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Cannibal Couture

Watercolor and textiles

Cannibal Couture is a portfolio consisting of costume designs for characters or themes within one of four shows: Sweeney Todd, Hannibal, Yellowjackets, and Dungeon Meshi. Each design sports its own distinct theme and detailing, culminating into a cohesive final product. These are not designed to seamlessly fit into the media that they come from. Please imagine these shows as jumping-off points for the viewing experience.

I'm inspired by lots of costume design for stage and the way these designers use clothing to tell a story about us. Scrolling through portfolios by Gregg Barnes (*Legally Blonde, Bye Bye Birdie*), Ruth E. Carter (*Black Panther, Malcolm X*), Franne Lee (*Sweeney Todd, Saturday Night Live*) and other costuming sketches have been massively provocative to me. I also take inspiration from the costumes in the four pieces of media I'm talking about, particularly in Yellowjackets and Dungeon Meshi. The stitched-up and ragged winter wear for the characters in Yellowjackets is beautiful and haunting at the same time, and I love the way the author of Dungeon Meshi covers such a wide variety of fashion, while challenging herself to make every character visually distinct.

These designs are full of little nods to the works they originate from. You can spy a stag pattern on Hannibal's tie, something that ties in effortlessly with the antlered headband the Yellowjackets model dons. The same pop of red links every piece in this portfolio together— whether it's the pocket square of a suit, a sweeping skirt, a pair of leather boots, or the red blood smeared over blue Converse, the color is screaming out at you wherever you look. It's only natural that this is the case— red *is* the color of blood, after all (and not to mention red's reputation as the color of love). Everything about the costumes is an inside joke with myself and the media— it's a love letter to my favorite things, spread out so everyone else can see how beautiful I believe them to be.

WHY WE EAT EACH OTHER



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OS50

Writer's Note: Cannibalism is shown in the media as both horrifying and humanizing. How can Sweeney Todd, Hannibal, Yellowjackets, and Dungeon Meshi hold separate truths about cannibalism and relationships, when they use such different methods to do so? Are these portrayals really saying anything that different? Regardless of what they express, it all links back to a few key points: class, survivalism, the concept of the "Other," queerness, the taboo, and our respect for the dead. They all illustrate the passion and excitement of indulging within this carnal desire. The act of eating each other is beautiful, even when meant to scare the viewer. It's art—figuratively and literally.

Additionally, I talk a lot about the obsession with cannibalism in this paper. The nature of academic papers require you to be an impartial narrator, so I distance myself from the "we" I refer to here, but make no mistake: I am just as enraptured with cannibalism as the rest of the world is. If I wasn't, I wouldn't be writing this paper.

SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

Most "defenses" of cannibalism are relative. There *might* be an unspecified culture which *might* value it, so to prevent casting judgment onto those different to us, eyes are averted from what we normally consider horrific. But that's not admitting cannibalism is permissible— that's just respect for others. That little respect is often disingenuous. It's just something to prove someone isn't intolerant, even if they secretly abhor those who are different.

To properly defend cannibalism, we first have to figure out exactly why it's generally considered unacceptable. If we agree that murder is wrong, then we can set that fact aside and look wholly at the simple act of eating another person's body. In *A Defense of Cannibalism*, J.

Jeremy Wisnewski states “the first argument goes, the human is treated merely as a means (to, say, the satisfaction of our desires). In doing so, we are forgetting the dignity that is owed to each individual person.” But, as he also elaborates later, a corpse is not a human, technically speaking. It’s what remains of one, but if living allows us dignity, then a corpse doesn’t have any. So, what constitutes respect for the dead– and is consuming their body disrespectful, really?

All of Wisnewski’s arguments hinge on the truth that someone is dead before the act is even decided upon. What of cannibalism when one party is alive and interested, or gives their permission for their body to be done with as the living will when they’re gone? Is it moral to allow yourself to be eaten from the outside in? And if it isn’t, then does morality constrict free will? The question of morality surrounding consensual cannibalism is a hard one to answer simply because it’s just not usually a consideration when portraying cannibalism in media– if the “victim” is willing and ready, then the intrigue is diminished, and therefore not as exciting to an audience. However, the infrequent times that consensual cannibalism comes up in either media or real-world criminal cases are often spectacles, with people marveling at the curious circumstances.

