

Supernatural Cowboy Heroes

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary television series *Supernatural* (2005-2020) stretches the limits of what a Western can be. Retracing the development of the cowboy hero in popular culture and analysis of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* provide a point of comparison to demonstrate how *Supernatural* replicates and recycles themes of the Western genre, permitting the series central characters, Sam and Dean Winchester, to signify as updated cowboy heroes for contemporary audiences.

Keywords: Westerns, television, film, cowboys, heroes, horror, Science-fiction, outlaws, masculinity

Supernatural Héroes Vaqueros

RESUMEN

La serie de televisión contemporánea *Supernatural* (2005-2020) extiende los límites de lo que puede ser un western. Remontar el desarrollo del héroe vaquero en la cultura popular y el análisis de *Butch*

Cassidy y Sundance Kid proporcionan un punto de comparación para demostrar cómo Supernatural replica y recicla temas del género occidental, permitiendo que los personajes centrales de la serie, Sam y Dean Winchester, signifiquen como héroes vaqueros actualizados para el público contemporáneo.

Palabras clave: Westerns, televisión, cine, vaqueros, héroes, terror, ciencia ficción, forajidos, masculinidad

《邪恶力量》中的牛仔英雄 关于“现代西部”特别版的思考

摘要

当代电视剧《邪恶力量》（2005-2020）延伸了美国西部可能的极限。通过追溯流行文化中牛仔英雄的演变和对《虎豹小霸王》的分析，提供了比较视角，证明《邪恶力量》如何复制并再次利用西部题材主题，让系列片的中心角色（山姆·温彻斯特和迪恩·温彻斯特）成为当代观众的牛仔英雄象征。

关键词 西部电影，电视，电影，牛仔，英雄，恐怖电影，科幻小说，逃犯，男性气质

Cowboys—first appearing in dime novels, illustrated newspapers, and Wild West performances—have transformed over time alongside changing cultural and political attitudes. Western cinema solidified and expanded the stature of the cowboy as the quintessential hero. However, by the 1960s, the popularity of traditional versions of the cowboy hero started to fade, shepherding in a new type of protagonist for Western cinema. In the twenty-first century, the contemporary television series *Supernatural* (2005-2020) stretches the limits of the Western genre. *Supernatural's* central characters, Sam and Dean Winchester, inhabit the periphery of society, fighting paranormal evil to protect ordinary people from inconceivable, apocalyptic threats. The television series takes its cues from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969). This film signaled a shift in the Western cinematic paradigm by elevating outlaws to heroic status and redefining the representation of masculinity in Westerns. Retracing the development of the cowboy hero in popular culture and analysis of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* provide a point of comparison to demonstrate how *Supernatural* replicates and recycles themes of the Western genre, thus permitting the Winchesters to signify as updated cowboy heroes.

Mass-market fiction, Wild West shows, singing cowboys, cinema, and television embedded the notions of the cowboy hero in the collective imagination of Americans. Portrayals of this working-class cowboy hero in popular culture blurred the lines between fact and fiction. Over time, as the cowboy's image was recycled through various media and adapted for commercial and political purposes, its occupational signification was overshadowed by meanings associated with American national identity. As the cowboy's visage became more ubiquitous in fine art, literature, and performance, his

image simultaneously became a potent mythical symbol of the United States both at home and abroad.¹

From the time Euro-Americans began exploring the lands west of the Mississippi in the nineteenth century, the region and its inhabitants captured the imagination of artists. In the post-Civil War West, detailed figurative works produced by such artists as Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell, among many others, portrayed cowboys who worked for wages on Western ranges and trails as working-class heroes and the embodiment of American masculinity. Cowboys also appeared as sensational characters in dime novels and starred in Wild West shows that highlighted riding and roping, skills they had honed on the range. The performances also added sharpshooting to the cowboy's repertoire, even though "real" cowboys were not gunslingers. Carrying pistols was banned on most ranches and inconvenient when working cattle. By the time cowboys appeared in films in the early twentieth century, their media image had proliferated throughout American popular culture, transforming into something that no longer signified a simple cowhand, but rather a mythological legend.

Novels and films established a formula for this legendary Westerner, imbuing him with rugged individualism, virile masculinity, and a moral code of right and wrong. The cowboy hero exhibited the following character traits: superb horsemanship; a dead shot with both a pistol and rifle; bravery; defender of the weak, typically women and children; and possessing honor and integrity naturally with an innate connection to nature (Frantz 71). The ideal Western hero is a

1 The iteration of the cowboy hero in various media are examples of what Benedict Anderson calls "print capital" because the media provides a shared experience for all readers and viewers (Anderson 44-46).

solitary wanderer who always gives his all because everything he owns is the bare minimum for survival; he is always at the point of losing everything (Hopkins 72-73). Such portrayals invariably placed the cowboy hero in a dangerous environment filled with hostile Indians,² deadly outlaws, uncertain weather, and other formidable obstacles.

