A REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE AND HIS PTSD: DEPICTIONS OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN *THE WINCHESTERS*

ANNA CATERINO

Name: Anna Caterino
Email Address: Anna.Caterino@unimi.it
Academic Centre: Independent scholar

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ABSTRACT
The Winchesters (2022) tells the story of John Winchester (Drake Rodger) after his return from Vietnam. The show seeks to explore his PTSD through the monster of the week format, exploiting the conventions of the horror genre without adhering to outdated and negative stereotypes. In doing so, showrunner Robbie Thompson challenges *Supernatural*'s (2005-2020) narrative and the one proposed by other media focused on the same issues. However, the references made to Western ideals of masculinity ensure an all but 'sanitized' depiction that ultimately asks the audience to question the limits of empathy and their own prejudices. This essay aims to analyze the show through the lens of medical humanities, focusing on the portrayal of John as a patient-person and the ways in which his PTSD is depicted throughout the course of the show.

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1. **INTRODUCTION**

On June 24, 2021, Danneel and Jensen Ackles announced that their newly established production company would oversee the creation of *The Winchesters* (2022), a prequel to Eric Kripke's *Supernatural* (2005-2020). Despite the original's cult-like status, the involvement of fan-favorite Robbie Thompson, and the deviation from the original formula, fans reacted negatively to the news and quickly begun to voice their disappointment across a variety of social media platforms. Under different circumstances, the dismissal of the toxic and codependent relationship between Sam and Dean Winchester might have been appealing. Instead, the decision to focus on the characters' parents —specifically, their father, John— was perceived as further indication of the powers that be's reluctance to challenge the status quo and their desire to bully and mock the majority of their audience for partaking in slash shipping (tiktaalic 2021).

Notwithstanding such qualms, *The Winchesters* premiered on October 11, 2022, with 0.78 million viewers total, making it the most-watched pilot episode of the season (Mitovich 2022). Just like *Supernatural* had always allowed "feminist and/or queer readings" (Nicole 2014: 165), the prequel soon revealed itself to be neither conservative nor oblivious to contemporary socio-cultural developments. As a matter of fact, it set out to explore the very same trappings of masculinity and the dark side of "ancestor reverence" (Harris 2019: 91) as the original. The focus on a new set of characters and a different time in American history merely provided new insight into patriarchal legacies, exploiting all the possibilities *Supernatural* had exhausted, and ultimately mixing childhood abuse and the consequences of asymmetric warfare into a story centered around mental illness.

As a result, the show forced its audience to reckon with their misassumptions on patienthood and illness, while also challenging television's penchant for associating mental illness with "fear, dislike, and distrust" (Fruth and Padderud 1985: 384) and with a two-fold effect. On the one hand, the dismissal of the parasocial relation between viewer and fictional character was undermined by the show's focus on John Winchester in order to test the limits of empathy. On the other hand, the deviation from mediatic dehumanization (Wahl and Roth 1982: 604) and "sense of evil" (Gerbner 1980: 47) enabled the creation of new frameworks and axioms that do not hinge on the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' patients —or sick people.

At a time when people are more inclined to see Vietnam veterans (and volunteers at that) as butchers rather than heroes, *The Winchesters*' introduction of two mentally ill characters makes the story more effective. Unlike John, his friend Carlos Cervantez is more likeable and easily redeemable due to his diversity, not to mention more accepting of his problems and willing to seek help. The audience's potential favoritism, which seemingly transcends personal taste, may facilitate the emergence of a "real social bond" between reality and fiction (Hoffner and Cohen 2015: 1047) but simultaneously unveils the bias behind self-reflection through the other at the expense of less open characters.

After all, the on-screen depiction of mental illness can be as didactic (Nordahl-Hansen et al. 2018) as it can be harmful (Klin and Lemish 2008: 434). In operating outside this standardized binary and relinquishing the trend of turning mentally ill characters into "role models" (Iranzo 2022: 98), Robbie Thompson and his colleagues were given the chance to reflect on contemporary issues as, for example, the tendency to "deprive [patients] of their individual story" (Dignan 2022: 156) or to portray the mas nothing more than "disease anthropomorphized" (Gilman 1988: 2). The educational nature of serialized television, therefore, is not entirely lost, regardless of how unlikeable John Winchester may be, allowing *The Winchesters* to insert itself into the ever-relevant debate on the humanization of patients and medicine.

