

Many (Un)Happy Returns: Haunted Memory and Nostalgia in the Final Season of *Supernatural*

Melissa Edmundson

Volume 3, numéro 2, January 2021

Supernatural – The End of the Road. A Reflection : Part Two. NOW

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1102494ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1102494ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Montréal Monstrum Society

ISSN

2561-5629 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Edmundson, M. (2021). Many (Un)Happy Returns: Haunted Memory and Nostalgia in the Final Season of *Supernatural*. *Monstrum*, 3(2), 11–27.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1102494ar>

© Melissa Edmundson, 2021



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

Many (Un)Happy Returns: Haunted Memory and Nostalgia in the Final Season of *Supernatural*

Melissa Edmundson

Supernatural is a Gothic television series. The Gothic has been updated, but it's still there. We have our brooding, tormented heroes, Sam and Dean Winchester. The setting has moved from dark European forests to the backroads of rural America. The Victorian suit and waistcoat have given way to flannel and jeans. The castle—that symbol of ancestral inheritance, the piece of property that has been passed down from one generation to the next—has been replaced by a muscle car and a bunker. And blaring classic rock takes the place of echoing organ music. Over the years, *Supernatural* has also given us that other Gothic stalwart: ghosts. And plenty of them. Aside from demons and angels, ghosts are the most recurring supernatural entities on the show. During the first two seasons, ghosts were the preferred antagonists for the Winchesters. As the series progressed, they became vehicles for allowing Sam and Dean to briefly reconnect to loved ones, such as Bobby Singer and Kevin Tran. The ghosts that inhabit *Supernatural* haunt and yet are also haunted by unfinished business that prevents them from moving on to either Heaven or Hell. Often, these spirits are connected to an object of great meaning, making these items symbolic of the ghost's lingering trauma and inability to move on and be free.¹ As *Supernatural* has gotten darker and more complex in its 15-season run, so, too, have its ghosts and its emphasis on how haunted memory affects individuals who are very much alive, namely Sam and Dean Winchester.

Dr. Melissa Edmundson is Lecturer of English at Clemson University. She has published numerous articles and books on women's supernatural literature, including *Women's Ghost Literature in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (University of Wales Press, 2013) and *Women's Colonial Gothic Writing* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). Her most recent work includes the critical anthologies *Women's Weird: Strange Stories by Women, 1890-1940* (2019) and *Women's Weird 2: More Strange Stories by Women, 1891-1937* (2020), published by Handheld Press. She has been a fan of *Supernatural* from the series' beginning and edited the collection *The Gothic Tradition in Supernatural: Essays on the Television Series* (McFarland, 2016).

¹ For a discussion of *Supernatural*'s ghosts and their connection to haunted objects and human remains, see Rebecca Stone Gordon's chapter "Got Salt?: Human Remains and Haunting in *Supernatural*," in *Death in Supernatural: Critical Essays* (McFarland, 2019), pp. 35-50.

This connection to—and imprisonment by—a traumatic past provides the show with another important Gothic concern: nostalgia. Just as the show's ghosts are bound to the earth by some connection to a troubled past (such as a violent death, physical and mental abuse, or lingering guilt caused by some misdeed), living characters are also bound to a past that is marked by regret, loss, and frequent attempts to come to terms with previous mistakes. Like ghosts, these emotions keep characters from fully living in the present. *Supernatural's* emphasis on these issues and the pull of the past on Sam and Dean marks the series as an important example of how nostalgia, which is often referred to as a positive—or at least a harmless—emotion, can easily become perverted and adopt Gothic characteristics. The word itself comes from the Greek “nostos,” meaning “return home” and “algia” meaning pain or longing. Ralph Harper describes the almost supernatural, “magical” nature of memories and how these memories connect to a lost past: “Nostalgia combines bitterness and sweetness, the lost and the found, the far and the near, the new and the familiar, absence and presence. The past which is over and gone, from which we have been or are being removed, by some magic becomes present again for a short while” (1966, 120). *Supernatural's* ghosts have reflected these concerns from the very beginning. In the pilot episode (“Pilot” 1.1), the “woman in white,” Constance Welsh, says repeatedly, “I can never go home.” Likewise, in the first season episode “Home” (1.9), when Sam and Dean return to their birthplace, Lawrence, Kansas (after Sam is haunted by nightmare visions of the brothers' childhood home), the spirit of their mother Mary Winchester appears in order to save the brothers from the violent poltergeist present in the house. The Winchesters, with the help of Mary, are able to rid the home of the entity, but the episode also makes clear—through the presence of both the ghost and the poltergeist—that their childhood home will always be a site of trauma and unfinished business. This fragmentary nature of the Winchester family is also emphasized by the fact that we see John Winchester at a neighbor's house at the end of the episode, but he remains separated from Sam and Dean in the present (both are unaware of his presence in Lawrence), just as Mary remains separated from her sons in the afterlife. This fact is further emphasized when the spectral Mary tells Sam that she's sorry before once again leaving her sons. What exactly Mary is sorry for remains ambiguous, but because she directs her words to Sam, she is expressing regret for leaving him with the family “curse” (a connection to demons). This connection directly results in his girlfriend Jessica's violent death, which subsequently forces Sam back into the life of a hunter. On a more general level, Mary also feels that she has let her sons down by not being there for them. Throughout the series, returning home has been

