

Bewitched: Rethinking a Sixties Sitcom Classic

A pop culture ruminator takes issue with conventional feminist wisdom. **By Cary O'Dell**

The cultural critics have not been kind. *Bewitched*, the hit series that aired on ABC from 1964-1972 about a beautiful witch and her oh-so-mortal husband, has been called “the most sexist program of all time.”

Feminist scholars have written that the premise of the show—a man forbidding the woman in his life to use her natural talents—is clearly a metaphor for the male backlash to the burgeoning woman’s movement in the wake of the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*.

But I don’t think that’s the case at all. *Bewitched*, like *I Love Lucy* (another show unfairly criticized), is a series dominated by female energy. While Lucy attempts to break out of her traditional wife/mother role by any means necessary, Samantha Stevens finds fulfillment in hearth and home. If feminism is fundamentally about

having choices, then *Bewitched* supports the notion.

Despite the brouhaha regarding Darrin’s stance on his wife’s witchcraft, the great majority of *Bewitched* episodes focus instead on the troublesome spells that Samantha’s mother, Endora, inflicts on her son-in-law. Or on some strange witch disease that Samantha falls prey to requiring the immediate attention of Dr. Bombay (i.e. “Dr. Bombay, Dr. Bombay, Come right away!”).

Still other episodes are centered around Sam’s otherworldly relatives causing problems in the Stevens household either via mischievousness (like anytime Sam’s swinging sister Serena stopped by) or via incompetence (as when Sam’s senile Auntie Clara popped in).

What almost all these episodes do have in common—besides one wild meltdown each by Darrin—is how Sam’s witchcraft combined with her

quick thinking always ends up saving the day. As Darrin fumes and the boss becomes crazed, Samantha with either a simple spell or a twitch of her nose, rights wrongs, cures the sick, and saves Darrin and Larry Tate's "big account."

Sometimes Samantha's magic even saves a life—including sometimes Darrin's. Despite her ability to rescue her husband and others from disaster, with all the havoc that the witchcraft of others inflicted on her household, is it any wonder that Sam, too, is by and large willing to forgo her powers? The very fact that Samantha pursues and marries a mortal suggests that she herself is not only a rebel in some regard but that she is also not adverse to living a life without witchcraft.

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It can be argued that there's an almost quasi-Amish aspect to Sam's choice not to use her powers. Just as the Amish could ease their lives by employing modern technology and don't, Samantha, whose life could be highly streamlined via magic, also



Elizabeth Montgomery (left) as Samantha, with Agnes Moorhead as her mother, Endora.

resists.

David Marc, in his book *Comic Visions*, likens Samantha's magic to the tranquilizers ("mother's little helpers") popularly over-prescribed at the time. In Sam's refusal to indulge in shortcuts and easy-outs, Samantha Stevens is, essentially, just saying "no."

Samantha's restraint against using her magic, and Darrin's desire that she do so, is an expression of both of their wishes for a mortal, normal life. This desire for "normalcy" in the suburbs might very well have struck a resonating chord with America in the 1960s and

early '70s, a time when political, social and technological changes were a constant.

Granted, the choice to withhold magic does, at first, seem an odd one. If one has magical powers, why not sue them at least for the betterment of your loved ones and the world? *Bewitched* addressed this issue directly during its run. In the episode "A Is for Aardvark" Darrin finds himself confined to bed and to try to help him, Samantha gives him some temporary magical powers. Unfortunately, Darrin soon goes wild with his newly acquired abilities until he realizes its drawback: when you don't have to work for things they don't mean as much.

True, Samantha, via her powers, could have anything she wanted, but what she wanted most of all was Darrin and the normal life he represented. In one episode, Samantha says:

"Now listen to me Darrin, you may have given up but I haven't. I enjoy taking care of my husband and my children in the everyday mortal way. I like things the way they are. If I didn't, I wouldn't be here."

It's a point well taken. Let's not forget that Samantha has the ability to twitch herself and her kids right out of the suburbs and away from Darrin forever. Or to turn Darrin into a frog or a rock. Her power gives her access to ultimate freedom—if she chooses.

Just as Samantha was far from the oppressed housewife, Darrin, despite his perpetual state of befuddlement, was far from the monster he is often remembered as either.

Despite the endless amount of torture mother-in-law Endora inflicted on him,

Darrin never threatened to walk away from his marriage or responsibilities. And Samantha knows and appreciates this. In one episode she says to him, "[You're] up to your neck in witches... Are you ever sorry you married me?"

To which Darrin replies, "No, I couldn't live without you."

Endora, played with relish by actress Agnes Moorhead, has been described as an "intergalactic Auntie Mame." She was an unrepentant divorcee who never considered her age a limit to her desires. Endora was a total troublemaker; quite literally the mother-in-law from hell. She never referred to Darrin by his real name, preferring such alterations as Delwood, Dobbins and Durwood. In one episode, Darrin intones that Endora learned cruelty from the Marquis de Sade. Endora corrects him, "It's not true... He was just a classmate."

Darrin and the rest of mankind was/is no match for Endora. If Samantha is supposedly the poster child for restrained womanhood, then Endora is the other end of the spectrum—representing what one risks when one attempts to suppress feminine power. Endora can be viewed as all of witchcraft's revenge: payback to the mortals who have attempted to persecute them. And in this show, literally and figuratively, payback is a mother.

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Among the readings, *Bewitched* can also be viewed as a metaphor for the

1960s with Samantha taking on the role of pseudo-hippie. Just as the hippie culture of the time stressed a return to a more hands-on and natural approach to life, so too does Sam with her desire to do the cooking, cleaning and scrubbing without taking the easy way out (i.e. a twitch of her nose).

In this approach to the series, then, Endora, with her addiction to superficiality and her preference for speed, represents an older, bourgeois generation. Just as many parents of the era couldn't understand the commune living and other choices that their children were making, Endora could not comprehend Sam's wish not to "live life to the fullest" i.e. consort with the other witches (the "in" crowd) or fly around the world (as if she were part of that newly named group, the "jet set"). In one episode, Endora even goes so far as to accuse her daughter of ignoring "her heredity, her birthright." Therefore, the relationship between mother and daughter is a clash of generations and ideals. And, unfortunately for him, Darrin is just the pawn stuck in the middle of these two powerful, equally stubborn women.

Continuing this thought — of possessing certain abilities or options and choosing not to exercise them —

Bewitched then becomes an allegory about the responsible restraint of power: one should not "twitch" just because we can, we will not split the atom.

Another interpretation of *Bewitched* is to view it as Freudian theory. Endora, with her life devoted to pleasure, represents the instant gratification demanded of the id; Darrin, by contrast, is the overly cautious ego; and Samantha, is the mediator between the two, the superego.

Along with being this series' mediator, equalizer and savior, Samantha is also its moral and ethical center. Not only in her refusal to use her powers selfishly, but also in balancing the alternating temptations of indulgence, as represented by Endora's devil-may-care lifestyle, and greed, as represented by Larry Tate and the advertising industry.

If there's more than one way to skin a cat, there are surely many ways to interpret a television series. Some might conclude that Sam is the victim of a patriarchal society. But my preference is to see the character brought to life by the wonderful Elizabeth Montgomery as a determined young woman who makes her own life choices and finds the inner strength to live by them.

Cary O'Dell is an archivist at the Library of American Broadcasting and is the author of *Women Pioneers in Television*.