Fictionalized depictions of the Wild West project individualism as or for cultural entertainment, thereby creating a simplified understanding of the American ideology of western expansion, establishing the cowboy as a national folk hero and an integral part of America's social culture (Wright 2). None did so more than Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Shows, which gave audiences on the eastern coast of the United States and in Europe their first glimpse of cowboys and frontiersmen. Far from representing reality, Buffalo Bill's spectacle nevertheless began a tradition of representation adopted by Western cinema and popular culture.

Literary and Wild West Show cowboys transitioned to film in the first decade of the twentieth century. For audiences, this evolution was seamless, and the celluloid cowboys connoted the same horsemanship and character traits embodied by "real" cowboys from the traveling performances of Buffalo Bill's Wild West and its imitators. The same individuals who appeared in the arena also starred in the movies. The cinematic fictional protagonist assumed the authenticity of the Wild West show celebrity to signify a true embodiment of the cowboy. Moreover, storylines remained consistent. A good versus bad paradigm was also central to the live performances and, later, Western films. John Ford set the standard

2 Note on terminology: the term "Indian" is used to refer to the fictional stereotypical representation of indigenous peoples of the North American continent as they appear in Western cinema and popular culture.

for such scenarios by creating an opposition between characters or themes in his Westerns, such as hero versus villain, civilized versus savage, or uninhabited frontier versus populated settlement.

Though his successors still ride the western range today, the working cowboy, past or present, rarely reflects the image of the cowboy hero popular culture calls to mind. Dialogue from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) explained it best by suggesting that if there is a choice for imagining the American West and its cowboy hero, a fictional version will always triumph over a factual one— a point aptly illustrated in a scene where the town's local newspaper editor learns the truth about who shot Liberty Valance. Lacking the intrigue of the believed rumors, the newspaperman proclaims, "This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

To be sure, the cowboy hero has changed over the last century; yet he remains a thriving part of American popular culture. The personification of the cowboy from a working hand to performer to outlaw-hero to space cowboy responds at any given time to the needs of the American audience and prevailing social and political conditions of the day. Consequently, the mythological connotation of the cowboy has taken on fresh layers of meaning with each new iteration of his image—historical or contemporary, factual or fictitious.

In *The Six-Gun Mystique*, John Cawelti proposes that all products of popular culture are composed of two elements: conventions and inventions. Conventions are familiar to both the creator and the audience in advance, such as stereotypical characters and plots that reinforce mythological formations of the American West. Inventions are newly developed by the

creator to impose a different reading or question mythical associations (Cawelti 27). In turn, Western cinema expanded upon pre-existing connotations of the cowboy with narratives that also invented new representations specific to the genre. Thus, the cowboy became the quintessential hero who eliminates evils that plague American society.

The late 1960s signaled a shift in the Western cinematic archetype by elevating outlaws to heroic status, noticeable by the evolution of what the cowboy hero could embody. Viewed through a lens of myth and romance, outlaws such as Jesse James, Billy the Kid, and Butch Cassidy become likable heroes rather than dishonest criminals. Film historian Paul Kooistra notes that

tales of outlaws may appeal to an audience because of dramatic elements embedded in the stories, as vehicles of vicarious rebellion against authority (with an implicit message that crime does not pay), or because broad cultural values such as honor, loyalty, courage, or cleverness may be expressed through the character of the social bandit. (Kooistra 222)

In such cases, illegal actions appear rational and justified because the hero “is endowed with noble attributes reflecting admirable cultural traits that cancel out the negative aspects of lawlessness” (Kooistra 223). Thus, criminal acts cannot supersede the benefits, and if the cowboy hero must kill a villain, the deed is sanctioned by the community he serves.

While a fundamental change in the American Western was underway, an Italian version also gained notoriety, including director Sergio Leone’s famed *Dollars Trilogy* starring Clint

Eastwood.³ Filmed on sets outside Altamira, Spain, these movies featured a cowboy hero whose appearance and values broke the traditional movie cowboy mold. The trilogy's central character, "The Man with No Name," rode a mule, wore a poncho, chomped a cigar, bore a weathered look, and engaged in flashy violence that differed from the measured persona of the traditional cowboy hero. In the United States, the elevation of cinematic violence was becoming more prominent, particularly in Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), in which Butch Cassidy's gang wreaks havoc and spills blood at levels unseen in any earlier Westerns. Criticized for its excessive violence, the movie's defenders suggested that the on-screen brutality merely reflected the chaos of the Vietnam conflict (Nelson 46). Americans experienced the horrors of the Vietnam War in full color in print media and on their living room televisions. Considered alongside the context of imagery such as the color photographs by Larry Burrows published in LIFE Magazine⁴ ("Larry Burrows"), the portrayal of violence in *The Wild Bunch* very much embodies the era's cultural tone.

