

Monsters in the Closet: Challenging Queer Stereotypes in *American Horror Story*

Introduction

The United States of America is currently experiencing significant moments in our history concerning the queer community. Same-sex marriage is on its way to becoming legalized nationwide, and current statistics show that the queer community is enjoying stronger support than in any previous American era (Newport & Himelfarb). The changing opinion regarding LGBT people is reflected not only in legislation, but in television and film as well. This movement towards acceptance has been taking small steps forward since the late 1960s, but the past two decades have displayed impressive growth in film representation of the queer community. Not only have the numbers of queer characters increased; but the characters themselves are taking on more complexity and depth, leading to a deeper understanding in viewers. This paper will examine the change in representation of the queer community over time in relation to historical progress, with a specific focus on the horror genre. This paper will also examine the use of queer characters in *American Horror Story*, in particular. While *American Horror Story* utilizes the common tropes of any horror film, what truly sets it apart is its use of the horror genre to turn queer stereotypes into meaningful questions for an audience. By making the viewer question what is truly “normal” and what is “other,” the show encourages the audience to empathize with and rethink their perception of the queer community. This is a trend increasingly reflected in other contemporary horror television and film as well; this paper will also conduct a brief examination and comparison of these to *American Horror Story*.

History of Queer Representation in Film/Television

While most of us understand that queer sexuality has existed as long as humans have, cinema has not. A fairly recent invention, film has only been around and available to the general public for about 120 years. Invented in the 1890s, the film industry grew quickly, both economically and in terms of artistic expression. In their book, *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America*, Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin describe queer representation in these early years of film-making. In a post-Victorian era where most of the population was completely ignorant of diverse sexual orientations, many films contained characters implied to be queer; most often, these characters were the “pansy” and the “mannish woman” (24-25). The pansy was characterized as a man displaying feminine behavior and speech; Benshoff and Griffin state that “the pansy stereotype reinforced (and grew out of) notions of homosexuality as gender inversion” (25). By using characters displaying this feminine behavior, these films perpetuated the idea that gay men were weak, foppish and certainly not “manly.” The shallow manner in which gay characters were portrayed encouraged the viewing public to regard homosexual men primarily as objects of ridicule. As with gay men, the stereotypical “mannish woman” depicted implied lesbians wearing masculine clothing and adopting masculine grooming and behavior (such as smoking cigars) (26). While the majority of these queer characters in the era before and during WWII were seen as humorous and harmless, there were some movies that depicted queer characters as deranged villains. Especially during WWII, queer characteristics were used to make villainous characters seem even more twisted and evil. For example, Benshoff and Griffin illustrate how Nazi characters in the movies *Saboteur* (1942) and *The House on 92nd Street* (1945) are given “queer” characteristics as a “device meant to show how unmanly and perverted the Germans were” (35). By encouraging viewers to associate queer tendencies with

villainy, Hollywood was creating a precedent for the viewing public to either disdain or fear the queer community.

After WWII, the country struggled to restructure itself as men returned home from war and women were expected to return from their wartime jobs to their place in the home. This post-war era, particularly the 1950s, was instrumental in the shaping of the “American Dream” and the nuclear family. Americans were expected to adhere to a restrictive idea of “normal”: a working father, a homemaker mother and children living under a strict moral code. Benshoff and Griffin state, “Conformity to a white, middle-class, heterosexual, jingoistic American norm became a national obsession” (86). This was visible in films that demonized queer characters and portrayed them as victimizing “normal” characters (86). As paranoia focused on the queer community rose, a movement was born: the “homophile movement” was the beginning of the modern fight for gay rights in the United States. Benshoff and Griffin clarify the use of this specific term *homophile* (replacing *homosexual*) as a way of emphasizing love over sex (89). In his article “The American Gay Rights Movement and Patriotic Protest,” Hall discusses the origins of the homophile organization called the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles and its founder, Henry Hay, Jr. This society grew to have chapters in other major US cities and partner with other groups such as the Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian society. However, those within the Mattachine Society fighting for the rights of gays in the community eventually rejected Hay’s leadership in favor of a more conservative leader (540). Even though the society wanted to support the queer community, they were fearful of the consequences of exposure to a homophobic public. Part of the driving influence behind America’s homophobia was the revolutionary study conducted by Dr. Alfred Kinsey. In his report, Dr. Kinsey reported homosexual tendencies and behavior in a much larger percentage of the population than people

could have imagined (Benshoff & Griffin, 88). By also asserting that heterosexual individuals could and would participate in homosexual behaviors, the report increased the public's paranoia. Benshoff and Griffin state the report "implied that homosexuality could now be lurking anywhere, even in straight-acting friends and neighbors" (88). This idea is reflected in film representation around that time, more specifically in the horror genre, which I will address later. However, films containing a queer character most often portrayed those characters as violent, sadistic and corrupt. In many of these types of films, the queer characters are "punished" by being killed or dying violent deaths (90-91). Benshoff and Griffin state that this "compensating moral value" is partly why these films were even allowed to appear by the Production Code Administration (90). Queer representation was growing – if only to scare America's youth away from "immoral" sexual behavior.

