



## AUDIOVISUAL ANALYSIS OF THE *DAHMER* SERIES Genealogy of a Monster and Family Models

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### KEYWORDS

*Dahmer*  
*Family*  
*Serial Killer*  
*Textual Analysis*  
*Liberal Family*

### ABSTRACT

*This article undertakes an examination of the familial representations within the series *Dahmer* (2022), which draws from the life and crimes of the eponymous serial killer. Employing a methodology rooted in textual analysis, the study elucidates a discernible bias in the portrayal of the perpetrator's familial unit vis-à-vis those of his victims. The principal inference drawn pertains to the thematic privileging of ostensibly "disadvantaged" familial constructs as the ones most adept at societal integration, juxtaposed against the portrayal of the ostensibly normative liberal American familial paradigm, which becomes the locus for the emergence and proliferation of dysfunctions culminating in the figure of the serial killer under scrutiny within this scholarly endeavour.*

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## 1. Introduction

In ten episodes, the *Dahmer* series tells the story of a serial killer - a term coined in the 1970s by Robert Ressler, who worked on psychological profiling for the FBI for 20 years (Hardmeier, 2016) - who killed a total of 17 men in the state of Milwaukee (United States) between 1978 and 1991. As Bacarlett (2021, pp. 2-3) describes:

Dahmer stalked his victims in gay nightclubs, propositioning them and then inviting them to his apartment. Mostly African-American men, they would spend the night together, but when the guest had to leave, the rage would erupt. As well as killing and dismembering them, he practiced necrophilia, cannibalism and sometimes climbed inside their skulls to pour acid or boiling water into them. His project was to create a species of zombies who would obey his orders without a squeak. To his credit, Dahmer always said that before he killed them - usually by strangulation or hammer blows - he drugged them so that they would not suffer. [A strange mixture of obsession, preservation and control drove Dahmer to kill these men, a desire for presence, to avoid abandonment. It is paradoxical that this young man, handsome and pleasant, had to resort to murder to keep his conquests.

Perhaps the cause of this paradox in Jeffrey Dahmer's behaviour coincides with those that have been empirically attributed to well-known '*serial killers*', such as psychopathy, sexual pleasure, childhood trauma, aberration, perversity, profit motive, pornography, drug addiction, alcohol, power and control, personality disorders, resentment and antisocial disorders (Arguello et al., 2022). The term paradoxical is again highlighted by Fajardo (2022) to refer to the figure of the serial killer in our modern democracies, as the crimes committed generate certain structural inequalities in our justice systems. Furthermore, his research concludes that the formation of the serial killer's identity comes from multiple sources, ranging from global culture to their own personal histories (p. 315). As in other narratives that also show the origins of evil, such as the film *Joker* (2019), in *Dahmer* these inequalities are valued while showing the system's disregard for the marginalized and the vulnerable (Prósper & Ramón, 2021). However, unlike *Joker*, Dahmer moves away from a colour-blind vision by making visible the role that racial identity plays within systemic differences (Sreepada & Domínguez Partida, 2022).

Returning to the causes of Jeffrey's behaviour, Lozano et al. (2019) go further and find the answers to the reason for this *modus operandi* in the family. The constant fighting between his parents and their individual behaviour caused Jeffrey a terrible sense of loneliness. In particular, his mother's abusive use of drugs, such as morphine, which she took during and after pregnancy for the pain she suffered, and her emotional instability, exacerbated by his father's absence, led her to reject him from a very early age. His father, for his part, introduced him to the sinister hobby of dissecting animals, which Jeffrey himself later applied to his human victims. Indeed, the practice taught by his father contrasted with his absence at key moments in his development.

In terms of the methodology used in this work, there are many studies based on textual analysis of series and films about murderers. However, none have been applied to the *Dahmer* series. Diez-Puertas (2022) analyses the Netflix series *Fear Street* as an example of the *slasher*, a sex- and violence-laden sub-genre of horror cinema that originated in the United States in the 1970s and is now widely watched by young people. The author concludes that the fact that these fictional series often give greater visibility to different sexual orientations and their manifestation in adolescent characters does not mean that the heterosexual model of society is questioned, but rather that the strangest or most anomalous are allowed to live in it (pp. 35-36).

