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Of Gods and beasts and Stranger Things

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by Tyler Tully

Stranger Things, the Netflix television series of the summer, has captivated audiences with its imaginative storytelling and nostalgic nods to the paranormal thrillers of the 1980's. The show's originators, the Duff brothers, originally envisioned [the series under the title of "Montauk"](#)—a real town in Long Island that coincidentally inspired the fictional location of "Amity" in Spielberg's *Jaws*. [Montauk, however, is also associated with](#) Camp Hero (aka Montauk Air Force Base) and the [Brookhaven National Laboratory](#); locations that allegedly served as sites for clandestine psychokinetic experiments that involved kidnapped test subjects, [according to some](#). Although the Duff brothers would later change the name and setting of what would eventually become *Stranger Things*, its plot still involves these eerie subjects.

Like many others, I have been binge watching this superb series as of late, but with a careful eye towards its themes of kidnapping, experimentation, and (yes) even religion. Below I'll attempt to tease out some of the obvious (and not so obvious) motifs I've discovered that revolve around the children of *Stranger Things*.

After a long night of playing *Dungeons and Dragons* with his trio of besties, Will Byers (a "sensitive" and "special" boy by all accounts) suddenly goes missing in the fictional town of Hawkins, Indiana. Yet as the series develops, this child seems to represent more than just the missing son of a single working-class mom (played by Winona Ryder). The heart of *Stranger Things* revolves around its cast of children as they propel the plot forward in their search for Will.

The plotline of *Stranger Things* is foreshadowed in an early sequence where Will, Dustin, and Lucas are completing a marathon D&D (*Dungeons and Dragons*) session hosted by Mike (acting as dungeon master) who orchestrates a perilous encounter with a demon known as the “Demogorgon” in D&D mythology. Under pressure from the attack, Will accidentally tosses the dice past the playing board and onto the floor where they fall hidden somewhere within Mike’s basement. The boys scurry about in search of the dice when Mike’s mom suddenly appears to tell them it’s time for everyone to pack up the game and go home.

Childlike wonder and encounters with the supernatural are common throughout the series, where the audience follows along with Lucas, Dustin, and Mike in their search for Will who disappears later that evening. Whether in naming the area near Will’s home as “Mirkwood Forest” or by referring to any turncoat as a “Lando Calrissian,” the show’s three (nerdy) boys often interpret the real world around them using the lens of their “sacred” texts. As children, they are forbidden by adults to meddle in the grander affairs of their world, (e.g. the disappearance of Will) and like mere mortals, the children are mostly powerless in the face of these forces. Yet they are also free to interpret them—to make meaning out of their ordinary encounters with the supernatural world as they understand them.

Encounters with the supernatural abound in *Stranger Things*.

While the boys are searching for Will in the woods one evening, they stumble across “Eleven”—a quiet and mysterious girl who escapes from the nearby Hawkins National Laboratory (a top secret location run by the US Department of Energy). From the moment she arrives on the scene, it is clear that Eleven is from a different world and completely out of place in rural Indiana. Scared, but in need of shelter, Eleven covertly returns with the boys to Mike’s basement, where she reveals a bit of her true identity. There, she recognizes Will from a photograph and reveals his hidden location to the boys who are eager to find him.

Clandestine government projects, such as MKUltra and those allegedly associated with Montauk, are intimately connected to Eleven’s past. As the plot develops, the audience sees that Eleven was subjected to all sorts of abusive experiments that exploited her paranormal powers. During one such experiment, Eleven punctured a rift in space-time, thereby making it possible for an otherworldly monster to cross into their reality. To communicate this complex situation to the boys, Eleven uses *their* common mythologies, referring to the otherworldly monster as the “Demogorgon.” Taking the D&D game board and flipping it upside down, Eleven demonstrates that Will has been kidnapped by the Demogorgon and is in hiding in this “upside down” dimension.

“El,” as she is affectionately referred to by Mike (aka Michael = “*Who is like El?*” in Biblical Hebrew) harbours awesome god-like powers. In the ancient Near East, “El” (or ‘Al) could generally refer to any god or *the* god depending upon the context. While the “El” of *Stranger Things* may have a few things in common with the ancient Semitic deity (association with water, mighty powers, and name recognition), both “Els” bring “death” into the world (so to speak) [and both do battle with a beastly](#), “creeping” monster in the “underworld.”

Of interest to me (as it relates to my own doctoral research) remain the similarities between the show’s laboratory exploitation and power broking from a religious studies perspective. [According to the ancients](#), El (and other deities) were associated with the practice of child sacrifice—especially during times of national crisis and war (Cold War anyone?). As [Kimberely Patton](#) has pointed out, victims of ritualized sacrifice in the ancient world were chosen as such precisely because of their perceived connection to the holy and supernatural—a theme that is something akin to that popular saying, “only the good die young” (Barb!?)

All of which brings me to Eleven’s association with Will and the theme of child sacrifice in *Stranger Things*. El escapes from the lab almost exactly at the same time as Will disappears, even as she disappears near the time Will is brought back. Both are children and innocent, “special,” and “different.” And it is through Will and El that the trio of boys make meaning of their powerless situation even as they are divided in their loyalties to El while searching for Will. Fascinating too remains the ways in which the boys conduct experiments with El, who

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they cannot manipulate but depend upon nevertheless.

Whether intentional or not, perhaps the Duffer brothers have also taken timeless truths and communicated them to us using our own common (if nerdy) mythologies.

- Image from [Wikipedia commons](#).

Tyler M. Tully is an American writer, graduate student, and theologian whose work has been featured in local and national news sources including *Real Clear Religion* and *Al Jazeera America*. In 2016, Tully was offered the Arthur Peacocke Graduate Studentship in Theology at Oxford's Exeter College for research at the intersection of science and religion. A graduate of Our Lady of the Lake University with a BA in Religious Studies and Theology, Tyler later earned a Master of Divinity with the Chicago Theological Seminary. Starting in October 2016, Tully will begin the Doctor of Philosophy in Theology and Religious Studies course at the University of Oxford under the supervision of Donovan O. Schaefer. Tully's research interests are at the intersection of critical theories on race.

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