While progress was made in the fight for gay rights throughout the 1960s and 1970s, films were beginning to change as well. With the dissolution of the Production Code, studios had more creative license in their films and began to more openly portray queer characters (131). With the rise of the rating system (still in use today), filmmakers were able to include more controversial material – this was bolstered by both the Sexual Revolution and a correlating financial crisis in the film industry (130-131). As the counterculture movement in the 1960s grew, audiences turned away from typical Hollywood fare and sought independent, foreign and art house films instead (131). To get audiences back in the theaters (and buying tickets), studios began to allow content into major Hollywood films that was normally only seen in independent theaters (131). Benshoff and Griffin state, "In searching for its missing audience, Hollywood of the late 1960s and early 1970s became very eclectic, producing work that was arguably more radical and experimental than it had ever produced before" (131). These new films had such an

abundance of sexual content that they created a new genre: sexploitation (131-135).

Interestingly, although many of these films portrayed queer behaviors (such as simulated group sex or “girl-on-girl” scenes), they were undeniably targeting heterosexual male viewers (132).

As films became more outrageous and bold, however, backlash began to grow. One critic in particular, John Simon, labeled these as “Loathsome Films” (141). Some examples include *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970), a somewhat-sequel to *Valley of the Dolls*, wherein a band of young women travels with their manager to Hollywood where they encounter deranged queer characters; *Myra Breckinridge* (1970), the story of a transgender woman who “travels to Hollywood to tear down American gender roles”; and *Performance* (1970), about a criminal gangster on the run who hides out in the home of a former rock star and encounters the cliché drugs, (queer) sex and rock’n’roll (141-142). Although these films, in the words of Benshoff and Griffin, “were meant to be dark comedic allegories about American social mores and sexual hypocrisy,” they created uproar among audiences and Hollywood critics (141). In the 1970s, when audiences began to turn back to more conventional films such as *Jaws* (1975), *Rocky* (1976), *Star Wars* (1977) and *Grease* (1978), queer characters were once again relegated to background roles (148-149). This indicated that US audiences were neither willing and/or ready to openly acknowledge the queer community.

In the early 1980s, something happened that radically changed the queer community – the rise of HIV/AIDS. When doctors first became aware of it, the cause was unknown; but they noted that the majority of those affected seemed to be gay men (202). Because doctors had not yet pinpointed a specific cause or manner of infection, it caused panic among the American public. Unaware at the time that the disease could only be spread through specific types of fluid exchange, people began to avoid places frequented by gay men and stopped going to businesses,

restaurants, etc. staffed, owned and/or visited by gays (202). Already a marginalized group, the association of AIDS with homosexuality further distanced the queer community from mainstream society. Although in time several campaigns educated the public about the cause of AIDS and how the disease spread, the public continued to negatively associate gays with the spread of AIDS. Many films of this time reflected this attitude; according to Benshoff and Griffin, “Within the industry, there was fear, hysteria, rumormongering, and renewed homophobia” (204). Even something as simple as a kissing scene became complicated as the panic created by the pandemic led studios to reject these scenes for fear of AIDS (204). This led to a rash of films that, once again, depicted queer characters and behavior as violent, dangerous, and possibly (or clearly) insane (205-206). Benshoff and Griffin describe the most common of these - the slasher film - as “the most prevalent type of crypto-AIDS film...cheap and easy to make, its repeated message equating sex and death seems an obvious displacement of AIDS-era fears” (205). One popular example is *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) in which the antagonist, a queer serial killer, abducts and kills women for their skin in order to make himself a “woman suit.” The other serial killer in the movie – Hannibal Lecter – seems himself to portray queer characteristics, further associating homosexuality with sadistic violence and sociopathy. However, as AIDS awareness began to grow and the public learned more about the disease, films emerged that portrayed queer characters infected with AIDS in a sympathetic manner (206-211). Many films and some television specials depicted gay men living with AIDS and their friends and families in a matter-of-fact, but positive and compassionate approach (207-208). By encouraging the public to see members of the queer community as human beings and not monsters, the film industry began to change and the stage was set for what Benshoff and Griffin describe as a “new movement of independent filmmaking that would become known as New

Queer Cinema” (216). The queer community was finally beginning to emerge from the closet and into the open permanently.