From a feminist perspective, Visa (2022) has analyzed the novel and the first film *Psycho*, in which the mother figure is shown passively, without a voice of her own, and is largely blamed for Norman Bates' criminality. The subsequent sequels continue in this vein. In contrast, in the prequel *Bates Motel*, the mother is a major character and the justification for Norman's behaviour is a childhood trauma caused by a violent father (p. 475). Also, from a gender perspective, but without the crime component, Parra et al. (2019) have analyzed the series *Girls* and *Big Little Lies* to find that it is still very difficult to find a realistic and heterogeneous representation of women (pp. 243-244).

For their part, García-Martínez et al. (2019) have analyzed the dramatic and cognitive mechanisms that activate emotional identification with the antiheroes in the *Breaking Bad* series. As is the case in series about drug traffickers (Domínguez, 2022), in *Breaking Bad* the knowledge of Walter White's noble

motives, extenuating circumstances, doubts of conscience and comparative advantages produces a modulation of our moral judgement about his most reprehensible acts. In its final two seasons, the show strips its protagonist of all justification, but it does so in order to redeem an anti-hero who has gone too far down the path of evil (p. 397).

The same modulation and sympathy exist between audiences and serial killers in television series. As Crespo (2022, pp. 22 and 23) notes:

It is precisely the fact that both the psychopath's family circle (partner, sons and daughters, parents, etc.) and his social circle (relationships and social ties) are presented that makes the psychopathic American serial killer a character with whom the audience sympathizes and identifies to a greater or lesser extent. Although he is still an anti-hero, he is a villain who is almost or fully integrated into society and who is not suspected or appreciated before we learn of his crimes, and even after we discover him, it is still difficult to detach him from all these components and see him as the monstrous and savage psychopath and systematic killer of the late 20th century. Therefore, despite these negative traits and characteristics that define the figure of the American serial killer of the 1990s, the portrayal in recent films recreates the modern psychopathic serial killer in a more humane and relatable way that appeals to ordinary Americans.

Although *Dahmer* as a series adheres to the traditional "Hollywood" narrative model, which requires a protagonist who undergoes a dramatic arc, unlike other similar content, the series in question proposes a social reading that contrasts with the search for empathy with the so-called anti-heroes. *Dahmer*, in its formal dimensions, exercises a series of passages in which the voices of the victims also play a role and are repeatedly contrasted with the vision presented of the serial killer, especially with his family. This fact allows a series of readings on the family compositions that are represented in the series and that give rise to this work. Thus, the main objective of this article is to study the representations of the families, both of the protagonist and of the secondary characters, in the series about the serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer. The second aim of the paper is to assess the implications that the series shows us about how these families influence the behaviour and social success of the characters.

In order to achieve the proposed objectives, the methodology used is based on a textual analysis of the series, which consists of ten chapters, in order to address two research questions: What are the main family models presented in the *Dahmer* series, and how does the series present and characterize the family of the main character, Jeffrey Dahmer? That is, what resources are used to distinguish it from the other families presented in the story? But before we go any further, let us take a closer look at the origins of what we will call the "liberal family system", which was so widespread in the United States in the post-war period and which, in a relatively short time, revealed its shortcomings, in the form of three cultural notes that will strengthen the analysis of the family models present in the *Dahmer* series.

## 2. Towards a Definition of the "Liberal Family System"

In the 1950s and 1960s, the 'liberal family system' was promoted as the social norm par excellence in Western society, particularly in the United States of America (Carlson, 2003). In essence, this system has its roots in the political and social philosophy of the English thinker John Locke (1665), who saw the institution of marriage as a "contract" between "equals" - the contracting parties, male and female - on an equal footing, but with some differentiation of "roles" or "functions" in terms of domestic, social and professional life. For his part, the male father would have to assume the function of "provider" and "head" of the family, as well as guaranteeing the procreation and education of his children, future "rational and free" citizens and professionals who will eventually inhabit the new liberal society. To this end, it would be necessary to free the male father from the domestic tasks of the apparently outdated "traditional family system", which would be delegated exclusively to the housewife. Eminent sociologists such as Talcott Parsons (1951, 116-119) and William Goode (1963) considered the liberal family system - centred on conjugality - to be the cultural norm to be promoted in the developed and developing world, since this model favoured the level of "specialisation" demanded by the new liberal society, in which the male father-professional would devote himself full-time to the corporate and institutional world, and the female housewife would settle permanently in the family home. Over time, this distinction would lead to what Allan Carlson calls the 'work-family collision' (1990; 109-125).

