

# *Brittle:* Re-thinking Narratives of Disordered Eating through Fanfiction

*Trigger warning: The following article discusses eating disorders from various perspectives and in different contexts. Reading this article might provoke readers who are sensitive to this topic.*

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## **Abstract**

This paper analyzes how *Brittle* (sammehsayum 2012), a popular work of fanfiction for the TV show *Supernatural* (2005-2020), relates to the *Supernatural* canon and to dominant cultural narratives on masculinity and eating disorders as identified by Bordo (1993) and Contois (2020). In its representation of protagonist Sam Winchester's eating disorder,

*Brittle* engages with the dominant cultural narratives associating disordered eating with a desire for control and with femininity. This case study illustrates how fanfiction can explore complex emotional tensions that remain underexplored on mainstream TV while simultaneously undermining cultural taboos and stereotypes regarding mental illness.

Fanfiction can take many shapes. If you have ever daydreamed about what it would be like to attend Hogwarts, to go on a date with Harry Styles or to solve a crime with Sherlock Holmes, you have essentially written fanfiction in your head. Fanfiction can be a private fantasy, a short story you wrote to amuse a friend, or a published work that takes elements from existing narratives no longer protected by copyright law. People write fanfiction for their own enjoyment, to explore stories, characters and fictional universes that fascinate them, or because they want to participate in a community of fans. Fanfiction often places a stronger emphasis on the inner lives and feelings of fictional characters than the canon it is based on.<sup>1</sup> Fanfiction about romance, emotional struggles or sex is especially popular. For the purposes of this paper, I define fanfiction as stories by and for fans, inspired by existing stories and exchanged for free online.

Fanfiction can also be used to interrogate and reshape culturally dominant narratives and to let fans explore experiences overlooked in mainstream culture. Fanfiction allows people to “restory” (Thomas 156) or, in other words, re-imagine dominant cultural scripts and narrativize complex subjective experiences like mental illness, often in empowering ways. Fanfiction thus fulfills an important role in relation to mainstream literary fiction, “enabl[ing] us to perceive aspects of our cultural reality which common sense, or dominant systems of meaning and value, tend to set aside” (Hills vi). Previous research illustrates fanfiction’s role in rethinking female gender roles (Scott 2019), sexuality (Floegel 2020) and race (Thomas 2019). For example, *Harry Potter* fanfiction re-imagined Hermione as a woman of color long before the theater production *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* cast an actress of color as Hermione. Through fanfiction, fans critiqued the dominance of white perspectives and the prevalence of white characters in *Harry Potter* canon. Similarly, the popular fanfiction trope of genderswap (“Genderswap”), in which fictional characters are depicted with a gender identity different from their canonical gender, is often used to critique depictions of masculinity and

<sup>1</sup> Fans use the term ‘canon’ to describe “the source property used as material by fanfic writers” (Pugh 242).

femininity and the marginalization of female perspectives in mainstream narratives.

Fanfiction's ability to explore and rethink marginalized identities and experiences extends to representations of mental illness. Although much fanfiction examines and critiques the taboos surrounding such illnesses, their representation in fanfiction remains undertheorized. This is surprising considering the increasing attention for mental health in societal and scientific debates as the pandemic has impacted the mental health of many people, and because coping with mental distress is a major topic in fanfiction. In August of 2021, over 220,000 stories were tagged "mental health issues" on the popular fanfiction repository *Archive of Our Own*. Representations of mental illness in fanfiction thus deserve further academic scrutiny, and there is plenty of material to analyze.

To better understand the ways fanfiction represents mental illness, this paper analyzes *Brittle* (sammehsayum 2012), a popular work of fanfiction for the TV show *Supernatural*. *Supernatural* is about two young brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester, who travel across the United States to fight monsters. In *Brittle*, protagonist Sam Winchester suffers from an eating disorder, which he struggles to hide from his family and reconcile with his masculine self-image. I examine how this story relates to the *Supernatural* canon, where Sam does not have an eating disorder, and compare the story to dominant cultural narratives on eating disorders and masculinity as identified by philosopher Susan Bordo (1993) and media scholar Emily Contois (2020). Bordo conceptualizes anorexia as the desire for the mental to control the physical, with the goal of eradicating hunger or desire altogether. As I will show, this theory maps onto Sam's behaviors and thought processes in *Brittle*. At the same time, Contois' concept of "dude masculinity" captures the norms of masculinity that Sam's brother Dean represents, and which Sam seeks to escape.