In 1985 amid fears of AIDS and the gay community, a new group was formed specifically to advocate for the queer community and report on queer representation in media such as radio, television, film, music, etc. This group, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) is still reporting on queer representation in the media today (249). Although performing an important function, many LGBT members of the entertainment industry feared that activist groups like GLAAD would “out” them against their wishes and they would be at risk for losing opportunities for work (249-250). In response to activist groups like GLAAD, studios began to make more films featuring queer characters (253-254). Although queer critics did not always respond positively to these films’ portrayal of queer characters, the public did. Movies such as *The Birdcage* (1996) and *In & Out* (1997) used comedy to soften the inherent edginess of the subject matter and were successful among mainstream audiences (256-260). Around this time, queer characters also began to emerge in television – two notable examples are Ellen DeGeneres’ character on *Ellen* coming out as a lesbian (Ellen DeGeneres herself came out as well); and the television show *Will & Grace*, featuring best friends Will, a gay man, and Grace, a straight woman. In the past two decades, queer representation has increased in both television and film; however, many of these characters are relegated to supporting or background roles and many sustain the same stereotypes depicted in the past. Benshoff and Griffin state, “In some ways, things have not changed all that much in mainstream Hollywood movies since the era of the Production Code. Homosexual content is still elided or written out of films based on real-life queers” (261). A recent example of this is the film *300* (2006), focusing on the story of Spartan king Leonidas and the battle of 300 Spartan warriors

against the invading Persians. In the film, Leonidas and other Spartans speak scornfully of homosexual behavior; but historically, Greek and especially Spartan society accepted and practiced homosexuality. However, despite the disturbing practice of heterosexualizing queer characters, queer representation is steadily rising. In its 2014 “Where We Are on TV” report, GLAAD states it “found an increase in the percentage of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) characters anticipated to appear on scripted primetime broadcast television” (3). Although queer representation is increasing, representation is still heavily in favor of heterosexual characters, with 96% percent of series regular characters presented as heterosexual compared to only 4% LGBT. Clearly, television and film have far to go towards achieving equitable representation.

History of Queer Representation in the Horror Genre

The horror genre has a history of containing subversive content – this a major reason why horror films and television are often subject to strict censoring and content control. As any viewer can attest, the primary goal of horror film and television is to scare, thrill and shock its audience. Part of how many horror films and television shows have accomplished this is by including content that had an inherent “queerness” (Benshoff, 36). By exploiting American fears of “otherness” that included queer sexuality, horror movies were able to further shock their audience while also perpetuating a fear of the queer community.

After WWII, the rise of communism led to extreme paranoia in the United States. Especially in Hollywood during the McCarthy era, anything deemed “other” was dangerous. In his book, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*, Harry Benshoff states, “A strict Self/Other dichotomy seemed to permeate the culture of the era, both for movie monsters and for homosexuals” (122). Many horror films of the 1950s and 1960s reflected this “us vs.

them” situation; though it applies to fears of the time that communists were secretly invading American society, these films also contained subtle clues that reflected a fear of invasion by “gender deviants” as well (128-129). A prominent example of this is the “invasion” horror film that was common in the 1950s. The central theme of these films was the invasion of the planet by aliens, monsters or some combination of both. In the film, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), the most terrifying aspect of the invaders is their ability to blend in (128). Another example mentioned by Benshoff is the film *I Married a Monster From Outer Space* (1958) in which an alien disguised as a human marries a human woman – but prefers the company of other men to spending time with his wife (130). Benshoff compares this with an article from a men’s magazine of that time that warns readers that gay men can appear as masculine as normal men, thus creating a suspicion of hyper-masculinity as well as hypo-masculinity (131-132). Combined with Dr. Kinsey’s assertion that homosexuality was far more prevalent than previously imagined, this heightened public fears that homosexuals were lurking, hidden in plain sight, waiting for their chance to prey on innocent members of the community.

