutilated, not only to signify her own castrated state, but also the possibility of castration for the male" (1996: 44). In this way, she says that "the horror film brings about a confrontation with the abject in order… to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between human and nonhuman" (Creed, 1996. p. 46).

Creed concludes her discussion with an analysis of the film *Alien* which, she says, presents a "complex representation of the monstrous-feminine in terms of the maternal figure as perceived within a patriarchal ideology" (1996: 47) and illustrates the continuous conflict between maternal authority and paternal law. This conflict is at the very center of Kristeva's idea of abjection, since it is that which exists outside the symbolic male order – the feminine body – that is the most abject.

Linda Williams (1996) employs psychoanalysis of horror films to a different end, focusing on the use of the "gaze" and viewer identification. In most genre films, Williams says, there is no perspective with which female audiences can identify, allowing the male gaze – the perspective of male characters and, by extension, male viewers – to dominate the narrative. Through this "frustration" of the female gaze, male desire is able to persist unchallenged. Williams goes so far as to say that "the woman's gaze is punished… by narrative processes that transform curiosity and desire into masochistic fantasy" (1996: 17), thus subverting any form of feminine pro-activity to the dominating pleasures of male viewers.

In privileging the male gaze, the female audience vanishes entirely from consideration. The data in my study, drawn almost entirely from female viewers, indicates that Williams' understanding of the exclusive cinematic gaze is not viable. Specifically, Williams' approach precludes the possibility that female viewers might identify with male characters, a tendency which appeared frequently in my findings.

Adam Knee (1996) expands the notion of the gaze and constructions of gender to examine the films of Dario Argento, discussing Argento's use and exaggeration of genre tropes to overturn traditional gender ideologies. According to Knee, Argento's films foreground notions of gender in order to question them. Argento presents female victims in order to highlight the

victimization of women in the horror genre, and in the media in general. In addition, he includes male victims, portrays as many female protagonists as male, and often includes villains which confound static concepts of gender.

In the film *Opera*, Knee says, the female gaze becomes identified with the gaze of the male killer as the captive woman is forced to watch a series of horrific murders carried out for her benefit. Similarly, in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, the male protagonist becomes obsessed with solving a murder which he witnesses, helplessly, from behind a glass door.

In both of these films and, Knee argues, in Argento's films in general, what the characters –and, subsequently, the audience – think they see is very often contrary to the narrative reality. In this way, Argento is able to subvert the audiences certainty and assumptions. Knee says, "As visual and auditory perceptions and memories are thrown into doubt, so are assumptions about gender, about sexuality, and about sanity – assumptions about what constitutes a norm, what constitutes the identities of those around us" (1996: 224). Thus, according to Knee, Argento uses the conventions of a genre which is notorious for its violent misogyny to undermine hegemonic constructions of gender, sexuality, and power dynamics.

Unlike Creed and Williams, Knee acknowledges the possibility of resistance within media texts. That is, rather than viewing gender in terms of abjection or exclusion, Knee suggests that the format and tropes of genre narratives themselves may be playfully subverted to reject dominant interpretations. What is most interesting about Knee's approach is the possibility of its application in interpreting the work of filmmakers other than Argento and, indeed, genres other than horror. In what ways might the broader conventions of film be used as a medium for resistance?

Although the psychoanalytic approach is predominant in feminist readings of horror films, it is not the only framework for analysis, and, according to Cynthia A. Freeland (2004), this approach is often lacking in film analysis. Freeland outlines her objections to the use of psychoanalysis in understanding horror cinema, pointing out, first and foremost, that psychoanalysis is not generally well regarded within the discipline of psychology. She adds that it is only useful as an aide to reading the texts themselves, and then only for certain texts, going on to say that the abjection approach, as employed by Creed, is too broad to provide a truly relevant context for analysis.

Freeland's second objection is simply that psychoanalytic readers of films tend to rely on the frameworks of Lacan and Kristeva to the exclusion, even, of other psychoanalytic approaches, such as those of Irigaray and Cavell. Third, she claims that psychoanalysis is too reductive, providing only a one-dimensional understanding of a single aspect or scene of a film, neglecting even narrative context and often missing the point of the text as a whole. Fourth, Freeland says, these readings rely upon assumptions about gender and gender differences which are culturally based and potentially problematic, and that such assumptions tend to gloss over or ignore other distinctions such as class, race, age, sexuality, and so on. The fifth objection Freeland raises is that psychoanalytic approaches are disproportionately common within feminist film theory, and she proposes that other strains of feminist theory, such as feminist frameworks centering on new technologies or even radical Marxist feminism, may be more useful in this regard. Finally, she says that psychoanalysis is not necessarily useful for understanding viewers, even if it does presumably provide insight into the texts.

Having thus deconstructed the psychoanalytic approach, Freeland refers to other possible tactics for feminist readings of horror. She suggests that a feminist reading should undertake to

reveal the gender ideologies of a given text. She points to Tania Modleski's "The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory" (1986), which views horror as attacking the feminine via deconstruction of "feminine" cultural elements, as an example of a critical approach that differs from Freeland's. Freeland also refers to Noëll Carroll (1990), who applies a different theoretical understanding, for the concept of "rhetorical strategies, such as the elicitation of audience presumptions in completing gaps in the story" (2004: 753). Freeland recommends the work of psychoanalytic theorist Luce Irigaray (1985) as a means of conducting psychoanalytic feminist analysis while also deconstructing the traditional assumptions of the psychoanalytic approach through critiques of Lacan and Kristeva.

Freeland then proposes her own alternative framework for reading horror films, saying, "a promising feminist approach to cinematic horror should be historically aware and also broad and open enough to work for all [the] varieties of horror" (2004: 751). In order to accomplish this, she suggests that films should be examined in two ways: "extra-filmic" and "intra-filmic". The "extra-filmic" analysis centers on the context, reception, and production aspects of horror films. Specifically, Freeland asks that the reader consider women's experiences in the production of horror, how audiences read and respond to horror texts, and the historical and cultural contexts surrounding them. By contrast, the "intra-filmic" approach focuses on "films as artifacts", examining specific elements of the film, representations of women and monsters, and narrative and cinematic structure in order to uncover gender ideologies.

Freeland's discussion is primarily concerned with the "intra-filmic" approach, and she provides specific questions to guide the reader in this analysis such as "How do the film's structures of narrative, point of view, and plot construction operate in effecting a depiction of gender roles and relations?" and "What are the film's implicit rhetorical presuppositions about

natural gender roles and relations?" (2004: 753). She encourages readers to consider both what is shown and what is *not* shown, to avoid assumptions about gender and focus instead on the ideology of a given text, to look at actual depictions of women and not search for deep, psychoanalytic readings.

It is worth noting that these and other analyses of gender in the horror genre (Clover, 1992; Grant, 1984; Conlon, 1992) are concerned exclusively with cinematic horror and give no consideration to genre television. A notable exception to this neglect is the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which has received a great deal of attention from feminist media scholars (Douglas, 2010; Driver, 2007; Early, 2004; Karras, 2002; Owen, 1999), though these studies do not situate *Buffy* within the context of the horror genre. This repositioning is understandable since *Buffy*, and indeed *Supernatural*, might arguably be classified as "urban fantasy".[1] I believe that the episodic nature of *Supernatural*, as well as its use of traditional horror tropes, will provide a rich and diverse variety of content for analysis.

Though I will refer to elements of the psychoanalytic approach in my reading of *Supernatural*, specifically Kristeva's abjection and the question of the male gaze, I do, for the most part, agree with Freeland's criticisms and intend to rely most heavily on her proposed alternative framework. I will, however, give equal attention to both the "extra-filmic" and "intra-filmic" aspects of the series, as I will be examining the fans' understandings of the program's gender ideology along with the construction of that ideology within the narrative. Freeland's framework includes extra-filmic analysis primarily as a means of understanding the text. My

[1] Wikipedia classifies both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Supernatural* as "fantasy" and "horror". The Internet Movie Database classifies *Supernatural* as "horror", but not *Buffy*.

work, on the other hand, focuses on both intra- and extra-filmic considerations as a means of understanding how the text and the audience interact in terms of gender.

Focusing strictly on gender within the text itself provides only a partial view of how *Supernatural*'s representations of women function as concepts and does not address the implications of those representations for a gendered audience. I propose that, in order to fully understand the workings of gender in *Supernatural,* or in any other television program, we must also consider the ways in which audiences respond to and engage with gender on television, not only in terms of explicit opinions, but also in the reading tactics and communal practices of devoted viewers. To that end, I have employed literature on the subject of viewer engagement in both classic cinema and contemporary television.

Traditional audience studies see the audience as "vulnerable" or "easily influenced and open to persuasion" (Adorno, 1991; Barker, 1997; Hoggart, 1957; Wertham, 1955; all cited in Brooker & Jermyn, eds, 2003). Brooker and Jermyn suggest that studies which propagate the "vulnerable audience" model are based in conventional wisdom, rather than empirical research. This model reinforces and justifies institutional control over media, and, by claiming that audiences have no agency, theorists actively restrict what agency might actually exist. In "Culture Industry Reconsidered", T.W. Adorno (1991) argues that audiences are not entities in themselves, but rather "an object of calculation; an appendage of the machinery" (1991: 55) which produces media culture. The "culture industry", Adorno says, reinforces pre-existing "mass" mentalities, leaving no room for the challenge of those mentalities either within the system of production or by audiences. He asserts that "true culture" is inherently meaningful and resistant, though what he means by "true" is unclear, and that the products of mass culture are necessarily incapable of acquiring meaning or expressing resistance. In Adorno's understanding,

the message of the culture industry is that of conformity in and of itself, and the concepts it "hammers into human beings… remain unquestioned, unanlysed, and undialectically presupposed" (1991: 59). Adorno's model of audience consumption assumes that there is no space in which viewers may resist or reinterpret the meanings of media text, and, moreover, that viewers have no desire to actively engage cultural messages, even if they could.

Though it is important to consider traditional understandings of cultural consumption as a foundation of contemporary audience studies, existing data on audience engagement (Hills, 2004; Jenkins, 1992; Jenkins, 1995; Radway, 2003; this study) undermines the vulnerable audience model completely. Rather than blind, mindless consumption, viewers approach media texts as objects of scrutiny, employing critical tactics in their reading and interpretation of those texts. In order to understand how media messages function in a social context, we must first reject entirely the construct of the unquestioning audience and replace it with a theoretical standpoint which affords the viewer, at the very least, the possibility of active engagement with the media text.

In her book, *Attack of the Leading Ladies*: *Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema* (1996), Rhonda Berenstein deals issues of gendered audiences in horror films of the 1930s. She addresses both the positioning of female characters in relation to male heroes and monsters and the relationship of the spectator to the on-screen horrors. In the third chapter, "Horror for Sale: The Marketing and Reception of Classic Horror Cinema", Berenstein discusses constructions of gender performance in promotional material.

She says that marketing for classic horror films encouraged horror spectatorship as an arena in which viewers could play out – possibly exaggerated forms of – conventional gender dynamics. Specifically, the advertising suggested that "horror movies provide women with a

socially sanctioned reason to grab on to their boyfriends" (1996: 60), showing that, even as spectators, men are given the opportunity to play the "hero" in comforting their girlfriends, the terrified victims. In this way, spectatorship was presented as an aspect of gender performance.

Berenstein also addresses the perspectives of film critics with regard to gendered audiences of horror cinema. She found that, when the critics remarked upon gender at all, they expressed one of three opinions. Some critics suggested that both men and women were equally frightened by the film, though often with the caveat, consistent with much of the marketing, that male viewers would feign bravado and disguise their fear. Other film reviews expressed unmitigated surprise that women enjoyed horror films at all. Still others concluded that men and women simply enjoyed different aspects of the films. Berenstein found the assumption that men and women enjoyed different aspects was also reflected in marketing. The 1931 film *Dracula*, for instance, was marketed as a romance in order to draw in a female audience. A 1933 study on the film-viewing habits of children, however, found that girls preferred mysteries while boys enjoyed war movies. Neither group, the study said, liked romance films (Charman, 1933). Likewise, a 1930 article on female film attendance suggested that women attended and enjoyed films whether they contained romance or not (Aaronson, 1930).

Regardless of evidence undermining that assumption that women were drawn to films with romance, Berenstein says, the romantic slant of publicity aimed at women persisted. This assumption and subsequent tendencies in promotion are also found in contemporary marketing and media reviews. A recent *New York Times* review (Bellafante, 2011) of the HBO series *Game of Thrones*, adapted from a series of fantasy novels by George R.R. Martin (1996), sparked a backlash from female fantasy readers (Eleni, 2011; Forum post, 2011; Hill, 2011; Ratcliffe, 2011) when the *Times* critic suggested that *Game of Thrones'* explicit sexual content was "tossed

in as a little something for the ladies, out of a justifiable fear, perhaps, that no woman alive would watch otherwise" (Bellafante, 2011). The *Times* review, written by a woman, ran just a day after *MSNBC Today* ran another review of *Game of Thrones* titled "Geek girls power viewership for sci-fi/fantasy TV" (Young, 2011). The aggressive response of fans and the marked difference between the *Times* and *Today* reviews illustrate the continued disconnect between conventional assumptions about female viewership and the actual practices of female audiences, as well as discontinuity within structures of mainstream media news.

Berenstein also refers to the use of the female scream, not only as a trope in the films themselves, but also as a promotional performance. She says, "the sound of a woman's scream promoted fear, guaranteed the genre's effectiveness, and linked female gender behavior to an overwrought performance" (1996: 73). Marketers also used the response of female audience members to judge the effectiveness of the films, specifically in inciting fear. It is worth noting that the marketing for *Supernatural*, though it is considered a "horror" series, does not attempt to invoke elements of terror. Rather, the series is promoted on the CW through brief clips of upcoming episodes, usually depicting moments of humor or emotional drama.