complicated for the Winchesters, and it is not until they find the Bunker in Season 8 that they have any real place (besides the Impala) to call their own.²

Nostalgia's emphasis on the interplay of the past, present, and future (and the often negative effects each has on the others) has always been a central concern of *Supernatural*, and the anxieties that result from past family trauma have provided the show with much of its Gothic underpinnings. In *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*, Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw describe three conditions that allow nostalgia to form: "a secular and linear sense of time, an apprehension of the failings of the present, and the availability of evidences of the past" (1989, 4). Stuart Tannock has likewise described nostalgia in very *Supernatural*-esque terms, claiming that one of its major concerns is the idea of "that was then, and this is now" (1995, 456). In *Supernatural*, both ghosts and the objects/people they haunt represent these anxieties, but so, too, do the Winchesters. Gothic nostalgia is concerned with the incessant pull of the past and trying to keep alive something that we know we should let go of. These anxieties are ever-present in the series and tend to take two distinct forms. The first is recalling and reminiscing in an attempt to reconstruct a sense of "normalcy" (to use Dean's words, the "apple pie life") or to reinforce the brothers' bond through shared experience. Yet this form of nostalgia has a negative side. Sam and Dean frequently try to recapture a past that has always been unavailable to them (or, in many ways, a romanticized past that never truly existed). The Winchesters' relationship with the past is filled with absence and presence. The "normal" childhood they never had, but which the brothers, and particularly Dean, often try to recreate as a coping mechanism. Nostalgia also surfaces in the series, in even darker forms, when the past is recalled through traumatic memory, a haunted, troubled history that keeps returning (like a ghost) to foreground the losses experienced by the brothers, as well as their continuing doubts, fears, and anxieties (about self and brother/other). This dark nostalgia takes shape when the brothers recall personal or communal suffering during various trips to Hell, the many (temporary) deaths of both Sam and Dean, the loss of close family and friends, and all the attendant memories that come with such physical and emotional pain. This form of nostalgia becomes dangerous and perverted, and therefore Gothic, when it keeps Sam and Dean

² It should be noted, however, that both the Impala and the Bunker are inherited (from John Winchester and the Men of Letters, respectively). So, in a way, these locations also carry a fair amount of emotional and historical baggage for both Sam and Dean. For a discussion of the Impala as the modern-day equivalent of the Gothic castle, see Thomas Knowles's "The Automobile as Moving Castle," in *The Gothic Tradition in Supernatural: Essays on the Television Series* (McFarland, 2016), pp. 25-36.

from fully moving into the present (and future) due to their inability to relinquish the past.³

This haunted aspect of memory and the incessant pull of the past are themselves Gothic preoccupations. Isabella van Elferen has suggested a thematic overlap of nostalgia and the Gothic, stating: “In the Gothic genre, the past always lingers in the present, whether as a disturbing shadow, a reverberation in a hollow space, a mental reflection, or a projection of the unconsciousness” (2007, 2-3). Working with the ideas of Fred Botting regarding the influence of the past on the present, van Elferen argues:

In whatever form, the Gothic recasts pasts upon presents, and brings with it unease and uncanniness as well as nostalgia and longing. The Gothic gaze into the past is not passive, and does not result in mere mirrored images. Gothic nostalgia is a gesture, a movement, an *act*, and one that intervenes with the structure and nature of the thing remembered. (2007, 3, emphasis in original)

Like a ghost bound to an earthly object, the past can prevent us from fully living in the present. In *Gothic Hauntings* Christine Berthin uses the theories of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok to discuss haunting as a “transgenerational” phantom because “it takes the shape of a secret transmitted within a family or a community without being stated because it is associated with repressed guilt, shame or is the result of a trauma that has not been worked through” (2010, 4). In this way, trauma can haunt us as well as any ghost. By exploring the many (un)happy returns in the final season of *Supernatural*, we can appreciate how the series interrogates Gothic issues of haunting, traumatic memory, and nostalgia and how Sam and Dean battle both interior and exterior ghosts while also navigating their relationship with the past, present, and future.

The fifteenth and final season of *Supernatural* returns to some familiar territory. Sam and Dean Winchester are once again on the road “saving people, hunting things” as the ghosts and demons they dispatched in previous seasons

³ Just as the show’s meta episodes allow the viewing audience to enjoy inside jokes that only the fan community can recognize, its frequent emphasis on nostalgia likewise allows us to make connections with past episodes and thus interact with the narrative on a deeper and more emotional level which represents the collective memory of *Supernatural*’s super-loyal fan base. In its final season, viewers are invited to become nostalgic for past seasons while watching the Winchesters and other characters in turn become nostalgic over a lost innocence and a past that cannot return except in supernatural, otherworldly ways.

have now returned, angrier and more dangerous than ever. Specifically, we see the return of Mary Worthington (Bloody Mary) from the first season, along with historical figures, such as Lizzie Borden (from the Season 8 episode “Clip Show” [8.22] and the Season 11 episode “Thin Lizzie” [11.5]), John Wayne Gacy (from the Season 14 episode “Lebanon” [14.13]), and Francis Tumblety (aka Jack the Ripper). In this way, the Winchesters are literally being haunted by the past, but these spirits also serve as reminders that the brothers’ work is not done; the past is never behind them. Through direct nods to the show’s early seasons, events and characters return in uncanny forms, while the brothers must come to terms with past transgressions and their family’s own haunted legacy. The show itself has repeatedly returned to explorations of the cyclical, haunted nature of the body and mind, and Season 15 is no different. In the premiere, fittingly titled “Back and to the Future” (15.1), Sam’s self-inflicted wound from the Equalizer in the finale of Season 14 refuses to heal. Dean notices that there is “no exit wound” as he tends to Sam, and Dean reminisces about distracting Sam with bad jokes while tending to Sam’s injuries when they were younger. This scene returns viewers to earlier instances of Dean protecting and caring for his younger brother throughout the series. The wound leads Sam to once again experience disturbing visions, a haunted return of traumatic memory that also harkens back to previous seasons where Sam has continuing nightmares and premonitions about future events.⁴ Dean likewise (re)experiences his past when he is reminded of the torture he inflicted in Hell, which the demon Belphagor—himself a specialist in torture—describes as a kind of “art.”⁵ In an effort to distance himself from these unpleasant memories, Dean replies, “That was a long time ago,” but Belphagor quickly responds by saying, “depends on how you look at it.” Dean is visibly uncomfortable as Belphagor reminds him that the past is never really that far behind. In the last scene of “Back and to the Future,” Sam and Dean decide that this final fight against Chuck/God is worth it because they have the chance to finally be free. We see Sam and Dean standing over the trunk of the Impala, and Sam says, “We got work to do,” before closing the lid of the trunk, which recreates the same scene that ends the pilot episode.

⁴ In “Bloody Mary” (1.5), we learn that Sam dreamed of Jessica’s death before it happened. In “Nightmare,” (1.14), Sam has his first waking vision.

⁵ In “Back and to the Future,” Belphagor inhabiting Jack’s dead (spiritually empty) body makes that body another example of a haunted/possessed space, as well as a physical reminder of the loss of Jack for Sam, Dean, and Castiel.