Besides being seen as an invisible threat, Benshoff argues in his book that monster movies of the time also illustrated a queer threat to homosocial and heterosexual bonds. In *Monsters in the Closet*, Benshoff states Margaret Tarratt’s idea that the monsters in horror films were symbolic of “repressed sexual desire” (8). While it is easy to assume that Tarratt was referring to heterosexual desire, Benshoff argues that this applies to homosexual desire as well. Many horror films, both pre- and post-WWII feature a love triangle in which the main characters, a heterosexual couple, are threatened by a monster (36-37,133). This can be seen in such films as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and many more. By characterizing both hero and heroine as innocent, virginal, and moral and the villains as

passionate, sensual, and violent, these films associate overt sexuality (and as Benshoff asserts, implied homosexuality) with evil. A good example that Benshoff describes is within the film *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954). Benshoff relates that in the film, two scientists vying for the affections of a young woman are tracking a mysterious creature. The creature itself is described as somewhat phallic in appearance, and is interested (presumably sexually) in the female lead. What Benshoff describes, however, is the inherent sexuality of the homosocial bond between the two scientists, named Mark and David. Benshoff points out that Mark's comments when observing David conversing with Kay (the female lead) are indicative of jealousy; he argues that Mark's jealousy springs from a desire to maintain his homosocial and perhaps, homosexual relationship with David. Benshoff states of this film and its sequels, "the films seem to be asking about monstrous male-male bonds and then demonstrating that they must be destroyed before the normative heterosexual couple can be established" (132-136). Only by destroying the "other" can "normal" (i.e. heterosexual) relationships grow and prosper.

Beginning in the late 1950s and 1960s, a trend began to emerge wherein the movie monsters of the previous era were domesticated and portrayed in a normal context. Classic monsters such as witches, vampires, and Frankenstein's monster became Samantha in *Bewitched*, and Lily and Herman Munster of *The Munsters* (173-176). Benshoff theorizes that the popularity of these characters normalized and even celebrated "otherness" – by placing the "monster" within the context of a nuclear family, the inference was that monsters were more like "us" than previously implied (173). However, as movie monsters became more comedic and campy, the horror genre began to move in a new direction – namely, the "slasher" film. *Psycho* is one of the first examples of this genre. Released in 1961, the movie portrays a lonely man, referred to by police in the film as a "transvestite", who runs a motel. Eventually, viewers discover that the

main character, Norman Bates, is a cross-dressing serial killer. This trend continued in the slasher films of the 1970s and 1980s. A common theme of these films was that of a group of young, heterosexual adults (or sometimes teenagers) terrorized at the hands of a crazed killer that was usually “queer” in some way. Part of how these characters are perceived as queer lies within their inherent difference and “otherness”. While this can be seen in a number of horror villains during this time, a prominent example is the character Freddie Krueger of the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series. These films feature a villain who had been a serial killer and who was burned to death by a vigilante mob. After his horrific death at the hands of the mob, Freddie Krueger terrorizes teenagers in their dreams and eventually kills them. His extreme “otherness” is represented by his burn-scarred visage and gloved left hand with razor blades extruding from the finger tips. As Benshoff describes, Freddie’s queerness is further supported in the second film of series, where Freddie menaces a teenage boy named Jesse, who is also being persecuted by a gym coach implied to be homosexual. This juxtaposition is meant to make audiences equate the gym teacher with Freddie as something monstrous and horrific (246).

With the rise of AIDS in the 1980s, horror began to take on a different tenor and the equation of AIDS with death lead to a dearth of movies reflecting the fear of the public. Two films Benshoff and Griffin mention as examples are *The Kiss* (1988), where woman-to-woman kisses perpetuate the spread of a lethal African parasite; and *The Fly* (1986), in which a scientist working on teleportation has fly-DNA fused with his own during an experiment. This “foreign DNA” causes him to mutate, eventually turning him from a normal human into something monstrous. In *The Kiss*, the implication is clear – queer sexual behavior will lead to disease and death. In *The Fly*, “foreign DNA” will turn a normal person into a monster. This fear of

“foreign” influences turning people into monsters has continued into modern horror movies such as *28 Days Later* (2002) and *The Invasion*, a 2007 remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

Queer representation in horror films and television throughout the 1990s and early 2000s has been mostly limited to background and/or non-speaking roles and are often meant to be campy or comedic in nature. Debating why this might be in his article, “LGBT Representation in the Modern Horror Film,” James Gallagher theorizes that putting a queer character in the starring role would interrupt the winning formula of the crazed serial killer vs. the “last woman standing.” This formula drives many popular horror anthologies, such as *Halloween* and the *Scream* series. He also argues that besides interfering with that popular theme, simply making a lead character queer automatically places the film into a subgenre - “gay horror” – where “horror” is secondary to the inherent “gay” themes. He states, “LGBT representation in horror cinema has been all but abandoned by mainstream filmmakers and is now the niche of a subgenre that has slowly but surely developed a devoted following of its own” (Gallagher). However, by relegating these films to a subgenre, filmmakers perpetuate the “otherness” that is underlying queer representation.