Janice Radway's (2003) study of women reading romance novels deals more specifically with women-as-audience, particularly with motivations for reading. Radway finds that, for the women in her study, a significant source of the pleasure derived from reading romance novels is the *act* of reading, not only - or necessarily - the texts themselves. The women she spoke to characterized their own reading as an "escape", a way in which to "diversify the pace and character of their habitual existence" (2003: 222).

Radway – and the women – also remark upon the semi-clandestine nature of reading romance fiction. The women refer to their reading as a "guilty pleasure", an activity which their

husbands consider to be "hedonistic" or foolish. According to Radway, the men's disapproval stems from the feeling that reading takes their wives' attentions away from their family and themselves. However, the women are quick to suggest that the escape they seek is from responsibilities, not family. Radway characterizes the act of reading romance as "a special gift a woman gives herself" (2003: 223), an act which acquires significant personal meaning for the readers despite the fact that their desire for pleasure in escape is not culturally validated.

Though my methods and approach differ radically from Radway's, I found some of her concepts useful in my analysis. Specifically, the act of reading as an element of visceral engagement and the understanding of fan activities as clandestine play significant roles in my discussion of fans' reasons for watching *Supernatural.*

In his discussion of women writing *Star Trek* fan fiction, Henry Jenkins (1995) focuses on the active engagement of female audiences with the media text. Fan fiction, a popular practice among media fans, is defined as "a fictional account written by a fan of a show, movie, book, or video game to explore themes and ideas that will not or cannot be explored via the originating medium" (Dictionary.com). Jenkins discusses the ways in which fan writing allows fans, in this case specifically female fans, to engage with and rewrite the source text. Fan fiction allows writers to focus on character relationships and to draw attention to minor – often female – characters. It also gives them an opportunity to "explore erotic aspects of texts which could not be directly represented on television" (1995: 197). Finally, fan writing offers a space in which to expand the series timeline and to allow the "universes" of various programs to interact.

Jenkins points out that most fan writers are women. This is of particular interest in the case of *Star Trek*, he suggests, since the egalitarian ideology of the program gives lip service to gender equality, but the narrative itself portrays traditional gender relations. In this way, "*Star*

Trek thus offered a potential or a 'philosophy' of gender equality which did not often translate into on-screen images of female *characters* being treated equally" (1995: 198). In the original pitch for the series, *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry fought to cast a woman in the role of first officer aboard the *Enterprise*, but the network producers denied this request. Instead, the ship's first officer, now rewritten as the alien Mr. Spock, was famously portrayed by Leonard Nimoy, and the female members of the crew were cast in subordinate positions, as nurses or glorified radio operators, wearing miniskirts and often defined by their sexuality. The only female characters shown to be in positions of authority, Jenkins says, are aliens.

Star Trek, Jenkins says, "invited female fans to think of themselves as active contributors to the utopian future, yet offered them little substantive representation within the program episodes" (1995: 199). Fan writing, on the other hand, provides female fans with a space in which to rework conceptions of gender identity, challenging in fictional form the politics of subordination and gender roles.

Christine Scodari's (2003) study of female fans of the science fiction programs *Stargate: SG-1* and *Farscape* deals directly with the responses of those fans to the show's female characters. For her analysis, Scodari relies upon fan fiction and fan comments and discussions in publications and online. Scodari argues that these seemingly resistive fan practices can lead to the reinforcement of other harmful practices and that fan solidarity can be disrupted by other statuses such as race, age, and so on. The act of reappropriation, Scodari suggests, is not resistive in and of itself, and the content of fan texts may not be resistive at all. She adds that, even in cases where the content is non-hegemonic, this does not necessarily represent a resistive mindset.

Scodari found female fans to be generally antagonistic toward female characters. She proposed that a reason for this may be that fans view female characters as competition for the

male protagonist's affections, saying that "slash" fan fiction, stories which describe a romantic or sexual relationship between two male characters, removes this competition. She also claims that "Mary Sue" fan fiction, stories in which a – usually poorly written, overly perfect – female character features as a fictional stand-in for the author, are written for the same reason.

The hegemonic motivations of producers seeking a male audience, Scodari says, are reinforced by female fans' activities which exclude female characters, so that even fans' proposed resistive activities can reinforce hegemonic structures of sexuality. She says that "[fans] want to *like* and the writers want to *be like* the show's male heroes" (2003: 123. Italics original). She suggests that female fans' dislike of female characters is related to fans' attachment to other male characters and says that fans who offer slash fiction as resistive are reinforcing continued marginalization of female characters.

In asserting that "[fans] want to *like* and the writers want to *be like* the show's male heroes", Scodari is making a number of assumptions that need to be addressed: that the writers are uniformly heterosexual males, that female fans are uniformly heterosexual, that identification with characters is privileged over attraction to characters, and that female fans cannot identify with male characters. First, a brief glance at the writing credits for both *Stargate: SG-1* and *Farscape* eliminates the assumption that all of the series writers are male, and, though I cannot speak to the sexuality of the writing staff, with 48 writers between them, it is statistically unlikely that all of the writers are heterosexual. Second, though Scodari's data suggests that the series' fans are predominantly heterosexual, white women, her statement that "[fans] want to *like*… the show's male heroes" not only assumes necessary attraction to male characters, it also precludes entirely the possibility that female fans of any sexual orientation might be attracted to female characters. Third, Scodari implicitly assumes that having a character perspective with

which to identify is inherently preferable to experiencing attraction to a character. This assumption also underlies work concerned with the male gaze (Knee, 1996; Williams, 1996) and, through its unquestioned persistence, serves to marginalize the experiential importance of female sexuality in viewership. Perhaps there are times at which female viewers prefer to appreciate the visceral appeal of characters, rather than seeking to position themselves subjectively within the narrative. Finally, and most importantly, Scodari assumes that viewers can only identify with characters whose gender expression matches their own, that female viewers can only identify with female characters, male viewers with male characters, and so on. By contrast, female respondents in my survey frequently said that they identified with or "related to" male characters in *Supernatural*, undercutting assumptions about gender restrictions in the narrative gaze.

Though Scodari's topic is directly relevant to my interests, my research approach differs greatly from hers, as do my findings. While Scodari relies on fan magazines and forum posts, my data comes from questionnaires addressing fans directly. Though antagonism toward female characters is not entirely absent, it does not characterize the majority of female fans' responses in my study. On the contrary, a number of female respondents in my study expressed varying degrees of displeasure with the narrative's treatment of female characters and with extra-filmic aspects of characterization, rather than with the characters themselves. Unlike those in Scodari's study, my respondents did not, at any point, frame female characters as sexual rivals. I would suggest, moreover, the possibility of an overlap between the fans in Scodari's study and mine, since at least four of my respondents also said that they were fans of *Stargate: SG-1*.

If the theoretical structure of film and media studies suffers through its neglect of the audience, then audience studies also suffers through its failure to address the content of media texts. A thorough understanding of audience engagement requires that the audiences under

scrutiny not be removed from the context of the textual content with which they are interacting, just as a thorough understanding of ideologies within media texts is not possible without considering how those ideologies are received and interpreted by readers. Through an inter-disciplinary theoretical approach which builds on Freeland's analytical framework and incorporates principals of audience studies via Radway and Jenkins, this study seeks to correct the imbalance between intra- and extra-filmic analysis and thus to construct a more complex, contextualized model of how media texts and media audiences interact.

III. METHODS

In order to create a thorough, complex understanding of how gender functions in media texts, it is necessary to examine not only the text itself, but also the readings of that text by gendered audiences. This requires that research be conducted with two questions operating under an overarching query. Given that my larger question pertains to the workings of gender in *Supernatural*, I must first ask how *Supernatural*, as a narrative, constructs gender and, second, how audiences receive and interpret gender within *Supernatural*. Freeland's framework for reading horror films provides a theoretical foundation from which to approach these very questions. By focusing on both the "intra-filmic" elements – those found within the text itself – and the "extra-filmic" elements – those relating to the text's production, context, and reception – I attempted to assess the function and meaning of gender in *Supernatural.* Through content analysis, I addressed the gendered intra-filmic elements in the text, and I approached the extra-filmic aspects through a survey of *Supernatural* fans.

A. Case Selection

Supernatural premiered on the WB Television Network in September of 2005. It followed the popular mother-daughter comedy *Gilmore Girls*, which had previously featured *Supernatural* star Jared Padalecki. Other popular programming on the network at the time included teen drama *One Tree Hill*, long-running family drama *7th Heaven*, Superman tie-in

Smallville, and sitcom *Reba*, starring country music singer Reba McEntire. The WB had first gained commercial success in 1997 when it launched *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* which it carried for five seasons. It is important to make note of the CW's broadcast history and similar programming on other networks in order to situate *Supernatural* in the context of its home network and of contemporary genre television.

Created and run by Eric Kripke, *Supernatural* centers on the adventures of the Winchester brothers, played by Padalecki and *Smallville* alum Jensen Ackles, as they travel around the United States fighting all manner of magical, mythical, and paranormal monsters. Sam and Dean Winchester, Padalecki and Ackles, respectively, were raised by their ex-marine father, John, to be monster "hunters". John himself pursued the life of a hunter seeking revenge for the death of his wife, Mary, who was killed by a demon named Azazel. In the first season of the series, the brothers are looking for their father, who has gone missing, and also discover clues to suggest that the demon who killed their mother has plans for Sam. Though Azazel himself is not seen in this season, the brothers encounter his "daughter", Meg Masters, a demon who attempts to manipulate and trap them. They exorcise the demon, with the help of another hunter named Bobby Singer, and the real Meg, the young woman being possessed, dies, having been brutally beaten. The brothers are reunited with their father at the end of the first season. However, at the beginning of the second season, John sacrifices himself to Azazel in exchange for Dean's life.[2]

In 2006, the WB merged with United Paramount Network (UPN) to form the CW Television Network. The CW retained *Supernatural* as part of its prime time line-up, moving the

[2] John and Mary Winchester are played by Jeffrey Dean Morgan and Samantha Smith. Meg Masters is played by Nicki Aycox. Bobby Singer is played by Jim Beaver.

series from Tuesday to Thursday nights where it competed with CBS's *CSI*, ABC's *Grey's Anatomy*, and Fox's *The O.C.* (Owen, 2007). That same year, NBC launched the science fiction drama *Heroes* on Monday nights. Through the first season, *Supernatural* saw a significant increase in male viewer demographics (WB Press Release, 2005), though the audience continued to consist primarily of women.

Season two follows Sam and Dean as they attempt to uncover Azazel's true plans and eventually stop him. Season two also introduces a number of recurring characters, including Ellen and Jo Harvelle, a mother and daughter who run a roadhouse for hunters. Also introduced in this season are Gordon Walker, a hunter who comes to believe that Sam is a monster, and FBI Agent Victor Henriksen, who intends to bring the brothers to justice. It is worth noting that both of these characters are Black men and are, up to this point, the only recurring characters of color in the series. They are also both killed in the third season.[3]

A subplot introduced in season one and developed in season two deals with "psychic kids", young men and women who, the brothers learn, have been given special powers by Azazel in preparation for a coming war between demons and humans. Sam, himself one of the chosen, has visions of the future, and, through the season, he and Dean meet Ava Wilson, who also has visions, and Andrew Gallagher, who can control people's minds. These two characters reappear at the end of season two, along with Sam and other "psychic kids", to compete in a battle royale set up by Azazel. All are killed except Sam and a young Black soldier named Jake Talley, who fatally stabs Sam just as Dean and Bobby arrive. Dean offers his soul to a demon in exchange for Sam's life. The demon makes the deal and tells Dean he has one year to live. The brothers, with

[3] Ellen and Jo Harvelle are played by Samantha Ferris and Alona Tal. Gordon Walker is played by Sterling K. Brown, and Victor Henriksen is played by Charles Malik Whitfield.

Bobby and Ellen, kill both Jake and Azazel and succeed in closing a gate to hell opened by the antagonists.[4]

Despite a ratings drop in the second season, *Supernatural* was renewed for a third season (Downey, 2007) and returned in 2007. That year also saw the premier of CBS's short-lived paranormal romance *Moonlight* and the Sci Fi Channel's *The Dresden Files*, based on the series of urban fantasy books by Jim Butcher. Science fiction series *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* also appeared mid-season on Fox.

In season three, the brothers attempt to save Dean from hell by finding and destroying Lilith, the demon who holds the contract for Dean's soul. In addition to Lilith, this season introduces three significant female characters. In the first episode of the season, "The Magnificent Seven", the brothers meet Ruby, a demon who professes to be on their side and claims that she can help them save Dean's soul. In the second episode, "The Kids are Alright", the audience is introduced to Lisa Braedon, a woman with whom Dean once had a brief affair. This episode features a subplot in which Dean believes that Lisa's young son Ben may be his own, though Lisa ultimately denies this. Later in the season, Lisa appears to Dean in a drug-induced dream state as a representation of the quiet family life which he secretly desires. She is not seen again until the fifth season. Also introduced in season three is a professional thief and black market occult dealer named Bela Talbot. Though her professional interests are typically at odds with the brothers' efforts, Bela periodically works alongside Sam and Dean as an ally and source of information and is framed as a possible – but never realized – love interest for Dean. In addition to the introduction of Ruby, Lisa, and Bela, the third season also brings back a male

[4] Azazel is played by Frederi Lehne. Ava Wilson, Andrew Gallaher, and Jake Talley are played by Katharine Isabelle, Gabriel Tigerman, and Aldis Hodge.

character called the Trickster, a god of mischief previously seen in the season two episode "Tall Tales". Through a complicated a highly symbolic trap, the Trickster shows Sam the consequences of his attempts to save Dean, urging him to give up and accept Dean's impending death, which Sam refuses to do. At the end of the season, the brothers, Bobby, and Ruby confront Lilith and her demon entourage, but their attack fails. Dean is killed, and the season ends with an image of his soul in hell.[5]

Because of the dramatic cliffhanger at the end of the third season, *Supernatural* fans have come to refer to the gap between seasons and the mid-season break as "Hellatus", a reference to the standard "hiatus" taken by television shows and to Dean's time in hell. Due to the Writers Guild of America strike in 2007 and 2008, season three was shortened to 16 episodes, rather than the standard 22. In spite of the shortened season, mixed reception by fans and critics, and consistently low ratings, *Supernatural* was once again renewed for a fourth season. Kripke's original series plan was for three seasons, and when *Supernatural* returned in the fall of 2008 it was with a decidedly different approach.