While the promotion of criminals to heroes occurs in George Roy Hill's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, its lack of gratuitous violence sets it apart from its contemporaries. Actors Paul Newman and Robert Redford play the infamous, real-life outlaws who robbed banks and trains before seeking refuge in Bolivia to flee an American posse hired to kill them. The outlaws' relocation to Bolivia doesn't mark a retirement but a reinvention of thievery suitable to the new landscape.

3 *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964, U.S. release: January 1967), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965, U.S. release: May 1967) and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966, U.S. release: December 1967) comprised the trilogy.

4 Photographs by combat photographer Larry Burrows were some of the first color images of war ever presented to the American public.

Film historian Michael Dunne described the film as a “new style Western” that was more suitable for viewers who would “recognize the mediation of experience which epitomizes the world of late Sixties America, but not the world of *Stagecoach* or *The Searchers*” (Dunne 40). Yet the film adheres to many basic tenets of Western cinema—wide-open landscapes, skilled horsemen, and sharpshooters—while also reflecting societal concerns of the 1960s. Film scholar Andrew Patrick Nelson considers *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* “the inaugurator of the revisionist Western” partly because of its vast popularity and that its director found critical and commercial success beyond the Western genre (Nelson 67). Hill’s film includes the hallmarks of Western cinema but had an aesthetic that aligned more with films from other popular genres.

Hill wanted Butch and Sundance to come across as “modern rather than traditional in approach and temperament” (Liebenson). Hill achieved this through the dialogue written by William Goldman and the inclusion of modern popular music, remarking that the film had “...a very contemporary rhythm and sound to it, and we didn’t want a traditional Western score” (Liebenson). A seminal musical sequence of Butch riding a bicycle to amuse Etta (Katherine Ross), Sundance’s love interest and the only female character of significance in the film, exemplifies Hill’s modern soundtrack. Butch invites Etta “to meet the future,” an invitation instigating a montage of the couple riding the bicycle along to B.J. Thomas singing “Raindrops Keep Fallin’ on My Head.” The song and film score, written by Burt Bacharach, illustrate how music added the more contemporary feel Hill was seeking (Liebenson). Thomas thought that the song “made sense. ‘Raindrops’ is an American song ... and it says as long as you’re free, you’re okay” (Liebenson). The song does not elicit any nostalgia for

life on the range or the days of cattle drives. However, it does introduce pop music of the late 1960s in place of the conventional soundtracks typical of the Western genre.

When developing the script, Goldman wanted to tell the outlaws' story from a new perspective and made alterations that distinguished the film from its counterparts. For example, Butch's gang became the Hole in the Wall Gang compared to Peckinpah's more historically accurate Wild Bunch (Nelson 67). While the narrative of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* departs from a factual or authentic portrayal of the two outlaws' exploits, the film does hold fast to several Western cinematic trademarks.

Featuring sepia-toned scenes of Butch and Sundance robbing a train accompanied by the sound of an old film projector, the film's title sequence evokes primordial Westerns. Grainy and jumpy, the imagery conjures a sense of nostalgia not only for the Old West, but also for newsreels screened at movie theaters just before the main attractions. The monochromatic opening scenes combined with a black and white montage of photographs documenting the outlaws' journey to Bolivia, marking the film's midpoint, insinuate that the viewer is watching a historical documentary despite the far from factual narrative.

From beginning to the end, Butch and Sundance exhibit characteristics typical of cowboy heroes. In the first scene, Sundance faces off with a man who made the mistake of accusing the outlaw of cheating at poker. Sundance shoots off his challenger's holster and fires multiple shots that make the fallen gun skip across the saloon floor, putting his marksmanship on full display. Later, as the pair evades a posse in hot pursuit, Butch jumps from his horse to ride double with Sundance demonstrating that the men are skilled horsemen.

Lastly, Butch exhibits physical prowess amid hand-to-hand combat with a member of his gang who questions his authority. Yet he does something more strait-laced characters like those played by John Wayne would never do—Butch gains the upper hand with a cheap shot.

Nevertheless, Butch and Sundance possess a specific type of Old West morality. When robbing banks or trains, they never intentionally kill or even harm others. Not until the two go straight working as payroll guards for a Bolivian mine operation do they kill anyone. During a gunfight with the banditos who had just murdered their boss, Butch confesses that he's never killed a man. The pair could have simply kept the money themselves, yet Butch and Sundance adhere to an honor code that prohibits them from shirking their obligation. This scenario and scenes featuring Sundance's gun skills demonstrate that killing is a last resort. The outlaws' credibility as cowboy heroes does not require them to kill their adversaries.

Formulaic Westerns tend to focus on action scenes; conversely, in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, the relationship between the two main characters is emphasized over the when or where of their robberies. This departure from standard protocol is most pronounced through dialogue as Butch and Sundance engage in what Dunne describes as "the abusive verbal irony central to male bonding in America" (Dunne 42). Quips between the friends in the film's final scenes illustrate such banter when Butch complains to Sundance after being shot, "Is that what you call cover?" to which Sundance replies, "Is that what you call running?" Sundance understands the teasing nature of Butch's comment, and his retort confirms that the two are in it together to the death.

