The Privilege of Pain

“Manpain” and the Suffering Hero in the Supernatural Series

Ritgerð til BA-prófs í ensku

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Abstract

Throughout history, the figure of the hero has occupied a central position in the narratives of Western cultures. Although the ways in which this figure is viewed and written/performed change over time, he remains the representative of his society’s privileged groups, incarnated overwhelmingly as a heterosexual, Caucasian male.

The present-day hero can, for example, be observed in the U.S. TV series *Supernatural* (2005–). The series stars two quintessential heroes, and its overarching story takes the form of a hero’s quest. It has acquired a reputation for using many narrative devices associated with the hero, especially its use of a trope recently dubbed *manpain*.

When the traditional hero experiences a trauma, he often suffers from manpain. This is the narrative voice—the set of values and beliefs embedded in the narrative—that privileges the experience of the straight, white, male hero over those of any other character. The narrative is coded as belonging exclusively to the manpained hero, and the portrayal of suffering becomes a means of establishing his intrinsic worth. However, while he enjoys supreme subjectivity, pain is also used to objectify him. In highly aesthetic images of blood, tears and brooding, the manpained hero becomes both meaning-maker and fetish object.

Making use of Laura Mulvey’s and Steve Neale’s writings on the cinematic gaze, as well as various works on narrative structure and masculinities, I attempt to clarify and analyze the concept of manpain. I demonstrate how it manifests in the *Supernatural* series and what purpose it serves within the series’ overarching story.
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Introduction

For millennia, the figure of the hero has been a near ubiquitous presence in Western storytelling. From Jason of the Argonauts to Jason Bourne, we have dedicated large portions of our creative resources to creating strong individuals to send out ahead of us and into the unknown, as guides, problem solvers, or role models.

Scholars have traced the development of the hero alongside that of human community, many viewing him¹ as an essential fragment of the human self-image. In her book A Short History of Myth (2006), Karen Armstrong posits that stories of the hero’s quest began with rituals performed by shamans and hunters in the Paleolithic period (37). On behalf of his people, the shaman would descend into the spirit world and obtain, at great risk, the knowledge needed for survival. His fictional successor would similarly traverse the mental landscapes of an increasingly complicated world, confronting dangers and problems, showing his creators the way to proceed. “The myth tells us what we have to do if we want to become a fully human person,” writes Armstrong. “Every single one of us has to be a hero at some time in our lives” (38).

Among the heroes of present-day Western mythmaking are the main characters of the American TV series, Supernatural (2005–). Currently in its ninth season, this horror/fantasy series relates the adventures of the Winchester brothers, Sam and Dean, who, following their mother’s murder at the hands of a demon, are raised by their father to be “hunters.” “Hunters” are a small community of people who secretly hunt down and kill supernatural creatures. Sam and Dean, both in their early twenties at the start of the series, travel across the American Midwest, hunting down urban legends, ghosts, monsters, and demons. At the beginning, the show centers on the brothers’ attempts to find and destroy the entity that killed their mother, but as the story progresses, the focus shifts to a build-up to a Judeo-Christian-style apocalypse and the brothers’ predestined roles in it.

The series has grown extremely popular, both within the U.S. and internationally. It has a large following among bloggers and users of other social

¹ I will use masculine pronouns when speaking of the hero, as this essay focuses on the gendered aspect of manpain, and thus on male heroes.
media, who write, among other things, fan fiction, episode and character analyses, and critiques. Within this “fan community,” *Supernatural* has long had a reputation for unrepentant use of tropes such as the *damsel in distress* and *women in refrigerators*, which I will address further in section 2.2. Not least because the two main characters of the show are virile, young, straight white males, the series also provides many examples of the trope referred to as *manpain*.

Simply put, manpain is a storytelling device that draws attention to the pain and suffering of a hero who is, almost without exception, a straight, white male. The narrative privileges the experiences of this character to the point where he becomes the only character with intrinsic value, and all experiences within the narrative come to belong to him.

Manpain as a trope was originally identified and named by the fan community. The term seems to have been created in response to recent pop-culture narratives primarily in TV and gaming, but variations on the trope can be found in narratives stretching back throughout literary history. It also has a strong relation to other, older concepts, such as that of the *Byronic hero* and of the *white man’s burden*, as it is heavily informed by patriarchal structures of privilege and deals with pain, sacrifice and responsibility.

The term has entered general discourse to the extent that, for example, the online readers’ community Goodreads has a list—the “Manpain Shelf”—dedicated to the phenomenon’s manifestations in literature. This includes canonical and critically acclaimed works such as Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* (1937). While the manpain trope seems most often to be used with only minimal self-awareness, some popular writers have chosen to engage it directly, acknowledging its widespread use. For example, Joss Whedon deliberately subverts the trope in the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), and mocks it repeatedly (although also making full use of it) in the TV series *Angel* (1999–2004). Elements of subversion can also be detected in Sarah Connor’s “manly” suffering in *The Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) and in Moriarty’s manipulation of Sherlock Holmes in the TV series *Elementary* (2012–).

What both analyses and subversions of manpain have in common is that they highlight the value placed on certain characters within manpain narratives. Within a manpain narrative, only some kinds of pain are real, and only some kinds of people
count. If the hero is a representative for humanity, in these narratives, he fails to represent but a few of us.
1.1 The Hero
Despite the hero’s important role as a source of inspiration and a problem solver, many have pointed out a darker side to this nearly omnipresent figure. In her book *Deconstructing the Hero* (1997), Margery Hourihan describes the hero’s story as one of “superiority, dominance and success” (1) inscribed with highly aggressive and divisive values. She sees the hero as an agent of the patriarchic order, especially constructed to champion its particular ideals (63). Hourihan points out that the hero’s identity relies heavily on a dualistic worldview and relies on Val Plumwood’s definition of *dualism* (Hourihan 16), as I will also.

Plumwood delineates a system of binary pairs (such as male/female, reason/emotion, strength/weakness, culture/nature, mind/body, self/other and subject/object) whose difference permeates and shapes the whole of Western thought (Plumwood 42-43). However, according to her, a dualism is more than a simple dichotomy: it is a construction by which “the qualities (actual or supposed) […] and the areas of life associated with the dualised other are systematically and pervasively constructed and depicted as inferior” (47). A dualism, therefore, not only constructs both halves of a binary pair as separate and opposite, but as intrinsically superior and inferior (47).

