

If You Followed the Urges: the Queer Argument for Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal*

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Earlier this year, Paramore released their latest album '*This Is Why*.' In a sentence, the album is a critique of one's own part in the cycle of anger, hate, and division that is being drummed up by entities bigger than us. The album's sixth song, '*You First*' is described by writer and singer Hayley Williams as a song about how you know all of your own darkness, and when someone tries to speak highly of you, you cannot unsee that darkness and look past it to the compliment. She uses the metaphor of animals fighting over scraps, with an overarching theme that karma will eventually come for those who deserve it, and it's all of us who deserve it.

It took until my partner said, "Ya know that line about horror films in *You First*? Yeah, that but a *Hannibal* t-shirt." for me to realize that Hayley Williams unknowingly wrote a song that I feel encapsulates what Bryan Fuller was trying to portray in his show.

Ten years ago, on April 4th, 2013, when Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal* premiered at 10 pm on NBC, I was watching. Two years and three seasons later on August 29th, 2015 I was watching the finale as well, seeing the unwanted end to what became one of my favorite queer love stories on television.

Funny how it only took a decade and a sixth Paramore album for me to wrap up all of my thoughts about the series.

Turns Out I'm Living in a Horror Film

Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal* follows in a long line of queer-coded horror. While never explicit, the story of a growing relationship between Mads Mikkelsen's Hannibal Lecter and Hugh Dancy's Will Graham is the main drive of the series.

The show is set a few years before the world learns the truth about Dr. Lecter and focuses on how the FBI uses both Lecter and agent Will Graham to solve a string of murders. As their relationship builds, Will begins to question himself, what his real desires are, and just who Hannibal Lecter really is.

At its core, *Hannibal* is a TV show about empathy. Graham is able to put himself in the minds of killers because, as he puts it, he has an empathy disorder somewhere "closer to aspergers and autistics than narcissists and sociopaths." This is an idea challenged by Hannibal, who is able to connect with Will because he has empathy for the path Will is on — a path that

Hannibal himself has already gone down. It's this empathy that helps link the show to the history of queer horror.

In 2022, Bryan Fuller released a docuseries on Shudder called *Queer for Fear*, in it Fuller and guests talk about how the history of the horror genre is a history of queer people. In the first episode, the talking heads — many of whom are both queer and horror writers/directors — speak about how early monster movies were queer-coded. A lot of the Universal monster movies actually ask you to feel some sort of empathy for the monsters, and it's showing this empathy for the outsider, for someone who society doesn't accept, that allows queer people to connect so easily to the genre and the monsters on screen.

One of the most famous monsters, Frankenstein's monster, was created by a queer woman.

In 1818, when she published *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, Mary Shelley became the first science fiction novelist while also helping push Gothic literature into the direction of what we see as modern-day horror literature.

A goth icon in her own right, Mary Shelley got the idea for *Frankenstein* while in Switzerland with her soon-to-be-husband (who she had sex with for the first time on her mother's grave) Percy, her step-sister Claire Clairmont, and Lord Byron (famous author, poet, hedonist). After a night of ghost stories, Byron suggested that the group try to write their own, and Mary did just that.

Mary stayed with her husband Percy — who is rumored to have had an affair with Lord Byron on that trip, along with Mary herself — until he passed in 1822. Afterward, Mary carried his calcified heart with her everywhere and started turning to women for comfort.

In a scene I would like to thank Bryan Fuller for personally, the first episode of *Queer for Fear* has drag icon Alaska Thunderfuck read part of a letter Shelley once sent her friend Edward Trelawny, in which she says: "Ten years ago I was so ready to give myself away, and being afraid of men, I was apt to get tousy-mousy for women." Tousy-mousy is 1800s slang for vulva and vagina.

The letter, which is a response to Trelawny talking about a current love interest, talks about how Mary "never saw a woman [she] thought so fascinating," when mentioning Trelawny's crush and if Mary was a man she "should certainly have fallen in love with her." However, Mary notes that she is done with both men and women at the end of the letter, evoking a Hamlet reference while doing so.

In Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the audience is supposed to feel some form of empathy for The Creature, a man who came into a world that hates him, and all he wants is companionship. The Creature is living a life similar to most queer people, who are often ostracized or attacked for wanting to live their lives and find a community. This might have been something Shelley struggled with or saw the people around her struggle with — seeing as many of her documented friends seemed to be queer as well.

Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal* takes this empathy a step further and asks the question: "Well, what if these monsters are the worst you can be, will you still empathize?"

The genius of Fuller's monsters is that his monsters are humans — they're highly educated, they're nicely dressed, and they have an FBI badge to boot. However, behind all of this, Hannibal Lecter is a serial killer who not only eats people but serves them to his clueless friends.

Will and Hannibal are introduced as therapist and patient, Will's boss Jack Crawford (played by the iconic Laurence Fishburne) tells him to go and see Hannibal in order to deal with the emotional fallout of Will helping catch a serial killer. During this time, we see the two find companionship in each other, they're drawn to one another, and oftentimes, Will himself questions why.

There's a line later in the series where Will is talking to Hannibal's friend and therapist, Badelia (played by Gillian Anderson, in probably one of her best performances) where he says: "I've never known myself as well as I know myself when I'm with him," and it's that empathy, that finding someone who makes you feel okay to be yourself that makes this relationship between Hannibal and Will a queer one.

Without going too into overarching Hannibal Lecter lore, the first time Hannibal eats a human being is when he is forced to eat his own sister. To Hannibal, this act of hunting, killing, and eating his eventual victims is something that is very personal to him — he often refers to it as one would refer to art. So when Hannibal begins to see the potential Will holds — the potential to also be a serial killer — he fosters it and allows Will to get to the point where he feels so wholly himself with Hannibal. In this instance, both Hannibal and Will are dealing with what The Creature is dealing with in Shelley's book, they're monsters born into a world that does not want them and all they want is to be understood.

Not only do Will and Hannibal share this underlying murderous empathy but they also, within days of meeting one another, seem to have an adoptive daughter. The daughter of a serial killer who Will murders (during official FBI business, still murder nonetheless) right before Hannibal walks in the room to see Will leaning over this girl, Abigail, to keep her alive. At the

end of the episode — the first episode — Will goes to visit Abigail in the hospital, only to find Hannibal already there.

By doing this, Fuller is doing two things: (1) deepening the connection between Will and Hannibal, and (2) creating empathy for them with the audience. As a viewer, you now feel for Will who seems to be a shy man with a house full of rescue dogs. You're also now curious about why the man who you know is a cannibal cares for this girl. But even deeper, Fuller created empathy for Hannibal with the audience by showing Hannibal call Abigail's dad earlier and warn him about the FBI — solidarity between murderers it may be, but it's also a gesture of respect from one outcast to another.

In his video essay '[The Appeal of Toxic Gay Love](#),' commentator James Somerton talks about why queer people may enjoy seeing portrayals of toxic queer love. The first section of the video is all about Fuller's Hannibal and in it, Somerton notes that Hannibal and Will cannot be truly called gay representation because (1) it happened in subtext only and (2) the main focus of their relationship was empathizing with people we shouldn't empathize with. But... isn't that a main function of the horror genre?

When looking at *Hannibal* as just another piece in a very long line of queer horror, I think the second reason Somerton gives is moot. While Hannibal and Will's relationship is inherently a toxic one — there's power dynamics at play, there's the fact that their connection is built on murder, and you can't forget the cannibalism! — it's a relationship that a lot of queer people can resonate with. Will is struggling throughout the whole series with who he really is and what his actual desires are, and it's when he is put in contact with Hannibal that Will begins to flesh out his real self. Hannibal, an older more experienced queer comes into the life of Will, a younger confused man who is just looking for some sense of normalcy while fighting who he really is — this is a very stereotypical queer story.