Butch and Sundance's friendship follows a trend of Western movies centered around what Nelson calls "masculine com-

panionship” (Nelson 53). In these scenarios, whether villains or heroes, duos often break out from the larger group. Butch and Sundance’s camaraderie also aligns with buddy Westerns that gained popularity in the 1950s. However, according to film historian Michael Coyne, Butch and Sundance were not necessarily a continuance of the trend, but rather “the first major “buddy movie” featuring younger American stars—which just *happened* to be a Western” (Coyne 147). Beyond featuring a more youthful cast than 1950s buddy Westerns, the relationship between the outlaws is far more complicated than just working together to rob banks and evade capture.

A love triangle exists between Butch, Sundance, and Etta. Sundance and Etta are romantically involved but do not wed until later in the story. Still, Etta also has feelings for Butch, revealed by her question, “Butch, do you ever wonder if I’d met you first, we’d been the ones to get involved?” to which Butch replies, “We are involved, don’t you know that?” The ambiguity of the trio’s entanglement resembles that of an unconventional relationship in 1969 far more than one deemed acceptable in a standard Western, in which respectable women are married, and those with liberal sexuality were often regarded as prostitutes. Moreover, Etta’s profession as a schoolteacher implies that intelligent women need not follow societal norms, reflecting sentiments of the late-nineteenth-century suffrage movement and second-wave feminism.⁵

Some critics such as Michael Coyne have proposed that *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* was “a thinly disguised homosexual love story” (Coyne 147), and Edward Buscombe con-

5 The American West was quite progressive regarding women’s rights. In 1870, Louisa Swain was the first woman to vote in a general election in Wyoming and Colorado was the first state to pass a women’s suffrage law in 1893 (Billock).

tends that “it has become almost a commonplace to suggest that the strong, often intense relationships between men in the Western as a covert form of homosexuality” (Buscombe 34). Even at the time of release, film reviewers commented about queer subtexts. One review in *Variety* on September 10, 1969, described Butch as “an affable, almost gay, individual” (Coyne 147). Moreover, Sundance’s insistence that Etta accompanies them to Bolivia hints at gay undertones. While hatching their escape plan, Sundance explains that Etta would provide them cover. He claims that the two outlaws would be less conspicuous traveling with a female companion because “no one expects it,” begging to question what type of “cover” is Etta providing?

Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid further breaks from the Western’s portrayals of masculinity where real men don’t talk—they act. Butch and Sundance divulge in lengthy conversations, even when on the run, and—more often than not—when they should be acting rather than talking. Nevertheless, the pair exhaustively debate everything. During these exchanges, the men also vocalize their emotions contradictory to stereotypical Western protocols that only allow the open expression of anger or hatred (Buscombe 34). In addition, the duo expresses vulnerability by sharing details about themselves, such as their real names or exhibiting remorse after their botched attempt at going straight.

Deviating again from Western cinematic convention, Butch and Sundance navigate a liminal threshold between the Old West and the modern world. Simultaneously, the film traverses between the traditional Western of the pre-mechanical era and the technological advents of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. New technological advancements in locomotion such as bicycles and trains are central to the

narrative. For example, in one scene, a local sheriff attempts to convene a posse to pursue Butch and Sundance only to be interrupted by a bicycle salesman. In the pitch for the “vehicle of the future,” the salesman declares that “the horse is dead,” garnering more interest from the crowd than the lawman can muster. This brief clip insinuates that capitalist ventures and new technology are replacing established means of frontier justice, and that the public does not view Butch and Sundance as their enemies. Instead, the film has an invisible villain, the railroad tycoon Harriman.

Utilizing his industrial wealth and influence, Harriman positions corporate power above the governmental justice system incapable of capturing the two outlaws. Harriman hires the best lawmen and trackers in the country to form an elite posse to pursue Butch and Sundance. Unable to evade Harriman’s posse, the stumped duo repeatedly asks, “Who are those guys?” Coyne suggests that their inquiry “is actually a quasi-paranoid rumination on the faceless wielders of real power in modern America” and that the self-imposed exile to Bolivia is a result of the outlaws’ refusal “to adapt to the increasing corporatism of American society” (Coyne 148). Harriman, only discussed and never seen, is the stand-in for corporate America.

Other subtexts connect *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* to other societal concerns of the 1960s. Butch and Sundance’s exodus to Bolivia corresponds to men who emigrated from the United States to avoid the draft. The outlaws fled the hand of the law just as American young men sought refuge from war. Additionally, the complicated relationship between the film’s central characters alludes to the sexual freedom exhibited by American youth.