Hourihan believes that the structure of the hero story relies on these demarcated binary oppositions, ascribing the “superior” half of each pair to the hero and the “inferior” half to his opponents (15). This inferior quality is also often ascribed to characters who are not the hero’s opponents, but his helpers (often “sidekicks”), family members or lovers. In this way, a hero narrative tends to mire its characters in the dualism of self/other, rendering all characters but the hero not only inferior, but ultimately unimportant.

1.2 The Voice
The situating of the hero on the “correct” side of these dualisms is based on selections made within the narrative structure. In her article “Feminine Perspectives and Narrative Points of View,” Ismay Barwell introduces a technique of analysis useful for identifying a text’s position within the various systems of privilege. This
technique is based on the idea of the implied author and reader, whom she respectively labels the *hypothetical narrator* (68) and the *ideal hypothetical audience* (71).

All storytelling involves a complex process of selection. A storyteller must make choices, deciding which events are narrated and which are not, how much space or time each event or character is allotted within the narrative, which adjectives are chosen, how the lighting is set up, etc. According to Barwell, these choices are made by the hypothetical narrator (67). He/she is the implied consciousness that shapes the story and is positioned between the narrative and the flesh-and-blood author, independent of that author (Abbott 84).

According to Barwell, the hypothetical narrator is the bearer of the point of view, which is “a set of desires, beliefs, preferences and values” (Barwell 67) that informs the choices he/she makes when constructing the narrative (67). In telling a story, the hypothetical narrator speaks to the ideal hypothetical audience, which he/she constructs as his/her interlocutors (71). The selections made by the hypothetical narrator will be influenced by what he/she believes about the ideal hypothetical audience, in terms of their beliefs, values and interests (71).

A narrative is thus constructed by the choices made by the hypothetical narrator based not only on his/her point of view but also on the point of view he/she constructs the ideal hypothetical audience as having.

Addressing the issue of point of view, Margery Hourihan invokes Gérard Genette’s term *narrative voice* to refer to what amounts to the hypothetical narrator: the anonymous sensibility that controls the structure of a story (Hourihan 38). In many ways, this more neutral term is more appropriate for my discussion of the beliefs and attitudes embedded in a narrative. However, the terms *hypothetical narrator* and *ideal hypothetical audience* are more suitable when discussing the consensus reached between the creators and consumers of a story. I will therefore use both Genette’s and Barwell’s terms in this discussion.

1.3 The Gaze

Another way in which Plumwood’s dualisms can appear is via the application of the gaze. In her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey examines the function of the gaze in film. Basing her discussion on psychoanalytic theory, she identifies one of the pleasures of the cinema as scopophilia, or the pleasure of looking
(46), and differentiates especially between the gaze as directed at a character and the gaze as directed with a character.

The looking at is, according to Mulvey, directed at the image of woman on the screen. This image tends to be static and iconic, designed to be perused (48). Mulvey quotes Freud, describing scopophilia as “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (46). The static display of the female allows the audience to take scopophilic pleasure by objectifying her as a figure. It also renders her passive, a blank slate on which the male gaze can inscribe meaning.

The looking with is, on the other hand, based on identification. Mulvey again refers to Freud, posing that the male hero becomes the spectator’s ideal ego, prompting his/her “fascination with and recognition of his [sic] like” (47). The hero’s image on the screen is three-dimensional, and positions him within specific scenery, capable of natural movement and behavior (49). He is the audience’s agent within the narrative world, who directs the gaze and thus constructs meaning onto the other. In short, Mulvey identifies the female as the object of the gaze and the male as its subject (47).

Using Mulvey’s theories, Steve Neale seeks to broaden the use of these categories of looking. Although he states, as Mulvey does, that the gaze in mainstream cinema is implicitly male (19), he argues that the spectator identifies not only with the main hero but, to varying degrees, with all characters. The spectator identifies various parts of him-/herself in the film’s many characters, and the process of identification is therefore essentially fragmented and changeable (Neale 11), and not based exclusively on gender.

Neale also argues that the male can be made the object of erotic gaze in a visual narrative. He points out several films presenting images of men that conform to Freud’s depiction of the “controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 46). Neale observes, however, that rather than being explicitly coded for sexuality, these images are often coded for violence (13). He concludes that the patriarchic structures dominant within these films forbid images in which the male body is made an erotic object. The gaze is therefore motivated by violence, suppressing the underlying sexuality and rendering the viewing pleasure sadistic (Neale 14).

Thus, in Neale’s approach, both identification and objectification occur in a state of flux and can happen along a wide spectrum of spectacle and narrative. The same character can be both the subject and the object of the gaze.
Although Mulvey’s and Neale’s analyses focus specifically on cinema, I believe these modes of looking either at or with can be observed in much the same way in other kinds of narratives, such as television shows or written stories, as the evoking of images in a reader’s mind can, to a certain extent, be treated as a kind of visual storytelling.
2.1 The Pain

Defined more or less through consensus within the fan community, *manpain* does not yet have an exact or academic definition. A version of the consensus definition has been written up on a Fanlore Wiki site and seems to be generally recognized within the community. The site defines manpain as a “set of narrative devices” (“Manpain”) and goes on to say that: “When a main character in a story (always male, generally white) is written with a particular kind of psychologically painful history that causes him to behave in specific ways, he is often said to have manpain.” (“Manpain”) The site identifies four main characteristics of the trope:

- It’s marked by excess. The tragedies of the character’s history are extreme: his reaction to them is melodramatic: his pain is tacitly or explicitly acknowledged by the story and/or other characters to be worse than anyone else’s.

[...]

- It is self-centered and inner-directed; events, especially traumatic events, in the narrative are typically viewed through the lens of how they emotionally impact the bearer of the manpain, who is often a figure of isolation.

[...]

