

# The Undertones of *Bewitched*: Feminism and Fear of the Supernatural

BY SAMANTHA KENG

## Television as a Cultural Force and the Premise of *Bewitched*

America in the mid 1960s was a kaleidoscope of shifting social patterns, middle class values, and gender roles. Society was caught in a state of constant flux; the baby-boom generation had grown into young adults intent on distancing themselves from the conservative '50s and the decades of their parents. A revolutionary new culture thus emerged, and this desire for change and individuality was the catalyst for a radical transformation of lifestyles and accepted social norms. Perhaps nothing so honestly and accurately reflects this evolving society as the television programs of the era, which both embodied and shaped American culture, revealing central tensions by functioning as a cultural gauge. *Bewitched*, which aired from 1964 to 1972, was a popular sitcom that fused elements of the supernatural with contemporary suburban life; at first glance, the show is nothing but an innocuous, escapist story about a charming witch who forsakes her magical life to marry a mortal advertising man. Yet in a decade of explosive feminist efforts, spearheaded by the Women's Liberation Movement, *Bewitched* indicated a deepening fissure in patriarchal society; in addition, it drew from a darker period of America's history, characterizing magic as both a cultural obsession as well as a social stigma. Though at surface level only a lighthearted sitcom, *Bewitched* in reality serves as a testament to both America's complex relationship with the supernatural as well as a rapidly evolving societal structure; as women increasingly sought liberation from roles they had long

been confined to, society was forced to confront this rising resistance against the status quo. America in the mid '60s was simply far less idyllic than the image created by the television programs of the day.

### ***Bewitched* as a Challenge to the Status Quo in Terms of Feminism and Magic**

*Bewitched* begins like any other fairy tale: "Once upon a time, there was a typical American girl who happened to bump into a typical red-blooded American boy."<sup>1</sup> Yet this storybook romance is complicated by an unorthodox husband and wife dynamic and a power structure foreign to society's traditional view of marriage: *Bewitched* was radical in that, in a literal take on female empowerment, the prototypical housewife, Samantha Stephens, is actually infinitely more powerful than her husband, the bumbling and confused Darrin. But despite her magical abilities, she still is forced to, and even willingly chooses to, remain subservient to her husband, who requires that she learn to perform household duties without the use of her powers: "You're going to have to learn how to be a suburban housewife- to keep house, to cook, and soon we'll be a normal, happy couple just like everyone else."<sup>2</sup> She rejects her magical background out of love and a driving desire to please her husband. At least outwardly, she still subscribes to the "husband knows best" notion; she is compliant, docile, even assuring Darrin that "Anything that makes you happy, makes me happy."<sup>3</sup> She is not outwardly defiant, not brazen, and still attempts to toe the line when it comes to social etiquette, yet throughout the

<sup>1</sup> Sol Saks, "I, Darrin, Take This Witch, Samantha," *Bewitched*, season 1, episode 1, directed by William Asher, aired Sept 17, 1964 (Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Television)

<sup>2</sup> Sol Saks and Barbara Avedon, "Be It Ever So Mortgaged," *Bewitched*, season 1, episode 2, directed by William Asher, aired Sept 24, 1964 (Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Television)

<sup>3</sup> Sol Saks, "I, Darrin, Take This Witch, Samantha."

course of each episode, she sneaks magic into her otherwise mundane life, to finish her long list of household chores, to ice a birthday cake, to zap Darrin to the basement in the midst of an argument. For Samantha, "magic spells become like prescription drugs, forbidden but tempting";<sup>4</sup> magic is an underhanded form of rebellion, an escape from the monotony of 1960s suburbia. Though she longs for the same domestic life that Darrin so desperately wants to maintain, her inability to stop relying on magic hints that she, perhaps unconsciously, rejects the life of a submissive woman dependent on her husband. Her use of magic is harmless, but Darrin is always disapproving and constantly worried about society's perception of them; due to his insistence, Samantha is forced to hide her powers, from Darrin's boss Larry Tate, from her nosy neighbor Gladys, and from the entire outside world. In short, Samantha must change her very nature in order to maintain an illusion of normalcy.

