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A tightrope act of faith and doubt

Teresa Malcolm | Oct. 15, 2009

Misha Collins as the angel Castiel in "Supernatural" (The CW Network, LLC)

It?s not often Shakespeare comes to mind while watching a horror TV show, but there I was, watching the premiere of the fifth season of ?Supernatural,? and being inexorably reminded of a line from ?King Lear?: ?Like flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;/They kill us for their sport.?

In this case, the ?gods? are the arrayed forces of heaven and hell, angels and demons poised on the edge of cataclysmic cosmic war, with humans in the middle, collateral damage or, at best, hapless tools.

?Supernatural? began four seasons ago as an entertaining but usually unremarkable show in the template of (the superior) ?Buffy the Vampire Slayer?: episodic adventures in which our heroes battle all manner of demons and monsters, protecting the innocent, and not-so-innocent, population of humankind. On ?Supernatural,? those heroes are brothers Dean and Sam Winchester (played by Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki), in the ?family business? as supernatural ?hunters.? So, like Buffy, but with not so many superpowers and with a lot more testosterone.

Of course, ?Supernatural? developed its particular quirks of mythology. But it took until the fourth season last year that the show truly unveiled its own unique approach to the genre.

Season three had ended with Dean sent to hell -- the consequence of a Faustian bargain to save Sam?s life. Season four began as Dean was pulled back to this earthly life -- and his rescuer was the show?s new twist. It was Castiel, an angel of the Lord: ?I gripped you tight and raised you from perdition.?

At last, there was another side of the equation, equally powerful supernatural beings of light to match the creatures of darkness. Or so one would think. What?s made this storyline fascinating as it has unfolded over the past year is that angel and demon, light and dark -- nothing?s so simple as that.

These are no greeting-card angels. From the start, they have been of the fiery-sword variety, creatures of awesome, destructive power. (Another incongruous literary allusion comes to mind: poet Rainer Maria Rilke?s ?Every angel is terrifying.?)

?Supernatural? is unabashedly giving its story a biblical cast, albeit a Bible that seems to consist only of the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation. God is real, so the angels assert -- or was, at least, as his present whereabouts are a mystery. In the cosmology of ?Supernatural,? even angels live by faith alone: God has been a murky master, unseen by all but a privileged few.

And the angels have no corporeal form of their own. On ?Supernatural,? this was true of demons from the start -- they must possess a human vessel in order to have effect in this world. So it is with ?Supernatural?s? angels, except that while demons take their vessels by force, angels must have consent. One of the standout episodes of last season, ?The Rapture,? told the tale of Castiel?s vessel, a devout man named Jimmy (with Misha Collins in both roles), who found his ?yes? brought far more than he bargained for. ?Having an angel inside you -- it?s like being chained to a comet,? he says.

In this season?s premiere, one angel was stretching the definition of consent to the breaking point -- employing torture to get a ?yes,? and ultimately failing. That ?good? angel made a curious contrast to Lucifer, recently freed from his hellish prison, who successfully used gentler emotional manipulation to gain consent from his chosen vessel, a newly bereaved husband and father open to questioning God?s goodness.

The angels changed the show?s paradigm, but in retrospect, the writers brought in overt religious themes early on. ?Supernatural? took care, in a few awkward, sincere early episodes, to examine the brothers? perspectives on faith. Dean, an atheist, was thrown to find out that Sam, while no churchgoer, believed in God and prayed regularly. A few years later, Sam would be nervously reverential upon meeting Castiel, in contrast to his brother?s coarse disrespect.

But that dichotomy could not stand either. Both brothers have themselves strayed down dark paths that might have been unimaginable in the early seasons, and both have had to face that these forces of heaven are not necessarily righteous, above reproach.

What distinguishes the show?s lone two angels we?re led to see as truly good -- Castiel and Anna -- is perhaps a connection with God?s purpose deeper than a simple will to defeat the forces of hell. However foreign human nature may be to angelic nature, these two recognize humanity as more than cannon fodder. Humanity is God?s creation, and therefore good, worthy of love, and worthy of forgiveness for its many failings.

Anna (Julie McNiven), like the angels in German director Wim Wenders? ?Wings of Desire,? fell to live as a human. But Castiel was undeniably the good son, a faithful messenger who is now set against the treachery of those of his kind who claimed to serve the same God.

As for God himself (the show sticks to the male pronouns), it is the question of his nature and existence that has come to the fore since last May?s season finale. ?God has left the building ? God is dead,? say the angels who

cast out Castiel and Anna, and they mean to force an apocalypse to put an end to this abandoned world and bring about an eschatological paradise on their own.

Castiel, though, still believes, and has embarked on a quest to find God, face-to-face. So far, this has meant consistently calling for help from wavering-atheist Dean, who is by turns annoyed, amused and sympathetic. (Hearkening back to the Winchester family dynamics of the first season, let?s just say Dean knows something about searching for absent fathers.)

Warning: ?Supernatural? is not for the squeamish -- it owes an unmistakable debt to modern horror films, and while the gore is kept within the limits of network TV, I often avert my eyes until the blood and violence are over. And I also wish the writers would stop killing off or otherwise writing off so many of its most interesting secondary characters -- particularly the female ones. At least it?s still an open possibility that Anna could return, but she?s been off the radar so far this fall.

But whatever the artistic failings along the way, and if the writers don?t always hit the mark handling the weighty theological and philosophical issues they?ve taken on, I?ve been impressed by their ambition.

It may be easier to pose the questions than to resolve them in a dramatically satisfying way. I don?t want to see Castiel?s hopes dashed, but on the other hand, I also think it would likely be a misstep to remove the veil of mystery as to the nature and existence of God in this show?s fictional universe. It?s a tightrope act of faith and doubt, and perhaps that, in the end, will be the lesson these characters learn to accept and embrace as they keep up the good fight.

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