- The character's painful history is frequently (although not universally) created by exploiting the death/suffering/loss of a woman, or children, or both. These women and children are often not characterized as having any importance in the narrative other than as plot devices to create manpain.

[...]

- The manpain serves a dual function. It is an easy way for a creator to shorthand a male character as vulnerable, and therefore sympathetic. It is also used to excuse a range of behaviors that often include actions that would otherwise be read as unsympathetically selfish, anti-social or violent.

(“Manpain”)

For the most part, I agree with this definition. However, I believe it can be elaborated and that a different emphasis would make the definition clearer. Here, I intend to set
out a more elaborate definition of the concept, based on this consensus and my own observations.

Manpain is an approach to the generation of narrative. It centers on the experience of pain and is informed by the central position of the heterosexual, Caucasian male in the world as constructed by the narrative culture. A manpain narrative relays the trauma and suffering of a character who is almost invariably a straight, white male, and the portrayal of his suffering is designed not only to emphasize the importance of that character’s experiences and actions but also to underline his intrinsic value.

What mainly defines manpain is its privileging of one experiential viewpoint, which means that it can theoretically be imprinted on any character, based on whatever privilege he or she might hold. There are, in fact, characters who suffer from manpain and are female, queer, or persons of color—for example, Buffy in Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997–2003), or Capt. Jack Harkness in the TV series Torchwood (2006–2011). However, as white, heterosexual males are overwhelmingly privileged throughout Western history, this trope is also overwhelmingly inscribed on them. Manpain is also almost inextricably tangled with other functions of patriarchal privilege, as I will demonstrate in sections 2.3 and 3.4. Therefore, when a character who is not a straight, white male suffers from manpain, that suffering does contain an element of subversion.

Manpain is characterized by four main elements present in the story (although the elements I consider important are slightly different from those listed in the Fanlore Wiki definition):

1. The narrative voice centralizes the suffering of the character in question, either disregarding the experiences of other characters, or appropriating them to the manpained hero.
2. The manpained hero has agency when few other characters do, and a large part of his suffering stems from this fact.
3. The manpained character’s behavior is heavily influenced by the ideals of contemporary hegemonic masculinity.
4. The manpained hero’s suffering is spectacular and often aesthetically pleasing.

Of course, these four elements are largely interdependent. One element can be either cause or consequence of another and they can converge or otherwise interact in different ways. Having agency is, for example, a demand that ideal hegemonic
masculinity makes of men, so the hero’s guilt, which I describe in section 2.3, could be a consequence of both points 2 and 3.

I have chosen not to list the “excess” named as an element in the Fanlore Wiki definition, as I think it is less an element in itself than simply a component of points 3 and 4. I will elaborate on this in section 2.4.

Another important aspect of manpain is that it is mobile and somewhat malleable. Some characters are based entirely around their manpain, while others may fit the trope only for some periods during their story arc. It is also possible for a character to be alternately the bearer of manpain and the object of someone else’s, or even to be both subject and object at the same time. Two or more characters in a narrative can suffer from manpain at the same time, but then it is not uncommon that one of their manpains is “biggest” or most important, and the others’ somewhat peripheral. Entire hierarchies of manpain can sometimes be observed in stories with a large cast of characters.

2.2 Narrative Voice

Barwell’s hypothetical narrator seems, during manifestations of manpain, to consider the experiences of one character more important than those of any others. The ideal hypothetical audience believes this also, and so the suffering of the manpained hero is given more space within the narrative than that of others. Most often, characters within the story, as well as the manpained hero himself, share this belief.

Narratives in this voice often ignore the experiences of characters other than the manpained hero, sometimes going so far as to erase whole characters from the story. An example of this can be found in the Bronte sisters’ works. In Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), the account of Rochester’s failed marriage becomes just that—*his* failed marriage. He is cursed with a mad wife and suffers through an unbearable marriage while she appears only as a quasi-human apparition with no experience or viewpoint at all. In Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Catherine, the supposed half of a pair of star-crossed lovers, is no more than a ghost and a memory to torment Heathcliff. In some cases, such characters are physically present, but act only as foils or mirrors for the hero. This is especially common in TV series, where the experiences of major characters are often mirrored in characters appearing in one or few episodes.
In more subtle incidents, other characters’ experiences are acknowledged as valid but still only secondary to those of the bearer of manpain. An example of this can be found in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998). There, the Weasley family’s horror over the near death of Mr. Weasley is acknowledged, but also eclipsed by Harry’s horror at having witnessed the incident, and his worry over his own possible connection with Voldemort.

This aspect of the narrative voice is often especially obvious when it appears in conjunction with tropes such as *women in refrigerators* and *damsel in distress*, as well as in certain revenge narratives. *Women in refrigerators* refers to a tendency within narratives to kill, damage or otherwise disempower female characters in order to provide more interesting story arcs for their male counterparts (Sarkeesian “Women in Refrigerators”). According to pop-culture critic Anita Sarkeesian, the *damsel in distress* is “a plot device in which a female character is placed in a perilous situation from which she cannot escape on her own and must be rescued by a male character, usually providing the core incentive or motivation for the protagonist’s quest” (Sakeesian “Damsel in Distress (Part 1)”). However present or absent the damsel or refrigerated woman is, these are narratives where the death, kidnapping, rape or other abuse of a character that the hero cares about or has an obligation toward is used as the precipitating event for the hero’s story. The story then revolves around how the hero deals with the traumatic event and how it affects him. The event becomes something that has happened to the hero, rather than to the victim he cares about.

2.3 Agency
The manpained hero is also distinguished by the fact that he has agency when few other characters do. It is he who reacts to the trauma, who analyses the situation, makes a decision and goes forth (even if it’s only to the nearest bar to brood), while those around him are the passive objects to whom things happen.

A large part of the hero’s suffering stems exactly from this—that is, from the amount of power he has, is expected to have, and expects to have over his environment. This leads, for example, to his feeling under extreme pressure and suffering from overwhelming guilt, loneliness and/or isolation. The figure of the straight, white male informs both the narrative and its creation and it is thus, directly
or indirectly, the cause of all events. The straight, white male must, therefore, protect all weakness, own all suffering, and atone for all sin.

