

The Monster's Lair: Gendered Sets in True Crime Dramas

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Submitted to the Faculty of Film, Art and Creative Technologies in
candidacy for the BA (Honours) Degree in Design for Film – Production
Design

Submitted 17th February 2025

Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Design for Film. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Harry Wainwright". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underlining the text.

Harry Wainwright

Acknowledgements

I would like to give a special thanks to my thesis supervisor Dr SORCHA O'Brien for all her guidance throughout the duration of this thesis. I would not be where I am today without her support. I gratefully acknowledge the use of the services and facilities of IADT.

I would also like to thank Riadhna Holahan, Lara Mellett and David Hawes for the advice they shared and for taking the time to proofread over my work. Finally, a thank you to my friends and family for the constant support.

Abstract

True crime dramas have become a rising genre of film and television in recent years. Recreating events that occur surrounding murders and other horrific crimes can be considered controversial as it can bring up unresolved trauma for victims and their families. When retelling these stories, they are often told from the point of view of the character who commits the crime as opposed to the victim, this gives the audience an insight into the mind and experiences of the perpetrators often referred to as “monsters”. From reading Gilmore’s *Monsters: Evil beings, mythical beasts and all manner of imaginary terrors*, it is clear that a common aspect of a monster’s story is their lair, a physical landscape to explore and reflect their psychological and emotional state, giving a deeper understanding of the character to the audience.

Netflix’s *Dahmer – Monster; The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (2022) and HBO’s *Love and Death* (2023) are two of the most recent true crime adaptations where both main characters, Jeffrey Dahmer and Candy Montgomery were both considered monsters. It is evident that both were affected by their upbringing and the environment around them. The production design of these shows and the monsters’ lairs plays a huge part in expressing their differences, but also their similarities. The idea that their true self is expressed through these settings is clear from the actions that take place within their ‘lair’. The tactics and reasoning behind their actions can be seen as a reflection of monsters in folklore and history.

The aim of this thesis is to understand if the recreation of horrific events on screen can make us question, as a society, how we define a monster and how the production design and habitus play a part in how it is depicted on screen.

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Introduction

Throughout media, monstrous figures have been known to be portrayed as grotesque, supernatural creatures from folklore and fiction. These portrayals have evolved, tapping into the darkest recesses of human nature. Contemporary media often invites a complex examination of identity, morality and the spaces that shape us. The rise of true crime dramatizations has furthered this evolution, as series like *Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (2022) and *Love & Death* (2023) invite viewers to examine the chilling lives of real-life individuals who have been branded as monsters. These shows offer compelling explorations of how monstrosity manifests, not just in actions but within the environments characters inhabit. In both shows, the main characters Jeffrey Dahmer and Candy Montgomery are branded as "monsters" due to their taboo and violent acts, yet the spaces they occupy, both physical and psychological, serve as key elements in the audience's understanding of their actions. These spaces, their "lair," are not mere backdrops but active participants in the construction of their monstrous identities. Through their lairs, both Dahmer and Candy navigate personal traumas, desires, and societal pressures, making their stories not just ones of violence, but of isolation, manipulation, and the human struggle for agency. By examining these locations, we can gain a deeper understanding of how their crimes were influenced by their environments and, in turn, how these environments helped define their monstrosity.

In order to study what makes a monster, the history of monsters and how they have been presented in both fiction and non-fiction stories will be explored in this paper. By studying how they are presented, the similarities and the differences will become evident, playing a crucial part throughout the thesis. The information discovered from studying monsters in folklore and pop-culture will be applied and discussed in relation to true-crime shows. There are many aspects of a monster's story that affect the way they are perceived by audiences. For example, the gender roles that are applied to the monster's characters play a huge part in how their stories are told and how they affect the personality and traits of the monster. By exploring the gender roles, a better

understanding of how society had shaped the character's will be given, especially their tactics and methods used and how they have affected the perception of the monsters.

I decided to investigate this topic for my thesis because I have always been intrigued by how true crime dramas have presented controversial characters on screen, particularly through the use of the production design. The production design of any project can bring depth to any character or situation by using hidden details: whether it's in a subtle feature or an obvious eye-catching décor choice. By the end of my thesis, it will be apparent that the world around the characters influence, reveal and reflect their monstrous psyches. The settings in which the monster's story plays out can enhance or diminish the monstrosity of the fearful characters, but it can also be what makes them who they are.

At the core of this thesis is the idea that the "lair" is more than just a setting; it becomes an extension of the character, embodying their desires, trauma, and the sociocultural forces that shape them. While both Dahmer and Candy are undeniably monstrous figures, the portrayal of their actions and the environments they inhabit offers viewers an opportunity to reconsider the definitions of monstrosity. Unlike traditional horror stories where the monster is clearly defined by its grotesque appearance and unambiguous evil, these characters embody more complex forms of monstrosity that challenge audiences to confront the uncomfortable reality that monsters can be ordinary people living in seemingly mundane spaces. Lairs are a seductive part of the monsters' stories, it often reflects the evil within the monsters themselves.

This thesis is going to explore how Netflix's *Dahmer – Monster* and HBO's *Love & Death* use the concept of the lair to complicate our understanding of monstrosity. To gain a deeper understanding of the two main characters and their spaces, the typologies of male and female monsters, both fiction and non-fiction, will be referenced. By reading Gilmore's *Monsters: Evil beings, mythical beasts and all manner of imaginary terrors* (2009), where he gives a detailed breakdown of the use of monsters and their lairs, the commonalities and the differences among them can be found. After making these details clear, the findings will be applied to the characters of Jeffrey Dahmer and Candy Montgomery. This will allow for a comparison of how the true crime dramas have represented their respective monstrous characters. By examining the

environments these characters inhabit, using stills from the shows, this work will investigate how the physical spaces around them reflect the psychological and emotional landscapes that define their actions. Through this lens, we see that the "monster" is not always what it appears to be, but is instead shaped by trauma, desire, and the societal structures that both confine and enable its expression.