Though the first three seasons were driven by over-arching plots, they were primarily built on a "monster of the week" format, where most episodes exist as individual stories in which the protagonists face a new problem, unrelated to the larger season plot. Season four, however, expanded the show's mythology and introduced a more complex meta-plot in which the brothers are inexorably caught in conflict between demons and angels and must stop an impending apocalypse. This season introduced a host of recurring characters, including the angel Castiel,

[5] In this season, Ruby is played by Katie Cassidy. Lisa and Ben Braedon are played by Cindy Sampson and Nicholas Elia. Bela Talbot is played by Lauren Cohan. The Trickster, later revealed to be the angel Gabriel is played by Richard Speight, jr.

played by Misha Collins, who is responsible for resurrecting Dean. Other angels are Castiel's middle-management superior, Zachariah, and the hard-nosed Uriel, played by a Black actor, who betrays the angels in the service of hell and is killed. The only new female character in season four is Anna Milton, a rebellious angel who, betrayed by Castiel, and is arrested and imprisoned by the other angels. In addition to angels, the fourth season introduced another, more unusual element to the *Supernatural* mythology.[6]

In episode 18, "The Monster at the End of this Book", Sam and Dean discover a series of pulp urban fantasy novels, written under the name "Carver Edlund"[7], that chronicle their adventures in exact detail, beginning with their father's disappearance and ending with Dean in hell. Confused and disturbed, the brothers investigate and learn that the series, titled *Supernatural*, has a devoted cult following and that many of its readers, mostly women, also write fan fiction. They track down the books' author, whose real name is Chuck Shurley, and demand answers. Castiel appears and informs them that Chuck is, in fact, a prophet and that the *Supernatural* novels will one day be known as the Winchester Gospel. Chuck continues to play a minor role throughout seasons four and five, but it is the breach of the television series' "fourth wall", the symbolic division between the performance and the audience, that is most notable and which becomes an oft revisited theme.

During the fourth season, Sam is involved in a romantic relationship with the demon Ruby, now played by a different actor, from whom he learns that drinking the blood of demons will give him supernatural powers. Eventually, it is revealed that Ruby is in league with Lilith,

[6] Zachariah and Uriel are played by Kurt Fuller and Robert Wisdom. Anna Milton is played by Julie McNiven.

[7] The name "Carver Edlund" combines the names of series writers and producers Jeremy Carver and Ben Edlund. Chuck Shurley is played by Robert Benedict.

who uses Sam to help release Lucifer from hell, and that the angels, as well as the demons, want the apocalypse to happen. Zachariah imprisons Dean, but Castiel, disobeying his orders, helps Dean escape. However, Dean is too late to stop Sam from killing Lilith and unlocking Lucifer's cage.[8]

As *Supernatural* entered its fifth season in 2009, five other major genre series entered the prime time line-up. The SyFy channel launched both fantasy drama *Warehouse 13* and *Stargate: Universe*, the third series in the *Stargate* franchise. Much-hyped science fiction series *FlashForward*, based on a novel by Robert J. Sawyer, aired for a single season on ABC, and *Buffy* creator Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse* premiered on Fox. Meanwhile, *Supernatural*'s home network, the CW, launched the paranormal drama *The Vampire Diaries,* based on a series of books by L. J. Smith.

Season five of *Supernatural* continued the apocalypse storyline from season four and added Misha Collins as a series regular. Sam and Dean discover that they are destined to become human vessels for the angels Lucifer and Michael and thereby facilitate the final battle between hell and heaven. Much of this season focuses on their efforts to circumvent this destiny and to also prevent the apocalypse. Castiel, killed at the end of the fourth season, returns claiming that he was restored by God and spends season five alternately helping the brothers and searching for his Father, who is missing.

Both Lucifer and Michael appear as characters, and this season sees the return of Anna Milton, who tries to kill the brothers and is destroyed by Michael, and of the Winchesters' long-lost half-brother, Adam Milligan. Also returning is the Trickster, revealed to be the angel

[8] In this season, Ruby is played by Genevieve Cortese. Lilith is played by Katherine Boecher.

Gabriel, who at first tells Sam and Dean to accept their destinies but later sacrifices himself helping them fight against Lucifer. The prophet Chuck also appears in multiple episodes and with him is a new female character, *Supernatural* super-fan Becky Rosen, who fills her screen time with mooning over Sam. Ellen and Jo Harvelle, unseen since season two, return to help avert the apocalypse, only to be killed mid-season.[9]

Ultimately, in an ill-conceived plan to send the devil back to hell, Sam allows himself to be possessed by Lucifer. After an abbreviated show-down with Michael, who is possessing half-brother Adam, Sam is able to regain control of his body and trap himself, Lucifer, Michael, and Adam in hell. During the fight, both Castiel and Bobby are killed but are immediately resurrected. With the apocalypse averted and Sam gone, Dean returns to Lisa and Ben Braedon to pursue a civilian family life.

With the end of season five and the resolution of the primary story arc, series creator Eric Kripke stepped down as show runner and ceded the position to series writer Sera Gamble. For season six, the CW moved *Supernatural* to Friday nights, and, according to network president Dawn Ostroff, the series is "doing better" and likely to be picked up for a seventh season (Arrow, 2011). As of writing this, season six is ongoing, and casual viewing suggests that, despite the beginning of a new meta-plot, *Supernatural* remains mostly unchanged under Gamble's leadership.

B. Intra-Filmic Methods

[9] Adam Milligan is played by Jake Abel. Becky Rosen is played by Emily Perkins.

Though *Supernatural* is currently in its sixth season, my primary data comes from the first two seasons, only. I have chosen to draw my data from the first two seasons for three reasons. First, the data yielded is sufficient to provide significant and interesting conclusions and to represent patterns which, I believe, would hold across the existing five seasons. Second, while the first season aired on the WB Television Network, WB then merged with UPN to become the CW Television Network, and subsequent seasons of *Supernatural* aired under CW management. By collecting data from both before and after this transition, I have hopefully increased the representativeness of my results. Finally, the over-arching plot for the first two seasons is resolved at the end of season two. Though a closed narrative arch is not essential, it adds a certain symmetry to the research and allows me to consider the data from these two seasons as isolated from the whole.

In order to conduct a thorough reading of the program, I created a coding sheet to record and describe the appearances and roles of female characters in individual episodes of *Supernatural*. Using the coding sheet, I made note of the following: what female characters appear in each episode, the character's approximate age, relationship status, role as victim or antagonist, whether the character is framed as a sexual object for other characters, and whether the character dies over the course of the episode. Due to time restraints, the coding for part of season one was done by another researcher who had knowledge of my research parameters and had been given detailed instructions. The information gathered through the coding sheets is used both to characterize representations of women across the narrative and to develop a foundation for my description of the program's gender ideology. See Appendix A.1 for coding instructions and an example of coding for an episode.

In addition to the episode coding sheets, each episode of the first two seasons received individual consideration. I viewed and took detailed notes on each episode with regard to female characters and gendered interactions. I noted, in particular, the deaths which occurred over the course of each episode, comparing the deaths of female victims to those of male victims. Though some details may overlap, the coding chart and detailed notes provide different perspectives on the presentation of characters and the functions of gender in the program. These notes are used to expand and specify my account of the show's approach to women.

C. Extra-Filmic Methods

To collect information on the engagement of female audiences with the text, I submitted surveys, via the internet, to fans of the series. The survey was first made distributed on June 8, 2010, and the last response was received on August 25, 2010. I did not identify a specific cut-off date for survey responses, but all responses were received before the beginning of *Supernatural*'s sixth season. No responses were submitted after August 25. The survey consists of fourteen questions related to demographics and engagement with the series. The first three questions ask respondents to identify their age, gender, and location, in order to identify patterns in the responses. Subsequent questions deal with the respondents' engagement with the text. The fourth question asks how the respondent was introduced to *Supernatural*. The fifth asks how she or he physically watches the show, and the sixth asks about frequency of interactions with other fans. The next four questions deal with the actual content of the text, asking the respondent to list and explain no more than four favorite characters and four characters she or he dislikes, as well as no more than three favorite and disliked episodes. Both to help characterize the respondent's engagement as a fan and to elicit further discussion, I asked whether she or he read fan fiction

and, if so, what kind. The next question asks directly why the respondent continues to watch *Supernatural* and to identify the aspects of the program that she or he finds most engaging. Intending to eventually submit a more in-depth follow-up survey, I asked respondents whether they would be willing to respond to such a survey, but logistical restraints prohibited a second round of surveys. The final question asks if there is anything the respondent would like to add that was not addressed in the previous questions. See Appendix A.2 for a copy of the survey as it was distributed to respondents.

Respondents' participation was entirely voluntary. I did not directly solicit individual participants, and I did not offer incentives for the completion of the questionnaire. Rather, I used social networking and fan sites to disseminate the survey and find volunteers. I contacted the moderators of *Supernatural*-focused blogging communities on the websites LiveJournal.com and Dreamwidth.com. Both of these websites allow users with individual blog accounts to join "communities", in which members post public journal entries dealing with specific topics. I selected the communities, first, by searching LiveJournal and Dreamwidth for communities which listed "supernatural" as an interest. Communities unrelated to the show *Supernatural* were eliminated from my search. I then eliminated unpopular or unused communities by looking at the number of users subscribed to the community and at the frequency of recent posts. At least one community that might otherwise have been eliminated due to a small number of members was included because it was maintained specifically by and for fans in a non-English speaking country, and I wished to include a wide variety of respondents. I contacted the users responsible for maintaining 20 different communities on LiveJournal and Dreamwidth, asking them to please make a post in their communities directing users to the survey available in multiple formats on

my personal journal. I received positive replies from only a handful of the maintainers, two of whom invited me to post in their communities myself, and negative replies from two others.

In addition to the blogging communities, I used other avenues to find respondents. I asked for volunteers on the *Supernatural* fan page on Facebook.com. I also posted a request for volunteers in the forum section of TheRandomAct.org, a charity organization founded by *Supernatural* actor Misha Collins and maintained by fans of the show. Finally, I made a personal request to Sam Starbuck, known by the username copperbadge on both LiveJournal and DreamWidth, a well-known fan of *Supernatural* and other programs, asking him to direct his readers to the survey.

Respondents submitted their completed surveys to an email address established specifically for this study, though some respondents replied via comments on LiveJournal. Once I received the responses, I saved them to my personal computer, assigned each respondent a number, and removed all identifying information. For those who responded on LiveJournal, I filtered the comments to so that they would only be visible to me.

I entered data from the surveys into a coded database with categories for each topic addressed by the survey questions. This database was used to calculate statistical characteristics of my sample and of their responses. Specifically, I examined data on the respondents' location, gender, and age, and on the respondents' introduction to the series, methods of viewing, favorite and disliked characters, and participation in the fan community. Moving beyond the numerical data, I approached the content of the responses as textual analysis, drawing out themes and observations among the comments.

For the sake of clarification, I would like to identify a distinction between "fans", who are the focus of my research, and "viewers". To this end, I propose two general definitions of

"fans". First, fans are those viewers whose media consumption extends beyond viewing a program into other activities, such as interaction with other viewers, creating art or texts which draw on specific media, or actively pursuing extra information on that media. Second, I propose that fans are those viewers who identify themselves as fans. This act of self-identification expresses a sense of attachment to a specific symbolic community and participation in particular methods of media consumption.

IV. FINDINGS

In this chapter, I discuss specific findings which provide a foundation for my analysis of *Supernatural* and the survey responses. First, I describe trends in female characters appearing in the first two seasons of *Supernatural* and trends in the deaths of both male and female characters in the first two seasons. Second, I present findings from fan surveys, beginning with statistical characteristics of my sample, followed by a description of fans' responses to female and male characters in *Supernatural*. These findings will help support and contextualize my analysis of the text and the surveys.

A. Women in *Supernatural*

a. Female Characters in Seasons One and Two

The 22 episodes of *Supernatural*'s first season introduce 83 female characters. Of these, only three appear in multiple episodes, and only three others are women of color. Approximately 48% of the female characters appear to be in their 20s or late teens. 22% are in their 30s, 17% are above the age of 40, and 12% are below the age of 16. Of the total, 34% are shown to be married or otherwise romantically attached and 30% are framed as sexual objects for one or more of the male characters. 36 female characters, 43%, are framed as victims, where they are threatened or placed in physical danger. Only six women, one of whom is a recurring character, are presented as antagonists and represent a threat to the principle characters, and three female characters are

framed, alternately, as both victims and antagonists. 18% of the female characters are dead before the end of their respective episodes.

B.1: Female Characters in Season One.