This assumed agency and responsibility is the subject of another agreement the hypothetical narrator makes with his ideal hypothetical audience: just as the straight, white male is the character whose experience counts most, he is also the character whose actions count most.

As his near monopoly on agency leads to an overlarge sense of responsibility on the part of the manpained hero, guilt becomes an important element of his characterization. Characters close to him suffer and die, either as a result of his actions, or of his inaction. Failing this, the hero has a harmful secret he cannot share, a drastic decision only he can make, or a difficult mission only he can complete. In all cases, the responsibility is a terrible burden, and other characters can only contribute to a solution in the capacity of a sidekick. They may even be endangered by the problem, taking on the role of damsels in distress. For example, in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007), only Harry Potter can die to save the world from Voldemort, and in *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955), only Frodo can carry the One Ring into Mordor.

Less commonly, the hero suffers for his agency without guilt. The final separation of Rick Blaine and Ilsa Lund (*Casablanca*, 1942) is thus a noble decision made entirely by him, one that causes him heartache but also grants him moral righteousness.

Other manifestations of the hero’s suffering due to his agency are isolation and loneliness. The narrative voice demands that the manpained hero’s suffering be seen as unique and greater than that of others, and, therefore, his burdens cannot be shared. Even when he works with others, those characters are not his equals. As the bearer of agency, the manpained hero always stands alone.

**2.4 Ideal Hegemonic Masculinity**

In his article “The History of Masculinity,” R.W. Connell explains how the last few centuries have seen, in Europe and America, the development of a hegemonic masculinity based largely around the ideals of reason (246), individualism (247), authority (249) and a capacity for violence (250). If Hourihan is right and the hero story is coded with the dualisms that Plumwood lays out (Hourihan 16-27), then a hero must be careful to stay on the “correct” side of those dichotomies. In this
context, some of the most important binary pairs are, as Connell concurs, reason/emotion and strength/weakness.

Staying on the “correct” side can be difficult when addressing things like pain and suffering, as they are invariably intertwined with high emotion, and the sufferer risks displaying weakness or vulnerability. One solution manpain presents is the appropriation addressed in section 2.2, which allows the hero to coopt another character’s pain.

Another solution is excess, where the hero is indeed moved to emotion, but only by extraordinary circumstances. Writers can often use the flexibility of fiction to create excessive trauma, which then generates excessive suffering. For example, in Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), the vampire Louis struggles with immortality and the necessity of killing to live, and in the science fiction TV series *Doctor Who* (1963–1989, 2005–), the alien Doctor’s entire race has been slaughtered in an intergalactic war, dooming him to roam the whole of space and time alone.

When the hero encounters emotional situations, he tends to react in ways acceptable to the ideals of contemporary hegemonic masculinity—for example, he represses certain emotions, often becoming obsessive or prone to violent outbursts. How the manpained character deals with extreme pain is the source of such classic scenes as a single tear tracking down the hero’s stony face, the vigilante stalking the dark streets seeking justice in the shadows, or the distraught man finally cracking under unbearable strain and smashing his fist into the wall or his glass of whiskey onto the floor.

In the fan community, manpain is often viewed as a sloppy attempt to write vulnerability (“Manpain”). In fact, it seems often to be an attempt to write vulnerability while avoiding what contemporary hegemonic masculinity defines as weakness. Manpain provides a chance for the author/creator to broach difficult subjects such as emotion and vulnerability—in fact, to revel in them (see section 2.5)—without having to commit to confronting them.

### 2.5 Spectacle

Through the devices discussed in sections 2.2 and 2.3, the viewer/reader spends a great deal of the narrative looking with the manpained hero. However, as Steve Neale points out, it is entirely possible for the audience to change modes of looking, directing its gaze both with and at the same character, either alternating between the
two or employing both modes simultaneously. Manpain engages in this looking at by creating images of the suffering hero that are designed mainly to provide pleasure through objectification.

It is my impression that objectifying images of males coded simply for sexuality are becoming more common, but that the accepted practice is still to code these for violence and pain, overlaying or obscuring their sexual nature. The manpain trope is therefore well positioned to sate the viewer/reader’s desire for an objectified male image. It picks out the hero’s many moments of torment, lingering on his haggard face, his torn shirt, his heaving chest, etc., and meanwhile, the viewer/reader is given leave to subject him to the aforementioned “controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 46).

An example of this can be found Baz Luhrmann’s Romeo + Juliet (1996). Mercutio’s death scene in this film consists of alternating extreme close-ups of the faces of Romeo, Mercutio and Tibalt, and near-static, highly structured images of their surroundings. Although the scene contains considerable action, the individual images of the men’s faces are mostly static. Romeo and Tibalt have bleeding abrasions on faces caked in sand, and Mercutio’s desperate grimace is underscored by his naked, heaving chest. The subsequent murder of Tibalt is followed by a 25-second-long image of Romeo’s face, which cuts off everything below the lips and above the eyebrows and gives the viewer an explicitly long pause to gaze at his tear-stained cheeks, staring eyes and half-open lips.

This sexual objectification is a large part of the suffering hero’s appeal. As I have mentioned, manpain is viewed as excusing certain behaviors (“Manpain”), and one of the ways it does this is by enticing the viewer/reader with the pleasure of observing the pained male. As certain self-centered behaviors are part of or result from the suffering that produces the pleasing images, the viewer/reader is inclined to view these behaviors more favorably. One might even conjecture that the lure of the objectified male justifies the trope in its entirety. Possibly, the viewer/reader experiences the worship of the straight, white male as the price that must be paid for the permission to objectify this same figure.
3.1 Supernatural and the Narrative Voice

*Supernatural* is a clear example of the use of the manpain trope in visual storytelling. In fact, the series’ main story is based on the aforementioned *women in refrigerators* trope, with the accompanying privileging of the viewpoint of the straight, white male heroes—in this case, the Winchesters. The *Supernatural* story begins with the murder by paranormal means of Mary Winchester, and the beginning of the series revolves around how her death has shaped the lives of her husband and sons. This theme is strengthened by what can be called the story’s second beginning twenty years later, when Jessica, Sam Winchester’s live-in girlfriend, is murdered in the exact same manner as his mother was.