My analysis serves as an example of the ways that fanfiction can explore complex emotional tensions that remain underexplored on mainstream TV while simultaneously undermining the cultural taboo around eating disorders and the stereotypes associating these disorders with women. In her analysis of the Russian *Harry Potter* fanfiction

community, Natalia Samutina found that this community was governed by different discursive norms than mainstream culture. The discursive norms of fanfiction communities more generally are characterized by a focus on emotions, “privilig[ing] interiority” (Coppa 14) and a desire to explore taboo (Tosenberger “Mature Poets” 17). Catherine Tosenberger further notes that “fanfiction is given life by what other spaces don’t allow, it takes for itself spaces within the text and fills those spaces with stories for which the canon has neither room nor desire” (17). As my analysis will show, *Brittle* explores the tensions between Sam and Dean surrounding control, intimacy and masculinity—themes which the *Supernatural* canon often subtextually but not explicitly addresses—through the subject of disordered eating. At the same time, the story does not reduce Sam’s eating disorder to a metaphor or a narrative device, by describing his illness in horrifying detail. *Brittle* thus exemplifies a way for fiction to describe eating disorders without glamorizing them and shows how fanfiction can be used to critique dominant narratives and stereotypes, such as those surrounding masculinity, that are present in much popular television.

### **Introducing *Supernatural* and *Brittle***

*Supernatural* is an American television show that aired between 2005 and 2020. The show is about the adventures of Sam and Dean Winchester, two brothers who travel the continental U.S. in a Chevrolet hunting mythical and dangerous monsters. Sam and Dean have a tragic backstory: their mother was murdered when they were children, and they spent the rest of their youth on the road with their father, John Winchester, hunting the demon that killed her. In the first episode, Dean comes to get Sam from Stanford, where Sam went to escape life on the road, to tell him their father is missing. Sam then leaves his university education behind to go look for their father and is sucked back into the life of monster hunting. As the show progresses, Sam and Dean battle ever more powerful dark forces. *Supernatural* inspired an enormous fanbase that expresses its appreciation in a variety of creative ways, including the production of a lot of fanfiction, to this day.

*Brittle* is a work of fanfiction written in the *Supernatural* fandom, published on online diary platform *Livejournal* in 2012 by someone with the username sammehsayum. The story is novella-length: approximately 30,000 words. Sammehsayum categorized the story as “Wincest,” meaning it explores an imagined incestuous relationship between the Winchester brothers. However, the story’s primary focus is not on this relationship. Its plot summary reads: “Sam Winchester has an eating disorder,” and that is the gist of the story. It narrates Sam’s experiences with disordered eating, primarily from his point of view. The story starts when Sam is a teenager living on the road with his family and follows his experiences from adolescence to maturity, when Sam and Dean are hunting monsters together in canon. It also explores the pressures of the Winchesters’ demon-hunting lifestyle and juxtaposes them with the civilian life Sam briefly enjoyed as a student at Stanford.

The story begins when Sam is in high school and meets Candy Sandy, an original character with an eating disorder.<sup>2</sup> Initially, Sam finds Sandy’s illness strange and alarming: “Eating disorders were a vague concept to Sam, something that happened to Other People and he wasn’t equipped in any way to deal with it” (Part 1). Nonetheless, once the Winchesters move away from Sandy’s hometown, Sam cannot get his mind off her and her illness. Over time, he turns to disordered eating to cope with the pressures and uncertainties of life as a teenage demon hunter as well as his complicated relationship with his brother. Sam exerts rigid control over his body and his eating habits:

He controls what goes into his body. In his whole life of endless highways and people he never got to know, Sam has five bottles of water, a granola bar, and two apples a day. He knows that. Food and water are the only things that he’s sure about. (Part 1)

Sam’s initial impression of disordered eating, which he associated with “Other People,” already aligns the illness with a community of non-hunters

<sup>2</sup> An original character or OC is a character in a work of fanfiction that is not present in canon.

that Sam desires but cannot join. By re-imagining Sam Winchester with an eating disorder, *Brittle* explores the tension between civilian life and life as a hunter, which plays an important role in *Supernatural*'s early episodes, when Sam has to leave his university life behind to look for his father.