While *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* fits within the realm of Western cinema, its underlying cynicism against established norms of law enforcement and contemporary societal concerns made it appealing to a broad audience, making it the biggest box office hit of 1969. The popular television series *Supernatural* embodies a similar tone; however, it is chocked-full of blood and gore. It combines horror, gothic, Sci-fi, and Western genres and evokes films such as Sergio Leone's *Dollars Trilogy* (1964, 1965, 1966), *Star Wars* (1977), *Young Guns* (1988), *Young Guns II* (1990), and *Back to the Future III* (1990).

Premiering on the CW in 2005, *Supernatural* ran for fifteen seasons ending in 2020. The series revolved around the adventures of brothers Sam (Jared Padalecki) and Dean (Jensen Ackles) Winchester as they crisscross mid-America in a black 67' Chevy Impala hunting otherworldly villains. Raised by a father obsessed with pursuing the yellow-eyed demon, Azazel, who killed their mother, the brothers' experienced a childhood filled with lessons "about the paranormal evil that lives in the dark corners and on the back roads of America ... and [how] to kill it" (*Supernatural*, About Show Information"). In the first season, the brothers search for their missing father, and as the series progresses, Sam and Dean follow in their father's footsteps becoming full-time "hunters" who encounter foes from urban legends, folklore, myths, and religion.

Supernatural's creator Eric Kripke cites Neil Gaiman's novel *American Gods* (2001) as a significant influence (Booker). Connections between the book and the resulting cable series on Starz! are readily evident.⁶ In Gaiman's tale, multicultural

⁶ An adaptation Gaiman's novel, the television series was cancelled after its third season on Starz! in 2021.

gods ranging from Odin to Osiris engage in an apocalyptic narrative centered around one man whose actions hold the world in balance. Similarly, Sam and Dean seek out an array of mythical beings, many of whom also appear in *American Gods*, to prevent the world's demise. However, in *Supernatural*, pagan gods merely serve as menacing villains with no direct hand in the ever-impending apocalypse orchestrated by the Christian God.

Homages to Western cinema frequent the series. The brothers' surname, Winchester, references the famous repeating firearm company founded in 1866. Winchester rifles were the preferred weapon for frontier lawmen, outlaws, and Wild West performers. Even the well-known photograph of Billy the Kid from 1880 features the 1873 Winchester rifle, a gun also favored by Buffalo Bill and sharpshooter Annie Oakley (Winchester Historical Timeline). Moreover, Sam and Dean possess character traits of the traditional cowboy hero combined with new personifications of the character as he appeared in various genres.

Numerous iterations of the Western's cowboy hero appear in Sci-fi and superhero action movies. In *Red, White, and Spooked*, M. Keith Booker asserts that "superheroes are distinctly American cultural icons because of their close family resemblance to the quintessentially American figure of the frontier hero" (Booker 50). Han Solo, a character played by actor Harrison Ford in the blockbuster film *Star Wars* (1977), exemplified the evolution from frontier hero to space cowboy and reveals how character conventions can bridge different genres.⁷ Solo wore his laser pistol tied low on

7 Upon the production of series pre-quells and sequels beginning in 1999, the original title, *Star Wars*, changed to *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope*.

his hip like B-western gunfighters and piloted his spacecraft like a cowboy reined a horse. Solo was a reluctant hero until confronted by circumstances that required him to act in favor of the common good. Resembling predecessors featured in dime novels and Western films, cowboy heroes like Solo remained aloof from society, lived by a personal code of honor, and stood ready to defend the public at all costs (Booker 68). Melding traditional Westerns and classic Science-fiction, cowboyesque heroes also appeared in television series such as *Battlestar Galactica* (1978 and 2004), *Firefly* (2002), and the film *Serenity* (2005). The Winchesters assume blended characteristics of both Western and Sci-fi heroes during encounters that require them to bend the rules that consigns them more to the realm of criminal outlaws akin to how Butch, Sundance, and Solo operate on the margins of society.

Sam and Dean also possess extraordinary abilities for confronting paranormal evil. Sam has a superhuman ability to kill demons, a “gift” he received from one of the show’s central antagonists, Azazel, when he was just an infant. Sam later learns that the demon killed his mother because she interrupted the event that made Sam an unwilling participant in a predestined prophecy. In the final season, God reveals that he imbued both Sam and Dean with supernatural abilities, which explains their uncanny knack at slaying mystical beings and the rare occasion they suffer serious injury. Both Sam and Dean’s superhumanness and moral code leave them no choice but to participate in gallant events like a typical cowboy hero’s inability to refrain from defending those in need.

Dean’s ’67 Impala also connects the series to Western cinematic conventions. Dean holds, what some might consider, an unhealthy attachment to his car that he adoringly calls

“Baby.” Such affection is akin to a cowboy’s fondness for his trusted steed. “Baby” is to Dean what Silver is to the Lone Ranger or the Millennium Falcon to Han Solo. Reliable means of transportation are essential narrative devices of Westerns, be it traditional or Sci-fi adaptations where technological innovation ushers in mechanical horsepower.