Age	Total	Sexual Object	Married/Attached	Victim/Antagonist	Dead
-16	10	0	0	4(V) – 1(A)	1
16-22	10	3	3	6(V)	4
20-30	29	20	13	15(V) – 3(A) – 3(V/A)	7
30-40	18	1	7	7(V) – 1(A)	3
40-50	9	0	5	2(V) – 1(A)	1
50+	5	0	0	1(V)	1
Total	81	24	28	35(V) – 6(A) – 3(V/A)	17

Season two sees a significant drop in the number of female characters, from 83 to 56, with two appearing in multiple episodes and six being women of color. A greater number, 60%, are in their late teens or 20s, while approximately 16% appear to be in their 30s, 14% above the age of 40, and 9% below 16. 24% are in some kind of romantic relationship, one of whom, a young woman in the season's penultimate episode who is quickly killed off, indicates that she was previously in a relationship with another woman. Other percentages hold relatively constant, with 34% of the female characters framed as sexual objects and 41% as victims. There is a small increase in the number of women portrayed as antagonists, 19%, and of women as both victim

and antagonist, 7%. 27% are killed over the course of their episodes, with a recurring character dying near the end of the season.

B.2: Female Characters in Season Two.

Age	Total	Sexual Object	Married/Attached	Victim/Antagonist	Dead
-16	5	0	0	1(V) – 2(A)	1
16-22	2	0	0	1(V)	1
20-30	33	17	8	11(V) – 7(A) – 4(V/A)	9
30-40	9	3	4	6(V)	3
40-50	6	0	2	4(V) – 1(A)	3
50+	2	0	0	1(V)	1
Total	57	20	14	24(V) – 10(A) – 4(V/A)	18

Of the three recurring characters in the first season, two die in the pilot episode and are seen throughout the series only as apparitions or in flash back. The third recurring character, a major antagonist, is violently neutralized in the season finale and does not reappear until the fifth season. The second season introduces three significant recurring female characters, two of whom are mother and daughter. Though both survive the season, they are not seen again until season five, in which they are abruptly killed.

b. Character Death in Seasons One and Two

During the first season, there are 44 separate death scenes, 39% of which depict the murder of women, and 61% depict the murder of men. Of these, only one male victim is shown in a state of undress, where all others are fully clothed. By contrast, eight of the 17 female victims are shown in night clothes, underwear, or no clothes at all. Also, in the deaths of female characters, the majority occurred onscreen and in the character's home, whereas the majority of male characters' deaths were not explicitly shown onscreen and occurred in a public space. Female victims were also more likely to be alone when they were killed, where male victims were more likely to die in the vicinity of other characters.

Of these murders, 57% were perpetrated by male antagonists, while 20% of the killers were female, and 23% had no specified gender. Male and female victims were both most likely to be killed by a male antagonist.

B.3: Character Death in Season One.

Gender	Total	Dressed/Undressed	On/Off Screen	Home/Public	Witnessed	Shot of Body	Gender of Killer
Female	17	9(D) – 8(U)	11(On) – 6(Off)	12(H) – 5(P)	8	6	3(F) – 10(M) – 4(O)
Male	27	26(D) – 1(U)	9(On) – 18(Off)	11(H) – 16(P)	18	9	6(F) – 15(M) – 6(O)
Total	44	35(D) – 9(U)	20(On) –	23(H) –	26	15	9(F) –

			24(Off)	21(P)			25(M) – 10(O)

In the second season, the number of deaths rises to 58, but the number of female victims drops to 28%. While only two of the male victims were shown in states of undress, so, too were three of the female victims, a marked difference from season one. Also in contrast to season one, the deaths of women in season two were equally likely to be shown on-screen as they were off-screen, and 59% of male characters were killed on-screen. Likewise, half the murders of female victims were witnessed by another character, though men remained less likely to be killed alone, with 78% of male character deaths being witnessed. Patterns of location, however, held more or less true, where 88% of men's deaths occurred in a public place, as opposed to 69% of women's deaths, though women became more likely to die in a public place, rather than their homes.

Though male and female characters alike remained more likely to be killed by male antagonists, men were twice as likely as women to be killed by a female antagonist. In addition, 38% of the total deaths in season two were either accidental or committed by antagonists whose gender is unknown or non-existent, as opposed to 23% in season one and compared to 40% of those committed by men in season two.

B.4: Character Death in Season Two.

Gende	Tota	Dressed/Undresse	On/Off	Home/Publi	Witnessed	Shot of	Gender

r	l	d	Screen	c		Body	of Killer
Female	16	13(D) – 3(U)	8(On) – 8(Off)	5(H) – 11(P)	8	5	2(F) – 7(M) – 7(O)
Male	41	39(D) – 2(U)	24(On) – 17(Off)	5(H) – 36(P)	32	12	10(F) – 16(M) – 15(O)
Total	57	52(D) – 5(U)	32(On) – 25(Off)	10(H) – 72(P)	40	17	12(F) – 23(M) – 22(O)

B. Survey Findings

a. Characteristics of the Sample

Of the 94 respondents, 93% identified as female and only 7% identified as male. Though I anticipated that my sample would be largely female, this divide is more extreme than I would have predicted. The distribution of ages, however, met expectations. The largest number of respondents, 34%, were between the ages of 18 and 22, what I would characterize as roughly college-age. The second largest group, at 30%, were between 23 and 30, followed by ages 31 to 40, at 17%. 14% of respondents were bellow the age of 18, and only 5% were over 41, with the highest age being 56 years-old. 51% of my respondents were located in the United States. 18% were from Portugal, 7% were from the United Kingdom, 6% from Canada, 5% from Australia and New Zealand, 2% from Brazil, and 1% each from Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Malaysia,

and Switzerland. A number of fans from non-English speaking countries reported that English was not their first language, and they, as well as others from outside the United States, expressed frustration that their local television networks were at least a season behind the episodes airing in the US and that they often had to watch current episodes online. See Appendix C.1 for respondent statistics by location.

C.1: Survey Statistics

Age	Female	Male	Total
-18	10	3	23
18-22	30	2	32
23-30	28	0	28
31-40	13	2	15
41-50	6	0	6
51+	2	0	2
Total	89	5	94

a) <u>United States</u>

Age	Female	Male	Total
-18	3	0	3
18-22	14	2	16
23-30	14	0	14

31-40	10	2	12
41-50	2	0	2
51+	1	0	1
Total	44	4	48

b) Portugal

Age	Female	Male	Total
-18	5	3	8
18-22	6	0	6
23-30	2	0	2
31-40	1	0	1
41-50	0	0	0
51+	0	0	0
Total	14	3	17

c) Europe (Not Portugal)

Age	Female	Male	Total
-18	2	0	2
18-22	5	0	5
23-30	5	0	5
31-40	0	0	0
41-50	1	0	1

51+	1	0	1
Total	14	0	14

d) <u>Other Location</u>

Age	Female	Male	Total
-18	0	0	0
18-22	5	0	5
23-30	7	0	7
31-40	2	0	2
41-50	0	0	0
51+	0	0	0
Total	14	0	14

The most interesting patterns began to emerge when I looked at questions about the respondents' favorite characters and characters they disliked. I asked each respondent to name no more than four characters in *Supernatural* that they considered favorites and to give a brief explanation of their choices. Some respondents named fewer or more than four, but I did not count any that exceeded four. 82% of my total 94 respondents listed Dean Winchester, the older brother, as a favorite character. The younger Winchester, Sam, came in third, with 54% of respondents naming him a favorite. The other three of the top five characters were also male.

In the survey, I posed an identical question asking respondents about characters they disliked. This time, of the top five characters, only one was male, and there was less consensus

among respondents than in the "favorite characters" category. The most disliked character, Ruby, one of *Supernatural*'s recurring female villains, was named by only 40% of respondents.

b. Female Characters

Based on the survey data, the most popular female character, and sixth most popular character overall, was Ellen Harvelle, played by Samantha Ferris. Ellen, introduced in the second episode of season two, is the widow of a hunter and the proprietor of a roadhouse that caters to hunters, specifically. In season five, Ellen sacrifices herself in an explosion to allow the Winchesters to escape.

The fans who cited Ellen as a favorite character referred to her strength as a woman and as a maternal figure, calling her "tough" and "kick ass", as well as "warm" and "caring". One fan added, "I wish they'd bring her back", a possibility exploited for many of the male characters killed and resurrected over the course of the series. The one respondent who cited Ellen as a least favorite character described her as "pushy" and expressed the opinion that "some writer wanted a female reoccurring [*sic*] presence and just threw [her] in without really thinking about it".

Overwhelmingly, the character fans most disliked was Ruby, a demon played in season three by Katie Cassidy and in season four by Genevieve Cortese. Introduced as an unsteady ally, Ruby becomes an ongoing love interest for Sam and ultimately manipulates him into releasing Lucifer from Hell, after which she is stabbed and killed by Dean.

The respondents who liked Ruby referred to her complexity as a character and moral ambiguity. Though many said they did not appreciate the way in which she was killed, and all made a distinction between the character as played by Cassidy and the one played by Cortese. Among fans who disliked Ruby, the most common complaint was her betrayal of Sam, as well as

inconsistencies between the two actors' performances. Others said they did not like the character simply because she was evil, while others pointed specifically to poor acting as the source of their dislike.

The second least popular character was Anna Milton, played by Julie McNiven. It is worth noting that Anna's character arc is sporadically developed and complicated. She is introduced in a two-episode arc in season four in which Anna, pursued by both demons and angels, is revealed to have once been an angel herself. During this arc, she has sex with Dean. After her angelic power is restored, Anna is betrayed by Castiel and imprisoned by the forces of heaven. She does not reappear until late in the fifth season, at which point she attempts to preemptively murder the Winchester brothers. This attempt fails, and she is burned alive by another angel. If, at this point, readers unfamiliar with the series are confused, you should know that fans were confused, too.

Of the 94 respondents, only one cited Anna as a favorite character, while 17% said they disliked her. Like Ruby, a number of fans mentioned poor acting as the reason for their dislike and several referred to inconsistent story lines and characterization. One fan observed, "I don't really think the writers knew what they were doing with her and her story seemed to go nowhere with earlier comments she made not matching up with later actions". Others cited her eventual animosity toward the brothers, with one respondent saying simply that she didn't like Anna because she "tried to kill them". Many fans also remarked on the character's death, a commentary absent in discussion of other female characters, saying that they felt apathetic or even elated. One fan went so far as to say, "when she burned at the end of that episode, my euphoria was only slightly dampened by the realization that Sam was lying on the ground, dead,

not ten feet away from where she was being destroyed". Another referred to her as "a whiney, selfish, heartless bitch" and others said she was "annoying".

Jo Harvelle, ranked fourth on the list of most disliked characters, is the daughter of Ellen and is played by Israeli actor Alona Tal. Against her mother's wishes, Jo pursues a life of hunting, including helping the Winchesters with a case. She is ultimately mauled and killed by hell hounds in the same season five episode in which Ellen also dies.

Like Ellen, the respondents who liked Jo described her as "strong" and "kick ass", saying that she worked well in conjunction with the brothers and was "totally a very good equal to them". While some remarked that they did not like the subplot in which Jo was romantically attracted to Dean, one fan observed, "She could take care of herself, and she could do that and still have an unrequited crush, which you hardly ever see on television in female characters". The respondents who cited Jo as a disliked character often said that she "tried too hard" to be a hunter or to "be one of the boys", with one fan even referring to her as "hunter!Barbie". Others suggested that she was "annoying" and childish.

Under suggestion from the network (Ausiello, 2007), Eric Kripke introduced Bela Talbot, played by Lauren Cohan, as a recurring character in season three. Bela, an occult thief, alternately helps and hinders the Winchesters' efforts, and is killed at the end of the season, due in part, according to Kripke, to negative response from fans (Williams, 2008).

The few fans who did list Bela as a favorite character liked that she was "sassy" and "smart ass", but did not provide much detail in their responses, though one did say, "I was really growing to like her sassy ways before they killed her off". The explanations of respondents who disliked Bela were even less expansive. One fan simply said Bela "rub[s] me the wrong way" and described the character as "pointless". The others did not give a reason for their dislike.

C.2: Female Characters

Character	Liked	Disliked
Anna Milton	1	16
Ava Wilson	0	2
Becky Rosen	1	4
Bela Talbot	3	10
Cassie Robinson	0	4
Ellen Harvelle	10	1
Jo Harvelle	4	10
Leah Gideon	0	1
Lilith	0	2
Lisa Braeden	0	6
Madison	0	1
Mary Winchester	1	0
Meg Masters	0	8
Missouri Moseley	1	1
Pamela Barnes	1	0
Ruby	5	38

Though it is tempting to view this aggression toward female characters through a psychoanalytic lens, specifically the Kristevan notion of the female body as abject (Creed, 1996), I do not believe that the fans' comments support this interpretation. Furthermore, I would point

to three specific patterns in these comments which, I believe, serve to undermine a psychoanalytic interpretation.

First, the comments evidence a certain hesitation in discussing characters they disliked. In general, fans responded to the question about favorite characters with detail and enthusiasm, but this was not necessarily the case when asked about characters they disliked. 26% of the 94 respondents said that there were no characters they disliked or that they couldn't think of any. Of those who did name disliked characters, many did not give a reason or said they didn't know why. This would appear to be in direct opposition to the enthralling attraction Kristeva claims is intrinsic to the abject.

Second, another trend in describing disliked characters was for respondents to cite reasons external to the narrative, a tendency which was also present in comments on favorite characters. Many fans pointed to failure or inconsistency on the part of the show's writers for creating poor characters with comments like "Their characters were introduced sloppily and handled poorly" or "[The writers] brought them in without any real idea of the context or where this would take the story". Also common was a tendency to refer to poor acting as a source of dislike, and a number of fans explained that they would have liked certain characters, Anna in particular, had the part been cast differently. Though some made a point to say that they held nothing against the actors and simply did not like the characters. If these characters existed for the viewers as representatives of an intra-narrative symbolic order, as Kristeva would suggest, then why would the respondents go to such lengths to de-mystify and contextualize them?