Just ya know, murder is involved.

Where I'm Both the Killer and the Final Girl

Will Graham finds himself inhabiting the minds of killers, and Hannibal Lecter is a certified psychiatrist. Immediately, these men are two sides of the same coin — and it's when Hannibal sees Will kill Garret Jacob Hobbs that he sees the deepness of their similarities.

Garrett Jacob Hobbs dies from 10 gunshots to the chest, making him Will's first-ever kill, and through this, we find out that Will left homicide because he had a hard time shooting. Hobbs's final word is a whispered "See?" to Will, a resounding question of "See? It feels good to kill? See how nice it is?"

The act of killing is seen as an equalizer in *Hannibal*, an act that brings people to the same level in a horrifying way — but once again, we empathize with them as they empathize with each other. We see Hannibal do this with both Will and Abigail, offering a listening and overly understanding ear to the two of them when the reminders of killing get to be too much. It's in one of these conversations that Will admits to Hannibal that he enjoyed killing Hobbs, to which Hannibal says: "Killing must feel good to God too, he does it all the time, and are we not created in His image?" This is Hannibal giving Will the okay to be himself, to speak from his heart even when it comes to the darkest of things.

Later in season one, we meet Tobias, another murderer in Baltimore who takes artistic liberty with his victims' bodies, who ends up basically asking Hannibal to run off with him. You'd think that this option would be easy for Hannibal, whose activities are now a main focus of the FBI, to leave it all behind. He doesn't even think about it. When Tobias raises the question he tells Hannibal he needs a friend, "someone who can understand me, who thinks like I do and can see the world and the people in it the way I do," and Hannibal tells him that he doesn't want to be Tobias's friend. Instead, we see Hannibal go to his psychiatrist to talk over this strange feeling of wanting to know and befriend Will and how to process it. This is proof to me that while Hannibal's interest in Will is based on finding someone like himself, he has started to develop deeper feelings for Will only a handful of episodes into the show.

From this point on, we see Hannibal spend a lot of time talking to Badelia trying to process what is going on with him and Will. When asked about the budding romance, Bryan Fuller noted "It felt authentic about somebody who once identified as heterosexual having a complex, intimate relationship with somebody of the same sex," and I think that idea of "who once identified" is important because not only are these men dealing with a crisis of sexuality, but Will is dealing with an entire crisis of self.

The romantic relationship between Hannibal and Will is parallel to the story of Will losing his grip on both reality and his sense of self. This discussion starts early on in the episode following Hannibal's friendship realization, where Will asks Hannibal if he should get a CAT scan because he seems to be losing time and sleepwalking. Hannibal says this isn't necessary. We see then over the next few episodes how Will's grasp on time and space is slipping, as Hannibal has him draw a clock "to stay present," and each time the numbers on the clock are shifted to the right more and more.

In reality, Will isn't losing time due to mental illness, but to his brain being inflamed — a fact that Hannibal knows, but doesn't tell Will.

Will becomes increasingly dependent on Hannibal as his hallucinations get worse, telling Hannibal he feels that he has been “gradually becoming different for a while,” and that he fears not knowing who he is. This type of conversation, while it is talking about Will’s mental state on a surface level, can also be seen as a man tumbling quickly into a same-sex relationship when he’s never done so before. Will is expressing such deep fears to Hannibal, and these deep fears are something that a lot of queer people can recognize in themselves, this fear of becoming something you might not know or understand and the realization that this has been a long time coming, a gradual change. In response to his stress, Hannibal tells Will that he can be Will’s gauge as to whether or not he is losing his mind, wrangling Will into this toxic and overly-dependent relationship.