Chapter 1

Monsters Among Us

Who are the true monsters among us? According to the Oxford Dictionary a monster is defined as a large, ugly, and frightening imaginary creature (Oxford Dictionary, no date). It is usually a being of extraordinary or daunting size striking fear into anyone that comes across it. But when it comes to talking about a monster in the sense of a person, it refers to someone who provokes or elicits horror by wickedness, cruelty, and sin. In the real world, the closest things we have to a practical manifestation of monsters are extreme criminals, such as murderers, sexual predators, kidnappers, and others alike. More often than not these individuals start off small and unsuspected, they may not be seen as a threat at first, but eventually their true self is revealed the closer you look into their lives. There are many reasons as to why one might go down such a dark route in life that would eventually lead them to be seen as a monster. Some do it to feel powerful, they take pleasure in belittling and taking control of others, some allow their emotions to take over giving in to the anger, greed and even fear, for example Voldemort from the *Harry Potter* series (Rowling, 1999). In other cases, like The Joker, it could be the result of a mental illness or their upbringing begging the question is it nature or nurture that determines the kind of person we will become (Joker, 2019).

One of the darkest reasons someone could be considered a monster is if they commit a murder or multiple murders and depending on the circumstances they would be classified as a serial killer. “The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) defines a serial killer as a person who commits two or more murders in separate events, motivated by anger, thrill, sexual perversion, financial gain, or attention.” (Warnes, 2022). In 2023, it was recorded that there were 36 victims of murder or manslaughter in Ireland (CSO, 2024b). There have been many murderers and serial killers at large over the years, some more memorable than others but all of which have taken the life of another and affected their families’ lives forever.

Sexual objectification and related offences are some of the world's most pressing issues today, manifesting in various forms in different contexts. Media has been known to perpetuate unrealistic standards of beauty; because of this, individuals are reduced to objects of desire, women especially. This objectification can lead to a culture that normalizes harassment and violence, making one feel powerless and as if their worth is measured solely by their physical appearance as opposed to their abilities and personality. This idea is explored by Karen Hogan's 2012 thesis titled *Body Image: the influence that the media has on self-objectification across women of different ages*. Hogan investigates the influence that the media has on women and issues surrounding self-objectification and body dissatisfaction (Hogan, 2012).

As reported by the Central Statistics Office in 2023, 81% victims of reported incidents of sexual offences in Ireland were female and nearly half of all victims were under 18 years old at the time ('CSO', 2024a). This is perhaps one of most psychologically damaging acts a person can do - making them one of the most fearful kinds of monster out there.

In many cultures female monsters are seen as sexual beings, using their beauty to entrap and lure men towards danger. For example, in Greek mythology mermaids and sirens would use their enchanting songs and looks to lure sailors to their deaths. In East Asian folktales there is a nine-tailed fox known as Gumiho that possesses the ability to turn herself into a beautiful woman so she can seduce and kill men. One of the most renowned female monsters amongst the myths and legends is Medusa, the woman cursed with snakes for hair and the ability to turn people to stone with a single glance (see Figure 1). These are only a few examples of female monsters in mythology (Kane, 2023), but what they all have in common is their strategy when attacking and causing harm, they all use their sexuality and their looks to entice men towards danger. This commonality is also shared between mythical and fictional monsters and monsters in the real world. Female murderers and serial killers "tended to be above average in physical attractiveness, which may have helped to engender trust in their victims" (Jarrett, 2015). Statistics show that one in six killers are female, being overlooked and underestimated allow for their crimes to go undetected for longer periods of time (Jarrett, 2015).



Figure 1 - Medusa, marble sculpture by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, 1630; in the Capitoline Museums, Rome.

While both male and female monsters share many traits, there are some characteristics that tend to be more prominent in male monsters. They are usually described as possessing more physical power than their counterparts, embodying brute strength and aggression; they represent a more overt form of violence. Frankenstein's monster was made with the intent of being something better than human; the creature was stronger and more athletic but lacked a soul which is why it was so easily driven to commit atrocities (Shelley, 1818). Male monsters are depicted as formidable warriors or hunters, showcasing physical dominance. In Greek mythology, the Minotaur was a monster who possessed the body of a man and the head of a bull who was imprisoned in an underground labyrinth (see Figure 2). Known for immense superhuman strength and durability the savage horned beast would prey on those who entered the labyrinth. Many male monsters are portrayed as predators, emphasizing their role as aggressors in their narratives. This contrasts with female monsters, who may embody deception, manipulation, or cunning rather than sheer physicality. Male monsters are used to symbolize various themes such as the dangers of power, destructive violence and its consequences. They are also used to represent how men can be seen in the real world, predators and aggressors. Unfortunately, this can be seen in many cases around the world involving different crimes.

They can represent deeply hidden aspects of ourselves, reminding us of the potential danger that comes from giving in to our own primal urges... They are embodiments of the trials we have faced to ensure our relatively fragile grip on the world we inhabit, always lurking in the shadows to remind us to keep on our guard. (Fox, 2018).



Figure 2 - Theseus killing the Minotaur, detail of a vase painting by the Kleophrades Painter, 6th century BCE; in the British Museum, London.

There are some differences to be seen between male and female monsters, especially in the form of murderers. According to Marissa Harrison in her book *Just as Deadly: The Psychology of Female Serial Killers*, a female's motive is most commonly financial gain whereas for men it's sexual gain. But there are also differences in their murder techniques, so the style and nature of the murder helps to identify the gender of the murderer. Women often take a sophisticated approach by using poison, because it's clean and efficient. For men, their primary means is asphyxiation, sloppy and disorganised. Harrison continues to explain that men tend to target strangers and to have stalked their victim before attacking and that women are more likely to attack someone familiar to them. The likelihood of a female having murdered their partner or spouse is twice as high as it is for men. A clear contrast between male and female murderers is the absence of sexual violence and perversion. Harrison explains that men

are more motivated to attack when seeking sexual opportunities, while women's motivation is to find a committed partner with sufficient resources.

As we grow up, we are taught that monsters are mythical creatures hiding under our beds, but as we get older we grow out of that fear and become more intrigued and fascinated with the monsters among us. Monsters have many things in common including how their frightening stories are told to the innocent.

First, the monster mysteriously appears from shadows into a placid unsuspecting world, with reports first being disbelieved, discounted, explained away, or ignored. Then there is depredation and destruction, causing an awakening. Finally, the community reacts, unites, and gathering its forces under a hero-saint, confronts the beast. (Gilmore, 2009, p.13).