Neither of the two women, who both have quite spectacular death scenes, “owns” her own death. We watch them found by their respective partners, at which point it is unclear whether they are dying or already dead, and then we watch the partners’ shock, terror and grief as “their” women are lost to them. Only in the penultimate episode of season two do we see Mary’s actual death, and even then it is coopted: her murderer creates a reenactment so that her shocked son can discover a hitherto hidden secret about himself (02.21 “All Hell Breaks Loose, Part 1”). The two women’s deaths are events that happen to the Winchester men, rather than to Mary and Jessica.

Jessica is entirely absent throughout the series. She does appear occasionally throughout season one and in episode 05.03 “Free to Be You and Me.” However, she only ever appears as a figment of Sam’s imagination or as a ghost haunting him, and then she is a ghost of his memory of her, rather than of herself. In the aforementioned season 5 episode, she appears to Sam to discuss his predicament of the week, and it is finally revealed that this is not Jessica at all but an evil power using her face. The actual Jessica then, despite being a much-cited genesis of the brothers’ crusade and a saint of the Winchesters’ personal pantheon, appears on-screen only for two opening scenes in the pilot. The audience knows nothing about her, other than the fact that she was loved by a male character.

Mary’s role in the series is slightly more complicated. During the first three seasons, she is absent, much like Jessica. However, she starts to appear in later
seasons not only as a memory or a figment, but as herself. Her functions vary, from her short appearance as a ghost in episode 01.09 “Home,” where her role is only to emotionally affect male characters, to her appearance as a younger self in time-traveling episodes 04.03 “In the Beginning” and 05.13 “The Song Remains the Same,” where she exhibits motivations of her own. Her experiences do, however, always rank lower than those of the heroes who draw their motivation from her. While she is not always absent, she is seldom portrayed as having intrinsic value.

Examples of a character’s entire experience being appropriated by a manpained hero are often more obvious. As I mention in section 2.2, other characters, both one-off and recurring, are often created specifically to be foils or mirrors for the suffering hero. This is apparent in season two of Supernatural, after Sam discovers that there is something supernatural about him and that he might become dangerous. Sam is adamant that Dean be prepared to kill him, should he lose control. In episode 02.17 “Heart,” the brothers then meet Madison, a young woman Sam falls for and who they discover is a werewolf. Madison’s predicament echoes that of Sam, she also having just discovered that she has something evil inside of her she cannot control. In her horror, she begs Sam to kill her to keep her from hurting innocent people; in this moment, Sam’s position echoes Dean’s. The narrative then proceeds to appropriate Madison’s experience to Sam, and Sam’s experience to Dean. Dean suffers for Sam and Sam suffers for Madison, while Madison herself seems present simply to be the object and inspiration of pain.

This appropriation is especially glaring in the final scene of the episode, where Madison is executed. When the narrative has reached the point that calls for Madison’s death, it is she who coolly argues for her own execution while Sam is distraught and Dean somber. Once it has been decided that the execution will take place, the brothers withdraw to the kitchen with grief-stricken faces to discuss the matter while Madison remains behind, looking mildly upset. At this point, two minutes remain of the episode but that is the last we see of Madison. In the kitchen, Sam bursts into tears and, with tears running down his cheeks, asks his brother for the gun. The camera then gives us a final shot of his tear-streaked and determined face before he also leaves the scene. Finally, the camera zooms in on Dean’s face as he stands alone in the kitchen, the music swells and a single tear runs down his cheek. Finally, a shot rings out, we see Dean jerk in a display of emotional agony, and the music cuts out.
Three things happen in this scene: First, Sam subsumes Madison’s pain, leaving her a filler character, devoid of her own story. Her situation becomes a fresh angle from which he can experience his own predicament, and her death becomes a source of pain for him. Second, both brothers see in the relationship between Sam and Madison a reflection of their own relationship. Sam experiences the situation from “the other side,” realizing what he has been asking of his brother, and Dean appropriates some of Sam’s pain as he sees his own situation reflected in Sam’s. Third, Dean is established as higher-ranking in the manpain hierarchy. He habitually appropriates Sam’s pain, and in the above example, Dean’s experience as he suffers for Sam is the most important. Sam’s experience as he suffers for Madison rates second in importance, and Madison’s does not rate at all.

As I have mentioned, manpain tends to be hierarchical. A “bigger man” often has bigger manpain. Thus, a character can have his/her entire experience appropriated by someone else and become an experiential non-entity, like Madison, or he/she can have their experience appropriated, temporarily, to someone else, despite normally being important in his/her own right, as happened to Sam in the example above. They can also, as in Sam’s case, experience their own manpain while at the same time being the object of someone else’s. Sam and Dean are, in fact, good examples of this, as Sam suffers from considerable manpain but must often take second place to his brother, who generally fits the trope better. In fact, Sam often becomes Dean’s damsel in distress, getting rescued, guided, or worried over by his older brother.

3.2 Supernatural and Agency
Just as the suffering of other characters is appropriated to the hero, so is their agency, as their choices or bad luck are ascribed to the action or inaction of the hero. As he expects to have power over his environment, and thus to be capable of preventing bad things from happening, the manpained hero is responsible for everything that does or does not happen.

Supernatural is rife with references to the brothers’ responsibility towards an oblivious world. Dean, as the brother with the dominant status, is generally assigned more unreasonable responsibilities, while Sam’s guilt tends to be more focused on things that are at least partially his fault. The attitude towards guilt and agency expressed in the series varies from a tacit acknowledgement of the heroes’ power to a
more critical view. In a few episodes, issues of guilt are dealt with directly, and the fact that most of this guilt is unreasonable is explicitly pointed out.

An example of a character whose trajectory is appropriated to the Winchesters’ guilt is recurring character Jo Harvelle. Jo first appears in season two as a young hunter just starting out (she is twenty-one at the time), and works her first-ever case with the Winchesters. She then appears regularly throughout the series until episode 05.10 “Abandon All Hope...,” where the Winchesters ask her to help them on a hunt and she is mortally wounded in the act of saving Dean’s life. Her death is staged as a heroic last stand. Realizing that she cannot survive her wounds, she insists that the Winchesters leave her behind with a homemade bomb, which she can use to take with her as many of their pursuing enemies as possible, thus buying her allies time to escape.