In light of these initial considerations, this essay aims to analyze the show through the lenses of Medical Humanities, highlighting its depiction of mental illness —more specifically PTSD. The first part will look at John Winchester as a mentally ill character and focus on the show's subversion of the typical connection between illness and criminality. In the second part, this essay will them move onto the show's depiction of mental illness and its use of the monster of the week narrative, exposing the ways in which the inability to distinguish "who's really the monster here" ("Art of Dying" 1.06) does not hinder a positive portrayal, not even at a time when audiences seek unproblematic fiction that offers a safe haven for all.

2. **BORN IN THE USA: PORTRAIT OF THE 'PATIENT' AS A YOUNG MAN**

Although *The Winchesters* takes place in a parallel universe and, as such, cannot be placed on the same continuum as *Supernatural*, first-time viewers may approach the show as if they were, resulting in substantial reservations as to the

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prequel's effectiveness. After all, in Kripke's work, John Winchester embodies the real "moral evil" due to the persistent associations with the yellow-eyed demon Azazel (Bolf and Bolf-Beliveau 2014: 118). Certainly, softer and more positive depictions of the characters do exist within the show's canon as, for example, in "Lebanon" (14.13). In spite of never vindicating or fully redeeming the character, they do provide glimpses beyond "outlaw fatherhood" (Rosen 2014: 185). This occasional distance from immediate and unromantic representations of post-9/11 masculinity (George 2014: 143) bestows verisimilitude to any alternate version of John, posing questions on the nature of his authoritarian behavior.

In *Supernatural*, John's indifference and violence are a consequence of his wife's gruesome death —a life-changing moment that jumpstarts his quest for revenge and the ruin of his sons' lives. No reference is made to his status as Vietnam veteran nor does the show imply that John, too, found himself at the receiving end of domestic violence. All in all, he remains mostly unsympathetic and underdeveloped, two features that may consistently warp the audience's perception when placed in front of a younger and different iteration of the character. However, the discrepancy works in *The Winchesters*' favor because it fools viewers into thinking that the show will uncritically reproduce the societal stigmas that surround mental illness and PTSD (Parrott 2022). Moreover, given the prequel's focus on the Vietnam War, any fears on the reassertion of "privileged and dominant perspectives" (Quintero Johnson and Miller 2016: 12) are not entirely unfunded.

Hereby, the dismissal of danger, violence, craziness, and volatility (Mittal et al. 2013) become the more fruitful and expose the "moral economy [affected by] values, behavioral norms, and ethical assumption" (Higashi et al. 2013: 13) found in media, healthcare, and everyday life. Rather than working in terms of perjorativeness and romanticization (Stuart 2006; Sieff 2003), the screenwriters introduce a more multifaceted portrayal that by-passes some of the fallacies inherent to on-screen mental illness (Spieker 2017; Sieff 2003; Hoffner and Cohen 2015). As a result, the show becomes richer and more complex than an initial and superficial approach may lead to believe to the point of inciting change and pushing people, like doctors, to "acknowledge, absorb, interpret, and act on the stories and plights of others" (Charon 2001: 1987). Because characters move in a world that is altogether not too different from the real one (Huxley 1963) and are driven by the same impulses that drive us, the "fears, desires, concerns, expectations, hopes, and fantasies" of any patient (Cassell 1984: 47) are faithfully rendered and more easily explored.

For all his flaws, John Winchester remains a sick *person*, inserted in a specific socio-cultural landscape. As any patient, he exists outside of his diagnosis and symptoms and, even though he is not particularly keen on seeking treatment, his PTSD does not hinder him from completely living his life nor does it entirely alienate him from those around him. Moreover, as with Carlos who witnessed his family's murder by the hands of a demon, John Winchester's trauma is not exclusively connected to his time in Vietnam —though it may be the most recent event. His characterization strongly relies on traits that predate his military service, casting doubts on the real or, perhaps, original source of his mental illness. Given the show's propensity to discuss the failings of fatherhood and the harmful consequences faced by children, it is unsurprising that this alternate version of John Winchester finds himself in the same position as Sam and Dean.