This is a similar layout as to what is used in most true crime films and shows such as Netflix's *Dahmer - Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*, HBO Max's *Love and Death* and the 2019 movie *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile*, which tells the story of Ted Bundy (see Figure 3). Using a human as the monster in a story raises many complex ethical questions. For example, portraying a human as a monster can reinforce harmful stereotypes and dehumanize certain groups, making it easier to justify discrimination or violence against them in real life. Simplifying a character to a monster can ignore the nuances of human experience.

It's important to explore motivations, backstory, and circumstances that shape behaviour, rather than reducing individuals to purely evil or monstrous archetypes. The cultural background of both the story and its audience can influence how a monster is interpreted. Some depictions may resonate differently across cultures, impacting the ethics of representation. Writers have a responsibility to consider the implications of their portrayals. They should reflect on how their depiction might affect the victims and their families, societal views and whether or not they will reinforce or challenge existing narratives about good and evil. "The names, ages, backgrounds, and family details of victims are often laid bare for public consumption... these vulnerable stakeholders are subjected to online scrutiny, where netizens give unsolicited opinions and commentary" (Liu, 2024).



Figure 3 - Zac Efron (Left) as Ted Bundy in *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (2019) and Ted Bundy (Right) in real life (Lundgren, 2019)

Publicizing and reporting on the events surrounding murders, the media refer to the attackers as “Monsters” and “Evil”, which evidently results in striking fear into the public “Turning Killers into Rockstars: Is the media’s hunger for readership creating celebrities out of monsters?” (Serna Jr., 2015). But after some time has passed people often begin to show interest and want to learn more about the case, leading to film companies producing projects based on the murderers and their victims. Taking a look back through history there are many figures from all over the world that can be considered as monsters due to the horrible acts they have committed.

The reasons behind them being referred to as monsters vary, some of which led to them being known around the world due to the severity and how high profile the cases were. But the ones that are remembered the most are often the murderers and serial killers, this is evident from the number of movies, shows and documentaries that have been produced over the years telling stories based on true events. When retelling these stories, it is not uncommon for the studio to cast a well-known, attractive actor or actress as the murderer, which is a tactic used to draw in more viewers, but at a price. This consequently opens the show up to be romanticised by audiences allowing them to forget who the sinister character was once real, and look past the heinous acts. Take Netflix’s *Dahmer - Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* for example there is no doubt that Evan Peters, playing the cannibalistic killer played a part in it being “the service’s most-watched series in its first week” (Jaffer, 2022). But was it for his talent as an

actor or was it to watch him “lift weights with sweat rolling off his muscular abdomen” (Jaffer, 2022)?



Figure 4 – Evan Peters as Jeffrey Dahmer (Netflix's *Dahmer* Season 1 Episode 3, 2022)

Even though the sexualization of serial killers can be concerning, in a way it is helpful to remind us that evil does and can look like anyone and don't always 'look bad' at first sight like how Disney villains have been presented to us (see Figures 5 and 6). It is also common for the writers to change and add plot points in the story to make it more dramatic and appealing for audiences, as a result this dishonours the victims and their families as it can create a biased account of the story and spread false information relating to their lives. True crime dramas like Netflix's *Dahmer* are a reconstruction of the stories told from Jeffrey Dahmer's perspective as his testimonies are the closest we have to the truth behind his acts. There are only so many details that can be filled in using police reports but ultimately the victims, storyline and perspective is often lost and dramatized to make up the plot for the drama.



Figure 5 - Hades from Disney's
"Hercules" (1997)



Figure 6 - Maleficent from Disney's
"Sleeping Beauty" (1959)

Something that monsters all have in common is "they often live in lairs deep underground, in an unseen dimension as it were, or in watery places like marshes, fens, or swamps" (Gilmore, 2009, p.12). In fictional stories and in folklore these are seen as places to avoid and be aware of imminent danger as you are at risk of encountering a threatening creature, for example The Forbidden Forest in the *Harry Potter* series (Rowling, 1997). By using them as the settings where characters are lured or accidentally stumble upon, we are introduced to the monster in its true form. In their domain they are the ones in control, they hold the power over anyone who enters but it is also where they are naturally most comfortable allowing for them to let their guard down becoming vulnerable.

It's when they are removed from their lairs and put in a new environment, they become erratic and unpredictable making them more dangerous, "They emerge from these fastnesses... to shake humans from their complacency" (Gilmore, 2009, p.13). A monster's lair is a reflection of their personality, by using subtle tones and colours that communicate their intentions and feelings. Some monsters' physical appearances are designed using details to indicate that they are manifestations of the environment around them, because of this they are seen as an entity created by nature allowing for a more fearful response. For instance, Dracula has his dark, mysterious castle in Transylvania (see Figure 7) (Stoker, 1897), the Abominable Snowman resides in the

harsh, cold Himalayan mountain range and in DC Comics Swamp-Thing inhabits the Louisiana swamps (see Figure 8) (Wein, 1971).



Figure 7 - Cover of *Swamp Thing* #9 (March–April 1974), art by Bernie Wrightson



Figure 8 - Dracula's castle, *Dracula* (1931) Directed by Tod Browning and Karl Freund

When it comes to the human manifestation of monsters in the real world, there are similarities to be seen between the lairs of humans and the lairs of fictional monsters. Each would settle in a place of their own, adapting it to suit their needs. To avoid drawing attention from the outside world, real life monsters' lairs will maintain an unsuspecting and discreet façade, keeping all of the dark secrets inside. On the outside, they could assume the appearance of your average home, office or abandoned warehouse. It's behind closed doors where the real monster's sanctuary lies. Monsters have lairs for a variety of purposes, they use it as their living space where they can plot and scheme their next attack but can also use it as a torture chamber where they lure and subsequently capture their prey.

The monster's lair isn't the only environment that is integral to their story, their upbringing also plays an important part in the character they are known to be. Pierre Bourdieu uses the term *habitus* to refer to "dispositions", "tendencies" and 'propensities' that have been deeply ingrained into the minds of individuals through their experiences in life, especially in relation to the social environment they are surrounded by (Bourdieu, 1977). It shapes how people make choices in life, react in

certain situations and perceive the world. There are many factors that contribute to the habitus, for example class, education, and cultural background play a part in the development of one's practices. If this is applied to monsters in the real world this can be used to interpret that a monster's first lair is where they first committed their crimes or experienced callous tendencies. Somewhere where they were shaped as a child and their opinions were formed would contribute to the future monster they would later become. Experiencing violence and unhealthy relationships at a young age can affect people and lead them down a dark path in life.