Her ownership of this death and of her life is, however, undercut in episode 07.04 “Defending Your Life,” which deals specifically with Dean’s all-consuming guilt. In this episode, the Egyptian god Osiris abducts people who suffer from guilt and puts them on trial, calling the victims of their misdeeds as witnesses. He sets up a trial for Dean, calls the ghost of Jo Harvelle and, speaking with the voice of Dean’s guilt, proceeds to make her life and death his responsibility. Her decision to become a hunter is attributed not to her personal history but to her first hunt with the brothers. Her career as a hunter is treated as an attempt to impress Dean, for whom she had feelings. Her death is blamed on Dean, not on the danger inherent in being a hunter, on her dedication to completing the hunt on which she died, or on her heroism.

Discussing their early hunting careers with Jo’s ghost, Dean tells her: “You were just a kid, you and Sam both. The right thing to do would have been to send you back to your mom” (07.04 “Defending Your Life”). Dean thereby assumes that her whole life has been dictated by what he failed to do, rather than her ability to take action and make decisions. Jo is not an ally: she is someone without agency whom the hero should protect and whose death is subsequently the hero’s responsibility.

In this episode, Sam acts as the voice of reason, pointing out that Dean is not responsible for other people’s choices. However, he is often the bearer of hero’s guilt, himself. Various examples of this can be found in season two, in which Sam is deeply worried about his own possibly evil attributes, as mentioned above. In episode 02.11 “Playthings,” a ghost compels a man to commit suicide before the Winchesters have a chance to eradicate the apparition. Sam views the man’s death as a personal failing on
his own part. When Dean points out that he could not have done anything to save the man, who they did not know was in danger, Sam retorts: “That’s an excuse, Dean! I should have found a way to save him!” (02.11 “Playthings”) Later in the conversation, he comments on the stranger’s death thusly: “Who knows what I might become. Even now, everyone around me dies!” (ibid). The man’s death is thus appropriated to Sam’s own looming fate.

I have already mentioned how Dean seems to hold a higher position than Sam in the show’s manpain hierarchy. In fact, probably the most pervasive theme of appropriated agency and the over-valuing of the hero’s responsibility in Supernatural is Dean’s constant conviction that he is responsible for Sam. This is a theme the show addresses many times, and it seems to acknowledge that Dean’s attachment is dysfunctional. This dysfunction, however, is also glorified and presented as a cornerstone of the brothers’ bond.

This perception of responsibility is clearly demonstrated in episode 02.22 “All Hell Breaks Loose, Part 2.” Sam has been stabbed to death in the previous episode, and Dean is about to sell his soul to a demon to bring his brother back to life. While making the decision to do so, Dean delivers a monologue over Sam’s body. He describes how he has been responsible for Sam his whole life, how protecting him was “his job” (a phrase that gets repeated often throughout the series), and how he has failed in that duty. The monologue ends with the words: “But I guess that’s what I do. I let down the people I love. I let Dad down. And now I’m supposed to let you down, too? How am I supposed to live with that?” (02.22 “All Hell Breaks Loose, Part 2”) It is clear from his words that Dean sees himself as responsible for the deaths of his father and brother, despite having caused neither. Several factors contribute to his decision to sell his soul in this episode, but a major one is a need to control his environment and to make up for what he sees as his failings, to not “let down” a person for whose life and death he believes himself responsible.

It is interesting that in his mission to “take care” of Sam, Dean takes on a nurturing, almost motherly role, which is not generally seen as fitting the hero’s masculine image. I believe, however, that much of this mothering behavior can be ascribed to this hyper-responsible facet of the manpained hero’s mental makeup.

Another example of the hero’s guilt over not having the control his possession of agency would indicate can be seen in episode 04.02 “Are You There, God? It’s Me, Dean Winchester,” where both Winchesters are haunted by the ghosts of people
they did not save. Especially interesting is the experience of recurring character Bobby Singer, an older hunter who acts as the Winchesters’ mentor. Bobby is haunted by two children who were murdered by a ghost he eradicated years earlier. He appropriates the blame for the children’s death, not because he caused it but because he failed to prevent it. While he is one of the most important recurring characters, he is not a main hero. However, he suffers from manpain in several instances, not the least of which is his guilt over having killed his wife when she was possessed by a demon.

Bobby’s suffering shows that it is not necessary to be a main character to be a candidate for manpain. This trope selects for privilege rather than focalization. Bobby Singer may not be the main character of the overarching Supernatural story, but he is the main character of his own story, and the hypothetical narrator assumes that such a story exists. The hypothetical narrator is more likely to view a character as a potential main character—if not of the current story then of some other—if he/she belongs to a privileged group. The white, straight male Bobby Singer is not a main character, but more so than white, straight female Jo Harvelle.

3.3 Supernatural and the Ideal Hegemonic Masculinity
When it comes to the behavior of the suffering hero, the Winchester brothers are shown as different character types. Sam is portrayed as more comfortable with emotion and vulnerability, while Dean is shown as resorting to repression and antisocial behavior. Dean’s manpain is often treated as superior to Sam’s within the series, and the reason for that could be that he fits the ideals of hegemonic masculinity better. However, although Sam is portrayed as the “softer” of the two, his character is also heavily coded for hegemonic masculinity. He does fit the mold, only less perfectly than his brother.

In order to stay on the privileged side of the reason/emotion dualism, a hero must not be seen as overly emotional. However, a character without emotion is simply uninteresting and the pain of a manpained character is, as I pointed out in section 2.5, one of the main appeals of a manpain narrative. It is therefore necessary to give the men of Supernatural opportunities to experience and acknowledge strong emotion, and this is accomplished to the extent that an episode can hardly be considered complete without containing some kind of heart-to-heart. There are two methods by which this can be achieved without breaking the taboo on acknowledging emotion:
First, by grounding emotions in excess (as described earlier), and second, by devaluing and/or mocking emotional displays, which counteracts the vulnerability they imply.

