

***The Gothic Tradition in Supernatural: Essays on the
Television Series***

Melissa Edmundson (editor)

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While Gothic and horror series are now a staple of broadcast television, online media, and video-on-demand services, when *Supernatural* (2005-) first came on the air in 2005 these genres had a very different relationship to TV. The Gothic's history has largely manifested in televisual adaptations of the classics of Gothic Fiction, such as *Dracula* (1897), *Frankenstein* (1818), and *Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), as well as anthology series such as *Mystery and Imagination* (1966-70) and *Hammer's House of Horror* (1980). Horror was often subsumed within other genres such as science fiction, melodrama, family television, and teen drama in the form of *The X-Files* (1993-2002, 2016-), *Twin Peaks* (1990-91, 2017), *The Munsters* (1964-66), and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). In contrast, *Supernatural* openly declared its association with Gothic tales of ghosts, demons and monsters, celebrating its allegiance to horror while also reimagining the genre through the lens of the American road movie. Over its lengthy broadcast run, the series has garnered much academic interest which has focused on a range of discourses and disciplines, including gender, theology, genre, music, postmodernism, and fandom. While some discussion has considered the show's place within a growing landscape of TV horror, little attention has been given to its debt and relationship to traditions of the Gothic. As such, Melissa Edmundson's *The Gothic Tradition in Supernatural: Essays on the Television Series* is a welcome addition to the study of the show. In her introduction, Edmundson provides an excellent overview of the existing scholarship on *Supernatural* and makes it clear why alongside these established critical approaches, it is important to consider it as a Gothic text. This is a show that is haunted by a past that repeatedly comes bubbling to the surface through the cases that ghost hunters Sam and Dean Winchester investigate each week, as well as its classic rock score and 1970s

aesthetics; the hunters' family legacy; an underpinning of religious and American history; and a plethora of characters who repeatedly return from the dead, including Sam and Dean. In the world of *Supernatural*, the past co-exists within the present, a never ending return of the repressed. This is an ideal Gothic text for the twenty-first century. Within this collection, Edmundson has brought together a range of critical approaches that considers how *Supernatural* engages with established traditions within the Gothic. The book organises the essays within four broad categories of Gothic: Tropes and Traditions; Narrative; Gender; and Monstrosity and Otherness. Through these categories, the book positions *Supernatural* within the heritage of gothic that underpins much of the show's storytelling, aesthetics and thematic concerns with history, legacy, transgression, and family. These categories also provide space to consider what *Supernatural* brings to our understanding of the Gothic, offering new perspectives on the genre, particularly in relation to its modernization and Americanization.

One of the strengths of the book is the juxtaposition of essays, which highlights the allegiance of the series to earlier Gothic conventions alongside a reworking of tradition. For instance, Daniel P. Compora's 'Gothic Imaginings: Folkloric Roots' considers how the show draws upon established American folklore, while Dana Fore's 'Shadows of Hope: Gothic Motifs and Nihilism' explores the influence of the classic Gothic novel *The Monk* (1796) on the series, both positioning *Supernatural* within a literary legacy. In contrast, Thomas Knowles' insightful analysis 'The Automobile as Moving Castle' examines how the series adapts gothic tropes and traditions in the form of European Gothic castle, re-imagined – and in so doing Americanized – as the Winchesters' signature 1967 Chevy Impala. Similarly, Jessica Seymour's "'We've All Been Demons": Postmodern Gothic and the Fragmented Self' analyses the identity crises of a selection of key recurring characters – Balthazar, Castiel, Gabriel, Meg Masters and Crowley – through the lens of *Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. In contrast, Megan Fowler's "'Psychotically, Irrationally, Erotically Co-Dependent": Incest and the Gothic Other' examines the role of incest – a recurring trope within the Gothic – but through the lens of queer studies in which notions of 'normality' and 'otherness' are challenged and subverted. As such the essays work well in isolation but also in conjunction with each other.

Fans of *Supernatural* know that one of the most disconcerting issues that surrounds the series is its representation of women, particularly given its largely female audience. Therefore the

section on Gothic Women: Heroes and Victims, with essays from Leow Hui Min Annabeth, E.J. Nielson and Ashley Walton, offers a welcome and much needed discussion of gender that uses the gothic to move beyond simple considerations of victimisation versus narrative agency to unpack complex, and often contradictory, issues of representation that are manifested through the show. Each of the authors offers a nuanced analysis that considers gender from diverse perspectives. Annabeth explores the notion of gender and nation through the post-colonial appropriation of indigenous folklore, while Nielson considers the role of consent in relation to bodily invasion through possession. Her argument reframes notions of victimisation and monstrosity to consider how the destruction of these female-possessed bodies is ‘used to advance the plotline of the show’s male characters’ (112). Walton’s chapter “‘What’s up, bitches?’ Charlie Bradbury as Gothic Heroine’ draws upon the gothic as a means to consider how Bradbury’s character, linked to actress Felicia Day’s off-screen persona, offers a refreshing alternative to the show’s traditional and problematic use of women. These essays therefore provide an insightful intervention into discussions of gender and misogyny in relation to the series.

If there is a gap in the book it is in the absence of broader considerations of televisual context that surrounds the show, with a tendency within the essays to consider *Supernatural* as a text out of context. Edmundson’s introduction does reflect on the show in relation to a presumed synergy between the gothic and television, both focused on the domestic space – a preoccupation that haunts *Supernatural* in terms of the ghosts and ghouls that stalk family homes across America, as well as Sam and Dean’s endless pursuit of home. Similarly, Lisa Schmidt’s ‘We All Have a Little Monster in Us: Dean Winchester, the Mark of Cain and the New Monster Paradigm’ positions the show’s re-imagining of otherness and monstrosity within established critical frameworks that surround horror cinema. What is lacking, however, is a discussion of where the show sits within a changing broadcast landscape as well as within traditions of the Gothic on Television, either historical or contemporaneous (*Night Stalker* [1972], *The X-Files*, *Buffy*, *Penny Dreadful* [2014-16], *American Horror Story* [2011-]). This is a missed opportunity given the fact that the show’s long run means that it straddles a significant transitional moment for the Gothic and horror TV. This absence however simply provides an opportunity for future scholars to build upon the excellent work achieved by Edmundson and her collection of Gothic scholars, who establish, in the vernacular of the series, ‘the road so far’ and lay the groundwork for Gothic journeys to come.