However, it can be affirmed that at the beginning of the 21st century this system has been put on the "dock" for the results it has produced: low marriage rate; low fertility rate; high divorce rate; high rate of "illegitimate" births; triumph of "contraceptive" culture, sexual liberalism, radical feminism and gender ideology, among others (Andrews & Hurtado, 2020; Alvira, 2022). The reason for such a resounding failure can be explained by three cultural notes inherited from the same liberal ideology:

*Note 1: Limited view of liberal fatherhood.* For Lockean liberalism, the male father of the 'traditional family system' is an individual whose aspirations are exhausted in his constant desire for authoritarian 'self-preservation' and sexual 'self-indulgence' (Locke, 1965, 20-23). In other words, the male desire to "make a family" is identified with the simple gratification of his sexual appetites in order to produce offspring for his own pleasure and to consolidate his "patriarchal" authority, which extends to the entire social and cultural fabric. In this sense, the "patriarchal society" would require the male father to be close to the family home, through which he will exercise his authority over his wife and children, and from which he will project it to his immediate environment. Obviously, this "traditional family system" would be incompatible with the new liberal model, and it would therefore be necessary to promote a "soft patriarchy", which would reduce paternal functions to a minimum, namely to *ad intra* relations within one's own family. The family home would then represent the limit of paternal authority, but *ad-extra* his individual function as worker, professional and citizen would be framed in the image of the *breadwinner* father, who would end up giving priority to his role as transformer of reality rather than as husband and father. This arrangement, which was attractive to the liberal mentality, did not consider a problem that is still unresolved today: *women know how to exercise their authority in the family home in a natural way* (Graglia, 1998). If men have to limit their (sometimes despotic) paternal authority to the domestic sphere, where women already do it naturally, this creates an existential conflict that eventually led women to seek their own development in other spheres of life. It had to be the woman herself who decided to suppress her maternal "intuition" in order to achieve her new goal. Thinkers such as John Stuart Mill (2008) were among the first to promote what is now known as the "feminist imperative", even to the extent of accepting the possibility of the single-parent family, with children being preferentially left in the mother's care.

*Note 2: The limited role of the liberal family.* As suggested above, the liberal family system is based on a 'voluntary pact' between a man and a woman aimed at reconciling their interests and property. This idea is not alien to the traditional family system, which at the time promoted an understanding of the family as a self-sufficient 'economic' unit (Carlson, 2003) based on sexual difference and the distinction between generations. In the Lockean-liberal approach, the family became a "consumer" entity dependent on the market and the state, limiting its function to the procreation and socialization of offspring, without neglecting their maintenance. In this new system, both father and mother have to become "specialists" in the various fields of knowledge and work that their respective domestic, social and professional realities require of them, leaving the education, health and upbringing of their children, including domestic work, in the hands of other specialists. As early as the 1950s, T. Parsons himself celebrated this new arrangement, which, together with the rise of feminism, completed the process of transition to the "liberal family". The latter would have two exclusive functions: *the emotional stability of adults and the procreation-socialization of children*. Over time, these strongly psychologically oriented functions proved to be boring and enervating (Abbott, 1981), even insufficient to maintain the functionality of the liberal family system itself.