As I have said earlier, the flexibility of fiction, especially speculative fiction, can be used to create excessive trauma for characters, which in turn makes suffering more acceptable for a character informed by the ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

Thus, Sam Winchester’s mother is murdered in his nursery when he is a baby and he grows up motherless, but the demand for excess is not satisfied until his girlfriend is killed twenty years later in the exact same manner, while Sam watches. In fact, the demand is not satisfied even then, as Sam suffers regular traumas for the next nine years, including the death of his father, watching his brother get torn apart by monsters, dying several times himself, being possessed, losing his soul, going to Hell, etc. Of course, excess in event calls for excess in reaction. Thus, the Winchesters’ father reacts to his wife’s mysterious death by completely abandoning normal society and raising his two young children as warriors, and Dean reacts to his brother’s death by selling his soul to an agent of Hell. As I discuss in section 2.4, this excess can be used as justification for the hero’s “indulging” in emotion.

The second method, the devaluation and mockery of emotional displays, often involves the characters discussing and evaluating the effectiveness of emotional expression onscreen. These exchanges are, as I have already pointed out, an integral part of the construction of nearly every episode, but they are also almost always undercut by the characters’ attitudes to them. They are devalued as they occur, in a way that violence and emotional repression are not.

In episode 02.04 “Children Shouldn’t Play with Dead Things,” communicating emotion is portrayed as useless. The brothers discuss their father’s recent death, and Dean, who has long refused to speak of it, finally admits that he blames himself for it. At the end of the scene, he looks at his brother with a bleak, hopeless expression and asks: “Now tell me, what could you possibly say to make that better?” (02.04 “Children Shouldn’t Play With Dead Things”) Sam, the acknowledged champion of talking things out, is stumped by this question and with his silence admits the ineffectiveness of his preferred approach. Devaluation is also often achieved by humor, where a character ends an emotional exchange by mocking its other participant, abruptly changing the tone of the exchange and creating a kind of romantic irony.
An element of this devaluation is also the further feminization of the act of acknowledging emotion. This underscores the incompatibility of emotional vulnerability with the masculine ideal and makes it clear that such vulnerability can never truly be part of the hero’s behavior. This is most obvious in the various comments made by characters either during or after the aforementioned heart-to-hearts. In episode 05.07 “The Curious Case of Dean Winchester,” Bobby Singer has an emotional exchange with Dean, in which both characters are made vulnerable. He chooses to end it with the words: “Now are we done feeling our feelings? ’Cause I’d like to get out of here before we both start growing lady-parts” (05.07 “The Curious Case of Dean Winchester”). Similarly, in episode 01.11 “Scarecrow,” Dean dubs exchanges of this nature “chick-flick moments” (01.11 “Scarecrow”), referring to a genre of films that emphasize emotion and relationships and are specifically marketed toward a female audience.

Feeling certain emotions is thus acknowledged as a reality but the expression of said feelings is also coded as undesirable and as evidence of inferiority. It is also made clear that, although the hero bears the burden of emotion, he is aware of its low status and takes care not to succumb to it.

A contrast to this constant evaluation of conversation is how seldom violence is discussed or analyzed within the show. Most often, it is treated as a given. In fact, the hypothetical narrator seems to consider violence the natural reaction of a man over-taxed with emotion.

Especially interesting in this context is the violence between the two brothers. Throughout the series, the brothers quite often come to blows for various reasons, but they very seldom discuss these fights. An exception to this is the first time Dean punches Sam, in episode 02.03 “Bloodlust.” During a confrontation, Sam accuses Dean of insulting their dead father’s memory and in response, Dean hits his brother. Sam’s reaction is to treat the act as ineffective, telling his brother: “You can hit me all you want, it won’t change anything” (02.03 “Bloodlust”). At the very end of the episode, however, Dean attempts to make amends by offering Sam permission to punch him in return. He thus acknowledges that he has wronged his brother, but at the same time confirms his resorting to violence as appropriate by instructing his brother to express his own feelings in the same way. Sam refuses the offer, but does not reject the violence outright, rather pointing out that Dean is already injured from a fight
earlier in the episode. Violence is thus endorsed as a reasonable reaction by both brothers.

3.4 *Supernatural* and the Spectacle

*Supernatural* is notoriously reluctant to display its male characters as sex objects directly. The eye is seldom allowed to linger on the Winchesters’ bodies, they are generally dressed in heavy layers of clothing, and sex scenes are few and non-graphic. There are some exceptions to this (a scene in 06.03 “The Third Man,” where Sam does a shirtless work-out routine, was received enthusiastically by fans), but in general, the series avoids the issue of the brothers’ bodies as best it can. Also, despite the presence of death and monstrosity, *Supernatural* does not take much advantage of opportunities for graphic, violent images. Although fight scenes occur in almost every episode, they tend to be non-graphic and are used solely to advance the plot at least as often as their purpose is to take pleasure in pain. Nonetheless, the Winchesters are coded as sex objects mainly by means of violence and suffering. This is achieved by implying the presence of violence through visual portrayals of emotional pain and via aesthetically pleasing images of the suffering male.

The violent nature of a hunter’s lifestyle is one of the main tenets of the series. Although the actual fight scenes are often non-graphic, woven into the episodes are images of the brothers’ confidence in violent situations, scenes of Dean lovingly cleaning and tending to his weapons, flippant mentions of scars, broken bones and other previous injuries, etc. The brothers’ lives are also portrayed as rough: they have no permanent home, they live off junk food and alcohol, they are mostly cut off from society, and their childhood is shown to have been lonely and abusive. These living conditions and personal histories can also be seen as indicating the presence of violence and pain, as they serve to portray the characters’ lives as devalued, and suffering as ever-present. The viewer is thus repeatedly confronted by the brothers’ physicality through the potential for violence and pain. As much as images of gore shown on screen, it is the implied history of violence and the potential for more that makes the Winchesters embodied. In this way, the viewer is made aware that just outside the frame or under a few layers of fabric does indeed lie a potent male body.