From stories throughout time, both fiction and non-fiction, it is clear that monsters can come in all different shapes and sizes. They take on many forms and are considered monsters for different reasons whether it is due to their upbringings, or their action or even their appearance. In fiction and folklore monsters are generally used as the antagonist or the obstacle to overcome. Whereas in real life we fear for our safety as anyone around us could be a monster.

Chapter 2

Netflix's *Dahmer - Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (2022)

Heritage described Netflix's *Dahmer* as “almost unwatchably queasy”, saying that it “spends too long in the grisly squalor of the serial killer's life” (Heritage, 2009), which compliments the nature of his psychopathic tendencies. The show focused a generous amount of time on the methods he used to entrap his victims as if they were prey, and went into great detail about the actions he inflicted upon them. Despite being well received by many and popular with viewers, the audience became quite disturbed with what was happening on the screen in front of them. The show became controversial after its release due to how the creatives behind the show decided to present the monster to audiences. The controversy stems from the glorification of the real-life serial killer, whereas for members of his victim's families, the show was retraumatizing and felt the show was capitalizing off the trauma of others (Shanfeld, 2022). Jeffrey Dahmer is a complex character to bring to life on screen and by showcasing different locations important to his story, the show highlights how they were integral to events that took place and how they influenced his character.

In the scenes exploring the life of a young Jeffrey Dahmer, it is clear the writers wanted to show that he had a rough childhood that potentially played a part in how he became a monster. He was neglected by his mother who suffered from mental illness and tempestuous behaviour, causing his parents to argue constantly in front of him and his brother. After they got divorced, he was abandoned at home, alone for over three months at the age of 18. It was during this time he started heavily drinking, exploring his sexuality and fantasising about murder. One day he breaks routine by inviting a hitchhiker into his home and takes his first victim. The time he was left alone after being traumatically deserted by his parents is what pushed him over the edge of going down the dark path, as implied by the show.



Figure 9 – Young Jeffrey Dahmer and his father at their taxidermy station (Netflix's *Dahmer* Season 1 Episode 2, 2022)

The episodes of the show explore different points in Dahmer's life, from his early childhood to his death. As a child, his father took his son's interest in dead animals as an interest in biology, leading them to take up the hobby of taxidermy. Setting up a taxidermy station in the garage, Dahmer learned how to bleach and preserve the bones of the animal carcasses they found (see Figure 9). These were the skills and techniques he would later use attempting to preserve his victims. For many years he would spend time alone in the garage isolated from the outside world surrounded by dead animals. This leads one to interpret that the Dahmer's garage was the monster's first lair.

After being discharged from the army, Dahmer was sent to live with his grandmother in Milwaukee, Wisconsin where he used the basement to lure young men with money in exchange for nude photos. But in fact, he intended to drug and murder his victims, leaving their bodies in the basement where he would later dismember and dispose of the remains. Another example of one of Dahmer's lairs was the gay bathhouse he frequented; he was eventually banned after being accused by the owner of drugging men he would lure to his private room. Ultimately, he would find his own one-bedroom apartment in Milwaukee where he was the one in control, the only occupant, as his ideal and final lair (see Figure 10).



Figure 10 – Jeffrey Dahmer's Milwaukee apartment (Netflix's *Dahmer* Season 1 Episode 1, 2022)

With most of Dahmer's victims being queer men of colour and Dahmer himself a white cis male, if anyone, including the police became suspicious of his actions he would take advantage of his white privilege and convince them that they were in a queer interracial relationship. This led to them becoming uncomfortable, overlooking certain alarming details due to the race and class of the victims and the homosexual nature of the events. An example of this is shown in the show when he convinces the police that the young 14-year-old Konerak Sinthasomphone was his drunk 19 year old boyfriend when in fact he had been drugged by Dahmer after being lured back to the apartment. When the police would be called to his apartment he knew how to charm and manipulate them into leaving and not investigate further, showing how he held the control over his victims when they were in his apartment, his lair, it was his domain.

The majority of the tragic events took place within his apartment making it clear that it was his ultimate lair. The pilot episode, "Episode One" of the show gives a detailed account and close-up view into the dark corners of apartment 213, during which Dahmer has lured Tracy Edwards back to his lair. This is the first heinous act we see take place within Dahmer's home, but in the sense of continuity this is in fact the last time he will attempt to murder another young man before his arrest. It serves as our introduction to his lair, focusing on Dahmer's dingy apartment, preparing the audience for his wickedness and setting the tone for the rest of the series. It's clear these events were intentionally used in the first episodes by the writers and director as an attempt to hook the audience into watching the rest of the show to see how the monster reached this dark point in his life. In the scene we see Dahmer standing behind Tracy Edwards,

as if a predator watching over and stalking its prey (see Figure 11). The shot shows the power he had over his victims after he lured them to his apartment as he makes Edwards dance for his own amusement. This causes the monster to lower his guard, finally getting his way, becoming vulnerable as his prey is seemingly submitting to his control. The sequence takes place moments before Dahmer's last known victim escapes from his apartment ultimately leading to his arrest.



Figure 11 – Shaun J. Brown (left) as Tracy Edwards and Evan Peters (Right) as Jeffrey Dahmer (Netflix's *Dahmer* Season 1 Episode 1, 2022)

The production design of the show plays a huge part in how the audience understands and receives the main character. During the scene in question, we are introduced to Dahmer's Milwaukee apartment and his psychological mindset as if we are the victim being lured into the monster's lair for the first time. The scene showcases the dark corners of his apartment giving the audience an insight into his character; this is done by using subtle details around the set. When Dahmer is seen in his lair his true self is revealed, it is the place he is seen to be most vulnerable, yet he holds the power over his victims. The monster's personality is expressed through their lairs and their décor, cleanliness, and lighting, affecting how the audience will view the character for the remainder of the show.

Before Dahmer's face is even revealed in the episode the audience is given close-up shots from different angles of the apartment that hint at the character of the monster. As a blood covered electric carving knife is being cleaned in the sink, we can see bottles of bleach placed around the counter and the floors along with crushed empty

beer cans. On his dining table lies a drill dripping fresh blood (see Figure 12), forming a dark red puddle next to an ashtray and a bottle of hot sauce. This suggests that he takes part in cannibalism and the table where he dismembers his victim's body is the same one where he relaxes and eats. This idea is reinforced by the full box of tools and the cassette player placed next to them under the fluorescent desk lamp, essentially meaning he finds comfort in the horror (see Figure 13). As he leaves to go hunt down his next victim, we see he has reinforced the door with several strong locks, foreshadowing the events later in the episode when Edwards tries to make his escape.