For example: the German case of Armin Meiwes, where the convicted Meiwes killed and ate Bernd-Jurgen Brandes. What makes this case so special is the conditions the crime was committed in and the outcome of the legal battle. Meiwes had reached out on an online forum to find someone who wanted to be killed and eaten, and many had responded, but they had either backed out or didn’t fit Meiwes’ specific requirements. Finally, when Brandes responded, they began to email– records of which show both parties’ enthusiasm for the upcoming cannibalism as a sexual act. Throughout their entire interactions, it’s clear that they both desperately wanted to participate (with Brandes even seeming more passionate than Meiwes at times), and consent

was given at almost every turn. However, when Meiwes was found out, he was tried for manslaughter. Meiwes saw this verdict as unjust. He wanted to be charged with “killing by request,” something only punishable by a maximum of five years in prison. The judge did not agree— the only reason he wasn’t charged with murder is because the judge ruled that he did not want to kill Brandes, and only “sought enjoyment in the dismemberment and consumption of his flesh” (Tedaja 7). But that isn’t the end of Meiwes’ case: three years later, he was retried, this time for murder. He was sentenced to life in prison. A quote from the prosecution reads: “The court left no doubt that anyone who kills another human being to fulfill such a monstrous breaking of taboos makes him guilty of murder” (Tedaja 7). The retrial brought the “taboo” into law practice, which makes the case infinitely more complicated. What gives the “taboo” legal standing? Cannibalism is not an illegal act under German law, so he couldn’t be charged with that specifically. It might be a moral offense to the general public, but does that constitute a legal punishment? All the court could do was argue for a “right” and hope it held up— which it did. The case between Meiwes and Brandes was enthusiastically and undeniably consensual, but consent is a concept restricted by social guidelines, so even if all parties deem it consensual, the public might not accept that because of the nature of the interaction. Legally and socially speaking, it doesn’t even matter if the cannibalism in this case was consensual— it was always going to be deemed immoral anyway.

The fact that the cannibalism involved with Meiwes and Brandes was explicitly sexual isn’t irrelevant. In fact, it’s the reason that Meiwes got retried— the prosecution argued that because he slaughtered and ate Brandes for his sexual satisfaction, that constituted a motive, and therefore he was guilty of murder. Sexual deviancy has always been one of the strongest taboos in our society, and it’s always been under intense scrutiny of the public. What is commonly

defined as legitimate sexual expression is perhaps restrictive to those who venture outside the norm. The sexual “taboo” can also appear subjective at certain points— queerness, for example, has historically been demonized and rendered illegal. Additionally, those who participate in BDSM or kink culture might feel the need to hide their interests for fear of judgment or shame, even those the vast majority of these communities underline the need for boundaries and rules to be able to practice sexual fantasies safely. As Anastasia Tedaja says when exploring the Meiwes case in their thesis *Your Master Butcher: The Rhetoric of Consent in Cannibalism*: “Consent is a vehicle for one’s own legal agency, but the right is restricted by social morals.” Two consenting adults have all the personal power in the world to do whatever they wish sexually, but they must be prepared to either mask that fact or face the social stigma surrounding the deviant.

Regardless of what an individual might think, cannibalism in the mind of the public is equal to some of the worst violent crimes out there, and there’s not much that can change that. We love to watch it anyway, if the recent influx in popularity of cannibalistic media has anything to say about it— movies like *Bones and All* and *Jennifer’s Body* as well as discographies like Ethel Cain’s are only some instances of that. This paper takes four such examples, consisting of *Sweeney Todd*, *Hannibal*, *Yellowjackets*, and *Dungeon Meshi*, to examine what representations of cannibalism say about human relationships, morality, and the taboo. If cannibalism is generally “wrong,” why do we love it?

