

***The Order, Seasons 1 and 2*** (Netflix, 2019-present)

*The Order* is one of Netflix's most recent additions to the ever-expanding world of supernatural teen dramas. The television series follows Jack Morton (Jake Manley) as he is accepted to the prestigious Belgrave University. While we are initially provided with a classic narrative frame – our young hero eagerly awaiting college acceptance – upon initial reading of his Belgrave letter, Jack is rejected. The contents of the letter are soon supernaturally altered, however, and Jack is offered a place, in what is the first of many instances in which this show plays with expectations. The subversion of the generic 'Chosen-One' trope is refreshing. Jack is not by birthright the key to unlocking an ancient curse, nor is he so exceptional that flocks of vampires fall madly in love with him. He is a working-class kid and average student with a strong sense of family loyalty and a task to complete that necessitates his acceptance to Belgrave.

Jack is fuelled by his desire to avenge his mother's (Aria DeMaris) death, blaming her suicide on the departure of his biological father (Max Martini), who is apparently unaware of his son's existence. Jack seeks to enter a secret Belgrave society – the 'Order' from which the show takes its name – of which his father is a prominent member. The Order is the means by which supernatural elements and many of the more obvious gothic tropes are introduced into the series. As Jack soon discovers, the secret society is devoted to the practice of dark magic, and much of the central plot involves werewolves, necromancy, and the like. Though the dark-magic storylines offer opportunities for some highly gothicised aesthetics, such as full-moon hunting expeditions and reanimated corpses haunting the living, some of the most successful aspects of the show are the perhaps less flamboyant though no less significant tropes of gothic fiction.

For example, the issue of class is one of the strongest character-building devices of the show. In depictions of third-level education, class is often reduced to a flimsy plot device, a motivation for whimsical financial schemes. *Charmed's* (1998-2006) Phoebe Halliwell (Alyssa Milano), for example, re-enrols in university to gain a degree in psychology. Despite her apparently sub-par academic history and the fact that she appears to miss more classes than she attends due to her demon-fighting Wiccan duties, Phoebe goes on to earn a Master's degree in the subject. *Charmed* employs third-level education more as a situational device for character encounters and narrative exposition than a well-developed theme. Rather than use it as a means to an over-simplistic end, *The Order* integrates Jack's working-class background into his relationships and wider college journey. Class tensions have permeated gothic fiction

from the earliest days of the classic gothic novel. Such canonical texts as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) centre on issues of inheritance, ownership, and class as entangled with identity construction. These themes continue to feature in contemporary gothic teen dramas, such as *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-17), in which the town of Mystic Falls is defined by feuds between so-called 'founding' and non-founding families. The vampire-brother protagonists are decidedly upper class (although this is often arbitrarily indicated by the little more than the vampires' penchant for high-quality scotch), while many of the early victims are from outside the founding-family inner circle. These murders implicitly establish the expendability of non-founding-family citizens, who are left vulnerable by their lack of a long-established, wealthy local heritage. In *The Order*, by contrast, class and class struggles are dealt with in a far more effective and indeed emotive manner. Access to university is more than education for Jack; it represents a social mobility that generates anxiety amongst his wealthier peers, who frequently mock and refer to him as a 'townie', out of place in their world. Jack finds light-hearted empowerment in this label. In one episode, when a magical escape plan hatched by Jack's superiors fails, he finds a solution in his self-described 'townie magic' – in other words, he steals a car. Although this act saves the day, it also draws attention to his lower-class identity and the socio-economic difference between Jack and his Belgrave peers, as well as the destabilisation of class dynamics that his presence engenders.

These class dynamics provide Jack with an endearing chip on his shoulder, as he struggles to worm his way into the upper echelons of college society and its elite Order. Jack's characterisation in this manner further introduces several recognisable themes of classic gothic fiction under the guise of contemporary teen melodrama. In a nod to Walpole's *Otranto*, questions regarding the authenticity of documents are immediately raised by Jack's false acceptance letter and the subsequent debates among the leaders of the Order as to whether his place in the university is legitimate. As the show progresses into the second season, it is regrettable that these class issues are decentred in favour of focusing on a much larger, multi-generational feud between the black-magic practitioners of the titular Hermetic Order of the Blue Rose and the Knights of Saint Christopher (an ancient society of werewolves based in the university in whose schemes Jack also becomes deeply involved). This change in focus adds a procedural element to the structure of the show and detracts from the significance of its original class-based approach.