Though some critics have dubbed *Bewitched*, "the most sexist program of all time,"<sup>5</sup> a prime example of male backlash against the broadening Women's Liberation Movement, in reality, the show merely reflects the tensions that arise from America's mutating social attitudes. In particular, *Bewitched* exhibits the intricate relationship between husband and wife, transformed and threatened by women's burgeoning independence. It does more to dispel the notion of the husband as all knowing and always right than to promote the image of the wife as fully equal and autonomous. Like the majority of husbands during this time, Darrin is not ill intentioned, not determined to subordinate his wife purposefully; though he does love Samantha, he simply perceives no faults in the time-honored power structure. Why fix what is

<sup>4</sup> David Marc, *Media and Popular Culture*, vol. 4 of *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* (Cambridge: Unwin Hyman, Inc., 1989), 134.

<sup>5</sup> Cary O'Dell, "Bewitched: Rethinking a Sixties Sitcom Classic," *Television Quarterly* 36.1 (2005), 65.

not broken? Women had always been the lesser gender, and why should that suddenly change? He is merely a product of tradition, afraid to shake up the status quo, and his “incorrigibly puritanical” view of marriage<sup>6</sup> is jeopardized as he struggles to come to terms with not being the most powerful figure in his household: “This is a show, no matter how goofy, about the growing power of women in both the home and society at large in the 1960s. It’s a show about how men weren’t sure how to deal with that.”<sup>7</sup> Samantha can easily be seen as an oppressed housewife or a victim of patriarchal society, yet the crucial distinction is that she actively chooses to separate herself from magic, and this ability to have and to make choices is the very essence of feminism: “*Bewitched* becomes an allegory about the responsible restraint of power—of possessing certain abilities or options and choosing not to exercise them.”<sup>8</sup> But *Bewitched* was not a blatant feminist statement; instead it combined “futuristic ideals of liberation and escape with nostalgic appeals to domestic comfort and stability.”<sup>9</sup> It did not set out to promote any specific social or political agenda, but it did foreshadow change in the near future with its suggestion of conflict between the oblivious husband and suppressed wife, the compliant woman and her hidden inner desire for liberation, traditional society and modern society. Though the show may seem to perpetuate the illusion of a suburban utopia, the underlying message indicates that the passive housewife in reality possesses an undeniable power, though society continually insists on concealing both that power and her right to harness it. By all means, Samantha Stephens has the American Dream, at least materialistically, but her dream is

<sup>6</sup> Marc, *Media and Popular Culture*, 136.

<sup>7</sup> Todd Vanderwerff, “Bewitched Tweaked ‘60s Gender Roles and Became One of the First Feminist Sitcoms,” *A.V. Club* (24 Sept. 2012): n. pag.

<sup>8</sup> O’Dell, “Bewitched,” 67.

<sup>9</sup> Lynn Spigel, “Television, Gender, and Space,” *Science Fiction Film and Television* 2.2 (2009), 391.

plagued by society's expectations and her husband's paternalistic concerns. The very existence of magic in fact poses a threat to suburban placidity, and the fact that it belongs to a woman makes it unquestionably clear that the status quo is rapidly decomposing. As *Bewitched* subtly hints, a spark of some kind of is being lit in the female consciousness, and combined with newly sprung progressive ideas of the era, it would ignite the American woman's desire to find a distinct and true identity independent from the home and its restraints.

### **Corresponding Feminist Movements of the Era**

In this decade of turbulent social protests and sweeping movements for equality, the notion of the modern woman was accompanied by a sharp, stirring awareness of the relationship between females and society. Housewives came to terms with their condition of gilded cages and golden handcuffs and realized, not for the first time, that they were capable of work and life beyond the domestic. This "click" was the "The Housewife's Moment of Truth" as labeled by Jane O'Reilly in 1971, the awakening of the feminist consciousness and the spirit of active resistance as women wondered: "What if [we] finally learn that we are not defined by our children and husbands, but by ourselves?"<sup>10</sup> Suburbia appeared pleasant and orderly, but inside housewives felt a distinct if inexplicable kind of suffocation: "the problem that has no name" as identified by Betty Friedan in the 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*. This dissatisfaction that housewives felt so pungently could be attributed to the invisible weight of being forcibly subservient to men financially, intellectually, physically, and socially: "The chains that bind her