SECTION II: SWEENEY TODD

At first, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* presents itself as an interesting case of cannibalism in media. The musical is certainly centered around a cannibalistic plot, but it’s not *about* cannibalism in the way that *Hannibal* or *Yellowjackets* may be. It’s a tale of revenge,

murder, and the twisted morality of the world, following Sweeney Todd, a scorned barber seeking to find the Judge who sent him to jail and raped his wife, and Mrs. Lovett, a down-on-her-luck baker, who welcomes Sweeney back to London. In a comedy of errors, the pair of them stumble into a murder plot. But there's one problem— what to do with the bodies? Well... Mrs. Lovett's pie shop has been losing steam recently, with the price of meat being sky-high in Victorian, low-class London. So, Sweeney kills his barbershop clients, and Mrs. Lovett butchers them and bakes them into her meat pies. It's a win-win-win situation— Sweeney practices so he can finally kill Judge Turpin, Mrs. Lovett's shop is thriving, and the citizens of London have never been more well-fed.

The murder spree that Sweeney embarks on is clearly morally reprehensible to the audience— even if killing an awful man like Judge Turpin would land in a gray area, Sweeney, blinded by revenge, has long since strayed from that one goal, and men are being slaughtered like pigs. However, he doesn't see it that way. In "Epiphany," the turning point of the narrative, Sweeney proclaims that "we all deserve to die," and death is salvation from suffering (Groban 1:08-1:22). It's definitely bold, but not entirely irrelevant when considering *Sweeney Todd's* cannibalism.

This presents a new spin on the topic of respect for the dead: what makes the dead deserving of respect? Is it simply because they once had humanity? Because, as introduced in the foreword, "A corpse is not a human being - at least not in the robust sense of the term. A corpse is human flesh. Human flesh itself, one can respond, does not have dignity" (Wisnewski 267). One could argue that once a person is dead, their corpse is only a shadow of who they once were, and so their bodies return to the common earth. So who are they to dictate what's done with their flesh? They're not using it anymore.

Additionally, if cannibalism is permissible in extreme situations, what distinction lies between regular and extreme? In starving, low class London where meat is almost impossible to come by, people might survive food scrap to food scrap but can they really live? Is cannibalism only alright when it's the only choice other than literal starvation? As Sweeney says in the song "A Little Priest," "The history of the world, my sweet / is who gets eaten and who gets to eat!" (Groban). If there are those who are starving on the streets, is the dignity of the dead more real than the needs of the living?

This line from "A Little Priest" also serves as Sweeney's commentary on the class dynamics of his Victorian setting. The upper class in *Sweeney Todd* consumes (metaphorically, this time) the low class citizens, shown especially with Judge Turpin's predatory behavior towards Lucy and Johanna Todd. Judge Turpin pursues each young woman, determined to dominate and possess them sexually. When he has his way with Lucy, shown dramatically in Sweeney through a choreographed ball where guests with animal masks watch and leer, she scorns him, and he casts her out as insane. Sent to an asylum, she loses her way and eventually attempts suicide. The Judge has effectively taken everything from her, consuming her life force. The audience watches as it all plays out again, this time with Lucy's daughter, Johanna. With Lucy out of the picture, and Sweeney gone, the Judge takes it upon himself to raise Johanna as his own— that is, until he proposes to her. Horrified, Johanna wants to decline, but she's quite literally trapped: the Judge houses her in a mansion where she's unable to leave, only looking down on the town streets, not knowing anything of the world except the Judge and his home. When she denies the Judge, just as her mother did years ago, he again ships her off to the asylum. Luckily, Johanna escapes, dodging the fate that befell Lucy, but everything she's weathered still stands. She was teetering on the edge of being completely devoured by the Judge,

and if things hadn't worked out for her, she would have had no defense against this wealthy, influential man. In a society where those in power prey on the powerless with pleasure, if the powerless got the chance to feast on the powerful, would it not be only fair for them to take it? Who, exactly, determines who gets eaten and who gets to eat?