While Sam and Dean appear to be operating in the realm of legality, their livelihood aligns more with outlaws. Financing their adventures through credit card fraud makes them thieves comparable to Butch and Sundance. Furthermore, the Winchesters routinely use counterfeit identification impersonating FBI agents to circumvent the legal justice system and perform extra-legal justice. The brothers’ rationale is not unlike how Butch and Sundance justify their own lawlessness by disregarding government authority. According to Coyne, such narratives relate to “blatant anti-establishment fantasies, in which outlaw heroes possess a moral purity presumed beyond the plutocrats they rob” (Coyne 25). Thus, stealing is justifiable as long as the victim deserves it or the theft does not harm the everyday citizen. Throughout the series, the Winchesters often rely on help from other hunters who come together like a loose band of outlaws, Sam and Dean’s version of the Hole in the Wall Gang. There are also organized factions such as the Men of Letters fraternity of demon hunters. Nevertheless, the brothers are wary of such institutions and tend to seek out hunters like themselves.

Sam and Dean’s unique personalities are significant to the show’s storyline and often create a palpable tension between the siblings. Sam is an intelligent, serious type, while Dean is quick to action with a boisterous wisecracking personality. Portrayed as book smart, Sam relies on research to find solutions but never shies away from physical altercation if nec-

essary. On the other hand, street-savvy Dean hastily resorts to violence. The Winchesters' close relationship echoes the comradery of Butch and Sundance. While Dean shares many a personality trait with Butch, Sam, like Sundance, favors a long-lasting romantic relationship over the fast and loose style of a single Butch who frequently mingles with prostitutes. *Supernatural* steers clear of brothels, but Dean is no stranger to a one-night stand.

The Winchesters avoid developing lengthy relationships as their significant others often find themselves in harm's way, a scenario that appears in the very first episode. The same demon that killed their mother years earlier murders Sam's girlfriend. Later in Season 6, Dean takes a brief retirement from hunting in exchange for the family way of life. In the end, Dean must sever all ties with his girlfriend Lisa and her young son Ben to protect them from dangers that always seem to be lurking just around the corner. Fearing for Lisa and Ben's safety, Dean requests the brothers' angel sidekick, Castiel (Misha Collins), use his angelic powers to erase Lisa's memories of him ("Let It Bleed"). This persistent theme guarantees that anyone connected to the Winchesters will at some point find themselves in peril. Only the series finale deviates from the storyline, whereupon Dean's death, Sam finally marries to raise a family. However, Sam doesn't necessarily give up the hunter's life; rather, his marriage and son ensure that demon hunters will continue to be part of the family line.

Sam and Dean inhabit a very masculine environment where they are "forced both literally and symbolically out of home and family..." while simultaneously being "haunted by notions of the family and the 'normal'" (McGuire and Buchbinder 296). Resembling the cowboy hero, their masculinity is expressed through proficiency with weapons and virility

in hand-to-hand combat. In addition, storylines often emphasize each man's physical appearance, and neither man has difficulty picking up women or using their good looks to advance their investigative pursuits. Yet in other circumstances, the two are often mistaken as lovers. Analogous to Butch and Sundance's banter, Sam and Dean's constant bickering reiterates stereotypes characteristic of married couples, insinuating that a romantic relationship exists between the siblings. Such innuendos add humor and hint to the lack of stable female companionship in each of the men's lives, another trope characteristic of Western cinema.

Supernatural's writers amplify the references to Westerns in Season 6, episode 18, "Frontierland," an obvious homage to the genre. The episode begins with Dean in a gun duel staged on the street of an Old West town straight out of the movies. A Bonanzaesque⁸ title sequence featuring a vintage map of Wyoming follows the scene. The song "Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo" from Leone's spaghetti Western plays as the map burns from its center, and the text, "Supernatural," emerges from the flames.

"Frontierland's" plot continues Season 6's fight against the supreme mother of all embodied in a character appropriately named Eve. Sam and Dean, assisted by Bobby Fischer, a veteran demon hunter and father figure played by Jim Beaver, discover that a dagger dipped in the ash of a mythological phoenix is the only weapon that can kill Eve. Research leads them to Old West hunter and historic firearms manufacturer Samuel Colt, who, according to his journals, killed a phoenix with his revolver in 1861. Colt plays an integral behind-the-

8 The opening credits for the television series *Bonanza* (1959-1973) feature a map of the Ponderosa in Nevada that catches fire, burning to a center point after the title appears.

scenes role in the series because he fashioned a special revolver that kills seemingly unkillable supernatural beings. Colt's gun first appears in season one as the only weapon capable of destroying the elusive, yellow-eyed demon. In a subsequent season, the weapon permits the Winchesters to avenge their mother, but they lose possession of it in the process.

In the present day, minus the Colt revolver needed to kill a phoenix and no knowledge of where to find such a creature, Dean concludes that the best way to get their hands on phoenix ash is to travel back in time to 1861 Wyoming to retrieve the remains of the phoenix slain by Colt. A feat of little consequence since the angel Castiel, a permanent member of the Winchester Gang, has the power to transport them back in time. There is a catch, however. If Sam and Dean stay in the past for more than 24 hours, Castiel will be unable to teleport them back to the twenty-first century.