Figure 12 – Drill covered in blood (Netflix's *Dahmer* Season 1 Episode 1, 2022)



Figure 13– Dahmer's kitchen table (Netflix's *Dahmer* Season 1 Episode 1, 2022)

His lack of personal belongings is one aspect of the apartment that lets the viewers know he lacks human empathy and is now alone in his life. He has been abandoned by his mother, distanced from his father and the only people he gets remotely close to are his victims. This is conveyed through the polaroids in his bedside table of his victims

in vulnerable positions and the trophies he keeps from each victim. Yet there is a clear lack of family photos anywhere in his home and nothing that resembles a personal or nostalgic item that would assist in humanising him. We see the apartment with very minimal decoration apart from a luminous green fish tank in the corner filling on the side of the room with its sickly light and the odd print on the walls.

As Dahmer brings Edwards closer to the tank to take a closer look, he tells him “They’re fighting fish, you’re not supposed to put two of ‘em in the same tank but I like watching them fight” (Murphy, 2022), the chilling line reflects his desire and love for torturing others. As one fish floats lifeless at the top of the water, the other carries on swimming carelessly around it, a scenario that Dahmer has experienced multiple times within the apartment after luring in his victims. A simple but eery detail that adds to the sinister mindset of the monster is when Edwards notices a satanic bible on the coffee table, as if the bare blood-stained mattress sitting hauntingly in the bedroom isn’t enough to make anyone wary of the occupant and run away (see Figure 14).



Figure 14 – Dahmer’s blood-stained mattress (Netflix’s *Dahmer* Season 1 Episode 1, 2022)

At the end of the episode after his arrest, the police begin their investigation by tearing apart the complex in search of evidence. This essentially gives a tour of the apartment to the audience showing them the traumatizing details that were hidden around the apartment almost in plain sight. Certain objects that would seem normal and unsuspecting on the outside contained dark secrets inside, similar to Dahmer and the approach he took when hunting his prey. For example, the fridge stocked with beer in the kitchen is unsuspecting at first, but it is revealed later that he had placed the severed head of one of his victims inside. In his bedroom he had kept a whole human skeleton

in a drawer. During the raid we see shelves filled with pill bottles containing various drugs he would have used to spike his victims and render them unconscious along with multiple kinds of acid and bleach he would later use on their remains.

As they enter the bedroom Edwards becomes disturbed with the sight of a sealed vat ominously sitting in the dark and dusty corner (see Figure 15). Initially it is not revealed what it contains, causing it to become more unsettling, but after the contents are unveiled it becomes more disturbing that it was kept only a few feet from his bed. These were his true decorations, his trophies, it was obvious from the blood dripping from a drill and the empty beer cans scattered around the rooms, that he took more care of the human remains than the rest of his own apartment.

When the police arrived to arrest your son, they found various items around the apartment that indicate that your son has committed multiple murders... There was a human head in his refrigerator. Two plastic bags in the freezer, each containing a human heart, another containing a set of male genitalia. In the bedroom there was five more skulls, knives and hammers and saws and polaroids documenting the dismemberments. In another drawer we found a complete human skeleton the bones had been bleached, a dried scalp. And then a 57-gallon vat, filled with acid. Inside were three torsos in various stages of decomposition, as well as other body parts that he was attempting to dissolve or strip the tissue off the bones. (Murphy, 2022).

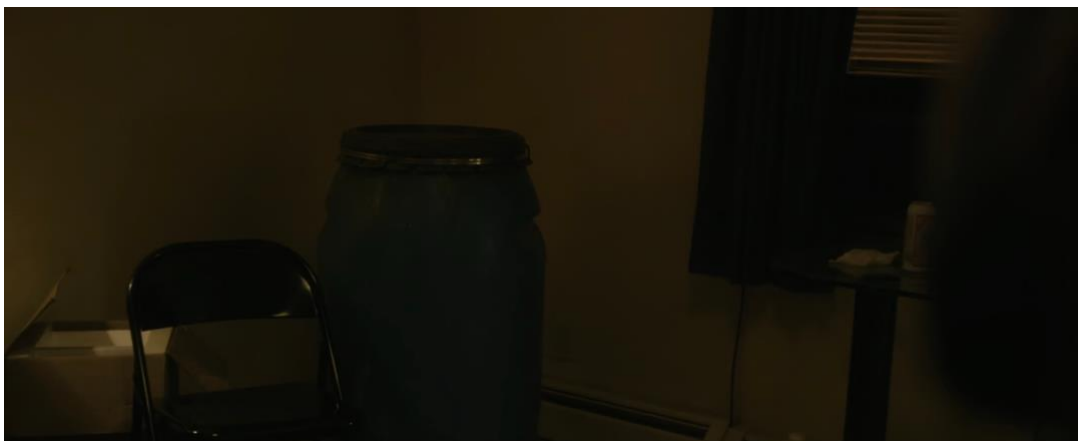


Figure 15 – Sealed vat in Dahmer's bedroom (Netflix's *Dahmer* Season 1 Episode 1, 2022)

Throughout the show, the scenes that take place in his apartment follow the same colour palette. The lighting creates a dark yellow kind of hue with a green tinge, a sickly colour to compliment the sickening personality of the serial killer. This colour

palette tends to provoke many emotions on film and can indicate many hidden meanings. Yellow, often associated with idyllic and innocent, can also be linked with madness and illness, while green is used to indicate corruption, the dangerous, and the sinister (Davies, 2022). Colours are used to generate many different psychological effects on film, but when it comes to this show it is difficult to look past the colour tint used throughout to indicate the madness and the sinister within the character of Jeffrey Dahmer.