<sup>10</sup> Jane O'Reilly, "The Housewife's Moment of Truth," *Ms. Magazine* (20 Dec. 1971), 2.

are in her own mind and spirit...made of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices."<sup>11</sup> The feminine mystique was the idealized mold that women attempted to conform to despite their lack of fulfillment and also the society-constructed lie that women could only attain happiness through marriage and motherhood.<sup>12</sup> Housewives claimed to feel "empty somehow, terribly tired, and incomplete," longing for something beyond and more: "As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, made sandwiches, lay beside her husband at night- she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question- 'Is this all?'"<sup>13</sup> Society had taught women that to be truly feminine was to desert fantastical desires like higher education, careers, and political rights, for "her only dream was to be a perfect wife and mother, her highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, her only fight to get and keep her husband."<sup>14</sup> As part of the second wave of feminism, the Women's Liberation Movement, launched in many respects thanks to Friedan's work, sought to both disillusion and empower the repressed housewife; in the process, these efforts rattled society's prevailing notions of family and femininity.

Similar to the women Friedan championed, despite Samantha's seeming satisfaction with the status quo, there is a lingering sense that she remains bound by societal restraints, falling short of her true potential: "Here is a woman with unimaginable magical power and she uses it entirely to shore up her husband's ego, make him look good. Has she no life of her

<sup>11</sup> Betty Friedan, "Selections from *The Feminine Mystique*," in *Feminism in Our Time*, ed. Miriam Schneir (Toronto: Random House, 1994), 66.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

own?"<sup>15</sup> When her mother Endora, who disapproves deeply of her daughter's decision to marry a mortal, learns of Samantha's plan to buy a home with Darrin she retorts: "That is fine for *them* but not for us. We're quicksilver, a fleeting shadow, a distant sound. Our home has no boundaries. We live in music, in a flash of color, on wind and in the sparkle of a star."<sup>16</sup> Samantha has powers but she must not use them; she has opinions but she must not voice them. Ultimately, society had learned that it was safer to silence any and all dissension for the sake of preserving the status quo.

### **Magic as a Cultural Obsession as Well as a Threat**

As much as *Bewitched* foretells about impending social transformations, it also reveals a great deal about America's history in relation to matters of the supernatural, as well as the struggle of minority groups to adapt and assimilate into society. Tracing as far back as the notorious 1692 Salem Witch trials, when a small Massachusetts town convulsed in the grip of rumors and accusations, America has been wary of magic, deeming it a threat to the natural order. The Trials were an ugly yet prominent taint on the Puritan legacy, and it left America reeling in its aftermath, struggling to reconcile this brutal piece of its history with its values of justice and humanity; in short, "the witches of Salem will not go away."<sup>17</sup> The historical climate that surrounded the events of Salem was one of economic and social tension; similarly, *Bewitched* is set in a time period dominated by unfamiliar yet promising new horizons, and Samantha's rejection of the supernatural thus is traced back to a "desire for normalcy in the

<sup>15</sup> Marc, *Media and Popular Culture*, 136.

<sup>16</sup> Sol Saks and Barbara Avedon, "Be It Ever So Mortgaged."

<sup>17</sup> Bruce Daniels, "Salem's Witches Haunt New England," *Johns Hopkins University Press* 26.4 (1998), 663.

suburbs [during] a time when political, social and technological changes were a constant."<sup>18</sup> *Bewitched* sees "dangerously foreign but attractive powers penetrate the suburban milieu, where they cause some commotion but ultimately prove domesticable."<sup>19</sup> *Bewitched* is easily brushed aside as simply magical realism or entertaining escapism, and it is this lightheartedness that allowed it to say what it did about society: "Perhaps only a show that could claim a purely unreal and romantic intent would be allowed to depict the outbreak of powers beyond the control of The American Father Who Had Once Known Best."<sup>20</sup> Magic and powerful women were foreign concepts in the colorless land of suburbia, yet *Bewitched* brought both of these ideas not only to the surface but to the forefront of the public conscience.