John Winchester is a White straight male from a blue-collar family. He is "tall, dark, angry" ("Art of Dying" 1.06). He has a record of "assault, disorderly conduct, [and] vandalism" ("You've Got a Friend" 1.11) that makes his incrimination for murder believable despite his innocence. He has a propensity for self-destruction and violence, which he blames on his desire to keep people safe, especially his friends. When Mary calls him out on his suicidal tendencies and the recklessness that stems from his fears and desires, John deflects worries and accusations alike.

JOHN:	*If getting you out of hunting alive means pushing myself, that's exactly what I'll do.*
MARY:	*So, you're doing all of this for me? That's the only reason?*
JOHN:	*Well, there is the whole 'saving the world' part.*
MARY:	*That's not what I meant. Your mom told me about you and danger and how you've run towards it every single time since you were a kid.*
JOHN:	*I don't need you or my mom psychoanalyzing me.*
MARY:	*And I don't need you using me as an excuse to avoid your issues.*

("THE ART OF DYING" 1.06)

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The exchange is a heated one. It questions the real motives behind John's interest in hunting, and invites the audience to look beyond John's embodiment of Western ideals of masculinity as, for example, "toughness, power, control, independence, differentiation from womanhood, restricted emotions, physical and sexual competence, assertiveness, and aggressiveness" (Canham 2009: 2). These attributes are close to the depiction of manhood found in "macho pulps" that used to circulate during the Cold War (Daddis 2020: 2), and do dictate John's actions.

A subsection of the fandom's displeasure stems from the belief that this type of portrayal reprises these images of bravado, conquest, and assertion to the point of either perpetrating racism and xenophobia, or defending American GI's. As such, the perspective of a Vietnam veteran appears both ludicrous and unforgivable (steveyockey 2022) and leads to the possibility of claiming the moral high ground while also inciting a cold and unsympathetic reading of the show's main character. Unlike his friend Carlos, who decided to enlist when a "judge said it was either jail or service" ("Masters of War" 1.04), John joined as a volunteer. Not only that, he joined the army between 1969 and 1970, years closer to the Fall of Saigon than to America's initial involvement. By then, disillusionment had already settled (Capps 1991), shattering the pretense of decolonization and the fight against the spread of communism.

In *The Winchesters*, there is no mention of the high casualty toll, a condemnation of war itself, or any interest in verging in on the debate surrounding the uniqueness of that moment in American history. Neither does the show open a voyeuristic window into the horrors of war: The Vietnamese landscape, a flying helicopter, the exploding landmines, and John's friend Murph turning around in distress and asking "John?" ("Pilot" 1.01) are enough to conjure horrific scenarios in the minds of the audience. However, as traumatic as these events may be, they are symptomatic of something else, as John's mother makes clear upon his arrival home.

MILLIE:	*Far as I'm concerned, you're the same age as when you illegally joined the Marines.*
JOHN:	*I had a waiver.*
MILLIE:	*By forging your dad's signature. Two years gone, look at you.*
JOHN:	*I'm fine, mom.*
MILLIE:	*The hell you are. You've been chasing your dad since he walked out our door. I know that's why you enlisted. But it is time to let go of the past.*

("PILOT" 1.01)

Millie's words expose the crux of the matter: John's incapability to forget about his father's desertion. Henry Winchester's voluntary disappearance incites guilt and feelings of inadequacy that survive well beyond childhood ("Reflections" 1.07). War is not the beginning and end of all things, even though it left Americans, like John, "sadder than it did wiser" (Kort 2018: 2). The restlessness and sense of futility that are associated with post-war America (Taylor 2003) shape John only partially. The ongoing reminder of John's pre-existing issues reframes the show's focus on his childhood and adolescence by hinting at the connection between absent fathers and children embracing patriarchal values and hypermasculinity (Perrin et al. 2009) as a form of compensation (Carlsmith 1964).