Figure 16 – Dahmer's alone in his kitchen (Netflix's *Dahmer* Season 1 Episode 1, 2022)



Figure 17 – Dahmer threatening Edwards (Netflix's *Dahmer* Season 1 Episode 1, 2022)

This sequence is one of many that caused much discomfort among viewers adding to the hatred and disgust they had for the vile man. The dark thrilling tone throughout the ten episodes convey the twisted soul of the main character, striking fear into viewers and reinforces the idea of the dangerous monster he was. The detailed view of the

apartment throughout the episode puts viewers in Edward's shoes as he notices the small details that indicate the main character was a monstrous villain and not the typical protagonist of the story going forward. The show's portrayal of this space, particularly in the pilot episode, emphasizes how Dahmer used his environment to create a false sense of security for his victims and to manipulate those around him, including the police. His ability to exploit racial and sexual prejudices allowed him to evade suspicion for years, making his apartment the ultimate lair where he could operate with impunity. The chilling atmosphere of his home, as depicted in the series, sets the stage for the unravelling of his dark story, leaving viewers to grapple with the terrifying reality of his control over both his victims and the world around him.



Figure 18 – Dahmer in his bedroom (Netflix's *Dahmer* Season 1 Episode 1, 2022)

Chapter 3

HBO MAX's *Love & Death* (2023)

Not unlike the monster stories Gilmore refers to (2009, p.13), Candy Montgomery caused destruction and uproar in the once placid unsuspecting community of Wylie, Texas. In 2023, HBO Max released *Love & Death*, a drama series based on the affair between Candy Montgomery and Allan Gore which carried on over the course of 10 months. During their affair they would make certain rules they would each have to follow to avoid getting caught and set boundaries for one another to make sure the relationship never left the motel room. Nearly a year after it ended, Candy went to the Gore's house to get a swimsuit for her daughter and was confronted about the affair by Allan's wife Betty.

After admitting to the affair and explaining that it had ended months prior, Betty swung at Candy with an axe and a struggle between the two erupted. An outburst of rage from Candy caused Betty to lose the fight, which resulted in uproar and devastation from the community. Candy had struck Betty with an axe 41 times including with 28 of the blows directed to her head and face, and the rest to her arms, torso and legs, leaving her body almost unrecognisable. All but one of the blows were inflicted while she was still alive. The show attempts to recreate Betty Gore's murder based on the details given by Candy Montgomery's testimony in the real-life court case. In the two-week period before she was apprehended, the small Texan community was shaken by the death of their friend, wondering who could do such a thing. But Candy, who claimed to have acted in self-defense, was referred to as a monster due to the heinous nature of Betty's death, even before people knew she was responsible for her murder.



Figure 19: Elizabeth Olsen (left) as Candy Montgomery and Jesse Plemons (right) as Allan Gore (*Love & Death* Season 1 Episode 1, 2023)

When looking at Max's *Love & Death*, it is obvious the show was intended to give a more of a positive attitude directed towards the character of Candy Montgomery and a brighter tone to be applied to the show. Candy is portrayed as an unexpected killer, allowing for the opportunity to sympathise and relate to her, by showcasing her perfect American dream life as a housewife, a mother of two and a beloved member of the church community. Elizabeth Olsen's take on Candy's unharmed demeanour throughout is almost comforting for viewers in comparison to other portrayals of real-life monsters. It is undeniable that Candy is deserving of being considered a monster by viewers and especially in the eyes of her community. Being from a very religious community and being a highly respected member of their church, when the news about the affair came out she was abandoned by her friends and had to move town.

When witnessing the beginning of her torrid affair with Allan Gore, her future victim's husband, it almost feels natural to be empathetic towards her and understand the choices she makes. After receiving a lack of affection and love from her husband she sought to find it elsewhere. During the affair, Allan and Candy developed strong feelings for each other which made them realise they needed to terminate their

relationship, but she never forgot about the time spent together and the bond they formed.

In the scene after Betty's brutal murder takes place, in a state of shock processing what just happened Candy takes a shower fully clothed to wash off the blood and walks back out to her car (see Figure 20). She now realises she will never be able to get her time back with Allan and rekindle their relationship. Without trying to clean up the crime scene, she goes home to change in an attempt to carry on with her day and avoid attracting any unwanted attention. The reaction the audience sees from Olsen's performance in this scene is one that many would relate to, it is one that would make them stop and wonder is that how they would react after such a traumatic event.



Figure 20: Candy Montgomery driving away from the Gore's house after washing off the blood (*Love & Death* Season 1 Episode 7, 2023)

The character of Candy Montgomery has two sides to her, the loving, trustworthy Southern housewife and the adulterous killer, branded as a monster by the same community she was once a part of. With these two personas comes her two lairs; her family home in Wylie, the comforting sanctuary that represents the good Christian mother she wants everyone to know her as and then there's the remote motel rooms where she would rendezvous with Allan Gore to commit their scandalous affair (see Figure 21).



Figure 21: Ext. The Como Motel (*Love & Death* Season 1 Episode 2, 2023)

The décor of her home clearly reflects a sense of style that creates a warm and welcoming atmosphere in the Montgomery's home. This reflects her personality and succeeds in convincing everyone that is the person she is, which is evident from all her friends and fellow members of the church that would visit her. Sticking to the classic 1980s aesthetic it uses vibrant colours, crazy patterns and wooden panelling with family photos, along with other personal belongings (see Figure 22).

Viewers of the show witness Candy spending most of her time in her well-kept kitchen cooking for her family and the community, showing her sweet and caring side. Her home is where she is seen as her best self, she is loving and caring towards her children. Designing a lair to look like anyone else's home was a way of humanising her, allowing viewers to be comforted by her tender nature, but this wasn't her true lair or the true Candy Montgomery. Candy was presented as a woman who enjoyed having everyone look at her and believe she was perfect and had the perfect life, but that was just how it looked. Candy felt she was lacking affection and love from her husband which eventually pushed her away into the arms of Allan Gore to fill that void.



Figure 22: Concept art of Candy's Kitchen in *Love and Death* (2023), illustrated by Andrés Parada

The lair of the monster is more intriguing in the sense that it represents the secrets and the lies she created by having her affair, effectively making her the monster she is painted as. The motel rooms where they arrange to meet for their secret dates acts as a heterotopia (Foucault, 1967) for the adulterers. It is a space outside of the conventional society, used as a short-term escape from her everyday life and refuge during her personal crisis. Even though the motels are tied to the flow of people, due to their location on the side of the road, the motel rooms themselves have a sense of nowhere. They are not anchored to any specific place or culture; they hold the feeling of isolation from the outside world. The anonymous spaces and the transient nature of their visit reflect the secrecy in Candy's life.