Figures 1 and 2: Sam and Dean standing over the open trunk of the Impala at the end of the pilot episode (1.1, top) and the brothers in nearly identical positioning at the end of the final season episode "Back and to the Future" (15.1, bottom).

This lets viewers know that, in this final season, we are indeed going “back and to the future” as Sam and Dean continue their fight to gain full control over their lives while also battling the ghosts, monsters, and demons of the past, including the inner demons which are formed through the brothers’ traumatic past. In “Proverbs 17:3” (15.5), Sam’s visions are about possible futures (the endings that Chuck has planned for them), but they also connect to past trauma. The brothers’ past battles, where one may have to kill the other, are seen in the first vision of the episode. Dean approaches from behind Sam (who is wearing a white suit reminiscent of the Season 5 episode “The End” [5.4]), where Dean meets Lucifer in the guise of Sam) and says, “Please forgive me” while he aims the Colt at Sam’s head and pulls the trigger. This calls to mind Dean’s earlier anxiety over Sam’s demon blood while also serving as a reminder to viewers of John’s warning to Dean that he may have to one day kill his brother. Sam then raises his head from the table and shows red eyes. He tells Dean, “We both knew it had to end this way.” Then Dean burns in flames. Yet the return of these anxieties about one brother having to harm the other don’t end there. The episode moves to Sam and Dean working a case of a possible werewolf attack, and the nostalgia returns. They use the U.S. Wildlife Service IDs with photos of their younger selves (in a nice nod to the Season 1 episode “Dead in the Water” [1.3]).



Figures 3 and 4: The U.S. Wildlife Service IDs used by Sam and Dean in the Season 15 episode "Proverbs 17:3" (15.5)

Sam says, “Hamill and Ford. Wow, that is a deep cut,” while Dean says, “Look at you. You look like a baby.” When Sam remarks about how young his brother looks in the photo, an incredulous Dean says he looks “exactly the same” and that “nothing has changed.” This exchange invites both the Winchesters and the viewers to go down memory lane while at the same time recognizing that the brothers have indeed changed. While working the case, they meet Josh and Andy May, werewolf brothers who, like the Winchesters, are deeply protective of one another. Andy, the younger brother, tells Josh, “I didn’t want to hunt people in the first place,” while Josh insists that he will always “look out for” his brother. When Andy is forced to kill Josh, we see the scenario of brothers killing one another yet again. Towards the end of the episode, when Sam tells Dean about his visions, he says he thought they were “some form of like messed up PTSD.” Sam then wonders, “But what if they’re not?” In actuality these visions are both. They stem from years of battling inner and outer demons while at the same time they are glimpses into possible futures. Dean says, “We were free and now...” The pause and blank space that follows the “now” is symbolic of the Winchesters’ continuing discomfort with living in the now but also hints at their inability to fully inhabit a “free” life. This makes one wonder if it isn’t Chuck keeping them in the “hamster wheel” after all, but their own inability to venture out of the hamster’s cage. They need to be set free, but they also need to let go.⁶

Nostalgic touches occur in every episode of the final season. In “Last Holiday” (15.14), the wood nymph Mrs. Butters, who guards the Bunker because of her past attachment to the Men of Letters, allows Sam and Dean to briefly experience the “normal” life they never had growing up. They celebrate birthdays and holidays, and Dean embraces the chance to have a routine and be spoiled for the first time in his life. In a montage, we see the brothers happily grab their prepared lunches each day as they go off in search of the next monster while “Cleanin’ Up the Town” from the film *Ghostbusters* plays. Yet there is also a darker side to this otherwise lighthearted section of the episode. Mrs. Butters

⁶ Throughout the series, Sam and Dean have had to deal with being controlled or possessed (or both) by various higher powers. In the original series arch that was supposed to conclude with Season 5, Sam was possessed by Lucifer, while Dean was meant to be the vessel for the archangel Michael. When Sam returns from Hell without his soul in Season 6, he must confront his traumatic memories. In “The Man Who Knew Too Much” (6.22), Castiel breaks “the wall” inside Sam’s head, which was originally installed by Death in order to block out Sam’s memories of his time spent in Lucifer’s Cage in Hell. Sam collapses, but within his own mind, he faces both his soulless doppelgänger and a version of his tortured self in Hell. Though his tortured self warns Sam of the emotional consequences of remembering, he chooses to reintegrate all his traumatic memories.

is giving the boys something they have never had, so in essence she is creating a nostalgic moment for them that reinforces (and calls into greater focus) what never existed in their past. This sense of perversion is essentially Gothic in nature because it is false and illusory; it was never real so is something that can never be returned to.