As noted by Coppa, much fanfiction relates to the canon it transforms by focusing on emotions. Stacey Goguen writes how in *Supernatural* Sam and Dean lack emotional openness and eschew emotional and physical vulnerability: "Scenes with Sam, [and Dean] are practically competitions for disguising their emotions. They stoically resist all urges to open up about their feelings, belittling anyone the moment they do" (173). The show often casts emotionality as feminized or weak and unbecoming to hardened hunters like Sam and Dean. For example, in *Supernatural*'s pilot episode, Dean tells Sam: "no chick-flick moments" (00:27:32). This way, Dean reminds Sam that hunters should refrain from emotional displays and aligns emotionality with femininity. Nonetheless, Tosenberger notes that: "the primary appeal of the series lies not in its macho trappings, but in the extraordinarily intense relationship between protagonists Sam and Dean Winchester" ("epic love story" 1.1). In the show, this intimacy remains largely non-verbal. Much fanfiction expands on and explores the Winchesters' emotional intimacy, often by reading their relationship in a queer, incestuous light. Thus, *Brittle* explores the difficulties of Sam and Dean's nomadic lifestyle and the complexity of their emotional connection in light of their stoic, standoffish demeanor in canon. In this sense, *Brittle* exemplifies Tosenberger's idea that fanfiction explores narratives disallowed or overlooked in mainstream culture.

## **Disordered Eating: Control**

In her influential book on the female body, *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo identifies the distinction between body and mind, which runs through much of Western philosophy, as key to the body imagery of the anorexic. This distinction enables conceptualizations of the body as separate from or opposed to the self, which creates a situation where "the body is the locus of all that threatens our attempts at control" (145). For Bordo, this

constant push and pull between mental control and the physical threat of the body is at the core of the problem of anorexia:

The attempt to subdue the spontaneities of the body in the interests of control only succeeds in constituting them as more alien and more powerful, and thus more needful of control. The only way to win this no-win game is to go beyond control, to kill off the body's spontaneities entirely—that is, to cease to experience our hungers and desires. (146)

In canon, Sam's character thrives when he is in charge. In relation to Dean, Sam often takes on the role of the responsible and mature one. Sam is the book-smart brother who plans their hunts and does the research while Dean is physically stronger and excels at improvising. Thus, Sam's need for control in *Brittle* is a magnified version of character traits he also possesses canonically.

As theorized by Bordo, in *Brittle* Sam's need to control his desire makes him want to eradicate longing altogether. He explains to Dean: "I don't like eating. I hate it. If I didn't have to look out for you, if I didn't have to be there for you, I don't think I'd even do it" (Part 4). In his eating disorder, then, Sam seeks to rid himself of the struggle that eating represents.

Sam's need to be free from desire suggests that his eating disorder is not just a consequence of his chaotic and stressful life as a demon hunter, but also a response to the homoerotic and incestuous feelings that he has for Dean in *Brittle*, which many fans also perceive in canon. As Tosenberger notes in her article on Sam and Dean's relationship in canon and fandom: "as brothers, they are given a pass for displays of emotion that masculinity in our culture usually forbids, which intensifies the potential for queer readings" ("epic love story" 1.2). Many fans use fanfiction to explore such queer readings, and *Brittle* is no exception. Toward the end of the story, when Sam and Dean are both adults and Dean confronts Sam with his disordered eating, Sam acknowledges the role that Dean has had in Sam's mental illness:

“It’s always been about you, Dean! I don’t eat because of you, I eat because you, I want to be better because you! Because you, because this,” he gestures to the room, the bed, their life, “And if I didn’t have that I’d be back where I was when I was twenty and the first time I ever took my shirt off in front of another person she cried because she was so horrified by my body. But I do eat, Dean. I eat for you. Do you know what that means to me?” (Part 4)

This scene, in which Sam explains how important Dean is to him, culminates in a kiss between the brothers. Thus, Bordo’s notion that eating disorders center around controlling appetites and desires applies to a character with incestuous desires in *Brittle*. The narrative of Sam’s eating disorder thus functions, among other things, as a way to explore *Supernatural’s* incestuous subtext.

At the same time, *Brittle* explains Sam’s eating disorder through the difficulties of his childhood, presenting it as a way to cope with the divide between his civilian identity and his identity as a hunter. This divide becomes clear when Sam is studying at Stanford and working on his issues with the help of a girlfriend. Suddenly, Dean comes to Sam’s dorm room, badly hurt from a hunt gone wrong. As he goes to administer first aid to Dean, Sam

feels the schism between his Stanford skin and his Dean skin as he rips himself out of one and sews back in to the other. Sam can’t have problems here; Sam can’t have skinny wrists and an empty stomach on the other side of this door. Well, he can. He just can’t acknowledge it. (Part 2)

By narrating an eating disorder from the perspective of a demon hunter, *Brittle* defamiliarizes the link between disordered eating and sociocultural pressures and expectations of slenderness. While eating disorders often to some extent relate to societal expectations, the expectations that Sam must meet and the stresses he must cope with are unimaginable and simultaneously unthreatening in their fictionality. By placing an eating disorder



in the strange and magical fictional world of *Supernatural*, *Brittle* makes the illness both more understandable and less frightening. While many readers may recognize Sam's feelings of helplessness and even his disordered eating, the plot element of demon hunting is so far removed from real life that Sam's suffering always remains somewhat distant from readers.