The dialogue is full of cantankerous comedic banter referencing Western films and pop culture. Dean shows his love of Western cinema as he unveils his outfit for their trip to the Old West. Sam admonishes him for thinking that this adventure will be anything like a Clint Eastwood film and in jest calls Dean Sundance. The ensuing teasing leads Bobby to inquire, "Even the monkey movies?" Sam rejoins, "Especially those with the monkey." Eventually, both brothers find themselves in 1861 Sunrise, Wyoming, dressed in what Dean considers "authentic" cowboy attire. Sam dons a cowboy hat and Western-style shirt with an embroidered yoke in contrast to Dean's Eastwood-inspired serape or "nice blanket," as a Sunrise resident quipped upon meeting Dean. Of course,

9 These remarks refer to *Every Which Way but Loose* (1978). In the film, the truck driving/prizefighter Philo Beddoe played by Eastwood is accompanied by an orangutan named Clyde.

neither costume carries any resemblance to historical clothing of the American West, but the set and period actors look as authentic as those appearing in classic Westerns. Bobby draws such a connection when he tells Castiel, “We can’t just strand those idjets in Deadwood,” a reference not only to the historic gold rush town but also to the HBO series *Deadwood* (2004-2006), for which Beaver also appeared and is known for its gritty realism and violence.

While in the past, Dean insists on using aliases despite a lack of necessity for pseudonyms since no one in 1861 would question their identity. Dean, of course, is Clint Eastwood, alluding not only to his Western film hero, but also the name assumed by the character Marty McFly played by Michael J. Fox in *Back to the Future III*.¹⁰ Sam, on the other hand, is Walker, a Texas Ranger, so named by Dean. Coincidentally in 2021, Jared Padalecki began reprising the iconic Chuck Norris role in a CW remake of the original series *Walker, Texas Ranger* that aired on CBS from 1993-2001.

The showdown between Dean and the phoenix, masquerading as an ordinary man, recalls a classic gunfighting scene. Dean successfully wins the gun duel killing the phoenix, but during the ensuing melee once again loses the Colt and fails to retrieve any ashes before Castiel zaps him back to the future. Again referencing the *Back to the Future* films, Dean’s blunders in 1861 are remedied in the present when Sam receives a package containing phoenix ashes posted 150 years earlier by Samuel Colt. Just as Marty instigates a chain of events that guarantees his own future survival, Sam’s search for Colt is instrumental in obtaining the special revolver in order for

10 Marty time travels back to 1885 to rescue Doc Brown, stranded in the Old West. Marty’s Western attire resembles that of the singing cowboys of the 1950s (*Back to the Future III*).

Dean, not Colt, to slay the phoenix. A trade of technology occurs; Dean requires the nineteenth-century pistol to complete his narrative task, and Colt utilizes a twenty-first-century electronic device to a similar end. As a consequence of the transpiring events, Colt ends up with Sam's cell phone, where he finds the Winchester's physical address in the future.

The episode relies on simulacra to create the nuanced Western plot. The reenactments of Western cinematic tropes and narrative constructs recalling *Back to the Future III*, which also simulates Western cinematic scenarios—are merely an imitation of an imitation. “Frontierland” relies on the viewer's cultural knowledge to make those connections and understand what the narrative devices and imagery signify (Barthes, 28). Audiences needn't get all of the pop culture references to understand or even enjoy the series; yet such connections create an enhanced experience for viewers “in-the-know” who have the requisite cultural knowledge.

Direct references to Butch and Sundance throughout the series illustrates this scenario. In Season 12, episode 22, “Who We Are,” the brothers find themselves in a hopeless situation—trapped in their bunker, quickly running out of oxygen, and destined to perish. Contemplating their impending demise, Sam and Dean evoke not only Butch and Sundance but also the finale of *Young Guns*¹¹ and Jon Bon Jovi's soundtrack anthem “Blaze of Glory” from *Young Guns II*:

11 The finale of *Young Guns* depicts the Battle of Lincoln in New Mexico. The Regulators, a group of cowboys and outlaws led by Billy the Kid, were held up in the home of Alexander McSween, a prominent figure in the Lincoln County war who had hired the men to protect his interests. Outnumbered and surrounded by the opposing faction, a sheriff, and the United State Calvary, the Regulators, were forced to evacuate when the house was set afire. Guns blazing, several men escaped, including Billy the Kid.

SAM. Is this how you pictured it? The end?

DEAN. Oh, you know it's not. I always thought I'd go out Butch and Sundance style.

SAM. Blaze of glory?

DEAN. Blaze of glory.

The exchange prompts Dean to remember a mammoth caliber weapon stashed in the compound. In the end, they do indeed escape doom in a “blaze of glory” —Dean blows a hole through a wall.