In *The Pleasure and Horrors of Eating*, Marion Gymnich establishes cannibalism as a cultural trope to address crisis capitalism, and then elaborates it to be a vehicle to make the "Other" separate from ourselves, so what's immoral cannot touch us. But cannibalism in modern media and not colonial tales makes us and the Other blur together, making it significantly more human to consume and in turn making it more horrifying to most. Sweeney Todd is certainly Othered (literally called the Demon Barber of Fleet Street") but he is also enveloped in humanity, painting him as a tragic anti-hero. He's made sympathetic, but that makes the cannibalism and his murders even more terrifying because of the implication that monsters are the same as us. If Sweeney's mentality is that everyone deserves to die, and therefore no one is inherently deserving of respect post-mortem, our whole perception of what is then acceptable or "right" is disrupted. The Other becomes a part of us.

SECTION III: HANNIBAL

Much of NBC'S *Hannibal* gravitates around the relationship between the titular character Hannibal Lecter, a psychiatrist and undercover serial killer, and his patient Will Graham, a criminal profiler. *Hannibal*, for all its gore, is a show primarily about relationships and the nature of being with others.

Hannibal, alluding to the Roman philosopher Seneca, states that "the most beautiful quality of a true friendship is to understand and be understood with absolute clarity." Will has an

uncanny ability to sense the emotions and thought processes of other people, especially killers, so him being able to relate deeply to Hannibal is almost a given. However, it's not only Will's hyperempathy that links him to Hannibal— though he might be able to recognize others' motives, the bond between Will and Hannibal is cemented into a deep kinship through their actions. Only someone who has indulged in the same crimes as they each have can understand, and because their crimes are so deeply intimate, there literally *couldn't* be anyone else involved.

To that extent, Hannibal and Will share the same unique experience of being Othered. Will and Hannibal are both deeply different from those around them— Will because of his hyperempathy and autism, and Hannibal because of his lack of empathy and psychopathic tendencies. The only distinction between them is how they are dealt with, or how they deal with it. Will is held at a distance because of his inability to act normal, but Hannibal perfects it like it's an art, expertly blending in with the socialites he hosts while they don't really know him at all. The only time the two ever really let their guards down is with each other— Will might love others, and even start a life with a woman, but he always comes crawling back to Hannibal— they're inextricably connected. Hannibal may have other romantic entanglements, but they all end in him asserting his dominance over them. Bedelia Du Maurier, Hannibal's psychiatrist, is the only female character who even comes close to being a romantic companion for him, but she falls victim to his manipulations time and time again, making her an unwilling murderer and cannibal. He feeds her human meat, and she can do nothing except let it happen.

Contrast this to Will Graham's experience with Hannibal: Hannibal certainly manipulates Will, but Will arguably has just as much control over Hannibal as Hannibal does him. At the midpoint of the final season, Hannibal plans to feed Will's own brains to him, and begins cutting his head open with a cranial saw, but it's stopped by a police intrusion before it can happen (“Digestivo”).

The interruption of this ritual symbolizes the (temporary) severing of the connection between Hannibal and Will– they’ve built it up by their trail of crimes committed together or in each other’s names (see: the moment where Hannibal arranges a victim’s body parts into an anatomical heart, and leaves it as a gift for Will to find), and now what was supposed to be Hannibal’s final victory over Will has been aborted. (Miller, Van Riper 214) Yet, that doesn’t deter Hannibal from chasing after Will.

Cannibalism is used as a metaphor for love and relationships throughout the show’s run. Those who have seen it most likely recognize this line: “But do you ache for him?” Spoken by Bedelia Du Maurier, and directed at Will Graham, it’s used time and time again as an expression of deep-seated love– if you loved someone, would you feel a physical pull to them? It’s an iconic line, yes, but what’s most important is what comes before it. “Is Hannibal in love with me?” Will asks, and in lieu of a clear answer, Bedelia replies: “Could he, daily, feel a stab of hunger for you and find nourishment at the very sight of you? Yes” (“The Number of the Beast Is 666”). The metaphor of love as consumption has never been more pointed as it is here– literally, Hannibal hungers for Will, and seeing him, indulging in him, is enough to fill him up. It’s set up beautifully to mesh with Hannibal’s actual cravings for human flesh. Will, to Hannibal, is a necessity to live. This theme returns in “Digestivo–” as Will is effectively breaking up with Hannibal, he remarks: “I don’t have your appetite.” This statement comes directly after a showdown with some main villains, where Will bites a man’s cheek off, therefore taking his first active taste of human flesh. To reject cannibalism to Hannibal’s face is the same as telling Hannibal he doesn’t understand him anymore. If, to Hannibal, Will is food, and Will tells him he doesn’t have an appetite, then it’s a cold rejection of his love.