Other nostalgic moments in the final season are meant to provoke sadness and bittersweet emotions in viewers, most notably in “Despair” (15.18), when Castiel sacrifices himself for Dean and leaves a bloody handprint on Dean’s jacket, an image which harkens back to the handprint on Dean’s arm after Castiel raises him from Hell at the beginning of Season 4. In “Gimme Shelter” (15.15), when Dean asks Amara why she brought Mary Winchester back to life, she tells Dean that the real Mary was better than the myth Dean had created in his mind: “the myth you’d held onto for so long of a better life, a life where she’d lived, was just that, myth. I wanted you to see that the real, complicated Mary was better than your childhood dream because she was real. That now is always better than then.” She says that only by accepting this can Dean “finally start to accept [his] life.” Amara is letting Dean know that he must let go of a mythic past in favor of the present. His perverted view of the past, his anger and guilt, the ancestral curse that Dean has largely created for himself, are negatively impacting his present moment. “Now is always better than then,” is, of course, a direct reference to the series’ title cards “NOW” and “THEN” that begin each episode, but in this context it is also a comment on how the Winchesters will need to come to terms with living in the “now” after defeating Chuck. This present may be unknown, but as Sam says, the brothers have the opportunity to write their own story and move forward with their lives by focusing on the present/future.

The final flashback episode (as well as the final monster-of-the-week episode) of the series, “Drag Me Away (From You)” (15.16), is perhaps the most nostalgic, and it is no accident that the episode contains ghostly versions of past selves and emphasizes the lingering effects of haunted memory.⁷ The setting immediately evokes memories. The Rooster’s Sunrise Motel recalls the most memorably bad (or wonderful, or wonderfully bad) motel rooms of the series. The bright orange décor, heavily patterned wallpaper, wood paneling, and vending machines haven’t changed in decades. When an old friend of the Winchesters is seemingly killed by the ghost of his former self in the motel, Sam

⁷ The title of the episode is inspired by a line in the chorus of Toto’s “Africa,” released in 1982, and along with the reference to *Ghostbusters* (1984) in “Last Holiday,” is another example of 1980s nostalgia that recurs on the show.

and Dean are asked by his sister Caitlin to investigate. We then get a flashback of the group as kids when they first met at the motel in January 1993. The Winchester brothers are left alone once again by John. Dean is his brother's caretaker, as ever, and, through the flashback, we once again see the amulet which the teenage Dean wears.⁸ The ongoing debate over the brothers leading "normal" lives comes back into focus by having a younger Sam and Dean thinking about what they will do when they are adults. We see Sam's struggle to live a "normal" life juxtaposed against his first real supernatural case involving the family business. When Dean tells him he'll never go to college, Sam responds by saying "that's what normal people do." This struggle is perfectly encapsulated when we see the *American College Guide* sitting next to a gun and knife on the bed of the motel room after the brothers check in.