The first motel room they rent at the Continental Inn is bland, lacks any sort of liveliness and a colour that is used predominantly throughout the set is green with a hint of yellow. (see Figure 23). Seen on the façade of the building, the room doors, the chairs, carpet and bedding, the green symbolises the beginning of their affair as it's often used to represent corruption and rebirth, and mixed with the yellow it enhances the blissful emotions in the scene (Davies, 2022) (see Figure 24). The room is designed with clean and polished furniture, varnished wooden panelling and stylish sconces give the room a rich and idyllic setting for their first meeting.



Figure 23: Ext. The Continental Inn (*Love & Death* Season 1 Episode 1, 2023)



Figure 24: Int. The Continental Inn, Candy setting up for lunch (*Love & Death* Season 1 Episode 1, 2023)

In the second episode, after only meeting once, Candy decides they should meet at the motel opposite, The Como Motel, for their next rendezvous due to it being cheaper. Apart from the rooms in their new lair being “a little sleezy” (Atkinson, 2023) in comparison to their previous hook-up spot, there is a noticeable difference in décor and tone. On the outside the doors and the trim of the building and the doors to the rooms are a scarlet red (See Figure 25). Inside their room is a red velvet bedspread and bedroom on top of a floor covered in a crimson carpet. As she always does, Candy brings a packed lunch for them to make sure they don’t waste any quality time with

each other. She has taken full control over the room officially making it her lair, she chose the location, luring in Allan on his lunch break, and after preparing their meal she decorates the space with her own red tablecloth and lunch boxes (See Figure 26). The change in tone signifies the change in their relationship as they have now started to develop feelings for one another and are no longer in the idyllic no strings attached liaison they had initially planned for.



Figure 25: Ext. The Como Motel (*Love & Death* Season 1 Episode 2, 2023)



Figure 26: Int. The Como Motel (*Love & Death* Season 1 Episode 2, 2023)

The monster that is Candy Montgomery is presented in a very similar manner to the female monsters such as mermaids and sirens. She lures in Allan, her prey, enticing him towards the danger that could disrupt and end his marriage. The cunning side of

her personality is revealed as she attempts to plan everything to avoid getting caught and ensure she can execute her plan of having an affair. While making their plan, she manipulates Allan into allowing her to take control of the situation by organizing the food and the motel. “I’ll be in charge of fixing lunch on the days that we meet so we just have more time, I’ll also be in charge of getting the motel room, same reason it just gives us more quality time.” (Atkinson, 2023).

Initially she was overlooked as a suspect because the investigators believed only a man was capable of brutally murdering Betty Gore the way she was and there was no way a woman could. Her unsuspected nature aligns with the cunning demeanor of female monsters. Apart from sharing characteristics and strategies with the fictional female monsters, Candy’s story also uses her sexuality and her desires as an integral part of her becoming a monster. In the show, the character Candy is written as a sexual character who uses her body to lure in a naïve man. This is emphasised by the fact that they hired the attractive and well known actress Elizabeth Olsen to play her to draw in viewers, despite the fact she doesn’t resemble the real life Candy Montgomery (see Figure 27).



Figure 27 – Candy Montgomery (left) in real life and Elizabeth Olsen (right) as Candy Montgomery (Leffelaer, 2023)

Seen in the clothes and nail polish Candy wears, the rooms of the motel where the affair occurred, and the streaks of Betty’s blood on the walls, it is evident that red is

used throughout the show to represent the intimacy and violence, or in other words: love and death.

Traditionally, red has been associated with intense and uncontrollable feelings: love and romantic passion, violence, danger, rage or ambition for power are themes that are often associated with this colour. In general, as we see, it is related to the forbidden, the controversial, the sexual... so it will be very present in violent or passionate stories, romantic or otherwise. (Davies, 2022).

Linked to the scenes surrounding the affair and the murder, red is largely used in the first episode in a scene where Candy and Allan meet to initially discuss the affair at a roadside diner. The colour red takes over the scene amplifying the forbidden sexual tension to an extent where it somewhat helps make the scene visually memorable. A ruby steel canopy covers the two as they eat at the diner with the classic red and white checked table cloth, in a sea of cherry stackable chairs and the surrounding buildings painted to match (See Figures 28). Hiding in plain sight, the colour red represents her loving nature and sexual desire, but also hints at her underlying rage and sinful fantasies that both contribute to her eventual arrest and her being branded a monster.



Figure 28: Candy and Allan having lunch at the roadside diner (*Love & Death* Season 1 Episode 1, 2023)



Figure 29: Candy and Allan discussing the affair at the roadside diner (*Love & Death* Season 1 Episode 1, 2023)

It is clear that the creators of the show wanted Candy to be a more relatable character and to do so they extensively broke down her mental wellbeing in the courtroom scenes. In these scenes it is discovered that not only did she not intend to murder Betty Gore, but in fact experienced a dissociative reaction brought on by one word “Sssssh”. After a hypnosis session, Dr. Fred Fason, the psychiatrist on the case established that Candy was “a person who is excessively concerned with what other people think of her” (Atkinson, 2023), this is because of her mother and an incident that occurred when she was a child (see Figure 30).

When she was a child, Candy’s mother would force her to care about what others thought of her and during an incident that sent Candy to the hospital her mother told her “Sssssh! What will they think of you in the waiting room? Stop crying. Shh! Shh!” (Atkinson, 2023). “Sssssh” was essentially a trigger word for Candy, and it was during the confrontation with Betty who whispered this to her, causing her to enter the dissociative state and kill Betty Gore in self-defense. This is another example of habitus and how Candy’s upbringing, her mother’s expectations of her and society’s expectations of women affected her at a young age. This humanises the monster and despite being based on a true story with the outcome already known, the show still manages to make you worry about the main character.



Figure 30: Brian d'Arcy James (left) as Dr. Fred Fason and Elizabeth Olsen (right) as Candy Montgomery (*Love & Death* Season 1 Episode 7, 2023)

Conclusion

In both *Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* and *Love & Death*, the concept of the "monster" is explored not only through their actions but also through the physical spaces these characters inhabit. These spaces, which could be described as their "lair", become integral to understanding the complex ways in which both characters navigate their desires, traumas, and the societal forces that shape them. While both Dahmer and Candy were undeniably branded as "monsters", the portrayal of their actions and environments provides a stark contrast in how monstrosity is defined, and challenges the audience to reconsider what makes someone truly monstrous.