Sam brings up Butch and Sundance again in the final season's episode 9, “The Trap.” God shows Sam glimpses of the future in scenes reminiscent of Ebenezer Scrooge's visit from the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. During the sequence, Sam witnesses a conversation between himself and Dean to occur a year later. Dean informs Sam that he is quitting hunting, believing their efforts at fighting evil are futile. Sam evokes the film's final scene arguing, “What happened to Butch and Sundance? Dean, what happened to going out swinging?” Outnumbered and surrounded by Bolivian troops, the two outlaws come out shooting to face their deaths, and the film ends on a freeze-frame of Butch and Sundance guns blazing.

In interviews, Jared Padalecki, who plays Sam, commented that the brothers should die when the series ended—“like a Butch Cassidy and Sundance kind of thing” (Piester). However, when discussing season fifteen, Padalecki indicated that he had changed his mind somewhat and that he just wanted Sam and Dean to find peace. The series nearly ended in the vein of an old Western. In the penultimate episode, Dean, behind the wheel of his beloved '67 Impala with Sam riding

shotgun, drives off into the sunset. In the end, the brothers do find peace in death, but not in a blaze of glory.

Supernatural's combination of genres is more or less a merging of the modern gothic with the Hollywood Western. Literary theorist Frederic Jameson contends that the modern gothic “depends absolutely in its central operation on the construction of evil Evil is here, however, the emptiest form of sheer Otherness into which any type of social content can be poured at will” (Jameson 290). In the myth of the American West perpetuated in Western cinema and popular culture, Indians assigned the role of the evil Other became a visual manifestation of the fears and misfortunes experienced by early settlers of the American frontier. Created in a post-9/11 world, *Supernatural* obliquely addresses the trauma of the attack on the Twin Towers and American anxieties regarding an unknown enemy. Sam and Dean's story promotes a paranoid awareness that adversaries incessantly conspire to end human existence. Scholars Ann McGuire and David Buchbinder propose that after 9/11, “the terrorist other began to figure in the western cultural imaginary as a single moral force, focused by its faith, and united in its mission” (McGuire and Buchbinder 296). In *Supernatural*, various monsters personify evil to serve as a stand-in for the unidentifiable Other.

The Winchesters engage in a never-ending conflict with paranormal entities portrayed in oppositional binary parallel to Western cinema's “cowboys versus Indians” scenario. Instead of Indians, Sam and Dean face a nemesis representing pure evil in various mythological forms. Unlike a Western featuring Indians as a recognizable enemy, there is no straightforward personification of evil in the American imaginary following 9/11. The villains in *Supernatural* are mysterious and

challenging to understand in terms of motive or which side of right and wrong they fall. Good versus bad isn't black and white but a muddled shade of gray. Likewise, it is difficult for Americans to fathom domestic attacks by an unperceivable and faceless threat and the uncertainty of America's endless war on terror.

Unique characters do appear, such as Eve, the brothers' arch-nemesis in Season 6, that display more nuanced personalities than the random vampire or werewolf. Yet most of the evil represents an unidentifiable power and is not representative of a particular individual or issue because of modern society's multifaceted nature. Jameson argues that "late capitalist societies today are now a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm" and "...faceless masters continue to inflict the economic strategies which constrain our existences" (Jameson 17). *Supernatural's* villains are frequently those "faceless masters." By adopting tropes of the modern gothic and Western genres, the show's antagonists—demons and gods—and protagonists—Sam and Dean—signify in ways that communicate the anxieties of contemporary American culture.

Western cinema's formulaic nature permits Sam and Dean to signify as modernized cowboy heroes despite the series' associations with the horror genre. Viewers learn to recognize genre associations because of the overarching themes and character traits. Audiences know a Western they see one, even if it deviates from the norm (Dunne 46). Therefore, Sam and Dean's characterization and pop cultural references to Western movies are recognizable for viewers familiar with the genre. Consequently, the television series can signify as a Western despite *Supernatural* encompassing a different temporal and technological space than traditional versions.

Ultimately, both the film and television series are novel versions of the Western, demonstrating how the genre and its cowboy heroes persist as a popular form of storytelling.

Portraying atypical cowboy heroes, categorization of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *Supernatural* as Westerns depends on audience reception. The former is characteristic of a Western, most notably because of the historical timeline and Western landscape. Still, it could be a buddy or road film. *Supernatural* recalls Western genre conventions to establish the mythic journey of the Western hero intuitively by drawing on the audience's preconceived notions of how the story will end (Schatz 460 and Altman 489). Conceivably, Sam and Dean have more in common with a stereotypical Western hero than do Butch and Sundance. Butch and Sundance's thievery may affront the powers that be, but they are only looking out for themselves in the end. Living by a strict moral code demands the brothers put their own welfare second to setting all right with the world. Rooting out and vanquishing evil with extra-legal justice, the Winchesters are modern American cowboy heroes.

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