American Horror Story: A New Era in Horror Begins

In 2011, a new show premiered on the FX channel that would push the boundaries of censorship and the sensibilities of the American public – *American Horror Story*. Created by Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk, each season of the show features a different storyline and challenges viewers with its often shocking content. All seasons of the show consistently feature queer characters as well as actors.

Chad and Patrick, a gay couple in the first season (entitled *Murder House*) are juxtaposed with a straight couple, Ben and Vivian; this connection, rather than exposing their differences or

“otherness,” serves to showcase their commonalities. In the season, *Murder House*, Ben and Vivian Harmon move with their teenage daughter, Violet, to Los Angeles from Chicago as a means of distancing themselves from painful events: this includes a miscarriage and affair. They are able to purchase a large and beautiful home, but soon learn that the house has a gruesome history; it is even featured on a crime tour and has earned the ominous title of “Murder House.” Over the course of the season, flashbacks and other devices allow the audience to learn that the house has played host to a series of common horror tropes – a mad doctor/scientist, slasher victims, disfigured “monsters,” ghosts, and demons. The viewer also learns that anyone unfortunate enough to die in the house is condemned to stay there forever as a ghost. As the Harmon family becomes acquainted with the various inhabitants of the home, the specific problems they face are shown as a pattern reflecting the histories of those living there before them. The common themes in particular that Ben and Vivian share with other inhabitants are problems of infidelity and infertility or the death of children. This is most clearly reflected when comparing Ben and Vivian to Chad and Patrick, who died in the house and now inhabit it as ghosts.

In the first episode, the viewer learns that Ben and Vivian have not been intimate since Ben’s affair in Chicago; later that episode, Vivian engages in somewhat rough sex with a man whose identity is completely hidden underneath a black latex costume typical of BDSM fetishism. While it is easy to assume the man beneath the suit is Ben, it is not; this leads to issues between Ben and Vivian later, as he suspects her to be having an affair. Shortly after that encounter, they do have sex for the first time since they moved and Vivian becomes pregnant with twins. Since fertility is another problem they have faced, Vivian’s pregnancy is welcomed; but the outcome is the birth of something twisted and inhuman. These problems are mirrored by

gay couple Chad and Patrick, who were the owners of the home just prior to the Harmons. Through flashbacks, we learn that Chad and Patrick also desired children, and also faced problems with infidelity. Chad (played by openly gay actor, Zachary Quinto) and Patrick bought the house and fully restored it to its former glory, hoping to flip it for a profit. However, it is shown that their attempt to sell the house fails due to the collapse of the housing market and the beginning of the global recession in 2008. As a result of being figuratively trapped in the house, Chad and Patrick begin to experience relationship problems and Chad suspects Patrick of having an affair. As an attempt to recapture Patrick's interest, Chad purchases the "rubber man" latex suit. Unfortunately, the attempt backfires and on Halloween, Patrick confesses that he *has* been having an affair. After he leaves, Chad encounters a man in the latex suit that he first thinks is Patrick; the man in the suit attempts to drown Chad in a bucket with apples for bobbing. When Patrick walks in on this attempt, the man in the latex suit attacks him, beating him to death. The man in the suit then drags their bodies to the basement and shoots both, staging the bodies to suggest a murder-suicide.

What is most interesting in the comparison of these two couples is their similarities – by illustrating the elements that each couple has in common, the show leads the viewer to question what is so "different" between heterosexual and queer relationships. The fact that both couples face problems with infidelity, with the ability to have a child, and with financial entrapment seems calculated to demonstrate that Chad and Patrick belong with "us" and not "them." By including Chad and Patrick among the "victims" of the house, the audience is encouraged to view them empathetically. Part of how this is emphasized is through the characters' vision of their own "American Dream"; for both couples, this is represented by the beautiful house, marriage, and children. In his article, "The Horror of It All," Gary Hoppenstand argues that the