These feelings, that lead to seemingly extreme behavior, are only one part of Henry Winchester's dark inheritance, though they may be the most obvious ones. In *The Winchesters*' sixth episode, the monumental change brought on by a father's disappearance takes on new meaning through the introduction of domestic violence. Halfway through the episode, John is possessed by the vengeful spirit of a dead hunter, Mac. Mac was "a dark soul", "a damn good hunter", and had "a rough childhood... abused by his dad, bullied by the other kids, and he thought if he became a hunter and killed real monsters, that would help with the pain that the other kind had caused him" ("The Art of Dying" 1.06). Although, unlike Mac, John does never turn to magic, the two share a likeness. The momentary loss of control allows John to speak freely and reinforces *The Winchesters*' position inside the canon of family melodrama which, as noted by Elsaesser, leaves the audience with "the feeling that there is always more to tell than can be said [which] leads to very consciously elliptical narratives" (2012: 444). The use of a mediator is therefore necessary for truthfulness as it provides enough detachment to condemn the imposition and enactment of hypermasculine and patriarchal ideologies.

When Mac proclaims, "You can't hurt me. All I've ever known are clenched fists. Learned that from my old man. There's nothing that you can do to me that I haven't already survived" ("Art of Dying" 1.06) he is not only talking about his relationship with his father, but also John and Henry's by

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proxy. Far from being a justification of John's behavior, it merely underlines the association between familial violence and emotional behavioral problems (Haggerty et al. 1996; Turner et al. 2006), anger and aggression (DiLillo et al. 2000; Turner et al. 2006), as well as depression (Branje et al. 2009). As the myth of the father/God comes tumbling down, the sense of dissatisfaction augments, together with the understanding that interpersonal relationships are the most important thing and ultimately have the potential of becoming the saving grace and redemptive force.

The reliance on meaningful connections is possible because "John isn't as closed off the way Henry was" ("Reflections" 1.07). Latika's understanding of her friend's past and present suffering confirms the possibility of empathy and, in turn, implies that to "supplant patriarchal power with fraternal equality" (Howell 2014: 173) is the only way forward. Fathers have to be forgotten if not forgiven to find fulfillment outside of the God-the-Father and Father-the-God model. For John Winchester such a dismissal is not an easy task despite the sense of belonging he feels within the 'Monster Club' and the contentment he did not manage to find in Vietnam. John Winchester's struggle is as expected as his final resolution to keep on hunting, leaving the show's final episode open-ended. The outcome of his choice is, perhaps, unimportant insofar that *The Winchesters* is not set up to be a trial. The audience is not asked to play judge and jury to establish whether or not John deserves to overcome his PTSD and start a journey out of anger and mental illness. What the show does do, is present a complex portrait of an unlikely patient while testing the limits of empathy and connection. In doing so, it challenges its own canon and the depictions of patients at large.

3. GOING UNDER: ILLNESS, MORALS, AND GENRE FICTION

Within the first two minutes of *The Winchesters*, the show establishes that John suffers from PTSD. Alone on a nearly empty bus, he wakes up from a nightmare —on alert and gasping for air. The brief array of images is sufficiently poignant and more effective than any possible voyeuristic window into the horrors of war. The brief, flashing memories at the beginning of the pilot episode are enough to conjure horrific scenarios in the minds of the audience. The sequence lasts three seconds, yet it provides an interesting portrait of the sufferer, iconographically linked to some of the tales of lonely repatriation featured in historical records. Furthermore, it effectively paves the way for the writers' interest in mental illness and the depiction of the lasting effects of trauma.