Finally, a reading of fans' distaste as a response to abjection is undermined by the simple fact that not all of the disliked characters discussed in the surveys were women. In fact, the second most disliked character was male. Furthermore, respondents often used similar language

or gave similar reasons for disliking characters of either gender. Disliked male characters were just as likely to be described as "pointless", "evil", or even "whiney" as female characters. Though the word "bitch" appeared often in descriptions of disliked female characters, the words "douche" and "asshole" were just as frequent in describing disliked male characters. Also, the extra-narrative complaints regarding poor acting or writing were equally common for disliked male characters as for disliked female characters.

c. *Male Characters*

Though my analysis centers on fans' engagement with female characters, I believe it is important to examine, briefly, specific patterns in fans' engagement with male characters, also. One trend in particular emerged through the survey responses that I did not expect and which runs counter to both conventional wisdom and previous research (Scodari, 2003; Knee, 1998; Williams, 1996) regarding gendered viewing.

As previously stated, the most popular characters were overwhelmingly male, which is unsurprising considering the make up of the principle cast. What was surprising was that many female fans said that the reason they liked these characters was because they related to them on a personal level. This tendency was strongest when discussing the character of Dean Winchester. "He reminds me a lot of myself", one fan remarked. On a visceral level, one fan said she liked Dean because "Dean is like a male version of me. I strongly identify with him because we like the same music, same clothes, and have the same sense of humour and issues with self-worth", while another expressed the same sentiment, adding "even though he can be a douche (mostly season 5) I can't help but love him". Another said she identified with Dean specifically because she was also an older sibling who "spent a lot of time as a kid taking care of my siblings when

my folks weren't around", much as Dean does for Sam throughout the course of the series. One respondent even identified Dean as role model, saying. "When I was eighteen I tried to model myself on him. He's so brave".

Likewise, one fan connected her own personal difficulties to Sam:

> I relate to Sam more probably since the Pilot. I get what losing people close to you can do to a person. And when I watched Sam struggle with his darker urges in Season 4; it was a scary reminder of my own inner struggle. I feel that Sam's journey can mirror a lot of ours (minus the monsters and stuff).

Regarding sibling dynamics, another remarked, "I feel a huge connection to [Sam]. We're both the youngest, black sheep in the family, and share a deep resentment to being bossed around without any explanation".

Even Castiel, an angel and the second most popular character, was considered relatable, with one fan saying, "like him, I often feel like I'm struggling to fit into society around me and don't understand why people think the things I say are funny sometimes".

C.3: Male Characters

Character	Liked	Disliked
Adam Milligan	1	1
Alastair	3	2
Andrew Gallagher	2	0
Ash	3	0

Azazel	3	0
Ben Braeden	0	1
Bobby Singer	33	1
Castiel	56	2
Chuck Shurley	4	0
Crowley	7	0
Dean Winchester	77	4
Gabriel	27	2
God	0	1
Gordon Walker	0	2
John Winchester	8	6
Joshua	0	1
Lucifer	8	3
Raphael	0	2
Sam Winchester	51	8
Uriel	0	6
Victor Henriksen	2	1
Zachariah	0	12

In many ways, my findings, specifically those on fans' responses to characters, serve to destabilize existing models of audience engagement, rather than support them. Specifically, the absence of abjection in female fans' readings of female characters diminishes the usefulness of a Kristevan psychoanalytic reading of gender in film. Also, the popularity of identification with

male characters among female respondents serves to undermine Scodari's (2003) assumptions about how female fans situate themselves in fictional narratives, and it calls into question ideas regarding the exclusive male gaze in horror films (Knee, 1998; Williams, 1996). By deconstructing these models, we can proceed to build a more useful, comprehensive model of audience engagement with regard to gender.

V. ANALYSIS

A. Intra-Filmic Analysis

a. Women as Victims

During the *Supernatural* panel at the 2010 San Diego Comic Con,[10] a fan asked new show runner Sera Gamble whether any of the women in season six would "stick around". Gamble equivocated, claiming that *Supernatural* was just as dangerous for men as for women, that just as many male characters were killed. Though the data supports Gamble's assertion, this does not address the fact that approximately half of all female characters are framed as victims or that, over the course of five seasons, only four of thirteen total recurring female characters survive, two of whom are not technically alive.

Throughout the first two seasons, six episodes open immediately on scenes of women in danger, and nine others show women being killed or threatened before the opening credits. All but four of the total episodes contain at least one scene in which a woman is in immediate danger. In order to contextualize this victimization, I would like to discuss three specific episodes which frame women as victims in different ways.

Many of the patterns for women in *Supernatural* are set early on, in the pilot episode. The episode, written by series creator Eric Kripke, opens in the Winchester family home. Mary

[10] I was in the audience during this panel, and I remember this question being asked. I reviewed video of the panel to refresh my memory of Gamble's response.

Winchester, a beautiful blonde woman dressed in a white nightgown, hears baby Sam crying and peeks into his nursery. A dark, male figure standing over the crib shushes her, and Mary, assuming it is her husband, John, acquiesces and moves on. Upon seeing that her husband is, in fact, asleep in front of the television, Mary rushes back to Sam's nursery. John is awakened by Mary's scream and runs, also, to the nursery, where he finds baby Sam asleep and Mary pinned to the ceiling above, a blood stain spreading across her stomach. As he watches, her body bursts into flames which quickly spread across the ceiling and eventually consume the house. John grabs Sam and calls for Dean, who carries his baby brother out of the house. The three of them stand on the front lawn and watch in horror as the house burns.

All of this happens before the opening credits.

The episode picks up 22 years later, and we learn that Mary's death propelled John into a life of hunting down the supernatural and that Sam and Dean were raised to do the same. Sam, however, has left the life and is now a pre-law student at Stanford. His girlfriend, Jessica[11], is a pretty blonde woman seen three times over the course of the episode. The first time she appears, she is dressed for a costume party as a "sexy nurse". For her other two appearances, one of which is her death scene, she is in a small T-shirt and underwear. She is, presumably, also a student, but her course of study is not known.

The monster for this episode is a creature, originating in Mexican folklore, known as a "woman in white". In *Supernatural*, the ghost of a beautiful woman in a white dress haunts a stretch of highway, luring men to their deaths, supposedly as punishment for their unfaithfulness. Once the brothers have eliminated the spirit, which Dean refers to as a "bitch", Sam returns home to witness Jessica die in the same manner as Mary. This tragedy causes Sam to join Dean

[11] Jessica Moore is played by Adrianne Palicki.

in the search for their currently missing father and for the creature that killed Mary and Jessica. Though this could be the origin story for any hero, the series may be viewed in a different light when we consider that this origin is framed by the deaths of two women and that it is those deaths which provide the impetus for the story that follows.

The sixth episode of season one, titled “Skin” and written by John Shiban, opens on a young woman tied to a chair. Her clothes are torn, she is crying, and it is obvious that she has been badly beaten and tortured. The monster in this episode is a shape shifter whose *modus operandi* is to assume the appearances of men with attractive wives or girlfriends and then torture those women. The Winchesters become involved in the case when one of Sam’s college friends, a young woman, asks him to help prove the innocence of her brother, accused of torturing and killing his girlfriend. Throughout the episode, we return to images like the one in the opening: a young woman, tied to a chair, being tortured for pleasure. Though there is a certain amount of action and drama, these are the only scenes of violence in the episode.

The third episode I would like to discuss strikes a very different tone. In season two’s “Heart”, written by Sera Gamble, Sam and Dean are investigating werewolf attacks in San Francisco when they meet Madison[12], a young woman connected to one of the victims. Believing her to be in danger, the brothers decide that one of them should stay and look after her. When Dean declares, “I’m gonna hang here with the hot chick”, Sam asks, “Why do you always get to hang out with the girls?”, at which point they use a game of rock-paper-scissors to decide who stays. Sam wins and ends up watching soap operas with Madison as she folds her underwear and describes how being the victim of a “mugging” made her a stronger, more confident person. The brothers quickly discover that Madison is the werewolf and that the victims were men by whom

[12] Madison, for whom no surname is given, is played by Emanuelle Vaugier.

she, consciously or not, felt threatened. In reference to the male werewolf who turned her, Dean says, “Maybe he was looking for a little hot breeding action.”

The remainder of the episode consists of Sam insisting that they must find a way to save her and reverse the werewolf curse. Their efforts fail, though not before Sam and Madison have sex. Eventually, the brothers realize that there is no way to save her, and Sam, at Madison’s insistence, shoots her in the heart with a silver bullet.

b. Women as Objects

In seasons one and two, 54% of the female characters between the ages of 16 and 30 are framed as sexual objects in one way or another. However, unlike many shows with a largely female audience, there are few long-term love interests for the brothers on *Supernatural*. Aside from Sam’s girlfriend, Jessica, who dies in the pilot, only four possible or existing love interests occur in multiple episodes. These characters are Jo Harvelle, Bela Talbot, Lisa Braedon, and Ruby.

When Jo first appears in the second episode of season two, Dean begins, apparently out of habit, to make a pass at her, but he stops himself. Jo seems surprised by this and tells him that the hunters who pass through the roadhouse often hit on her, and she describes a pick-up routine that sounds, to regular viewers, like a page right out of Dean’s playbook. This establishes a pattern for their interactions as the series goes on. In episode 14 of season two, a demon who is possessing Sam mocks Jo for her “crush” on Dean, supporting the assumption that she is, in fact, attracted to him. Though Jo’s mother, Ellen, appears sporadically through the rest of season two and is featured in the season finale, Jo herself is not seen again until episode two of season five. In the 10th episode of season five, Dean makes a direct sexual advance, but she rejects him. Later

in the same episode, Jo is fatally injured, and Dean, before leaving, kisses her on the forehead, as a brother, and on the mouth, as a lover. Though there is clearly a rapport and attraction between them, circumstances and hesitation prevent them from acting on the possibility of romance until that possibility is finally eliminated by Jo's death.

To a certain extent, a similar pattern is set for Dean's relationship with Bela Talbot. Bela, however, is frequently at odds with the brothers, and it is this conflict which prevents the romantic possibility from being realized. Though it is never entirely clear whether Dean feels any kind of attraction to Bela, she openly expresses sexual desire for him. In one episode, Dean emerges cleaned up and dressed in a fitted tuxedo. Bela is obviously flustered by his appearance and tells him, "You know, when this is over, we should really have angry sex." Dean hesitates, embarrassed, then crosses his arms uncomfortably and replies, "Don't objectify me." There is also an episode in which Sam has an erotic dream about Bela, but the implications of this are not explored. Bela's motivations, however, are primarily self-interested, and she frequently undermines and betrays the brothers. For the most part, the only feeling Dean expresses toward Bela is a desire to kill her. When the opportunity to shoot her presents itself, he tells her she's "not worth it" and walks away, and he later listens unfeeling as she cries and begs for help to escape her impending death. She gives Dean a crucial piece of information just before she is killed by hell hounds in payment for a deal she made with a demon, foreshadowing Dean's own death at the end of the season.

Through sporadic contact, Dean is able to eventually establish a relationship with Lisa Braedon, a single mother with whom he had a brief affair eight years before. She is introduced in the second episode of season three, in which her son and other neighborhood children are threatened, and Dean initially pursues the case out of a desire to see Lisa again. She appears once

more in season three, but it is as a dream in Dean's mind. He sees her in a picnic setting, calling him to her and talking about picking up her son from soccer practice. This scene suggests that, for Dean, she is a symbol of the suburban family life he has never had. Dean does not actually see her again until episode 17 of season five.

Faced with what he believes is inevitable tragedy, Dean goes to see Lisa to tell her goodbye and to say that he is going to make "arrangements" to ensure that she and her son will be safe. Later in season five, after forming a plan in which Sam must sacrifice himself to stop the apocalypse, Sam makes Dean promise that, once everything is over, Dean will return to Lisa and lead a normal life. At the end of the fifth season, with the apocalypse averted and Sam gone, Dean does exactly that. As of season six, however, Dean and Lisa are no longer together.

The only definite, ongoing romantic relationship in the series is that between Sam and the demon Ruby[13], though describing their involvement as "romantic" may not be entirely accurate. Ruby first appears in the third season, claiming to be an ally, and provides the brothers with information and help throughout the season. Though she expresses an interest in Sam from the beginning, they are not involved in a sexual relationship until the following season. At first, Sam keeps the relationship and Ruby herself a secret from Dean, despite Ruby's insistence that he tell his brother the truth. Dean does discover that they have been working together by following Sam, and he immediately attacks Ruby. Sam stops him, and the three establish a shaky truce. Throughout the season, Ruby encourages Sam to develop his latent psychic powers and strengthen them by drinking the blood of demons. She provides her own blood during a few

[13] I have chosen to approach Ruby as a single, uniform character, though she was portrayed by two different actors, and fans typically make a distinction between "Ruby 1" or "blonde Ruby", played in season three by Katie Cassidy, and "Ruby 2" or "brunette Ruby", played in season for by Genevieve Cortese. Incidentally, in February of 2010, Cortese married Jared Padalecki.

highly sexualized scenes, and Sam drinking from her acts as a prelude to their sexual encounters. Despite being warned by Dean and openly threatened by the angels, Sam, under Ruby's advisement, believes that using his powers is the only way to stop Lilith from releasing Lucifer. In general, Ruby appears supportive and understanding of Sam's decisions and the difficulties he faces, and she frequently tells him that he should be honest with Dean and that she doesn't want to come between them. Eventually, Sam's addiction to demon blood and his conviction that he is doing the right thing drives the two brothers apart, and Sam and Ruby pursue Lilith on their own, though Ruby insists Sam and Dean will patch things up once everything is over. Meanwhile, Dean learns that killing Lilith will actually release Lucifer. He races to stop Sam, but he is too late. Sam kills Lilith, and Ruby, triumphantly euphoric, reveals that she has been in league with Lilith all along. However, she does not mock Sam for his gullibility. Instead, she is happy for him, saying that he has done the right thing and that they'll both be rewarded. Finally, Dean bursts in, and Sam holds Ruby still so that Dean can stab her and kill her.