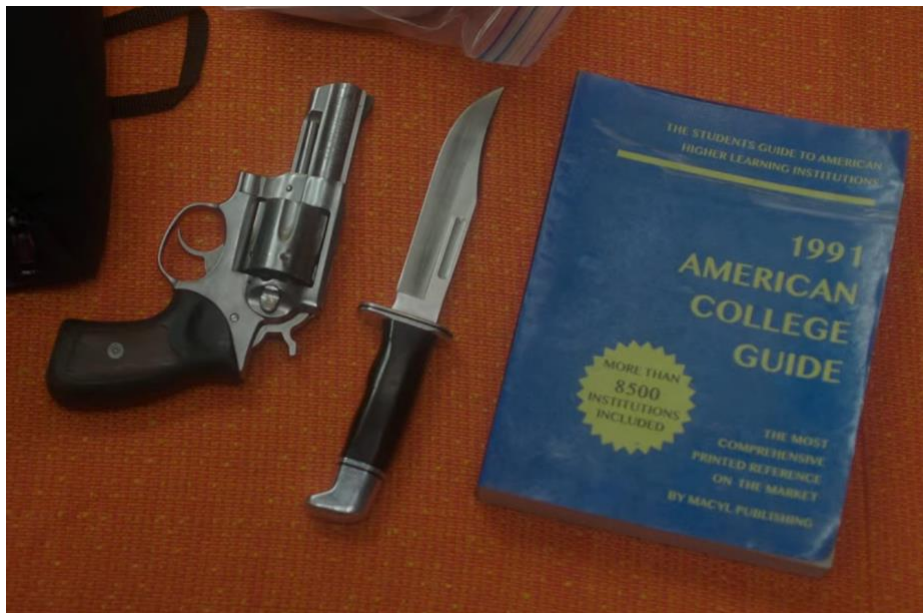


Figure 5: Items belonging to the younger Sam Winchester in the episode "Drag Me Away (From You)" (15.16)

⁸ The presence of the amulet also returns viewers to "A Very Supernatural Christmas" (3.8), in which we have nostalgia on multiple levels. Set during the holiday season (perhaps the most nostalgic time of year), the episode brings back childhood memories of Christmas television specials. It is also a flashback episode that shows Sam and Dean spending Christmas together in a motel room, as we see Sam giving Dean the amulet, a gift originally intended for the absent John Winchester. Like most glimpses into Sam and Dean's past, this vision is bittersweet. Stuck at the motel without their father, Dean scrapes together some meager gifts for his younger brother as the pair try their best to celebrate the holiday.

While investigating the case in the present day, Dean is literally haunted by the past when he comes face to face with his former self in the motel's hallway. The young Dean preys on the older Dean's need to always be the strong, protective one by telling him that he's failed. After hearing this, Dean comes close to stabbing himself but is saved when Sam approaches. When Sam asks him about his experiences with the supernatural presence years earlier, Dean responds with the characteristic remark that he "shoved it down the old memory hole." Yet he later admits that he had nightmares about it for years and is clearly still haunted by seeing the Baba Yaga's "nest" of dead children, including a vision of young Sam's body amongst them. The monster-of-the-week format allows viewers to once again see Sam hitting the lore in order to provide necessary information about how to defeat the Baba Yaga. Towards the end of the episode, young Dean tells Sam they made a good team, something he tells Sam at the end of the pilot episode in an effort to keep his brother with him. This reminds viewers of the conflicted life that is ahead for both brothers, particularly Sam, who we know does get to Stanford but decides to leave and return to the family business after Jessica's death.

At the end of the penultimate episode "Inherit the Earth" (15.19), after the Winchesters defeat Chuck and part ways with Jack (the new God), Sam and Dean are seen together in the Bunker, having a celebratory beer as Dean says, "To everyone that we lost along the way." Sam responds by saying that both brothers can now write their own stories, and Dean says they are "finally free." The scene then cuts to an extended montage of all the past characters who had some influence on the Winchesters' story. This symbolizes the ever-present past and its impact on the two, but there is also a new emphasis on the present and future that is indicated through the brothers' conversation immediately before the montage, as well as Sam and Dean in the Impala hitting the open road and heading off into the sunset (which is interspersed within the montage). The past will always be with them, but its pull is not as unrelenting. Almost every season of the show has focused on the ominous "what next?" but this is something different, something equally unknown, but hopeful. The brothers are now truly writing their own story.

The final episode of the series, "Carry On" (15.20), brings themes of family, memory, and nostalgia to the forefront. The co-showrunners have both commented on how the finale focuses on the close bond between Sam and Dean and signifies the journey the brothers have taken together through nods to previous seasons, particularly Season 1. Andrew Dabb stated, "We wanted it to, in some ways, hearken back to where the show began, which was two guys on the road saving people, hunting things," and Robert Singer noted, "It's a

very emotional episode. It's a personal story really about the boys" (qtd. in Highfill "*Supernatural* Boss"; qtd. in Highfill "Celebrating"). The episode begins with lighter nostalgic moments such as Sam and Dean's visit to "Pie Fest" and the familiar monster-of-the-week format (which also calls for the return of John Winchester's journal), but it quickly takes a darker turn by delving once again into equally familiar territory involving haunted memory and the persistent pull of a lost but ever-present past. When Sam mentions missing Castiel, Dean agrees but says, "That pain's not gonna go away" and that they have to keep living. This emphasis on learning to live with grief and loss—one's personal ghosts—will become even more relevant for Sam later in the episode.