However, the rejection doesn't last long, as they're reunited in the next episode. They just can't stay away from each other— they're more connected to each other than anyone else because Hannibal feels real compassion for Will (which he proclaims is inconvenient) and doesn't just see him as entertainment. It's not a coincidence that the scene where Hannibal tells Will this is paired with Hannibal opening a bottle of wine, signifying an indulgence. This dialogue is also oriented directly before the scene where they work together to take down a murderer. After the deed is done, Hannibal whispers that “[it] is all I ever wanted for you, Will. For both of us,” and Will replies: “It's beautiful,” before they take each other in their arms and tumble off of a cliff together (“The Wrath of the Lamb”). They are each other's only person— as seen by literally attempting mutual suicide, they cannot live without the other. *Hannibal* is the classic example of the type of cannibalism in media that people love— an all-consuming, obsessive type of love, and what better way to express that than through actual, tangible hunger pains?

SECTION IV: YELLOWJACKETS

Yellowjackets centers around a highschool women's soccer team that has just crash landed in the Canadian Rockies on their way to nationals. Their main struggle is fending for themselves in the wilderness— a struggle that gets more threatening as the months move into the harsh winter.

Yellowjackets is definitively *about* cannibalism, but in the first season, it hangs over the viewer's head like a threat— the first scene the audience ever sees is a montage of a human hunt for sport and of them tearing into their teammate's bodies like it's fresh game, but we never actually encounter cannibalism— they haven't reached that point yet. Instead, we bounce back and forth between their stress-inducing stabs at survival as teenagers, and their fragile lives as adults who've returned from the woods. But even when they aren't practicing cannibalism onscreen,

you can feel what's unspoken. It haunts each and every survivor, as they often allude to "what we did out there," but they can't ever say it with their chest. That is, until we finally do see their breaking point.

Stuck in the winter woods, with no game and no prospects of rescue, they have to eat something out there, so they eat each other. Most wouldn't reprimand this behavior as unacceptable. There may be some who turn up their nose at their actions, but when push comes to shove, these girls' hands were forced into doing what they had to in desperation. It's the definition of survivalism. They could come forward with crocodile tears, admitting to their horrific mistakes, and plead with the public that there was no other choice. And on the surface, that might all be true. But as we follow the team through their teenage years in the woods, we discover that it's not exactly the whole story. There is a presence trapped in that forest with them, referred to as "the Wilderness" or just "It," and It is Hungry.

The first of their team to drop post-crash is Jackie— the captain, and the former leader before she was ousted. She is sent into the woods to sleep outside after a fight with her best friend Shauna and snow falls overnight. Shauna wakes up; Jackie doesn't. It haunts Shauna— literally. She speaks to Jackie's corpse, hallucinating conversations between the two, and she flies into a frenzy when Jackie's lifeless ear falls off her body. This can't be right, she thinks— she can't really be gone. In her desperation, she pockets the ear, and later, in the safety of the attic, she takes it out to examine it. In a brief moment of obsession, she takes a bite, and the scene cuts to black. Credits roll ("Friends, Romans, Countrymen"). The viewer is left there to consider what private moment they've just witnessed. It's easy to excuse what Shauna has done through the survivalism lens— she's pregnant, and starving, and they're running out of meat, so anything that's edible is fair game— but in reality, Shauna does this because of the irresistible urge to

consume the other. She loves Jackie, even in death, she wants her gone, and she wants to carry Jackie inside her forever (Lisco). The team attempts to cremate Jackie's body, much to Shauna's dismay, but snow falls miraculously, extinguishing the flames—right after she's been cooked to perfection. The Wilderness doesn't want her to go. The girls crowd around her, hungry, but wary. Then, Shauna reaches for Jackie. "She wants us to," she whispers, before the team swarms Jackie's body like a whale fall. They tear her apart ("Edible Complex").