*Note 3: Constant harassment by social engineering.* John Locke rethought the natural family through the lens of his liberal vision. Given that human beings are not born "rational and free", it is necessary to create a new "environment" that allows and encourages this. Therefore, the new "liberal family" - essentially nuclear: father, mother and children - would have as its main function, as we have seen, to model the new "individual" who would be subject to the new liberal order, distancing itself from the stale traditional pre-modern vision. It can be affirmed that a similar task has been undertaken by various later ideologies, such as the "Soviet man" in Stalin's USSR, the "Nazi man" in Hitler's Germany, and now the "feminist man" on a global scale. But it was J. S. Mill who took the final step in this direction by asserting that if it is desired that every child should become a "rational and free" being seeking its own "individual" development, it is equally necessary to promote perfect "equality" between the sexes. In other words, the liberal family system would have to aspire to familial egalitarianism and promote it as a social norm. Since the traditional family is not naturally endowed with the new liberal virtues, the new model would have to be imposed, if necessary, by force (Mill, 2008). Finally, the English philosopher

Thomas Hill Green took the next step in this line of discourse, arguing that the state has a responsibility to ensure that every human being is free to pursue "possible self-satisfaction" (Green, 1967, pp. 32-33). This promoted the vague notion of "self-realization" or "self-satisfaction" as the liberal principle par excellence. The American philosopher John Rawls, for his part, introduced into the discussion the civil need to promote the concept of "fair opportunities" in the family environment. If the new "liberal man" is to lead a "rational and free" life, striving for "self-realization" and "self-satisfaction", then the "liberal family system" must provide the foundations for all its members to live according to these maxims, while the state must guarantee this functionality, by force if necessary. Faced with this bumpy dialectic, J. Rawls himself ventured the following sentence: "Will the family be abolished? In short, the family has not yet disappeared but it has been considerably weakened, to such an extent that today we no longer speak of "the family" but of "families" (Salar, 2019). The guiding principles that have shaped domestic family life since yesteryear have been overshadowed, in favour of the new plural and inclusive society. Now, all that remains is to apply another major assumption promoted by ideological liberalism: tolerance. Indeed, contemporary families must accept the liberal family system, in its individualistic version, as the model that favours the self-realization of its members according to the liberal aspirations of unlimited growth. The drama exposed can be summarized as follows: ideological liberalism (as well as eventually Marxism, communism and feminism), like someone trying to embody in life a mythological hero of yore - Hercules - decided to engage in a pitched battle against its archenemy Hydra - the traditional family - the monster that, having lost one head, generates two more from it. As was to be expected, the liberal project dedicated itself to "cutting off the heads" of the dreaded Hydra, but these did not stop growing. The result is all too familiar in our times: the plurality of contemporary families seems to know no bounds.

### 3. Methodology

As part of the cultural production of a context, audiovisual content articulates within its representations of different dimensions of social configuration. Because of this property, media contents are recognised as symptomatic texts (Dubrofsky, 2011). They indicate the influence/adoption of certain ideological systems by a society. In the current era, where the impact of globalisation on the (co)production of cultural identity is notorious, content requires a transnational quality; that is, constructions that appeal to multiple contexts through a stripping of cultural markers (De la Garza, Doughty & Shaw, 2020).

In this environment, textual analysis allows for the exploration, identification and study of content in relation to the operation of the structure in the culture from which it emerges or represents (McKee, 2001). It also considers the cultural fluidity of the constructs that give meaning to these structures. In order to identify them, the fragmentation of content according to the principles of segmentation and stratification proposed by Casetti and Di Chio (1990) must take into account the principles previously identified in a culture during textual analysis.

Therefore, in order to answer the first research question about the family models that appear in the series, it is necessary to extract the scenes in which the members of the three families portrayed in the narrative - Dahmer, Sinthasomphone and Hughes - interact with the aim of contrasting these representations with the models that operate in society. This analysis not only recognizes the characteristics of each family within the series (as well as their differences), but also considers the extent to which the models proposed in the narrative coincide with, or differ from, those recognized as operative in the Western society in which they are set.

Secondly, the textual analysis allows us to identify the stylistic and narrative elements typical of the audiovisual language used in these scenes to present the three families. In this way, the series aims to reinforce the readings derived from the events presented and reinforced by the editing, the framing or the music used. This allows us to answer the second research question about the technical choices made to differentiate the Dahmer family from the others.

### 4. Inside Dahmer's Family Structures

The 10 episodes that make up *Dahmer* (2022) deal not only with the crimes committed by Jeffrey, but also with the genealogy of a serial killer and that of his victims, in order to give the viewer a comprehensive view of the magnitude of the events. In this depiction, family dynamics are used as a

narrative device to explore the troubled psyche of the serial killer protagonist, while allowing the viewer to witness the moral consequences that disrupt the lives of the survivors and their families. Through the portrayal of family environments and their dynamics, the series provides a rationale for psychopathic tendencies.