mistakes of the characters hold them back from achieving this dream and that the entire season is representative of the deterioration of the “American Dream”; he states that the show is “a subversive deconstruction of middle-class angst” (2). What is notable in this is that Chad and Patrick are included in this description. Their middle-class, suburban existence and the mistakes they have made trying to reach their “American Dream” humanize them rather than demonize them. It is an equitable representation that further validates their status as non-“other.” As Dawn Keetley states in her article, “Stillborn: The Entropic Gothic of *American Horror Story*,” “the Harmons seem fated to follow in the footsteps of former owners, gay couple Chad and Patrick” (93). Her statement illustrates the sameness of the two couples, an affiliation between the victims of the house. As Keetley further points out, an exchange between Chad and Constance, the next-door neighbor and mother of four whose children include a mass murderer, a girl with Downs syndrome and a disfigured “monster” that she had killed, further questions the connection between “queer” and “other.” In the exchange, Constance refers to Chad and Patrick’s ambition to create a family as “abomination” and “perversion.” Keetley sums up Chad’s counter to this abusive language by saying Constance’s mothering “amounts to having been ‘the hole’ her children ‘crawled out of’” (96). Keetley argues that this characterization of Constance is representative of the season as a whole – that the “Murder House” is a “black hole” that turns energy into entropy, a stagnation of all that is normal. This is supported by the way Constance treats her children; one child she arranges to have killed due to his disfigurement and “otherness”; one child appears perfectly normal, but is actually a sociopath; and one child with Downs syndrome is constantly belittled and emotionally abused. Chad’s retort to Constance’s remarks is designed to frame the question: who is really the monster? By associating Constance,

who is representative of “normal” heterosexuality, with what is “other,” the show encourages the viewer to change their perspective about which is which.

Another aspect of this particular season that illustrates this twisting of audience perspective is in regards to offspring itself. By presenting the children of heterosexual unions as “other” and in some cases, “monstrous,” the show urges viewers to consider the production of family from something other than a heteronormative perspective. Constance remarks in the show that she thinks that Chad and Patrick’s desire to have children is unnatural and wrong. In his article, “Mutations and Metamorphoses: Body Horror is Biological Horror,” Ronald Allen Lopez Cruz argues that the reason why people find movie “monsters” so horrifying is due to the mutilation or violation of the human form. Constance seems to be arguing for this in her remarks to Chad and Patrick. Because she views their relationship with revulsion, she imagines any product of the couple to be monstrous and abhorrent. Lopez Cruz states that body horror is “characterized by the manipulation and warping of the normal state of bodily form and function” (161). This idea is certainly present in the series, most notably in the child of the house’s first owners, Charles and Nora (a Frankenstein-type monster whose mutilated form is stitched together and brought back to life by its father), as well as Constance’s children and Ben and Vivian’s twins. While these individuals have produced “monstrous” children, whether the deformity is physical, mental or emotional, what is notable is that all are the products of heterosexual unions. People do seem to, as Cruz argues, have a fear or “horror” of humans or organisms (most often represented by aliens) that go against what we know to be “nature’s laws”; but in *AHS: Murder House*, the offspring of these “normal” heterosexual unions become twisted, unnatural, and “other.” This realization, in turn, leads the audience to question what is

truly normal, and points out the hypocrisy behind Constance's assumption that any offspring of Chad and Patrick would be an "abomination."

While the first season of *American Horror Story* makes an effort to emphasize the similarity between queer and straight individuals, the second season showcases a queer character tormented and victimized by straight characters. The second season focuses on the patients and administrators of a sanitarium called the Briarcliff Manor. In this season, entitled *Asylum*, this questioning of what is "other" is further examined, with the characters illustrating the diversity among both straight and queer individuals. The majority of the season is set in the 1960s, with flashbacks and flash-forwards incorporated within episodes to enhance the storyline. The first episode begins in 1964 with a young woman, Lana Winters (later shown to be a lesbian), posing as a reporter interested in the bakery at Briarcliff Manor; however, her true intent is to write an exposé on the cruel and inhuman practices taking place at the asylum. She is introduced to some of the other main characters in the series – Sister Jude, a cruel nun who practices corporal punishment and secretly fantasizes about Monsignor Howard, the spiritual head of the institution; Sister Mary Eunice, an innocent young nun who becomes demon-possessed; Dr. Arthur Arden, the institution's sadistic head doctor who secretly experiments on patients in the asylum; and Dr. Oliver Thredson, a psychiatrist who is later revealed to be a serial killer. Although the season has many story lines, Lana's is the most prominent and also concludes the season. As an outsider to the Briarcliff Manor, her "normality" is established early and indicates that, while a lesbian, she is less like "them" and more like "us". This is supported further by events immediately following her visit – Sister Jude, discovering Lana's true purpose in visiting Briarcliff, visits Lana's girlfriend Wendy, a local schoolteacher. Sister Jude threatens to expose Wendy's romantic relationship with Lana - putting her job and likely her personal safety in

jeopardy – unless Wendy agrees to have Lana committed to Briarcliff. Wendy, fearing the loss of her occupation, agrees and Lana is involuntarily committed. Sister Jude's actions lead viewers to question the stereotypes presented; normally, nuns are seen as benevolent and peaceful, while queer characters are often portrayed as villainous and predatory. By portraying a straight woman persecuting and victimizing two queer women, the show encourages viewers to rethink their perceptions of right and wrong.