Jo, Bela, Lisa, and Ruby are framed as objects in two senses. First, they are sexual objects in that they receive the sexual attentions of the protagonists and, more to the point, do not overtly project sexuality of their own. Only Bela and Ruby express direct sexual agency, and they are framed as erstwhile antagonists and are both killed. We must also question the possibility of female sexual agency in the context of such a male-dominated narrative. Second, these women are objects in the sense that they are disposable. They are brought into the story sporadically as needed, and, once they are no longer useful to the narrative, they are killed off.

c. *Women as Props*

Though a case can be made for the regular victimization and objectification of women on *Supernatural*, the most frequent and most significant pattern for female characters is that they are simply pushed aside, comparable to the way in which small physical props might be used in stage or film. Women, like props, appear when they are useful or serve a specific purpose and return to the offstage when they are not. Observation suggests that women in this series will meet one of three fates. A female character will appear in a single episode, in which much is made of her relationship with one of the brothers, and then she will never be heard from again. Alternately, a female character will appear in a single episode, establish a relationship with one of the brothers, and then she will die during that episode. For an example of the second pattern, see my discussion of the episode “Heart”, above. Finally, a recurring female character will be introduced, she will disappear from the narrative for some length of time, and then return later to be quickly killed off. There are a few exceptions to these patterns, but, as a general rule, women who attempt to take part directly in the action are, at best, prevented from doing so or, at worst, meet with death for their efforts.

In the episode “Route 666” in season one, written by Eugenie Ross-Lemming and Brad Buckner, an old girlfriend of Dean’s, Cassie[14], asks him for help in discovering the truth about her father’s mysterious death. Dean and Cassie intimately reconnect, and, at the end of the episode, he promises to call her. She is not mentioned again. In a later season one episode, “Provenance” by David Ehrman, Sam goes out with Sarah, an intelligent young woman who eventually helps the brothers solve their case. Sarah is up-front with her attraction to Sam and tells him they should pursue a relationship. Sam insists that this would be too dangerous for her,

[14] Cassie Robinson is played by Megalyn Echikunwoke.

and she tells him his protectiveness is both “sweet” and “archaic”. Despite this, she is never seen again, and, when Dean asks about her in the following episode, Sam is dismissive.

Episode six of season two, “No Exit” by Matt Witten, focuses on a monster, the ghost of serial killer H. H. Holmes, who victimizes young women exclusively. In “No Exit”, the brothers are joined by Jo, who finds the case and conducts preliminary research, but both brothers are resistant to her working with them. She accuses Dean of sexism, telling him, “You don’t think women can do the job.” He replies, “Women can do the job fine” and that it is her lack of experience he doesn’t like. Dean insists on remaining close to Jo in order to protect her. Just moments after she does, in fact, leave his sight, she is abducted by the ghost and imprisoned in a concrete chamber. Another woman is likewise imprisoned, and Jo tells her, “This won’t make you feel better, but I’m here to rescue you”, underscoring the helplessness of their mutual situation. In her single moment of active resistance, Jo stabs the ghost as it reaches for her, but she is otherwise unmoving until the Winchesters arrive to save her. To resolve the case, Jo is positioned as bait so that the Winchesters can trap the ghost. This episode resolves without harm to the heroes, but Jo, of course, is seen only twice more before her death in season five.

Finally, the themes of victimization, objectification, and marginalization are most clearly expressed in the character of Anna Milton. Anna is introduced in a two-episode arc in season four and is first seen as a patient in a psychiatric hospital. What the psychiatrist describes as paranoid schizophrenia, however, is a psychic gift, and Anna is pursued by both demons and angels. After she escapes from the hospital, the Winchesters find her and help her evade capture. For the first half of the arc, Anna is fearful and follows their lead, becoming angry only when she’s overhears them discussing her past and psychiatric history. In the second half, however, Anna learns that she was once an angel, and her frightened demeanor immediately becomes one

of calm confidence. It is worth noting that this dramatic self-discovery is ultimately passive. Anna regains her memories after being hypnotized by a psychic, and continues to acquiesce to Sam and Dean, even after revealing that she was a military leader in heaven. She then has sex with Dean in the backseat of his car. Though they appear to have established an emotional connection, this encounter is not framed as part of a larger romance, and there is a vague suggestion that she might be sleeping with him out of gratitude. At the end of the arc, Anna regains her full powers as an angel and vanishes.

She appears briefly in three more episodes in season four. The next time she sees the Winchesters, Dean remarks, "You look terrific." She replies simply, "Yeah, not the most appropriate time, Dean." Most of her exchanges are with Castiel, encouraging him to question the authority of heaven and think for himself. Though he ultimately follows this advice and sides with the Winchester, Castiel first betrays Anna and turns her over to the other angels. She is not seen again until episode 13 of season five, during which interim she is being tortured in heaven.

When she does return, Anna appears to Dean during a dream in which he is entertained by exotic dancers dressed as a demon and an angel. She tells him to meet her, saying that she has escaped from heaven, but Castiel believes she was released for a purpose and goes to meet her instead. Anna insists that the only way to stop the apocalypse is to kill Sam, and, warned away by Castiel in the present, she time travels to 1978 with the intention of killing John and Mary before Sam and Dean can be born. Dean suggests that she is insane, saying that she has "gone all Glenn Close", presumably a reference to *Fatal Attraction*[15]. Castiel transports Sam and Dean

[15] Close's character in *Fatal Attraction* becomes fixated on a married man with whom she had an affair, harassing him and his family and threatening them with violence.

back in time to stop Anna, which they are unable to do. Michael appears to save them and undo Anna's actions. Without a word, he touches Anna and burns her alive from the inside out.

Though she is, at least in part, framed as a strong, competent female character, Anna's over-arching story cycles through the patterns already established for women in *Supernatural*. She is introduced as a victim, threatened by supernatural forces, and saved through the intervention of the Winchesters. Her sexual encounter with Dean frames her as a sexual object, though subsequent interactions, or lack thereof, negate her as a potential love interest. She is established as a recurring character, only to be abruptly removed from the narrative for an extended period. When she does eventually return, she not only meets a violent death, but has also transitioned from an erstwhile hero to a clear villain.

In my analysis of *Supernatural*, I have chosen to focus on the representation of female characters, neglecting the question of how male characters are also represented. It is possible that the majority of male characters also fall into patterns of victimization and marginalization. What is significant about the treatment of women as "props", however, is the fact that all female characters on *Supernatural* meet one of the three fates discussed above, which is not the case for male characters. There are three exceptions among female characters, but the circumstances surrounding these characters makes it difficult to argue that they break pattern in a significant way. It is also worth noting that the series is not over, and these three characters may yet return to the narrative to die.

B. Extra-Filmic Analysis

a. Why fans watch

If, as I have asserted, *Supernatural* consistently marginalizes and portrays women as sexual objects and victims of violence, why, then, do so many women continue to avidly follow the series? References to the program's content appeared in the majority of responses, but fans also mentioned aspects of visceral engagement with the program and boundary work in the fan community as reasons for watching.

1. Content

Almost all of the respondents cited the relationship between the two brothers, as well as general characters and dynamics, as the reason for their continued interest in the show. As one fan said, "If you're not watching it for the brothers, then you're doing it wrong". The sibling bond and the sacrifices it necessitates are, in fact, a major themes of the series.

A majority of respondents also said they appreciated the folklore and mythology – American, Christian, Eastern, and Classical, to name a few sources – from which the writers draw nemeses for the brothers to fight. While some respondents said they were not generally fans of horror or paranormal media, many others said that it was these elements that drew them to the show, to begin with, and were part of what they most enjoyed. Some said they liked the show's humor and funny episodes, others preferred the drama, and many appreciated the blending of the two. Likewise, many fans enjoyed the large, over-arching plots in the series, while others would rather see scary "monster of the week" episodes.

2. Visceral Engagment

Interest in character and plot, however, was far from the only reason fans gave for enjoying *Supernatural*. Regarding the aspects she most enjoyed, one fan observed frankly, "It's a

couple of hot guys in a mad-ass car, killing monsters and ghosts with fire and guns". Many fans expressed love for the series' musical soundtrack, which consists almost entirely of classic rock and eschews, as one draft of the pilot script stated, "anemic alternative pop" (MacKenzie, 2011). There was also admiration for Dean's car, a black 1967 Chevrolet Impala, known affectionately to fans as the "Metallicar" and considered by many to be a vital part of the show's cast. Many fans also referred to the attractiveness of the actors as one of a number of sources for their continued interest, and several mentioned the technical and visual aspects of the series.

In addition to the visceral elements, fans also engage with the program through the physical act of watching. 52% of the total respondents said they watch *Supernatural* primarily online, and another 6% said they watched it on DVD or using a DVR device. This suggests that a significant number of fans are deliberately going out of their way to watch the series, especially fans in countries where the local television channels are often a season or more behind the American broadcast schedule. One American fan who no longer had access to the CW network said that she used a website for video streaming which put her computer at risk for viruses, but this was of less concern to her than the fact that she had to wait a day for the episodes to be available online.

Radway (2003) describes the "escape" experienced by women reading romance novels, but only one respondent in my survey said that watching *Supernatural* helped her "[forget] the world and the problems", though another described it as a "cathartic experience". Rather, for many fans, watching the program is a semi-communal experience. 31% said that they regularly watch with friends or family members, and, unlike the women in Radway's study, several watched with their husbands or boyfriends. One fan said it has become a "tradition" for she and her sister to watch online every week. Another described a typical family scene, saying, "I watch

live every week in my den with popcorn and soda and one or two family members join me every time", and another said, "I watch with friends the night new episodes premiere, sometimes just the one friend, but if others are around, there can be about five of us in the room, starting at the screen". Even those who said they typically watched the show alone were likely to have some communal contact, since 46% of respondents said that they became fans because of a friend, and 59% said that they often talked to other fans about the show.

One similarity between Radway's participants and my own was the understanding of reading or fan activities as being "clandestine". Though my respondents were highly likely to be in regular contact with other fans, several expressed a sense that their enthusiasm was inappropriate outside of a fannish context. One fan confessed, "I didn't used to admit to anyone that I watched it, actually", though she did not elaborate on why. Another described the experience of encountering a fan in her class while she was student teaching, saying, "Every Thursday it was "Did you watch it?! What did you think?!" And we'd go on and on, to the great displeasure of everyone else", suggesting that, though she and her student clearly enjoyed these exchanges, other non-fans found them irritating. One respondent said that she had "bothered a few friends who've at best seen a few episodes with my over enthusiastic ramblings about it", and another said she was hesitant even to talk with the friend who'd introduced her to *Supernatural* because "I don't want to freak her out [too] bad with my fannish obsessive behavior". Another respondent even described reducing her discussions of the program, saying, "Two years ago I did it more often, because I was younger, now I grew up and became to know how to control myself", though it may be interesting to note that this respondent is 16 years-old.

3. Boundary Work

Other reasons for watching went beyond actual consumption of the program itself and extended into the boundary work undertaken by more devoted fans. By "boundary work", I mean those activities which take place specifically within the fan community, including interaction with other fans, the writing and reading of fan fiction, and the act of self-identification as a fan. The understanding of their activities as "clandestine" allows and even encourages fans to maintain the boundary between the "symbolic community" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) of *Supernatural* fan culture and "mainstream" media culture, though boundaries between *Supernatural* and other media fandoms are highly permeable. Within the *Supernatural* fan community itself, however, boundaries between subgroups are actively policed, particularly between readers of specific subcategories of fan fiction, but even these divisions are often transgressed. Still, it is not the work of maintaining boundaries in which fans took pleasure, but rather the activities within those boundaries. Even those respondents who said that they do not regularly interact with other fans still identify themselves as fans, suggesting that communal identity can exist separately from communal interaction.

As I mentioned in my discussion of the text, *Supernatural* regularly breaches the metaphorical "fourth wall" and engages in an unusually direct dialogue with fans. The episode in which the brothers discover the *Supernatural* novels includes the following exchange about fan fiction:

> *Dean: There's "Sam girls" and "Dean girls", and... what's a slash fan?*
>
> *Sam: As in... Sam-slash-Dean. Together.*
>
> *Dean: Like, together together?*
>
> *Sam: Yeah.*

Dean: They do know we're brothers, right?

Sam: Doesn't seem to matter.[16]

In another episode, super-fan Becky tricks Sam and Dean into attending a *Supernatural* fan convention, featuring fans dressed as characters, *Supernatural* merchandise, a role-playing game that turns out to be a real hunt, and running commentary on the series' tropes. The most dramatic transcendence of the fourth wall divide occurs in a season six episode in which the brothers are transported to an alternate reality where they are actors, named Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles, on the television show *Supernatural*[17]. Through this device, *Supernatural* openly invites fans to engage with the text and creates a unique fan environment, and a recent survey (Clarissa, 2011) listed *Supernatural* as the television show with the strongest online fandom.

Reference to these "fandom-call outs [*sic*]" appeared in many survey responses. One fan even remarked, "I have the whole Dean Discovers Fandom exchange as a ringtone on my cell phone". Another cited the character of Becky as evidence of the show's intelligence and fan savvy, saying, "She provides hilarious and awkward moments to the show. It's like a metaphor or a representation of the fans of Supernatural, it's our caricature exaggerated to the top. It's really funny and not offensive at all". Discussing the writers' awareness of the largely female audience, one fan said, "It is so refreshing to be thought highly enough of as viewers that the

[16] This dialogue is from episode 18 of season four, "The Monster at the End of this Book". I referred to a video on YouTube.com for the exact dialogue. The YouTube user had title the video "Funniest scene" of the episode.

[17] Because season six is ongoing at the time of conducting this research, I have chosen to focus on events and characters in the first five seasons only. However, I feel this episode is pertinent to the discussion and have chosen to include it.

writers don’t assume we’ll eat up any drama we can get, even if it’s silly, nonsensical melodrama, because “girls dig that”. No thank you”.