The show's initial focus on Vietnam is perhaps a given, considering John Winchester's status as a veteran. However, the government's lack of interest in soldiers and veterans (Milam 2009) is only secondary, notwithstanding the discussion of such shortcomings in episodes like "Masters of War" (1.04). Even so, while not ongoingly remarked on, the kind of trauma caused by the active participation in the Vietnam War is never far. Firstly, because of the historical connection between PTSD and the anti-Vietnam War movement (Nicosia 2001) as well as PTSD's original iteration as Post-Vietnam Syndrome (PVS), a post-traumatic disorder with symptoms that ranged from intrusive thoughts to psychosis and paranoia (Friedman 1981). Secondly, because John's trauma takes on the shape of a matryoshka doll: war is the most recent and prolongued traumatic event in his life and, although the show will later add childhood abuse to it, it is the point of convergence between reality and symbolism. Notably, the presence of two different levels of interpretations does not result in vagueness for the temporal and geographical markers are ever-present, providing the show with a distinctive American uniqueness. The introduction of metaphors to speak of the unspeakable does not play into the fictional dichotomy of altered perceptions and delusion either. It merely offers the writers the chance to circumvent the limitations imposed by language (Cross 2010; Harper 2005) and the necessity to find ways of portraying a non-biological illness.

It follows that the show belongs to the slow-growing corpus of media that deals with mental illness (Pieper et al. 2023; Özkent 2023). At a time when quantity is not synonymous with quality and the "expressions of myths about the world" (Gilman 1988: 37) remain the same in spite of the push for more inclusivity and better representation, positive and/or neutral approaches cannot be taken for granted still. For example, *Legion* (2017-2019) and *Homeland* (2011-2020) are relatively recent but both television series embrace detrimental and overly dramatic renditions of mental illness (Sibielski 2021; Wondemaghen 2019). Amidst the larger group of media, *The Winchesters* provides an interesting portrayal because of its dismissal of negative stereotypes and sensationalism, as well as its refusal to look at the world with rose-tinted glasses, notwithstanding the discarding of an excessively pessimistic onlook.

The Winchesters is a product of popular culture. What's more, it is a show that aired on The CW, a channel still associated with female viewers between the ages of 18 and 34

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(Gough and Hibberd 2008) and with trashy television shows focused on "daddy issues" (Moore 2022). While these two features often resurface in criticism, neither are a limitation. The necessity to produce low-class entertainment, characterized by "frivolity" and "mass consumption and mass distribution" in order to feed into "consumer culture" (Foster 2016: 6-7) does not affect the show and prove to be an asset insofar as the final product may end up reaching a larger audience. Furthermore, the writers' approach to the story and to the depiction of mental illness does not lose any quality, allowing for the construction and re-proposition of a fresh exploration of *Supernatural*'s characters and themes. As a result, the writers manage to steer away the common misconception that mentally ill people are "confused, aggressive, dangerous [and] unpredictable" (Signorelli 1989: 326) or the adherence to any trope used for the depiction of disabled people (Barnes 1992). Simultaneously, they also avoid generalizations by refusing to exclusively depict veterans in terms of "corrupted, tarnished, and ruined innocence" (Dean 1997: 10).

The multifaceted nature of experiences, come together in stories about people "who have already shown their vulnerability by having collapsed" (Gilman 1988: 1), ultimately converge, aided by the exploitation of genre television and its conventions. By writing a horror show, the screenwriters are able to tap into the gothic genre's "fixation on literal and symbolic transgressions" and its focus on "deep-seated, sometimes repressed, desires and anxieties" (Davidson 2012: 126). These set the foundations of what, in the *Supernatural* universe, is always referred to as 'the family business', marking the generational nature of trauma. Therefore, the introduction of monsters is not, as sometimes argued, about the introduction of the Other as the incarnation of minorities that must be killed in the name of White supremacy. Rather, the Other represents a shocking aberrations of humanity that cannot be discussed openly due to their taboo nature. The ongoing inclusion of storylines centered on lost childhood innocence, violent fathers, and patricide creates what Miller defines as "a complex tissue of repetitions and of repetitions within repetitions" (1982: 2) which, in turn, redirects the audience attention to subtextual matters of a certain importance.