Somerton mentions a lot in his video essay how this toxic, all-encompassing relationship is something that can be extremely relatable for people early in their queer journey, and I agree. Many of us have run into relationships that weren’t good for us because we realized that the other person is finally going to accept us for who we are, after years of being told we’re weird and different. A lot of early queer relationships become co-dependent, because it’s the first time many of us are seen so wholly by another person, and we do not want to lose that.

This same thought process is what’s going on with Will during the end of season one until he realizes that Hannibal is the real copycat killer, even though Will is eventually arrested for it. In the moments before Will is arrested, he and Hannibal have a very telling conversation:

Hannibal: You are alone because you are unique.

Will: I’m as alone as you are.

Hannibal: If you followed the urges you kept down for so long, cultivated them as the inspirations they are, you would’ve become someone other than yourself.

Will: I know who I am... I’m not so sure that I know who you are anymore.

While this is obviously the two of them speaking about who the copy-cat killer is, it is also Hannibal and Will talking about the fear of coming to terms with who you are as a person — as a queer person — after a whole lifetime of being what can be seen as “someone else.” This moment is Will coming to terms with this part of himself, directly telling Hannibal that he knows who he is. However, it is followed by the rest of Will’s realization: Not only does he not know how safe Hannibal is anymore, but he also doesn’t know just what to think of him — is he a threat or is he someone who helped Will realize his true self?

It’s while in jail that Will realizes he is in too deep with Hannibal, finally telling Hannibal when the doctor visits him: “My inner voice sounds like you.” Will says this in the first episode

of season two, and by the end of the season, he and Hannibal have cooked up a plan to murder Jack Crawford and run away together. U-Hauling lesbians have nothing on these two.

Season two of Hannibal sees the pair causing harm together, essentially Hannibal and Will coming to terms with their feelings for one another and acting on them. After the attempted escape backfires at the end of that season — with Hannibal stabbing Will and then going off on his own — season three feels like a story of two men dealing with themselves post-breakup.

Hannibal flees to Italy with Badelia while Will eventually gets married and adopts his new wife's child, however, just the chance that Will could hunt after Hannibal again is enough to have him leave his new family behind and fly to Italy as well. It's all a game of cat and mouse then, culminating in a quiet reunion in an art gallery, in front of a Botticelli, where the two men speak about how much they've missed one another. It's a conversation that resembles one many have had before, a conversation where you realize your relationship is no good for you, and it needs to end:

Hannibal: If I saw you every day, forever, Will, I would remember this time.

Will: Strange seeing you here in front of me. Been staring at afterimages of you in places you haven't been in years.

Hannibal: "To market, to market, to buy a fat pig. Home again, home again, jiggy-jig."

Will: I wanted to understand you before I laid eyes on you again. I needed it to be clear... what I was seeing.

Hannibal: Where does the difference between the past and the future come from?

Will: Mine? Before you and after you. Yours?

Hannibal: It's all starting to blur.

...

Will: You and I have begun to blur.

Hannibal: Isn't that how you found me?

Will: Every crime of yours feels like one I am guilty of. Not just Abigail's murder, every murder... stretching backward and forward in time.

Hannibal: Freeing yourself from me and me freeing myself from you, they are the same.

Will: We're conjoined. I'm curious whether either of us can survive separation.

Hannibal: Now is the hardest test: not letting rage and frustration nor forgiveness keep you from thinking.

Hannibal and Will walk out of the gallery together, and Will attempts to stab Hannibal, only failing because Hannibal's guardian angel of sorts (Chiyoh) shoots Will first. It's in the next episode that Will tells Hannibal he is officially done and wants nothing to do with him. Only then does Hannibal surrender himself to the FBI in front of Will's home because, as he tells Jack Crawford while looking directly at Will, "I want you to know exactly where I am, and where you can always find me."