After Lana is committed to the institution, she is subjected to treatments for her “condition” that were common during that time period – electroshock and aversion therapy. These treatments unfortunately have a basis in fact, as homosexuality used to be classified as a mental illness and was not removed from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* until 1973 (Ault, 188). The audience watches as Lana suffers through the electroshock therapy, obviously in great physical and mental pain. By viewing such barbaric treatment, the audience is led to sympathize with her plight – betrayed by her lover and subjected to torture at the hands of those she is expected to trust – nuns, doctors, and psychiatrists. The visiting psychiatrist, Dr. Oliver Thredson, suggests that the only way out of the asylum is by proving she has overcome her “condition” and suggests aversion therapy. At first she is reluctant and states that she “has been this way...since I can remember. There is no cure” (“I Am Anne Frank: Part 1”). Later, as she is standing in the line to receive her medication, she fantasizes about receiving an award for exposing the maltreatment of inmates at Briarcliff, imagining herself saying during an acceptance speech, “I did everything I could think of to survive...and then I did what I had to do to get out” (“I Am Anne Frank: Part 1”). Fearing that the electroshock therapy will cause her to lose her memories or her mind, she goes to Dr. Thredson and agrees to undergo aversion therapy. In his article, “Redirecting Sexual Orientation: Techniques and Justifications,” Timothy

Murphy describes how aversion therapy is supposed to work: subjects are punished with moderate to severe physical discomfort for experiencing arousal when shown homoerotic images, and rewarded (by *not* being punished) when they demonstrate arousal when shown hetero-erotic images. He also describes a form of aversion therapy wherein “subjects have been required to sniff various repulsive substances (ammonium sulfide, butyric acid, aromatic ammonia) during homoerotic fantasies” (505). The smell of these chemicals would lead the subject to become physically ill and would, in theory, cause them to associate homosexual thoughts and arousal with physical illness. This is exactly what Dr. Thredson uses on Lana in the fourth episode of the season, “I Am Anne Frank: Part 1.” She is given an intravenous drip of apomorphine to make her violently physically ill while Dr. Thredson shows her different images of nude women. Even though Dr. Thredson appears to be well-meaning, the treatment is brutal – Lana retches into a bucket as he shows her slide after slide, her expression pathetic and wretched. Her physical discomfort and emotional pain encourages empathy in viewers and leads them to question whether it is better for the two women to love each other or for each to be subjected to such extreme emotional and physical agony. Dr. Thredson then tells Lana that they are going to also conduct “conversion” therapy and he brings in a young man named Daniel. Lana panics, asking Dr. Thredson if he’s going to have Daniel touch her. He responds in the negative, but orders Lana to masturbate while looking at Daniel’s naked genitalia. Lana obeys, but does not appear to get any form of pleasure out of the action – instead, she cries silently as she does what is asked of her. He then asks her to touch Daniel’s genitals while masturbating, a request she reluctantly complies with; but she is soon forced to stop as her disgust causes her to vomit. She begs for a few minutes to recover, but Dr. Thredson claims that his “expertise” tells him that the therapy will not work for her. It would be very hard to watch this scene and not be moved by

Lana's pain – her desperate attempt to “cure” herself failing miserably while she (and Daniel as well) endures this torturous and de-humanizing treatment. While in the past, queer characteristics have been portrayed as unnatural and horrific, in this scene it is the cruel treatment of a queer character that fills viewers with horror. This particular scene is very powerful in questioning what is “normal” and what is “other”, as well as what constitutes “monstrous” behavior. The series of events that leads Lana to this moment – Sister Jude's blackmail, Wendy's betrayal, and Lana's subsequent physical and mental torment under the supervision of supposedly “good” religious authorities – leads audience members to truly feel for and empathize with an individual that previously would have been demonized; or even more significantly, torture of a queer individual would have been seen as a just punishment for “unnatural” behavior – what was previously mentioned as “compensating moral value” (Benshoff & Griffin, 90). By portraying a queer character in a sympathetic manner, the show encourages an understanding of the queer community as “us” and not “them”; the “other” is applied to those who oppress and persecute Lana. Viewers find out in the following episode that Dr. Thredson (although he seemed well-intentioned at first) is actually a serial killer who has chosen Lana as his next victim. This further supports Lana's journey as a queer character who struggles to overcome horrific tragedy produced by “straight” monsters.