As I have already described, the manpained hero suffers an inordinate amount of emotional pain. This can contribute to the hero’s objectification whereby mental suffering takes the place of physical pain. Images of such mental suffering allow the
gaze to linger on the tortured male form, activating the sadistic gaze of which Neale speaks, regardless of the absence of physical violence. Scenes also often portray both physical pain and the emotional suffering particular to the manpained hero, as they complement each other and together construct a stronger image of the suffering hero.

In this context, it is interesting that some of Supernatural’s most extensively choreographed and attentively designed fight scenes are those between Sam and Dean, or ones that include the angel Castiel, one of the series’ most beloved recurring characters and the bearer of considerable manpain. Also, the only two scenes in which Dean has been beaten to the point where his face shows considerable disfiguration are in episode 05.22 “Swan Song,” where Sam, possessed by the devil, beats him, and 08.17 “Goodbye Stranger,” where Castiel betrays and beats him. (It is worth noting, however, that in both cases, Dean receives a miraculous healing moments later and does not stay disfigured for long.) The violence the brothers and Castiel perform on each other is thus often harder and portrayed more attentively than the general run of the series.

Of course, it is natural that more attention should be paid to scenes containing the series’ main characters. However, I argue that both subjects and objects of violent acts in a given narrative are made into objects of the gaze. Thus, scenes like these allow for the objectification of more than one hero at a time, providing more opportunities for pleasure-in-pain.

The iconic, aesthetic close-up of a suffering male appears frequently in the Supernatural series. In fact, it is present in several of the scenes I have already discussed. This includes the final minutes of episode 02.17 “Heart,” in which the werewolf Madison is executed. As Sam walks out of the kitchen, he turns and stands framed in the doorway with a look of desperation and the light shining on his tear-stained cheeks. This is only a prelude, however, as the last moments of the episode are dedicated to the camera slowly zooming in on Dean’s pallid face, wreathed in shadows, a single tear tracking down his cheek. Similarly, Dean’s face is depicted almost in chiaroscuro during his monologue over Sam’s body in episode 02.22 “All Hell Breaks Loose, Part 2.”

Although the series cannot be said to be graphically violent, it does make use of an aesthetic application of gore to provide pleasure in looking. Certain frames are made so striking by their composition and the application of indicators of suffering that they stand out from the running sequence of events as individual images. As their
appeal is almost purely visual, these images are fairly independent of the scene they are a part of. For example, we have the artful spatter of blood across Dean’s face as he has just killed a vampire with a chainsaw (02.03 “Bloodlust”), an image from above of Sam grinning with blood-red teeth as he has just bitten his arm to be able to draw a sigil with his own blood (06.10 “Caged Heat”), or Castiel’s injured chest as he rips his shirt open to reveal a similar sigil he has carved into his own flesh (05.18 “Point of No Return”). All of these images have backstories, which do add to their significance; however, they can stand alone as sources of aesthetic, visual pleasure.

All the pain constructed for the manpained hero is thus put to use in various ways, allowing the viewer to linger on the hero’s physical existence and potential sexual objecthood. His suffering creates a space where the gaze can “safely” linger on the male figure, taking pleasure in looking on various levels.
Conclusion

In this essay, I have approached the figure of the hero by examining the dualisms on which his characterization relies. I have explored how these dualisms affect the structural choices made by the hypothetical narrator (or narrative voice), and how they inform the gaze, and the practice of sexual objectification in narrative. These elements seem to function to position the figure of the heterosexual, Caucasian male at the center of the narrative universe as someone with intrinsic value, essential to the creation of meaning within the story.

In this positioning is rooted the trope known as manpain. I have defined manpain as an approach to building narrative that, in the portrayal of pain and suffering, privileges the experiential viewpoint of the straight, white male. In a manpain narrative, the viewpoint of the hero is privileged to the point where the experiences of other characters are either disregarded or appropriated to the hero. Traumatic events are thus only important insofar as they cause the hero himself suffering. He is also often the only character with agency, his actions being the only ones that matter within the narrative, and he is therefore expected to have a high level of control over his environment. The characterization of a manpained hero is heavily informed by the ideals of contemporary ideal hegemonic masculinity, and in order to keep his status as a hero, he must react to his suffering in a traditionally masculine manner.

The suffering of the manpained hero, coded as specifically male and centralized via the elements listed above, is then put to use by creating a figure objectified through violence and pain. The gaze is allowed to linger on this figure, enabling the audience to take pleasure in looking without challenging prescribed gender roles.

Manpain in its current form is a fairly ubiquitous trope and can be observed in a number of contemporary narratives. I have chosen to examine its expression in the American TV series *Supernatural*. The trope is clearly displayed in this series via its focus on the heroes’ suffering and the ways it impacts their lives, its glorification of the ideals of contemporary hegemonic masculinity, and the way in which the male
characters’ coding as sex objects occurs almost exclusively through the use of manpain.

In this essay, I have focused on the expressions of manpain in Western, English-speaking cultures. Although the structures of privilege on which manpain relies are generally considered to be global in scope, the trope may behave differently in different narrative cultures. In some instances, it may even diverge to the point of becoming, essentially, a separate trope.

I have also emphasized the expression of the male/female dualism here. The trope could be studied further from the perspective of queer studies or with a focus on its racial dimensions. In that context, its relationship or interaction with other racially oriented tropes such as the mighty whitey (“Mighty Whitey”) or black best friend (“Black Best Friend”), or the racially informed hero complex that writer Teju Cole named the white savior industrial complex (Cole), might be of special interest.

Of course, stories do not exist independent of society. The interaction between narrative and societal values is complex, and theories on its exact nature vary. I do not intend to contribute to that broader discussion here. However, it is safe to say that examining narratives and the attitudes that shape them tells us something about the society in which these narratives are created and consumed.

In examining manpain stories in particular, and hero stories in general, I have asked the following questions: Who is important in this story? Whose experience is made real to the viewer/reader? Who counts? And, repeatedly, the research has shown that those who count are straight, white men. Given the prevalence of both manpain and the hero figure in contemporary Western narrative, this is alarming. Whether art, here, imitates life or vice versa, this tendency to perceive a certain kind of person as having more value than others is something that should give a storyteller—and an audience—pause.
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