Dahmer takes a direct approach to emphasizing the darkness within its leading character, aligning him with the archetype of a monster whose lair becomes a central tool for storytelling. The bleak, decaying environment of Dahmer's apartment mirrors his disturbed psyche and creates a visceral sense of dread and horror, preparing viewers for the brutality he inflicted upon his victims. On the other hand, *Love & Death* introduces Candy Montgomery as an unexpected and, at times, a sympathetic figure. While her actions ended in violence and heartbreak, the show takes great care in humanizing Candy, especially through her domestic life and the portrayal of her internal struggles. Her home, decorated in a wholesome 1980s aesthetic, serves as a comforting lair for the public's perception of her, while the motel rooms where she conducts her affair with Allan Gore represent a space of secrecy, guilt, and ultimately rage.

Dahmer's lair becomes an active participant in the thriller, amplifying the sense of isolation and depravity that defines his character and the decaying nature that reflects Dahmer's internal rot. The show makes little effort to humanize Dahmer, instead using his environment to establish him as an isolated figure, focusing on his ability to manipulate and control those around him. His victims, many of whom are young men from marginalized communities, are lured into his apartment with promises of

companionship or financial gain. Once there, Dahmer uses drugs, coercion, and psychological manipulation to render them powerless. His victims, dismissed or overlooked by authorities due to racial or sexual biases, are further isolated by the environment itself. His ability to gain the trust of his victims and simultaneously exploit racial and sexual prejudices reveals the darker side of male privilege. Dahmer's manipulation goes beyond just his victims; he manipulates the system itself, using his understanding of societal biases to evade suspicion, and the police often overlook the victims' disappearances due to their marginalized status. His ability to charm and manipulate the police, by exploiting racial and sexual prejudices, further highlights how his victims were often dismissed. This manipulation of race and sexuality, along with his victims' isolation, underscores the chilling reality of how Dahmer used his environment to control and overpower others. In this context, Dahmer's monstrosity is amplified by the dehumanizing space that he calls home, emphasizing his role as a predator who moves unnoticed through a system that fails to protect those most vulnerable to him.

In contrast, *Love & Death* introduces Candy as a character whose monstrosity is more nuanced and complicated. While her violent actions are undeniable, the show takes a more sympathetic approach in its portrayal of her. By showcasing the nurturing side to Candy's personality, it enables the audience to humanise and sympathise with the character, in doing so it allows for a more formal response when talking about her. Compared to Dahmer who is mainly referred to by his surname as an attempt to dehumanise and distance from the monster himself, it is almost comforting to refer to her as Candy and not Montgomery or Mrs. Montgomery. Unlike Dahmer, who is presented largely as a predator with little to redeem him, Candy is humanized through her domestic life and her internal struggles. This duality between her public image and private dissatisfaction sets the stage for the secret life she leads, particularly in the motels where she carries on her affair with Allan Gore. These motels represent Candy's escape from the constraints of her domestic life, but they also embody a space of secrecy, guilt, and passion. Through these spaces, the show complicates the concept of monstrosity, asking viewers to consider the psychological motivations behind Candy's actions and to sympathize with her, despite the tragic consequences of her choices.

The two lairs, Dahmer's dingy, oppressive apartment and Candy's seemingly ordinary home along with the seedy motels, highlight the contrasting ways in which a "monster" can be constructed. Dahmer's lair is an extension of his psychopathy, where his control over his victims is absolute. In contrast, Candy's lairs are sites of both vulnerability and manipulation, as she navigates the complexities of desire, guilt, and identity. The contrasting treatment of the lair as both a psychological and physical space in these series invites viewers to reflect on how we define monstrosity and the spaces that contain it. Compared to Dahmer, Candy is presented as an equally manipulative character, but in a different context. Candy's approach to luring Allan Gore into an affair is less about physical domination and more about emotional seduction. She presents herself as a lonely, misunderstood housewife, trapped in an emotionally barren marriage. Allan, similarly dissatisfied with his own marriage, is drawn to her warmth and affection. However, what makes Candy's manipulation particularly intriguing is the subtle way she uses gender expectations to her advantage. She plays into the role of the nurturing, affectionate woman while carefully orchestrating the affair's conditions, taking charge of the logistics, such as choosing the motel and preparing meals. Her actions are driven by a mix of sexual desire and emotional desperation, yet she also uses the affair to reclaim a sense of agency in her otherwise constrained life.

These contrasting portrayals challenge traditional definitions of monstrosity. Dahmer's monstrosity is tied to his violent actions and the enabling environment, where his apartment reflects his twisted mind and victims remain powerless. His manipulation of race, sexuality, and vulnerability allows him to evade detection. In contrast, Candy's monstrosity is more complex, as the show explores empathy and moral ambiguity. She is shaped by societal pressures on women, with her affair representing a rebellion against patriarchal roles. Her violent outburst, driven by emotional boundaries being crossed, brands her as a "monster," reflecting the destructive impact of repressed emotions and rigid gender expectations.

Both Dahmer and Candy represent different aspects of monstrosity, and their lairs serve as crucial settings for understanding their complex characters. While Dahmer's lair is one of power, control, and dominance, Candy's reflects vulnerability, emotional manipulation, and the consequences of societal repression. They are not just spaces of

physical control but more psychological projections that mirror the darker recesses of their minds. The spaces they inhabit are extensions of their monstrous selves; one a cold and isolating trap, the other mirrors repressed desires and unmet needs. The two characters' actions and the spaces in which they occur emphasise the ways in which the "monster" can take many forms. One as an invisible predator hiding behind societal privileges or one as a complex, emotional figure who is both victim and perpetrator of her own monstrous acts. Ultimately, these shows invite viewers to question not only how we define monstrosity but also how the spaces we inhabit physically, psychologically, and socially, shape our understanding of ourselves and others. Through these environments, *Dahmer* and *Love & Death* challenge the viewer to reconsider the nature of monstrosity, empathy, and the spaces where both can thrive. The monster is not always who or what society imagines it to be; sometimes it is hidden behind seemingly ordinary façades, shaped by trauma, isolation, and the blurring lines between good and evil.

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