This defamiliarization of an eating disorder can be viewed in two ways. On the one hand, fanfiction can help inform people about taboo topics such as eating disorders by mixing these difficult topics with beloved characters and settings and thereby making them more accessible. On the other hand, this combination arguably reduces or obscures some of the complexity of the topic. While tying disordered eating to the lifestyle of demon hunters may make the illness more understandable from an outside perspective, it also reduces some of the complexities of eating disorders to a fantasy context. In *Brittle*, for example, Sam's eating disorder is linked to the demand Sam makes of his body: he must be slender and agile to function as a hunter. Many people with eating disorders struggle with an ideal of physical fitness. However, the fact that Sam is a hunter makes his struggle more extreme. While this makes his eating disorder more foreign and unfamiliar, it makes it more specific and thus recognizable as well.

## **Disordered Eating: Masculinity**

*Brittle* represents Sam's eating disorder as causally related to the circumstances of his youth. Sam begins to struggle with his weight around the same time that he starts feeling attracted to Dean and abandoned by their father. On the one hand, Sam's father demands that he is tough and independent. On the other hand, Sam has an almost codependent intimacy with his brother. His response to these conflicting pressures of toughness and emotion is to take compulsive control over his eating. In the story, Sam's eating disorder is also a type of rebellion, a way for Sam to assert privacy and independence in his close-knit family by rejecting their diet of diner food and gas station snacks. The eating disorder alienates Sam from his family. He reflects that:

One, he can't tell anyone. Because he's a Winchester, because he's a boy, because they don't have the money for the types of therapy every website and book Sam's poured himself all over tell him that he's going to need to get over himself. Because he should be better than this. Two, he wants to be normal. He wants to be able to eat and live and love outside of a big black car. (Part 1)

In his musings, Sam recognizes that disordered eating clashes with his identity as a Winchester and an adolescent male, but also with his desired identity as someone not living on the road. In his internal monologue, Sam thus reproduces the cultural norm which associates eating disorders with women. As Bordo notes: "female bodies have historically been significantly more vulnerable than male bodies to [...] cultural manipulation of the body" (143). She theorizes eating disorders as the result of this manipulation. Contois also notes that "dieting [has become] essentially coded as feminine in American culture" (10). Because of its cultural association with the feminine, Sam's eating disorder creates tension in the relationship with his brother Dean.

In *Supernatural* canon, Dean embodies a masculine ideal similar to Emily Contois' concept of "dude masculinity." This masculinity is characterized by a "lackadaisical demeanor" (4). The dude "thwarts expectations and responsibilities that come with age and adult status" (6). Dean's lifestyle as a demon hunter without steady income or monogamous relationships takes these behaviors to extremes. Contois further explains that dudes "value independence, take risks, and are relatively unconcerned with wellbeing, as they eschew 'healthy' behaviors and disease prevention as feminizing" (7). Thus, dude masculinity opposes preoccupation with healthy or diet-oriented food choices. *Brittle's* exploration of this tension plays on the fact that Sam in canon often opts for salads and complains about Dean's unhealthy diet. Since Dean—the primary influence on Sam during his youth—behaves in accordance with dude masculinity, Sam grew up in a social context where dieting is deemed strange or other. This is also evident in Sam's observation that eating disorders "happened to Other People." Sam is acutely aware

that, as a boy and a demon hunter, he does not fit the dominant cultural script for someone with an eating disorder.

Dude masculinity also relates to the disavowal of emotions identified in the *Supernatural* canon by Goguen. Contois describes coolness or detachment as “central to the dude’s identity” (6). As illustrated by his dismissal of “chick-flick moments” (“Pilot” 00:27:32), Dean refuses emotional openness while associating this openness with femininity, thus echoing “the overwhelmingly dominant idea that emotions are irrational and feminine” (Kelley 3). Brit Kelley further explains that “emotions have often been relegated to the realm of the feminine or the other [...] – the weak” (3). Such dismissals of emotion are typical of Dean’s character in canon and of the canonical differences between Sam and Dean. Throughout the series, Dean often mocks Sam for being emotionally open toward the witnesses and victims of the monster attacks the Winchesters investigate. In their canon dynamic, Sam often takes the role of the responsible and emotionally mature one, and *Brittle* magnifies this dynamic.