This is evident, for example, in the dramatic development of Lionel, Jeffrey's father. In the *First Episode*, Lionel reflects on how traumatic his divorce was for Jeffrey. This leads him to question whether staying married would have been the way to "save Jeffrey", as is revealed in the episode *Blood on His Hands*. This idea lingers in Lionel's mind towards the end of the series. For example, although he denies having played a role in his son's transformation, when he says goodbye to him - after learning that Jeffrey will spend the rest of his life in prison - he reveals his guilty conscience: "I wasn't a good father because I wasn't a good husband. I abandoned you" (Lionel, 37:29).

The structure of the series suggests that the viewer focus on the family relationships that occur within the story in order to unravel the causes that give rise to a "monster". At the same time, the viewers witness how the families of the victims are configured, allowing them to ask themselves what family dynamics can lead a man to become a victim or a perpetrator.

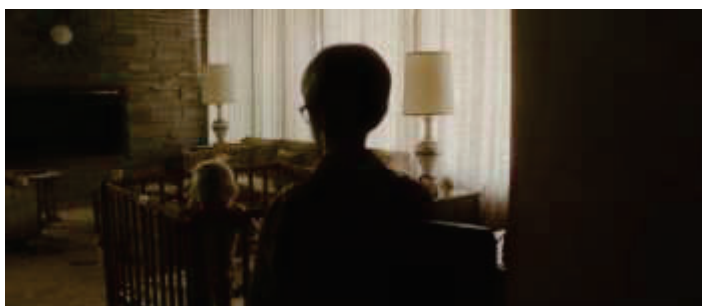
The series focuses on three families: the Dahmers, the Hughes and the Sinthasomphones. Each has characteristics that place them in a different family model: liberal family, single-parent family, traditional family. As a starting point, the way in which the plot introduces them provides the audience with a set of characteristics to describe them, to refer to their internal dynamics, and to create a set of expectations in the audience that either evoke hostility or empathy for the family structure.

In the case of *Dahmer*, most of the dramatic development focuses on the eponymous family, which follows a liberal model. The series introduces the Dahmer family dynamic with a scene set in the mid-1960s. At that time, the United States was torn between two concepts of the family: a liberal one, which presented the suburbs as the idyllic place for the formation of the ideal nuclear family, where roles and responsibilities within the family were defined (provider - housewife - children), and another, critical of this vision, which prevailed in the media and sought a return to a liberal nuclear model.

However, the liberal model was not for everyone, but essentially for Caucasian couples, where men had a university education and a well-paid job, and whose members could afford to live in the 'utopia' described by advertising and television (Spigel, 1992). However, this model offers more challenges than benefits: "With fathers away at work in the city all day, they functioned more like 'overnight guests', while the ubiquitous presence of women made the suburb a new kind of 'matriarchy'. Worse still, the suburbs introduced a new power structure, filiarchy, where children called the shots" (Absent all day at city jobs, fathers functioned more like 'overnight guests', while the ubiquitous presence of women rendered the suburbs a new kind of 'matriarchy'. Worse still, the suburbs introduced a new power structure, the filiarchy, in which the children called the shots" (Morowitz, 2007; p. 37). The Dahmer family makes this failure visible.

In episode 2, *Please Don't Go*, six-year-old Jeffrey Dahmer returns home from school in the suburbs. Inside his house, he is greeted by the heartbreaking cries of his brother, a one-year-old baby left unattended in a crib (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Jeffrey watches over his crying brother, who is only a baby, who is being neglected in his own cradle.



Source(s): Netflix, 2022.

The camera follows Jeffrey on his journey until he discovers his mother unconscious on the bed from an overdose of sleeping pills (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Jeffrey Dahmer finds his mother unconscious after taking an overdose of sleeping pills.



Source(s): Netflix, 2022.

Lionel arrives home just as the paramedics are taking Joyce to hospital. He is upset and berates Joyce for, in his words, "just trying to get attention". Jeffrey is a mute witness to the situation; his father only engages him in dialogue: "Well done," he congratulates him for calling the ambulance. (Figure 3).