There are also issues of family lineage and rightful heritage at stake, as Jack seeks out his estranged father, a powerful player in Belgrave societal circles, in a manner that disrupts the Order's established hierarchical structure. Jack's tumultuous parental relationships further highlight the gothic nature of this show, as he struggles between succeeding his villainous father and avenging his angelic mother, sanctified in death. This underlying revenge narrative unfortunately lacks the desired expansion to be maintained as a central theme and for the show to maintain a sense of focus. While avenging the untimely passing of his mother is the central motivation for Jack and his grandfather at the beginning of the series – the entire reason Jack wishes to attend Belgrave is to confront his biological father, to blame him for the mother's death – this very quickly fades into the background and is referenced increasingly infrequently as Jack becomes more and more entrenched in the feud between the Order and the werewolf Knights.

Despite this issue with plotting, *The Order's* greatest success is that it does truly feel like a classic teen show, in that it does not merely repeat over-wrought tropes of constantly brooding, existential teens (*Twilight's* (2008-12) Edward Cullen immediately comes to mind). These kids do not wile away their days grimly binge-drinking whisky from antique crystal, an activity that is for some reason incredibly common in programming of this genre. *Supernatural's* (2005-20) Sam Winchester (Jared Padalecki), for example, finds himself dropping out of Stanford University to embark on a demon-hunting road trip with his borderline-alcoholic elder brother Dean (Jensen Ackles) in the very first episode, and the brothers' self-destructive, melancholic binge drinking increases in correlation with their demon fighting. *The Order's* scenes of drinking (somewhat inevitably, given the youthful cast and university setting) are, by contrast, social and light hearted. In one episode, the members of the Knights of Saint Christopher are forced to agree upon whether or not a fellow student is a threat and must be killed. This life-and-death decision does not play out against the backdrop of an arcane supernatural ritual, but is worked through over a beer-pong tournament, a scene that effectively illustrates the playful immaturity of these characters and their misalignment with the otherworldly responsibilities that have been thrust upon them. *The Order's* grounding in age-appropriate reality makes the supernatural narrative frame far more accessible – and intriguing – than many other supernatural series to date. Now in its second season, the show remains at its finest when it showcases light-hearted interactions between college students (who, refreshingly, look their age) grappling with assignment deadlines, developing sexualities, and dealing with dark magic that is far out of their league.

The show is, by extension, at its weakest when it takes itself and the magical feud between the Order and the Knights a little too seriously. Perhaps it has fallen victim to the demands of an audience that has become over-saturated with the abundance of life-and-death situations and world-ending prophecies that have become commonplace in teen TV Gothic.

It is therefore a shame that, despite presenting well-constructed and well-performed teenage relationships, the show fails to seriously delve further into the prominent class-based teen conflict that it introduces in the early episodes. It begins by addressing the possibility or, in many cases, the impossibility of attending a respected university as a working-class teenager, and the inherent unattainability of the associated prerequisites for elite education, such as familial standing and inherited wealth. Unfortunately, aside from continued passing references such as Jack's peers referring to him as 'trailer trash' and so on, the show fails to capitalise fully on the opportunity to reframe these features of classic gothic fiction in a context relatable to contemporary teen audiences. All too quickly, Jack becomes consumed by the ongoing battle between the Order and the Knights, losing some of his individuality as a protagonist in the process. Ultimately, *The Order* requires a more in-depth consideration of the socio-economic issues that affect Jack's journey, as they could serve this show well and efficiently differentiate it from the large roster of post-millennial teen supernatural dramas.

Although it is not without its flaws, *The Order* shows promise and popularity. This is thanks in large part to its likeable cast. Though charming from the outset, Jake Manley's charisma develops in tandem with his character, while the supporting characters, and particularly his friends within the Knights and the Order, strike an amiable balance between genre tropes and individual likability. One arena in which *The Order* consistently improves is in its balance of teen drama and horror. Gore and violence become more prominent in the second season, as the show continues to embrace and foreground its horror elements through scenes of torture and ritual sacrifice. One hopes that the show's creators will endeavour to dig a little deeper, as it were, in future seasons and give as much screen time to the characters' internal ideological conflicts as they give to the exposure of their internal organs.

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