Fans and fan practices also played a major role in many respondents’ continued interest in and introduction to *Supernatural.* Fan fiction, in particular, was a crucial factor, with an overwhelming 82% of respondents saying that they read or wrote fan fiction of some kind. A few even claimed that they started watching the show as a result of fan fiction. One respondent said she first encountered *Supernatural* through “crossover” fan fiction, stories which feature characters and elements from different media texts, and became interested. Finally, she said, “When I found myself writing Supernatural fanfic myself I realised it was time to give up my resolution never to watch Supernatural and I then proceeded to watch through all five seasons at once”. For some, fan fiction and other fan writing provide a medium in which to interact with other fans and to express ideas about the show. Saying that she didn’t often talk with others about *Supernatural*, one respondent explained, “I'd rather show how I feel through fanfiction” and another similarly remarked, “I prefer to just read fanfiction”. Placing fan practices in a broader cultural context, one fan said that she occasionally wrote fan fiction, “but I work in publishing, so not only is there not a lot of free time for it and I read and write all day for my job, but it’s a bit of a risk having a career in an industry that frowns on violation of copyright”. Another respondent said frankly, “I’d have given up on SPN if not for the fiction that was written around the canon”. One fan concluded her survey by embracing her status as a fan, saying, “Don’t hate the crazy fandom, yo. Life is too short to be normal”.

However, not all respondents appreciated *Supernatural*’s “meta” episodes or viewed fandom interactions as entirely positive. One respondent stated simply, “[T]he whole “breaking the fourth wall” thing just scares me. Fandom/canon should NOT mix. Kripke should stay off the

internet". Another fan referred to Becky as one of her most disliked characters, saying, "she exemplified everything that is negative about fandom, with none of the positives". Likewise, another praised *Supernatural*'s "incredibly large, talented, prolific fandom", adding, "I heavily resent Kripke for how he's portrayed fans on the show". Other fans expressed more negative views of the fan community. Several indicated hesitation to voice unpopular opinions, "for fear of being jumped by bitch-queen fangirls wearing rose coloured glasses" or because "it is easy – especially since it is online and there are no facial expressions to help convey people's meaning – to misunderstand and even offend others". One fan explained her reluctance to participate in fan activities, saying, "I tend to steer away from the 'fandom' as a whole, not in the least because it generates a lot of hatred and I don't like being caught in that", and another went so far as to say, "I don't talk to many people anymore because fandom was kind of ruining the show for me". Despite this resistance, however, these respondents continue to watch the show.

In addition to fan practices, a sense of loyalty also played a role in fans' continued interest in *Supernatural*. Some of the respondents also made reference to the amount of time and emotion they had invested in the story and characters. "I just keep watching because I've invested a lot of time in the show, and I want to see how it ends", said one fan, adding that it was elements of earlier seasons that she liked the best. Another remarked, "I've been watching for four years and you can't just let that kind of time go". Likewise, one respondent said frankly, "I've been with the series pretty much since the beginning. And, even though the show [has] disappointed me greatly this past year, I'm staying with it because I do enjoy the mythology greatly".

It is possible that the size and breadth of *Supernatural* fandom, as well as the prominence and accessibility of the fandom, is a motivation for viewers to become involved as fans of

Supernatural, rather than seeking out alternative genre programming with more positive representations of women.

b. Critical Commentary

Though the questions were designed to elicit responses on specific subjects, the format of the survey allowed fans a great deal of latitude in the detail and content of those responses. Though respondents presented their love of *Supernatural* as a matter of course, many also remarked upon aspects of the series in general that they did not like or found offensive. For instance, referring to an episode which dealt with a coven of "witches", one fan said, "I'm a pagan and I didn't particularly care for the way that modern pagans were portrayed". In a discussion of a different episode, another fan said, "Being that I am Catholic and am taking a college course in Theology, I am somewhat offended by what they (the writers) did with the plot", and another described the series as "very dismissive of any religions other than Judeo-Christian".

With regard to women in the series, a number of fans expressed frustration both with the absence of strong female characters and with the narrative treatment of women. The same fan quoted directly above also stated, with regard to her dislike of Bela, that she "wanted a good, strong female character" and was disappointed. Another fan referred to "just another example of Supernatural NOT creating well developed female characters, and shafting them when they do appear" (emphasis original), and another, in response to the question about disliked characters, said, "just every single vapid female Sam and Dean rescue from Maintown, America in every single episode when they're not busy causing the Apocalypse. They all run together, and they're all uninteresting".

The absence of strong female characters was also mentioned in reference to fan fiction. Almost all of those who said they read or wrote *Supernatural* fan fiction said they read primarily slash fiction, which features a romantic pairing between male characters, though most mentioned that they sometimes read other types of fan fiction, as well, at least in other fandoms. One fan remarked, “The main problem I have with Het[18] ships in SPN is that none of the girls are shown to be strong enough to handle the several tons of issues that each of teh boys bring”, adding, “SPN is dangerous for women though, so be careful!”. Another observed, more circumspectly, “I mostly just read slash. I mean, there's not really much else, is there? The writers of the show kind of shot themselves in the foot when it comes to females”.

In addition, a few fans commented pointed on the series’ general treatment of female characters. The observations of two respondents, in particular, are especially interesting. The first, 21 years-old, listed four female characters as the ones she most disliked, remarking, “Obviously, there is a huge problem with how all four characters I most dislike are women”. In another response, she referred angrily to the deaths of Ellen and Jo, saying, “While their death was brave, it’s still yet another instance of women dying for the Winchester brothers, while when men die (as in the S5 finale, with Bobby and Castiel, and even John briefly at the end of S2), they get to come back”. Finally, when invited to make any additional comments, she said frankly,

> As I watched the show, I quickly became aware of the very serious problems it has in its treatment of race and women, and quite honestly, if I didn’t love it (meaning how well-written 95% of it is, Sam and Dean’s characterization and

[18] “Het” refers to fan fiction focused on heterosexual couples.

relationship, and Jensen's and Jared's acting) as much as I do, I wouldn't stand for it.

Though this respondent is evidently aware and critical of *Supernatural*'s gender ideology, she actively prioritizes her pleasure in watching the series over her displeasure with its gendered messages. Likewise, another respondent, 31 years-old, cut directly to the heart of the series latent misogyny and situated it in the broader context of network politics and the horror genre:

> My one criticism of this show (and Supernatural is not alone in doing this) is the fate of its women. It goes beyond the age-old Angel/Whore syndrome. Supernatural kills off its women via fire, stabbing, choking, drowning, shooting, getting hit by cars, blowing themselves up, being attacked by monsters/demons/hellhounds, or being turned into ash. I'm sure this is done in part b/c rabid teenage fangirls feel possessive of "their boys" and don't want any potential female love interests on screen, and the CW caters in part to their wishes. And Supernatural also dishes out plenty of pain to male characters. But so few of the doomed male characters come off like victims or die such uber-violent deaths. Supernatural seems to almost take pleasure or eroticize the torture of women, and, if you look too deeply into it, it can dampen enthusiasm for the show and its writers… particularly when Sera Gamble herself has made such strides for female screenwriters, and the president of CW Entertainment, Dawn Ostroff, is a woman—but perhaps they do the best they can in a male-dominated industry where the horror genre has always eroticized and sensationalized the abuse of women.

Here, the respondent not only criticizes *Supernatural*'s treatment of women, she interprets it in terms of production and genre politics. She describes the treatment of female characters in detail and makes distinct comparisons to the treatment of male characters. She even goes on to speculate possible reasons for this gender disparity, attributing specific rationales on the part of the writers and producers and pointing to potential influences within the horror genre itself.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

A. Discussion

Based on the findings and analysis I have described, I feel that there are three principal implications to be considered. First, though some fan comments do reinforce existing sexist ideologies, this reinforcement is not uniform, and is sometimes actively resisted. Second, fans bring their own frames to the reading of female characters, rather than applying the frames established by the narrative. Finally, fans are actively engaging in complex, contextualized readings of the narrative, not simply absorbing what they're given.

This study is, in part, a response to Christine Scodari's (2003) findings regarding female fans of the shows *Stargate: SG-1* and *Farscape*, in which she concludes that fan practices reinforce sexist structures, rather than resisting them. Many of my respondents did, in fact express antagonism toward female characters, employing sexist terms such as "bitch" and expressing joy or apathy upon characters' deaths. These sentiments, however, did not constitute a majority of the responses. Many fans attributed their dislike for female characters to poor writing or acting, rather than the characters' actions or attitude. Though this may be a subtle distinction, I believe it is an important one, because it suggests that what antagonism exists is directed toward extra-filmic elements and not to the characters as women. In addition, a number of respondents, especially those quoted in the previous section, articulated ideas that actively resist sexist ideologies and condemn the misogyny in *Supernatural*.

As I have demonstrated, *Supernatural* frequently frames women as victims and as sexual objects, but the survey data suggests that female fans do not use these frames. Nor do they, as Scodari would suggest, frame female characters as sexual rivals. Rather, respondents seemed to understand women in the series, first and foremost, as fictional characters. This may seem intuitive, but there is a point to be made. In their responses, fans framed female characters in terms of their purpose in the larger narrative, their relationship to other characters, and the competency with which the character was presented. In the only instance in which a fan referred to a female character as a sexual rival, she suggested that Dean, the brother in question, should have instead been involved with another male character. Likewise, fans discussed female characters in terms of their agency and active involvement in the story, not, in general, as plot points waiting to be rescued. Though some fans did refer to the attractiveness of the female actors and to the sporadic romantic relationships between male and female characters, this was the extent of fans framing female characters as sexual objects and was far from their primary understanding.

These conclusions and other evidence in the data suggest that fans' readings of *Supernatural* are not simply those of uncritical consumption. Rather, fans regularly bring external ideas and knowledge to their viewing and situate the text within the larger contexts of its production and its status as a genre series. The fact that respondents made reference to writing and acting illustrates that, in addition to engagement with the text itself, they are also considering extra-filmic elements in their reading. Also, a number of fans referred to other television series in their responses, whether to describe how they had come to watch *Supernatural* or to compare specific elements between shows. Though this could be dismissed as simply evidence that fans do, in fact, watch other television, I propose that it demonstrates some of the ways in which they

situate and understand *Supernatural* within a broader context. This is a significant observation when we consider the possibility – indeed, the likelihood – that other programs may not represent women in the way that *Supernatural* does. In fact, at least a few of the other programs mentioned, including *Stargate: SG-1, Dark Angel*, and *Supernatural*'s original lead-in *Gilmore Girls*, all feature female leads. Though fans may not actively connect *Supernatural*'s gender ideology to those of other series, their awareness creates the possibility for reading one in terms of the other.

Though other researchers, have argued that audience consumption extends beyond simple reception of media (Berenstein, 1996; Jenkins, 1995; Radway, 2003; Scodari, 2003), I believe that the engagement of fans is even more complex than previous models allow. My findings suggest that fan practices achieve a broader purpose than "poaching" the text for useful or interesting elements (Jenkins, 1992). Rather, I contend than fans are using avenues such as fan fiction, community interaction, collective viewing, and even filling out surveys about favorite programs as mediums in which to conduct critical analysis of the text at hand. Though interpretations of the text may vary widely, the act of engaging in complex, contextualized reading appears across responses, illustrating an awareness which academia traditionally fails to recognize in media audiences. In fact, I propose that, through interpretation and criticism, fans are acting as academics, reading the text through an experiential lens that draws on knowledge of social politics, genre, and personal ideology.

In "Strategies, Tactics and the Question of *Un Lieu Propre*: What/Where is "Media Theory"?", Matt Hills (2004) suggests that fans "poach" from the canon of academic media theory just as readily as Jenkins (1992) says that they do from media texts. Theory, Hills says, is constructed as being the property of the academy, the educated elite. This notion of theory as

academic property restricts the production of it to the elite and undermines the “legitimacy” of applied theoretical research. It is with a particular application of theory, however, that Hills is concerned: the application of media theory by fans in the reading of media texts and in the reflexive understanding of fan practices. Hills argues that, because media fans receive primarily negative or dismissive attention from mainstream media and academia, they are inclined to reflect critically on their own practices, tactically appropriating elements of media theory. While Hills raises interesting and important questions regarding the position and purpose of theory in academic and media culture, he persists in using the “poaching” metaphor (de Certeau, 1984 Jenkins, 1992). I contend that the actual critical practices of fans are more holistic than this metaphor suggests. Furthermore, though Hills identifies three intersecting identities of scholar/fan – “scholarly fans”, fan-scholars, and scholar-fans (2004: 141) – I would argue that the distinction between “fans” and “scholars” is itself arbitrary and unnecessary. Furthermore, I propose that the generation of media theory is not restricted to the academy. Rather, fans themselves are both employing existing theories, with and without awareness, and generating theory of their own. Finally, my research supports the contention that *all* fans are employing critical tactics in their reading, not just those fans with access to “legitimate” theory, as Hills suggests (2004: 144-5).

I cannot state with confidence the nature of female fans’ response to representations of women on *Supernatural*, because the responses of those in my survey were not uniform. However, I believe that this lack of uniformity supports an understanding of fans as critical readers. Some fans read *Supernatural* as a misogynistic text, while others did not, and even those who acknowledged its underlying sexism did so with different attitudes and expressions. The variety of responses undermines the conventional assumption of fans as uncritical devotees, and

the content of the responses suggests an engagement other than "poaching" or taking away only those things that appeal to them. Through visceral engagement and boundary work, fans are situating the text as a whole within their own critical understandings and using fan writing and community as means to express their interpretations. It is this complex reading and contextualization which allows fans to act as academics and to experience criticism as an aspect of pleasure in viewing. Ultimately, fans' resistance to or tacit support of *Supernatural*'s gender ideology is secondary to the practice of engaging with the text as critical readers, as academics.