No More “Monsters in the Closet”: Modern Queer Representation in Horror

The character of Lana Winters in *American Horror Story: Asylum* illustrates a dark time in our history; in the past, queer individuals have endured social ostracism, legal persecution, treatments such as Lana's character experienced, and threats to their health and even life. However, in the past few decades, the queer community has been slowly attaining equal rights and major milestones have been reached in this struggle. Part of how this is facilitated is by

exposure to television and films portraying queer characters in a sympathetic manner. By using storytelling, a medium most people enjoy, television and film are able to expose the general public to ideas and situations faced by the queer community, garnering sympathy and understanding for issues the community faces. The horror genre in particular has been popular to promote this kind of exposure and seems to have more equitable and diverse representation than other genres; *American Horror Story* and shows such as HBO's *True Blood* feature a veritable plethora of queer characters. In her article, "Uncanny Recognition: Queer Theory's Debt to the Gothic," Mair Rigby argues that there is a close connection between horror and queerness, discussing a correlation between the shadow existence of gothic monsters and the shadow existence of the queer community (49, 50). She states, "What the Gothic (horror) appears to recognize so compellingly for queer scholarship, I would suggest, is the special relationship between the 'queer' and the uncanny, a relationship that is culturally constructed, but deeply felt." (51) She is arguing that because the queer community is often made to feel "monstrous", the horror genre and monsters within it hold special meaning and relevance to the queer community.

Modern horror seems to be capitalizing on this connection by making the association between horror and the queer community more overt. A great example of this is the show *True Blood*, an HBO series loosely based on the Southern Vampire books by Charlaine Harris. The premise is that scientists have been able to create a synthetic form of human blood that is capable of sustaining vampires. After this invention is made public, vampires "come out of the coffin." Interestingly enough, that is the exact phrase used in both the book and television series and makes a blatant connection between vampires and the queer community by playing on the phrase "coming out of the closet." Even in the opening credit sequence, this connection is supported by

a sign proclaiming “God Hates Fangs”, a deliberate pun on the phrase made infamous by the bigoted Westboro Baptist Church – “God Hates Fags.” Throughout the series, vampires struggle to attain equal rights while also attempting to protect themselves from the attacks of “normal” humans. This is made clear in the first episode when Bill Compton, a 173-year-old vampire, visits the local bar in Bon Temps, Louisiana (the setting of the show). Bill appears to look like any other random visitor in the bar – until he orders a bottle of True Blood. The tension this creates is a clear parallel to social situations featured by members of the queer community. The display of “otherness” brings a hostile reaction from the people in the restaurant who suddenly fear Bill. Sookie Stackhouse, a waitress, is the only person who reacts positively to his appearance and who makes an effort to reach out to him – but as Sookie, too, is “other” (she is a telepath), she is able to relate and empathize with his situation.

While *True Blood* and *American Horror Story* have an obvious connection with the queer community, other shows are more subtle. A new series that premiered in 2014, *Penny Dreadful*, connects classic gothic horror stories with queer characters, most prominently in the character of Dorian Gray. The series unites storylines from *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and is set in Victorian London. The main characters include Vanessa Ives, a young woman who is implied to be the reincarnation of an ancient Egyptian princess/goddess; Sir Malcom Murray, her guardian and father of Mina; Ethan Chandler, later revealed to be a werewolf; Victor Frankenstein; and Dorian Gray. Throughout the first season, viewers watch this group struggle to unite against a common enemy (Dracula) while overcoming personal difficulties. For Vanessa, this is her often-involuntary attraction to darkness; for Ethan, his werewolf nature; for Dorian, his boredom with immortality; and for Victor, his creation and abandonment of his first creature, Caliban. Each of the characters is shown striving to resist evil, both inner and outer; but the

message put across is that even those who might be considered “monsters” can be heroic and affect positive outcomes. The classic novels the show is based on often equated sexuality with immorality – through the characters in *Penny Dreadful*, audiences are shown that “other” or “queerness” and “good” and “heroic” can co-exist.

Conclusion

While many positive changes are happening in regards to queer representation in television and film in general and horror in particular, there is still farther to go to achieve equitable representation. As our society and popular opinion grow to understand and accept the queer community, perhaps we will one day see films and television shows that feature queer main characters without limiting them to subgenres. For now however, the use of a genre commonly associated with “otherness” to challenge and question common perceptions about what is truly “other” allows shows such as *American Horror Story* to present new ways of thinking about the queer community in a manner that is more easily received. By illustrating the true horror – how “good” people can treat “others” cruelly and inhumanly – shows and films like *American Horror Story* encourage the audience to empathize with and, perhaps, change their opinion of the queer community.

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