To summarize, Dean’s canonical character rejects both dieting and emotionality because these behaviors are culturally associated with femininity, and because he perceives femininity as weaker than masculinity. In *Brittle*, Sam uses excessive dieting to suppress his emotions, and thus Dean’s worldview feels to him like a rejection of his personhood. These tensions between Sam and Dean reach a crisis when Dean confronts Sam with his disordered eating and scathingly calls it his “manorexia, or what-the-fuck ever!” (Part 4), explicating his dismissal of Sam’s serious mental problems as feminine and incomprehensible.

Dean’s dismissal of emotionality and of dieting also relies on the distinction between hunters and civilians in *Supernatural* canon. While emotions and diets may be feminine concerns in Dean’s eyes, they are also, and more importantly, trivial concerns that competent hunters cannot let themselves be distracted by. Feelings are luxuries that hunters cannot afford, because for hunters weakness and distraction can have deadly consequences. When Dean visits Sam at Stanford so that Sam can treat his injuries, Sam is delayed because he was talking to his girlfriend about his eating disorder. Sam feels guilty and thinks: “Dean was

bleeding and he was with a girl, talking about feelings” (Part 2). Dean obviously disapproves of Sam’s behavior: “‘Better have been one hell of a date,’ Dean snorts, tone fringing into derisive and bitter” (Part 2). In that moment, Sam’s eating disorder recovery clashes with his responsibilities toward his brother as a hunter. Toward the end of *Brittle*, Sam learns to manage his disordered eating but he never recovers from it. While this is perhaps realistic, it also condemns the hunter lifestyle that Dean embodies by showing how hunting negatively impacts Sam’s mental health. As such, *Brittle* can be read as a condemnation of the emotionless dude masculinity that characterizes much of *Supernatural* canon.

## Conclusion

In this article I have explained Sam Winchester’s struggle with disordered eating in *Brittle* through an analysis of his personal situation as a hunter and the cultural scripts in *Supernatural* canon surrounding control and masculinity. As Bordo’s work shows, these scripts shape much of Western culture’s understanding of eating disorders. However, like any illness, Sam’s eating disorder also defies explanation. It is not caused directly by any cultural narratives or personal circumstances. Toward the end of the story, when Sam matures, resigns himself to life on the road, and even opens up to Dean emotionally, his eating disorder does not disappear. While the difficulties in Sam’s life are not separate from his mental illness, they are also not solely responsible for it.

*Brittle* counteracts the dominant cultural narrative associating eating disorders exclusively with women by re-imagining Sam Winchester with an eating disorder and adopting the dominant narrative that eating disorders are related to control. This way, the story also explores the desire for control that is present in Sam’s canonical character. It critiques the dismissal of those traits and behaviors considered feminine—and by extension weak—that are present in Dean’s canonical character. Through this critique, *Brittle* shows that the unemotional, stoic masculinity that characterizes much of *Supernatural* canon is harmful. Additionally, Sam’s eating disorder can be read as a pretext to explore

the intimacy between the Winchesters, which some fans and academics have interpreted as queer.

Simultaneously, *Brittle* resists reducing Sam's eating disorder to a metaphor or a symbol, instead depicting the illness in visceral and horrifying detail. Sam's horrible struggle with eating is described explicitly:

The food slides down his esophagus, mucking up his throat along the way, and hits his stomach like a lead brick and he already feels like his blood's thick with everything he just put inside of himself, heavy sludge coursing through his veins and he wants water, he needs to scrub his insides clean. It's in his skin like he's sweating oil. (Part 1)

After Sam eats, the self-hating and destructive urges that follow are also described in alarming detail: "He feels fluffy on the inside, like he's full of cotton candy and the thought makes him want to claw himself open and tear it all out" (Part 1). These descriptions are so visceral, so detailed and physical that it becomes impossible to read Sam's eating disorder merely as a metaphor for his incestuous desires or for the difficulty of being a demon hunter. Instead, the eating disorder is described here as a complex and individual experience that cannot be explained away by cultural scripts or complicated family relationships.

To conclude, by re-imagining Sam with an eating disorder, *Brittle* explores the emotional tensions present in the canonical relationship between Sam and Dean and critiques canon's representation of masculinity. At the same time, narrating the horrifying experience of disordered eating through the perspective of Sam Winchester makes the illness seem unthreatening in its fictionality and relatable in its terror. Although the story can thus be said to use an eating disorder for narrative purposes, it nonetheless succeeds in representing the illness without reducing it to a metaphor for Sam's canonical struggles.

Furthermore, this analysis of *Brittle* shows that fanfiction can critique discourses of emotionality, mental illness and gender that circulate in popular culture, by showing, for example, that specific mental illnesses

are not linked to specific genders. These discourses impact our perception of popular culture, of mental illnesses and of ourselves. By critiquing them, fanfiction is truly transformative.

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## Biography

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