At the beginning of this study, I asked two principal questions. First, how does *Supernatural* construct representations of women? Second, how do women viewing the series respond to and engage with those representations? These questions were posed with a view toward understanding both the construction of gender ideologies in media texts and the tactics employed by viewers in reading those ideologies.

Through analysis of the narrative text, I found that *Supernatural* frequently marginalizes, victimizes, and eroticizes female characters. Though this representation of women is consistent with that found in traditional horror films, it appears to be out of step with contemporary genre television. Through viewer comments in my survey, I found female fans to be generally ambivalent with regard to female characters, expressing both admiration and dislike as well as frustration with extra-narrative factors. I found that fan tactics in reading *Supernatural* were complex and contextualized, which, I believe, supports a fan-as-academic assumption.

Though the practical and theoretical limitations of this study prevent me from providing a more comprehensive understanding of textual and fan practices in *Supernatural*, I believe that my findings offer some insight into the ways in which readers engage with media texts, and that this work may be useful in future research on this subject.

As I have contended, a thorough understanding of media texts requires examination both of the texts themselves and of their reception by dedicated viewers. To that end, I have developed a research model which draws on and combines elements of contemporary media studies and fan studies. Using Freeland's (2004) framework as a methodological foundation, I applied different theoretical approaches to analyze the "intra-filmic" and "extra-filmic" elements of the text. Because it is useful to understand *Supernatural* as a horror text, I used theory which addressed constructions of gender in horror films to analyze the text itself, though I believe that any media theory may be applied through this method to address texts of various genres. To analyze the engagement of female *Supernatural* fans, I applied the work of Radway (2003), Jenkins (1995), and Scodari (2003), but, once again, I believe that other theories may be employed. I have applied this dual approach model to a specific end, but I am confident that it is applicable to the study of other media texts. Indeed, I propose that it is necessary and that a research model which addresses both text and audience is crucial to the future of cultural studies.

B. Limitations and Further Research

Though the focus of this study is relatively narrow, there are issues that I have not addressed which should be considered when discussing fandom, gender, and *Supernatural*.

First, any further research on the subject should conduct an analysis of the ways in which masculinity is also constructed in the narrative. I have chosen to focus exclusively on representations of women, but this is problematic insofar as any understanding of gender as a performance requires consideration of how different genders interact. In addition, I believe that such an analysis would reveal an interesting, complex relationship between *Supernatural*'s gender ideology and constructions of hegemonic masculinity.

Likewise, an examination of how race and ethnicity are dealt with on *Supernatural* is in order and would be integral to any larger discussion of gender on the program, especially with regard to masculinity. The series features three recurring characters of color, all Black men, two of whom are framed as antagonists, and all of whom, as of season six, are dead.

Finally, with regard to the text, in order to fully understand constructions of gender on *Supernatural*, we must consider it within the context of the horror, science fiction, and urban fantasy genres, as well as the other CW programming. As I have asserted, I believe that fans are already making this contextualization as a matter of course, and we, as academics, would be remiss in doing otherwise. Extensive research on gender in horror films suggests that *Supernatural* is far from unusual in its treatment of women. However, a cursory look at the larger genre of science fiction television shows, to which *Supernatural* is linked by viewers, at least, paints a different picture. *Stargate: SG-1* and *Farscape*, the two series in Scodari's (2003) study, both include significant female characters as part of a large ensemble. *Dark Angel*, a show mentioned by several respondents because it features Jensen Ackles, centers around a female protagonist. Likewise, other programming on the CW network, ostensibly aimed at the same audience as *Supernatural*, also includes prominent female leads. Popular series *The Vampire Diaries* and *Nikita* both feature female protagonists, and long-running Superman tie-in *Smallville*, in which Ackles also appeared and which several respondents mentioned, includes a number of central female characters as part of its ensemble. Multiple respondents also indicated that they had begun watching *Supernatural* due to an interest in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a crucial text in the dialogue on feminist media (Douglas, 2010; Driver, 2007; Early, 2004; Karras, 2002; Owen, 1999). This, in my opinion, raises a pointed question regarding *Supernatural*'s place in genre television with regard to women.

Other questions concerning fan engagement also remain unaddressed and unanswered. I have suggested that fans simultaneously reinforce and resist sexist ideologies, but I have not examined the possibility of active, conscious resistance within fan practices or what shape that resistance might take, if it does exist. If, as I contend, fans criticize and interpret media texts, does that critical engagement then translate into social action or activism, either within fan spaces or outside of them? The understanding of fan practices as inherently resistant has been scrutinized elsewhere (Jenkins, 1992; Scodari, 2003; Busse and Hellekson, 2006), but we must also address the possibility that fandom may provide a medium for resistance and activism, regardless of whether it is resistant in-and-of itself. Based on anecdotal experience, I would suggest that social action is strongly present within fan culture, but further study is required to understand the shape and meaning of this action.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I have chosen to focus my research on the engagement of female fans and have neglected to address the perspective of other genders within fandom. Specifically, I would ask whether male fans of *Supernatural*, or of any other media text, are equally engaged, and, if so, where is their engagement taking place? A number of my respondents said that they watched *Supernatural* with their husbands or boyfriends or that they had been introduced to the series by a male acquaintance. Based on these comments and on the fact that only 7% of my respondents were male, we may assume that, though men are engaging with the text, their engagement is conducted in different spaces than those through which my survey was transmitted, i.e. those spaces dedicated to fan writing. Where, then, and through what means do male fans interact with media texts? Other scholars (Busse and Hellekson, 2006; Green and Guinery, 2004; Jenkins, 1995; Scodari, 2003) have examined the motivations of women writing and reading fan fiction, but I have not encountered a study asking why so few men

participate in these practices or addressing the motivations of those that do. Other spaces for fan engagement and interaction, such as fan art and films, role playing, and conventions, are prominent, well-used, and generally neglected by academia. If male fans are more present in these spaces, we must question the gender disparity among fan practices and examine why and how men engage through their chosen mediums. Secondarily, we must wonder about the academic assumptions that have excluded male engagement from fan studies in the first place.

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Appendix

Appendix A

1. *Coding instructions for text analysis.*

   1) "S." = "Season". The researcher should indicate the season number of the episode under consideration.
   2) "Ep." = "Episode". The researcher should indicate the number of the episode under consideration.
   3) "Description" = The researcher should provide a brief description of the female character. If a name is given, that should be indicated here. Otherwise, the character should be identified based on her function in the narrative, e.g. "victim no.2", "blonde waitress", etc.
   4) "Age" = The researcher should indicate the approximate age of the character to within at least ten years, e.g. "20-25", "30s", "late teens", etc.
   5) "Obj." = "Object". The researcher should indicate whether the character is presented as a sexual object. A character is considered to be presented as a sexual object if she engages or is engaged by another character in sexually or romantically suggestive conversation of if she engages in or is known to have engaged in physical intimacy of any kind with another character.
   6) "M/A" = "Married or Attached". The researcher should indicate whether the character is known to be married or otherwise romantically attached.
   7) "V/A" = "Victim/Antagonist". The researcher should indicate whether the character is a "victim", whose well-being is directly threatened during the course of the narrative, or an "antagonist", who poses a direct threat to either the protagonists or other characters. If this distinction is ambiguous, this should be indicated in the "Notes".

8) “D.” = “Dead”. The researcher should indicate whether the character dies during the course of the narrative. If the character is a reappearance of a character who died previously in the narrative, this should be indicated in the “Notes”.
9) “Notes” = The researcher should make note of any extraneous information relevant to the current research. Notations regarding meta-knowledge are appropriate.

An example of the coding for a single episode is given below. If an episode features no female characters, this should also be noted.

S.	Ep.	Description	Age	Obj.	M/A	V/A	D.	Notes:
1	12	Nurse in hospital	40s					
		Layla Rourke	20s	x				Not victim but charac as sick/weak
		Doctor	30s					
		Sue Ann la Grange	45-55		M	A	x	
		Layla’s mother	45-55					
		runner	20s			V	x	

2. *Copy of survey as it was distributed.*

Before you get started, you need to know two things. First, all the answers you give to these questions will be entirely anonymous, there will be nothing connecting your identity (RL or digital) to your answers, and the only person who will see your answers as they appear on this form will be me. Second, while I would ask, for the sake of accuracy, that you answer every question as fully as you can, all of the questions are entirely optional. If you don't feel comfortable providing certain information, feel free to skip the question.

Once you're finished, please send the completed survey to spnsurvey@gmail.com under the subject line "Survey". Don't miss the last two questions on the second page!

Age:

Gender:

Location:

How did you start watching *Supernatural*?

How do you watch the show now? (e.g. on TV every week, online, alone, with friends, etc.)

Do you talk to other fans about the show? How often?

Who are your favorite characters? Why? (No more than four, please.)

Which characters, if any, do you most dislike? Why? (Again, no more than four.)

What are your favorite episodes? Why? (No more than three.)

What episodes, if any, do you most dislike? Why? (You get the picture.)

Do you read fan fiction? If so, what kind? (Please be as general or specific as your are comfortable with.)

What aspects of the show do you most enjoy? What keeps you watching?

Would you be willing to respond to a more in-depth, follow-up survey? If so, please provide a contact e-mail address.

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

If you have any questions of your own about this survey or my project, please contact me at spnsurvey@gmail.com, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can.

Appendix B

1. *Female Characters in Season One.*

Age	Total	Sexual Object	Married/Attached	Victim/Antagonist	Dead
-16	10	0	0	4(V) – 1(A)	1
16-22	10	3	3	6(V)	4
20-30	29	20	13	15(V) – 3(A) – 3(V/A)	7
30-40	18	1	7	7(V) – 1(A)	3
40-50	9	0	5	2(V) – 1(A)	1
50+	5	0	0	1(V)	1
Total	81	24	28	35(V) – 6(A) – 3(V/A)	17

2. *Female Characters in Season Two.*

Age	Total	Sexual Object	Married/Attached	Victim/Antagonist	Dead
-16	5	0	0	1(V) – 2(A)	1
16-22	2	0	0	1(V)	1
20-30	33	17	8	11(V) – 7(A) – 4(V/A)	9
30-40	9	3	4	6(V)	3
40-50	6	0	2	4(V) – 1(A)	3
50+	2	0	0	1(V)	1

Total	57	20	14	24(V) – 10(A) – 4(V/A)	18

3. Character Death in Season One.

Gender	Total	Dressed/Undressed	On/Off Screen	Home/Public	Witnessed	Shot of Body	Gender of Killer
Female	17	9(D) – 8(U)	11(On) – 6(Off)	12(H) – 5(P)	8	6	3(F) – 10(M) – 4(O)
Male	27	26(D) – 1(U)	9(On) – 18(Off)	11(H) – 16(P)	18	9	6(F) – 15(M) – 6(O)
Total	44	35(D) – 9(U)	20(On) – 24(Off)	23(H) – 21(P)	26	15	9(F) – 25(M) – 10(O)

4. Character Death in Season Two.

Gender	Total	Dressed/Undressed	On/Off Screen	Home/Public	Witnessed	Shot of Body	Gender of Killer
Femal	16	13(D) – 3(U)	8(On) –	5(H) –	8	5	2(F) –

e			8(Off)	11(P)			7(M) – 7(O)
Male	41	39(D) – 2(U)	24(On) – 17(Off)	5(H) – 36(P)	32	12	10(F) – 16(M) – 15(O)
Total	57	52(D) – 5(U)	32(On) – 25(Off)	10(H) – 72(P)	40	17	12(F) – 23(M) – 22(O)

Appendix C

1. *Survey Statistics*

Age	Female	Male	Total
-18	10	3	23
18-22	30	2	32
23-30	28	0	28
31-40	13	2	15
41-50	6	0	6
51+	2	0	2
Total	89	5	94

e) <u>United States</u>

Age	Female	Male	Total
-18	3	0	3
18-22	14	2	16
23-30	14	0	14
31-40	10	2	12
41-50	2	0	2
51+	1	0	1
Total	44	4	48

f) <u>Portugal</u>

Age	Female	Male	Total
-18	5	3	8
18-22	6	0	6
23-30	2	0	2
31-40	1	0	1
41-50	0	0	0
51+	0	0	0
Total	14	3	17

g) <u>Europe (Not Portugal)</u>

Age	Female	Male	Total
-18	2	0	2
18-22	5	0	5
23-30	5	0	5
31-40	0	0	0
41-50	1	0	1
51+	1	0	1
Total	14	0	14

h) <u>Other Location</u>

Age	Female	Male	Total

-18	0	0	0
18-22	5	0	5
23-30	7	0	7
31-40	2	0	2
41-50	0	0	0
51+	0	0	0
Total	14	0	14

2. *Female Characters*

Character	Liked	Disliked
Anna Milton	1	16
Ava Wilson	0	2
Becky Rosen	1	4
Bela Talbot	3	10
Cassie Robinson	0	4
Ellen Harvelle	10	1
Jo Harvelle	4	10
Leah Gideon	0	1
Lilith	0	2
Lisa Braeden	0	6
Madison	0	1

Mary Winchester	1	0
Meg Masters	0	8
Missouri Moseley	1	1
Pamela Barnes	1	0
Ruby	5	38

3. *Male Characters*

Character	Liked	Disliked
Adam Milligan	1	1
Alastair	3	2
Andrew Gallagher	2	0
Ash	3	0
Azazel	3	0
Ben Braeden	0	1
Bobby Singer	33	1
Castiel	56	2
Chuck Shurley	4	0
Crowley	7	0
Dean Winchester	77	4
Gabriel	27	2
God	0	1

Gordon Walker	0	2
John Winchester	8	6
Joshua	0	1
Lucifer	8	3
Raphael	0	2
Sam Winchester	51	8
Uriel	0	6
Victor Henriksen	2	1
Zachariah	0	12

VITA

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