Although America continually found itself morbidly fascinated with magic, witchcraft earned a place as a taboo topic, and the word "witch" became likened to a slur. In particular, magic, especially dark and sinful, has been linked to women. Since the biblical days of Adam and Eve, females have been generally portrayed as physically and morally weaker and thus more susceptible to evil, as well as the more mysterious and secretive gender.<sup>21</sup> For centuries, society had maintained an unfortunate disposition towards ostracizing women and emphasizing their "otherness"; Samantha's powers make her an outsider, a threat, a potential scapegoat. Yet while the Salem Witch Trials were targeted at the "femme sole," *Bewitched* intentionally grants power to a married woman. Samantha is confined to the periphery, both as a woman and as a witch, and although America had supposedly grown past its old prejudices

<sup>18</sup> O'Dell, "Bewitched," 66.

<sup>19</sup> David Allen Case, "Domesticating the Enemy: Bewitched and the Seventies Sitcom," 1994, [http://members.tripod.com/anthony\\_giacalone/bewitched.html](http://members.tripod.com/anthony_giacalone/bewitched.html).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Daniels, "Salem's Witches," 664.

long ago, it was still in the habit of damning those who strayed from mainstream society. Magic was unfamiliar and thus threatening, and despite the lessons America had endured, it was still prone to xenophobia, still wary of those who did not fit into its unyielding and uncompromising mold: "The show very clearly defines Samantha's identity as a witch as a cultural and ethnic difference, which is different and opposite from the dominant mortal culture."<sup>22</sup> In a humorous and thus easily stomached fashion, *Bewitched* brought to light the itch that America still refused to scratch: the harsh reality of its enforcement of a strict us versus them mindset that repeatedly and ceaselessly manifested itself in society.

### **The Cultural Contribution and Lasting Impact of *Bewitched***

In conclusion, during a time of volatile social relations when previously reliable realities were quickly decaying, *Bewitched* was able to function as both a critique of America's shameful tendency to isolate perceived outsiders as well as an omen that hinted at future adjustments to the social hierarchy. It suggested that "magical gimmicks could be used to tell surprisingly deft stories about a changing nation and world, even if everything could be fixed with a quick bit of magic."<sup>23</sup> Universally, the United States of America was heralded as the land of equal opportunity and endless dreams, yet haunting former prejudices were still trickling down into modern times. How could America claim to be the moral leader of the world and a beacon for democracy when essentially half its population was still deprived of a meaningful place and a legitimate voice in society? What did the boiling over of female discontentment say about the

<sup>22</sup> Audrey Lundahl, "Samantha Stephens as the Third-World Feminist Other: Border Theory and *Bewitched*," Lecture, Colorado State University (June 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Vanderwerff, "*Bewitched*."

American Dream and “inalienable rights” for all? Perhaps our foundations were not so secure; perhaps we could only afford to give opportunity to some but not to everyone. America was still grappling to adjust to a fluctuating power structure, still struggling to accept women as fully autonomous individuals. *Bewitched* portrays suburbia as pleasant and placid, often glamorizing its faults and glossing over societal tensions, but its greatest cultural contribution lies in its ability to characterize the era altogether as one of uncertainty amid rapid change; magic, a woman with a will, and a husband no longer in full control all threatened to tip society’s already shaky equilibrium. Perhaps in Samantha Stephens’ world, all bumps and bruises could be quickly and painlessly mended with a twitch of her nose, but as America would find, lasting societal change would take far longer, be far more complex and have much higher stakes. The true landscape of middle class America was not one of picket fences and picturesque families; instead, it was one of swiftly collapsing certainties and newly formulating ideas, of the disappearance of traditional authority and the ushering in of modern powers, of a society boldly attempting to shoulder the consequences of rapid and unpredictable change. Even in a decade of incredible self-proclaimed progress, both technologically and in terms of movements for equality, America in the ‘60s was as distant from perfect, ideal equality as the tedium of suburbia was from the magic of Samantha’s shimmering yet faraway former world.