The tragedy of Will and Hannibal's relationship is that it is what they both needed at the time despite its toxicity and as Somerton says, this is a relationship that so many queer people deal with. He notes, "It's not the horror we want, it's the unconditional connection," it's the unconditional understanding that you are not a monster despite what the world may say that can bond so many queer people and it's why many of us see Hannibal and Will's relationship as a queer love story. These are two men who go through the worst of their minds together, only to come out on the other end still completely infatuated with each other — so infatuated that the pair throw themselves off of a cliff together in the end.

It's a sad love story. It's a toxic love story.

But it is a love story.

So Who, Who Are You?

As a big fan of not only Fuller's version but all versions of Dr. Lecter, I closely watched the way the internet interacted with this show. I wanted everyone else to love this serial-killing cannibal as much as I do.

At first, seeing as *Hannibal* came out during a BBC *Sherlock* hiatus, Tumblr was full of new gifs and edits of the show — everyone praising the pacing, the cinematography, and the amazing performances — and this momentum carried up until the show's cancellation in 2015. Tumblr was actually the first place I saw people organizing to bring the show back, creating #SaveHannibal letter-writing campaigns and spreading the word that this show deserves more.

I didn't start seeing my first anti-Hannigram (Hannibal and Will's relationship name) content until my third rewatch of the show back in 2020, during the first summer of the pandemic. This is when I realized that a problem I was seeing in other fandoms had made its way over to the Fannibals (yes, that's what we call ourselves, I think it's cute).

A quick rundown: Anti-fandom culture has been rapidly taking over online fandom spaces, a crusade against anything that might seem "problematic" in media, hiding behind false claims that whatever fiction one consumes is a reflection of who they are and what one does in real life.

The Antis came for the Fannibal community because the relationship between Hannibal and Will is a toxic one, and because of that Antis think that you're a bad person if you enjoyed the relationship in any way.

Yes. They're mad about a toxic relationship in the cannibal serial killer show.

In true Anti fashion, many Hannigram artists and fanfiction authors began getting harassed under everything they posted, getting told that the art they put time and effort into was "gross" just because it showed Hannibal and Will in a sexual relationship. This harassment got so bad that it was eventually targeted at Bryan Fuller himself.

Fuller often retweets fanart drawn by Fannibals, and even purchases things from their shops, — the only showrunner I've ever seen do this if I'm being honest. It's wonderful to see someone so supportive of his fanbase, he often responds to people on Twitter and sends them well wishes when he can. However, because of Fuller's openness on the internet, he has gotten the same amount of harassment as his fans. [Fuller has constantly defended and supported the Fannibals](#), even outing himself as a childhood sexual abuse survivor while doing so, hoping to show these people that enjoying dark themes in love stories isn't bad — it's pretty healthy.

It's important to note that queer representation is still working its way into media, meaning that we are still looking for quality and well-meaning representation. However, gay cisgender men have been on TV for decades, and at this point, they should be allowed to graduate to just being characters that are more than a stand-in for the community as a whole.

Fuller's characters are complex, they have a storyline that isn't centered around being queer, — even though the story both alludes to and shows it — and they all have differing levels of morality. Fuller's characters act as real people, which is exactly what we should be demanding of our queer media. While it is important for young people to see themselves happy and healthy in media, the same should not be pushed upon stories that have darker themes and are not intended for young people (*Hannibal's* time slot was 10 pm, with a TV-MA warning before it).

I've gone through this whole piece without once mentioning the canon queer couple in this show because I think what's important about the queer representation in *Hannibal* is not the fact that it exists (Margot + Alana 4ever) but that it shows us that the queer experience is all about empathy.

Hannibal and Will empathize with each other as they grow into the serial killers they were meant to be. Margot and Alana empathize with each other because the men in their life have been trying to keep them down, injuring them along the way.

That's how they found each other. That's how we find each other.

Being queer means that you're an outsider, you're the monster, you're the cannibal — and we need to find those around us who will care for us, and who will allow us to become something so wholly ourselves even if that might terrify others because we cannot see ourselves being any other way.

Being queer means understanding that The Creature just wanted to be loved.