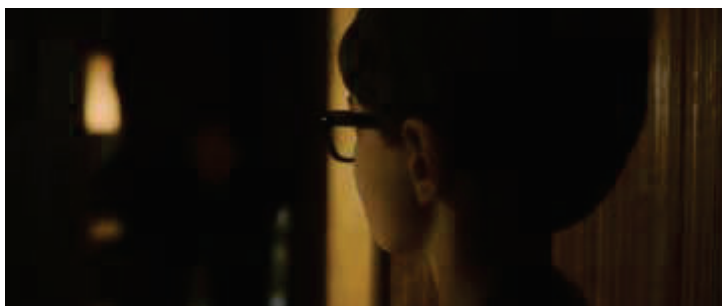
**Figure 3.** Jeffrey Dahmer gets congratulated by his father for being responsible of calling an ambulance after his mother's overdose.



Source(s): Netflix, 2022.

There is no consolation, no interest in the impact of this situation on the son. This second episode also highlights the central trauma and recurring motif in Jeffrey's transformation into a killer: abandonment. *Please don't go* is primarily a reference to the emotional wound in the protagonist's psyche. "Dad? Please don't go," Jeffrey pleads after overhearing his parents' heated argument, in which Lionel insists that by leaving he will live "the best days" of his life. The camera, at Jeffrey's facial level and out of focus on the adult characters, positions the audience from his point of view. (Figures 4 and 5).

**Figure 4.** Jeffrey Dahmer in the presence of his parent's last argument.



Source(s): Netflix, 2022.

Despite his pleas, his father leaves. His mother, in the room, remains distant from her son's feelings, absorbed in her thoughts.

Figure 5. Jeffrey Dahmer watches his father leaving them.



Source(s): Netflix, 2022.

However, the breakdown of the Dahmer family structure precedes Jeffrey's birth. In episode 3, *Making a Dahmer*, we see how, since Joyce's pregnancy, there has been not only a fractured relationship with her husband, who is constantly away from home and dismisses his wife's depression as the result of a hormonal imbalance, but also a rejection of motherhood: "I want to get it over with so I can get on with my life. Some women enjoy pregnancy. And I feel guilty that I don't enjoy it" (3:20). This rejection marks the mother-child relationship that is verbalized in their final on-screen encounter.

In the same episode, Jeffrey returns home. His mother and brother David are packing several suitcases into the car. As a narrative device, the camera shifts from fixed to handheld, conveying the instability/tension the characters are experiencing at this moment. Joyce reveals to Jeffrey that Lionel is unfaithful as she urges David to get into the car. "I've got to go," Joyce mentions to Jeffrey's quizzical look, "I can't go. I have the ball and the dance." Joyce's response is ironic: "What are you talking about? You're staying here. Although Jeffrey begs her not to leave, Joyce's response is forceful, emphasizing the lack of a mother-son relationship: "You don't want a mother. You don't want me." Physical abandonment is again present. Jeffrey is the son of the failed dream, the consequence of the unfulfilled utopia of the liberal system.

Thus, the main characteristic with which the Dahmer family is presented to the audience is the lack/failure of parental figures in relation to Jeffrey. The constant abandonment of both parents will be central to the framing of the character's actions, as his motivation can only be explained by the emotional need for someone to "stay" by his side. Even when Lionel returns to find his son living alone, he consistently avoids making room for him in the new home he has created with his second wife, Shari. Instead, Jeffrey is sent to live with his grandmother and, later, in the solitude of his own apartment, not so much by his own choice but as a consequence of his failure to function in society (his expulsion from the army and college; his murderous/immoral behaviour of taking young men and drugging them to kill them at his grandmother's house).

The portrayal of the Dahmer family illustrates a domino effect that marks the decline of the liberal model. The failure of American society to realize this system leads to deviations in the communal behaviour of the individuals within it. It is important to note that although his brother and Jeffrey share similar conditions, David's absence from the narrative and his mother's unconditional support make a significant difference in the perception of their formative experiences. The whitewashing of David's childhood/life makes it clear that the consequences of the failure of the family model fall solely on Jeffrey.