The endless iteration is made possible by *The Winchesters*' monster of the week format, which requires the use of episodes in which "the characters fight a villain who is expeditiously defeated at the end, never to be dealt with again" (TVTropes n.d.). The ongoing battle against monsters, who necessarily retain some semblance to humans (Schrempp 2016), is a battle against the source of trauma itself and, in this instance, represents the strive to overcome mental illness. Any hunter enters the lifestyle in the aftermath of a traumatic event, either because of prolonged exposure or a single life-changing moment that "temporarily or permanently alter[s] their ability to cope, their biological threat perception, and their concepts of themselves" (Van der Kolk 2000: 7). When Mary admits that "my parents never let me dream like that. Being a kid who killed monsters was my only option" ("You're Lost Little Girl" 1.03), she not only hints at a broken childhood, but also at the real truth about hunting. "Monster Club is a secret" ("You're Lost Little Girl" 1.03) out of necessity, shame, and guilt. To be a member of it implies an overall loss of innocence more than it implies an easy outlet for violence. It is the fight against "horrific damage and suffering" (Schmidt 2016: 169) and against its perpetrators.

In the case of John Winchester, hunting provides a framework that allows him to reframe his past experiences through abstract concepts in order to rationalize them and eventually overcome them. Even so, not all of these are treated equally. When, in the first episode, he is sitting in Mary's car, he has a second flashback. This time, the audience learns that Murph stepped on a landmine right in front of hit and, immediately after he turned around calling for his friend, blew up. The audience is aware that these flashbacks, dreams, and intrusive thoughts represent what the *Diagnostic Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V) lists as "intrusion symptoms associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred" (American Psychology Association 2013). John, on the other hand, is trying to avoid any stimuli in order to get rid of memories with "distinct here-and-now qualities" (Bar-Haim et al. 2021: 219). His suggestion that he is being haunted by a vengeful spirit is quickly refuted by Mary, leading them to the following conversation:

MARY:	*You are not being haunted.*
JOHN:	*Why is that not comforting?*
MARY:	*Tell me what you are seeing.*
JOHN:	*I keep seeing my friend Murph. I still have pieces of his necklace in here. Silver cross. It's all that was left of him. I see the face of everyone I couldn't save.*
MARY:	*So, how do you cope with it all?*
JOHN:	*I'll let you know when I find out.*

("PILOT" 1.01)

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A reassessment of trauma thanks to the dismissal of the "wound inflicted [...] upon the mind" (Caruth 1996: 3) is hereby marked as impossible. The only ways forward are upward, out of anger and mental illness, or backwards, at the risk of succumbing to monstrousness and turning into one. It is precisely in these underlying tensions that the real and the metaphoric fight against mental illness sublimates. Their repeated interconnection ensures a point of no return, where quantifiable experiences turn into unquantifiable horrors. This transition is effortless and does not come at the expense of the show's finesse and lack of interest in mental illness as plot device or plot twist.

When John Winchester runs to the bathroom after being triggered by a silver cross necklace, memories of Murph's death flash in front of him. His hands are shaking and he is out of breath. John is a "trained [soldier]" but, more importantly, he is "a fighter since he was four years old" ("Masters of Dying 1.04) and reacts violently by punching a metal dispenser of paper towels out of helplessness. As he does, the audience catches a glimpse of the episode's villain Mars Neto, the God of War, who vanishes as soon as John turns around. His aggression and anger, however, are not a consequence of his mental illness. He is not "a criminal", nor "morally tainted" and especially not "a *bad* person" as common misconceptions would have it (Wahl 2003, 75), notwithstanding his preference for the "more punchy" ("Teach Your Children Well" 1.02) part of hunting. Thanks to the clear distinction between realism and symbolism, the audience becomes aware of why and when *The Winchesters*' main patient acts the way he does and, in doing so, manages to avoid the kind of norms that can be found both in fiction and real life (Stuart 2006) and ultimately provide an altogether more humane portrait of a mentally ill person.

The ongoing re-exposure to trauma creates a vicious cycle for which triggers and the exposure to "aversive details" (American Psychology Association 2013) are followed by momentarily relief, all of them fueled by a never-ending sense of obligation. This, of course, makes for an unsustainable environment that may end up being harmful in the long run. The downside of hunting surpasses the privileges even in those instances in which the day is saved because all does not necessarily end well. Thus, the existence of monsters that the characters must fight not only enables John's confrontation with the cause of his PTSD, but also ensures an outlet for all of its symptoms at risk of making things worse.