During Dean's death scene, the writers return to dialogue from the pilot. When Dean tries to convince Sam to join him in trying to find their father, he says, "I can't do this alone." When Sam replies, "Yes, you can," Dean responds by saying, "Yeah, well, I don't want to." Only this time, it is Sam telling Dean that he doesn't want to continue the family business without his brother, while Dean reassures him that he can. There are also similarities with the Season 2 finale "All Hell Breaks Loose," (2.21) in which Sam dies in Dean's arms after being stabbed in the back. The color blocking and positions of the brothers are nearly identical (figures 6, 7, 8 and 9, next page).

These recurrences allow viewers to see how far Sam and Dean have come and how they have matured emotionally, even as we also recognize that the show has always been about the bond between the brothers—something that has remained constant through fifteen seasons. Dean accepts his death and asks not to be brought back. While Sam reluctantly accepts his brother's final wishes, it is clear that he never fully overcomes the trauma of his brother's death, becoming the epitome of Gothic nostalgia and haunted memory: he wears Dean's watch, keeps the Impala, names his son "Dean," and teaches his son how to be a hunter. He visits the Impala in the garage and it's clearly painful for him, but he returns to it nonetheless. The car is covered and hidden away, but its meaning (and memories) are ever-present for Sam. He lives in the present but remains connected to the past through grief and the loss of his brother. The car scene is even more poignant because Sam is using it to try to reconnect to a past. This also marks a significant shift in how the brothers have experienced traumatic events because instead of trying to forget painful things, he is now trying to remember. He returns to the car like someone who returns to an old family home in an effort to be closer to lost loved ones. Sam is forced to live in the present but is continuously haunted by the past, forever suffering from nostalgic absence and presence. Likewise, the absence of Sam affects Dean after death, who calls Heaven "almost perfect." Just as Sam sits in the car in an



Figures 6 and 7: Sam dying in Dean's arms in "All Hell Breaks Loose (Part 1)" (2.21)



Figures 8 and 9: Dean just before he dies in Sam's arms in "Carry On" (15.20)

attempt to reconnect with a lost past, Dean drives the Impala (complete with its original license plate) while he awaits his brother's arrival. When Sam gets to Heaven, the final scene shows them wearing almost identical clothes to what they wore in the pilot episode, and standing on a bridge. The brothers are reunited. Their mutual heavens are being together, on the road.



Figures 10 and 11: The clothes Sam and Dean wear in the pilot episode (1.1 top) are reproduced in the final scene of the series finale episode “Carry On” (15.20 bottom).

Gothic nostalgia is not desiring to look back but being compelled to remember. In his last dying moments in the barn, Dean reminisces about having doubts when he visited Sam at college to ask for his help finding the missing John Winchester. But in this moment, we begin to see the final shift that *Supernatural* makes from haunted memory to something more positive for Dean. He is able to accept his present situation, to tell his brother how proud he is of him, and to urge Sam to live in the now and not try to bring his dead brother back to life. In other words, Dean can finally let go. As the final episode of the series progresses, viewers recognize that Sam, like Dean, can only truly escape his haunted past at his death (many years later). Significantly, it is not until the Winchesters become supernatural beings themselves in Heaven that they can fully leave traumatic memory behind them. But the series finale makes it clear that they will not become the vengeful and unsettled ghosts that the brothers have fought for the past fifteen seasons because Sam and Dean are no longer tied to the living world through pain and suffering.

By repeatedly pointing back to the first season during the fifteenth season, and especially in the series finale, *Supernatural* comes full circle. We began with two brothers and we end with two brothers. Throughout fifteen seasons of battling an array of monsters, demons, angels, and ghosts, while at the same time dealing with their own personal demons, the Winchesters find the meaning behind their own story. It's no surprise that the Kansas song that gives the series finale its title—the nostalgic song that has recurred throughout the series and one which has great meaning for the characters and fans alike—assumes its greatest emotional power, “There’ll be peace when you are done.”