While the other girls are nervous but mostly just eager to have a good meal, Shauna is devastated. She's shaking with guilt, even if she's reassured that it is in fact what Jackie would have wanted— "But I wanted it, too," she whispers, teary-eyed and afraid of what it means ("Digestif"). Forced cannibalism might have been forgivable, but truly desiring to consume your best friend, another human, is intensely taboo. Though no other girl is in their right mind to judge in the Wilderness, Shauna's subconscious can't forgive her that easily. It's fucked up, she thinks, she's fucked up— and yet she still wants it. She'll still indulge the next time she gets hungry, because there's no room for moral quandaries when surviving, especially when it would be more disrespectful to the dead to let their bodies rot while the rest of the team starves. When another girl dies after falling off a cliff in the woods, two girls whisper in the corner. One poses a dangerous statement: if they find her body, they could finally have a good meal again. "It'd be, like, disrespectful to the Wilderness to waste it," the other girl agrees ("Burial"). That presence comes back again— the Wilderness, He— *It*— is providing for them. To survive out there, they must create a symbiotic relationship with It, and that means being grateful for what they have. It's as if the Wilderness is as alive as Jackie was, and just like the girls reassure themselves Jackie would have wanted them to survive as long as they could, the Wilderness expects them to take what

they can to sustain themselves— if they aren't meant to live, It will make that clear. The cannibalism they act upon isn't only a necessity, but it's an indulgence.

SECTION V: DUNGEON MESHI

The manga *Dungeon Meshi* follows a group of adventurers as they traverse a magical dungeon, battling monsters and eating them for sustenance along the way. At first, it's a lighthearted episodic comedy, but something has been hanging over all the character's heads since the beginning: Falin, a companion to the group and sister to the main character Laios, has been eaten by a dragon, and they must race to save her in time for her to be resurrected. *Dungeon Meshi*'s rules of revival are simple and clear-cut. The healing magic needed to bring someone back to life takes a huge caloric toll on the person being resurrected, but it also requires calories in fresh blood or meat from those doing the resurrecting, and if blood that didn't originally belong to the body is used, the results are worse. Additionally, the corpse must be in good condition. All of these technicalities punctuate the desperate undertone of the manga— if they don't find Falin before she's digested, she might be lost forever.

The good news is, the team finds Falin, and after a few resurrection mishaps, Falin is revived! However, it doesn't go as smoothly as they hoped it would after the fact. She's reclaimed by the dungeon. The party finds out in shock that she has been transformed into a chimera, and to bring her back to a regular state, that monstrous part of her must be excised. What is a party of four people going to do with the dragonic ex-body of their lost friend? Laios Touden has an idea: he wants everyone to pitch in to “help [him] eat [his] sister” (Kui 40).

Of course, most within *Dungeon Meshi* outside of the immediate party insist that it's dragon meat, but for all intents and purposes, it's treated like Falin— Marcille, another member of

Laios' party, even remarks to Falin that "[she's] so delicious." The focus here is less on the cannibals themselves— everyone who eats Falin's body seems relatively hesitant, but ultimately gives in to do Laios a favor— and more on what this means for the person being cannibalized herself. It's an act of service to her— if the dragon meat remained connected to her body, or even if it was out in the world, the risk involved with resurrection would increase dramatically.

Digestion is the safest way to continue forward, and furthermore, consuming the remains of Falin's body signifies a close to a chapter (figuratively and literally), marking an end to this part of her life and a renewal of life. The concern about respect for the dead resolves: here, it is ritualistically important, in a literal sense, and it would be a disservice to Falin to let that meat go to waste or interfere with her resurrection.