The idea that all monsters must be killed indiscriminately ("Legend of a Mind" 1.05) feeds into hypervigilance and paranoia as well as reckless and self-destructive behavior, which prolongs the "marked alterations in arousal and reactivity" (American Psychology Association 2013) of the patient and lead to persistent isolation. In John's case, hunting becomes the reason for his crumbling relationships with former friends, such as Betty, and with his own mother too. When Millie tells him "We had a deal. You promised to come home. Instead, it's your dad all over again. You disappear for a week and when you finally do come back, you're covered in blood" ("Teach Your Children Well" 1.02) she exposes herself to her son's annoyance and anger, but also anticipates John's degenerative recklessness and self-destructive behavior. Indeed, seven episodes later, while hunting vampires, John will indeed kill himself (if only momentarily) in order to save the day. The 'grand gesture', however, is not praised. Rather, his observation that his "fate's already sealed" ("Cast Your Fate to the Wind" 1.09) sounds like a cop-out that reprises previous remarks and strengthens the idea that John cannot overcome his self-blame. After all, his friends died in hell and all he got was "a lousy scar" ("Masters of War" 1.04).

These "negative alterations in cognitions and mood" (American Psychology Association 2013) manifest themselves repeatedly throughout the course of the show. However, they portray an uneven road to recovery rather than being used to "denigrate, segregate, alienate or denote the character's inferior status" (Stuart 2006) as in other media. Indeed, because the members of the Monster Club share the same burdens, bonds are strengthened and do not become frail nor do they snap. John is not cut off from meaningful relationships —platonic and romantic— or from life. The "unstable" nature of folktales (Benson 2003: 22) from America and the rest of the world ensures the creation of connections and understanding even between individuals at different points of their journey out of mental illness. Poignantly, his mother repeatedly reaches out to him even after his disavowal of therapy and the fiasco at the veterans' hospital. So do his friends, notwithstanding the chance that he, too, could become "more violent, more aggressive, and an even more effective hunter" because help, patience and understanding are the only feasible solutions under unprecedented circumstances ("Art of Dying" 1.06).

4. CARRY ON, WAYWARD SON: POSITIVE REPRESENTATION AND THE ROAD AHEAD

By the time *The Winchesters* started airing, the number of mentally ill characters on television and on the big screen was still relatively low despite the increase in representation

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in the past fifteen years. Accurate and positive depictions were not necessarily the norm either, not only because of the occasional slip into dated conventions and tropes, but also because of the unrealistic and damaging portrayals as in the case of *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2017-2020) (Yu 2019). While these have historically led the audience to partake in activism (Olstead 2001), they are also at risk of warping people's perception of mental illness and painting an excessively negative picture.

The Ackles' announcement of a *Supernatural* prequel, online fandom's reaction to the news, and the subsequent development of the show make *The Winchesters* an interesting case study. Firstly, because it forces people to reconsider their perception of the characters as depicted in the original show. Secondly, because it challenges pre-existing narratives and misassumptions related to mental illness. Furthermore, because of the show's focus on John Winchester, questions about representation itself and empathy are also raised. These align with the prerogatives of the Medical Humanities insofar as they look beyond the mere illness and provide a portrait of the patient as person. In doing so, it flashes out an interesting and positive depiction of the patient and incites the audience to take into consideration their own bigotry and the easiness with which either by "bad lack, accident, or inverted destiny" (Schmidt 2016: 169) people may develop PTSD.

At the end of the show, when John Winchester's journey ends with the beginning of a new one, not all questions are answered. Even so, the open-ended nature of the finale does not undermine the positive approach because John *is* on the right path for recovery. He may not be there *yet* but not all is lost. The road ahead may be long and winding, though the means to go on living and handle his PTSD are all there, be it "meditation or therapy or something" ("Hey, That's No Way to Say Goodbye" 1.13). His decision to continue his pursuit of hunting is therefore unexpected in light of the necessity to leave the past behind. As John carries on with the promise of one day achieving both peace and freedom, the audience watches him and Mary driving across a stretch of American road while Led Zeppelin's "Ramble On" plays on the radio. In doing so, they stand witness, aware as much as the characters that recovery may be difficult but not entirely impossible.

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