References

- “All Hell Breaks Loose (Part 1).” *Supernatural*, season 2, episode 21, aired May 10, 2007, on The WB/The CW.
- “Back and to the Future.” *Supernatural*, season 15, episode 1, aired October 10, 2019, on The WB/The CW.
- Berthin, Christine. *Gothic Hauntings: Melancholy Crypts and Textual Ghosts*. London and New York: Palgrave, 2010.
- “Bloody Mary.” *Supernatural*, season 1, episode 5, aired October 11, 2005, on The WB/The CW.

“Carry On.” *Supernatural*, season 15, episode 20, aired November 19, 2020, on The WB/The CW.

Chase, Malcolm, and Christopher Shaw. “The Dimensions of Nostalgia.” In *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*, edited by Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw, 1-17. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989.

“Clip Show.” *Supernatural*, season 8, episode 22, aired May 8, 2013, on The WB/The CW.

“Dead in the Water.” *Supernatural*, season 1, episode 3, aired September 27, 2005, on The WB/The CW.

“Despair.” *Supernatural*, season 15, episode 18, aired November 5, 2020, on The WB/The CW.

“Drag Me Away (From You).” *Supernatural*, season 15, episode 16, aired October 22, 2020, on The WB/The CW.

“The End.” *Supernatural*, season 5, episode 4, aired October 1, 2009, on The WB/The CW.

“Gimme Shelter.” *Supernatural*, season 15, episode 15, aired October 15, 2020, on The WB/The CW.

Harper, Ralph. *Nostalgia*. Cleveland, OH: Press of Western Reserve University, 1966.

Highfill, Samantha. “Celebrating *Supernatural*’s Humanity in Its Time of Dying.” *Entertainment*

Weekly (November 17 2020). Accessed November 20 2020.

<https://ew.com/tv/supernatural-series-finale-digital-cover/>.

—. “*Supernatural* Boss Says Series Finale Is ‘More of an Old-school Episode’.” *Entertainment Weekly* (November 11 2020). Accessed November 20 2020. <https://ew.com/tv/supernatural-series-finale-old-school-episode-andrew-dabb/>.

“Home.” *Supernatural*, season 1, episode 9, aired November 15, 2005, on The WB/The CW.

“Inherit the Earth.” *Supernatural*, season 15, episode 19, aired November 12, 2020, on The WB/The CW.

Knowles, Thomas. “The Automobile as Moving Castle.” In *The Gothic Tradition in Supernatural: Essays on the Television Series*, edited by Melissa Edmundson, 25-36. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016.

- “Last Holiday.” *Supernatural*, season 15, episode 14, aired October 8, 2020, on The WB/The CW.
- “Lebanon.” *Supernatural*, season 14, episode 13, aired February 7, 2019, on The WB/The CW.
- “The Man Who Knew Too Much.” *Supernatural*, season 6, episode 22, aired May 20, 2011, on The WB/The CW.
- “Nightmare.” *Supernatural*, season 1, episode 14, aired February 7, 2006, on The WB/The CW.
- “Pilot.” *Supernatural*, season 1, episode 1, aired September 13, 2005, on The WB/The CW.
- “Proverbs 17:13.” *Supernatural*, season 15, episode 5, aired November 14, 2019, on The WB/The CW.
- Stone Gordon, Rebecca. “Got Salt?: Human Remains and Haunting in *Supernatural*.” In *Death in Supernatural: Critical Essays*, edited by Amanda Taylor and Susan Nylander, 35-50. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2019.
- Tannock, Stuart. “Nostalgia Critique.” *Cultural Studies* 9.3 (1995): 453-64.
- “Thin Lizzie.” *Supernatural*, season 11, episode 5, aired November 4, 2015, on The WB/The CW.
- van Elferen, Isabella. “Nostalgia and Perversion in Gothic Writing.” In *Nostalgia or Perversion? Gothic Rewriting from the Eighteenth Century until the Present Day*, edited by Isabella van Elferen, 1-10. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007.
- “A Very *Supernatural* Christmas.” *Supernatural*, season 3, episode 8, aired December 13, 2007, on The WB/The CW.

- 2020/2021 -

MONSTRUM is Published in Montréal, Québec by the Montréal Monstrum Society.
Intellectual rights are held by the individual author(s).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).