It's no coincidence that the cannibalism within Dungeon Meshi leads directly into the rebirth of Falin Touden. The desire to be consumed is an expression of vulnerability that means more of a want for symbolic reincarnation than actual death (Takada 315). In *Eating and Being Eaten: Cannibalism As Food for Thought*, Akira Takada states that this want for symbolic death has especially taken hold in Japanese youth. Within this claim, the author examines the case of TS, a 27-year-old Japanese man who killed and dismembered nine people after they expressed suicidal ideation on social media. He expressed that if they wanted to die, he would like to be the one to kill them, and therefore would "die together with them." He may have been reaching to experience a type of symbolic death, linking himself to his victims, and provoking a feeling of reincarnation within the killer. Like Armin Meiwes, he was searching for people with whom he could connect on the most ultimate level with (though Meiwes was explicitly romantic/sexual, and TS seemed to be searching for connection through pure humanity). But that's not what happened, in the end— he killed nine victims in a short period of time, rushing through each

ritual, and severed any connection he was trying to foster between him and the death he brought. Cannibalism, like the murder in this case, is a way to fill an incompleteness felt within the consumer or the consumed. But the tone of *Dungeon Meshi* couldn't be any more different than TS's case. Maybe it's simply because TS was a murder case, and *Dungeon Meshi* is almost entirely just about eating, but maybe it is also about intent. TS's intention was, maybe, to kill his victims in order to reach symbolic death himself—consuming their being in a non-literal sense and bringing agonizing death upon them. The characters of *Dungeon Meshi*, however, literally consume Falin's body in order to bring her *back* from death—they're flirting with the boundaries of death to root her back into humanity. It's in contrast to other cannibalistic media as well (ex: *Hannibal*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Yellowjackets*), because the cannibalism is certainly explicit, but it marks a celebration of life and literal rebirth, instead of being used as a tool to emphasize something inhumane or wild within the cannibal characters.

As we travel into Falin's mindset in a limbo between life and death, we see her make the choice to return home and live again by choosing to eat more. It's a lovely way to underline what's important about the story: in order to stay alive, we must keep eating, but we must accept death too. As Marcille says in the final chapters of *Dungeon Meshi*, "living things use other living things as sustenance, we're not exempt from that fact either" (Kui 151). *Dungeon Meshi* makes it clear that everything, even ourselves, must consume, and therefore we will be consumed in the end too. It's not only the ultimate end for a human, but it's the most important way of giving back. To eat is to live, and the only honor greater than enjoying the special privilege of a meal is to become one yourself.

SECTION VI: CONCLUSION

The citizens of *Sweeney Todd's* London, Hannibal Lecter, Shauna Shipman, and the main cast of *Dungeon Meshi* all indulge in the consumption of flesh passionately— some more enthusiastically than others, but the end result is the same. We as the audience are still in our seats, watching as they consume those around them, feeling excited and scared and calm and whatever it is meant to evoke in us. But why? Why are we seated, unable to look away? Why do we even sit down in the first place?

Well, because the simple fact that cannibalism is attractive. It's a sensationalization of the illicit— we crave intense taboo as stimulation, and since we've explored so many other areas, consumption of ourselves and others is the last stand (Foltyn 14). As seen in *Hannibal* and *Yellowjackets*, it can be especially romantic. We're obsessed with love, and the idea of a love so large that you would tear the other apart to become the closest imaginable for it is a desirable ideal.

Our other obsession is with the horrific. Sweeney Todd, Hannibal, and other cannibalistic villains are “scary” because of the implication that something like them lives inside all of us, and is present even now. Look to *Sweeney Todd's* final song, “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd (Finale)” — the opening it's reprising establishes it as a retelling, but the finale points him out in the crowd and “beside” you. “Perhaps today you gave a nod / To Sweeney Todd,” the ensemble shrieks, linking Sweeney to the present, and letting the audience sit in the knowledge that Sweeney was once a “normal” man whose life went south (Sweeney Todd 2023 Broadway Company). It's terrifying to most, but that's what's exciting about it— we crave the disruption of normality. We want something that upheaves the most basic “givens” of respect for humanity. We want to be shocked, especially in the comfort of fiction.

For the audience, it's dazzling because the possibility of those social norms being shattered, but for a participant, it's the ultimate way to fill something empty. Perhaps the audience is filling something inside them, too, something that craves anything a little more dangerous through a safe conduit. The motives of the spectators and the cannibal may not be so different— viewers are called consumers, after all. Maybe the cannibal is searching for a perfect connection with a willing partner, like Meiwes, or maybe they want to honor the lives of those they love by remembering them in their body, forever. Maybe they have no other choice. Or maybe they're just hungry.

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