As for the families of the victims, the series only allows us to meet two of them: the Hughes and the Sinthasomphones. Presented far from the time when the liberal vision of the family prevailed, this distance serves to highlight their main differences: the racial identity of the families and their internal dynamics. In terms of race, Jeffrey and his family, as Caucasians, are called upon to achieve the utopian construction of the liberal system, but they fail to do so. In contrast, the Hughes and Sinthasomphones, who are black and Asian respectively, do not carry this burden on their shoulders. However, the show chooses to make suburbia and the middle class, a place reserved for the liberal model, the context in which the other two families develop. Although historically, in the period in which we meet them (late 1980s, early 1990s), they should have been subject to the segregation that marked a gap between the quality of life of whites and minorities (Clark, 1992), the series does not make this fully visible.

On the one hand, *Dahmer* illustrates this differentiation when Jeffrey is questioned on several occasions about his choice to live in an economically depressed area with a majority black population.



However, the Hughes' and Sinthasomphone's home is never embedded in this reality. In fact, although there are scenes in which the facades of both houses are shown, the neighbourhood or place where these houses are located is never made visible (the few shots in which the place is observed make this context seem blurred and therefore unintelligible). (Figures 6 and 7).

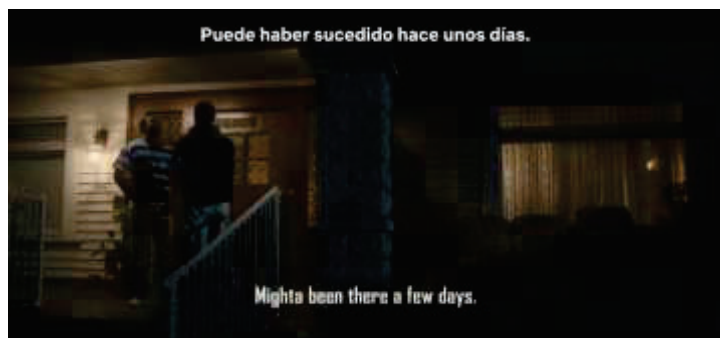
**Figure 6.** Jeffrey Dahmer's household.



Source(s): Netflix, 2022.

The interiors of the houses and their spaciousness suggest a place far removed from where Jeffrey, and therefore racial minorities, live.

**Figure 7.** The Hughes' household.



Source(s): Netflix, 2022.

Secondly, both families move away from the nuclear model necessary in the liberal system. In the case of the Hughes, the father figure is absent. In the family dinner, where we are shown the internal dynamics, the mother is at the head of the table, with the children on either side of her. (Figure 8).

**Figure 8.** Having dinner at the Hughes' household.



Source(s): Netflix, 2022.

Every scene in the dining room leads us to this configuration. The mother is the pillar and support of the Hughes family. The Sinthasomphones, for their part, respond to a traditional model, at least this is revealed in episode 5, *Blood on Their Hands*, when Konerak, returning home after running away from Jeffrey, staggers in front of the family gathered around the television. (Figure 9).

**Figure 9.** Family time at the Sinthasomphone's household.



Source(s): Netflix, 2022.

In his only intervention in the series, the mother of the family stands up and asks him where he has been. From then on, Southone, the father, takes the central role. He is the one who follows his son to his room and takes care of him. Later, during the trial of Jeffrey for this act, although both parents are introduced to the audience, the scene ends with a close-up of Lionel, seen from the other end of the courtroom by Southone, who appears in focus, while the mother does not. (Figure 10).

**Figure 10.** A glance of Jeffrey Dahmer's trial.



Source(s): Netflix, 2022.

The series chooses to present a nuclear family in which the image of the mother is inoperative and therefore non-existent in the story. This is the case in her last appearance, at her son's wedding, when Southone appears alone, seated, watching the dance that her son and his partner are leading. "I'm trying to be happy for my family" (24:37, *God of Forgiveness, God of Vengeance*), Southone says to Jeffrey's ex-neighbour Glenda, the beginning of a speech in which he reveals the pain he suffers within. The scene ends with Southone agreeing to dance with Glenda, without a trace of the family's mother. By denying her the opportunity to appear, the show not only silences the character, but erases her from the family setting altogether.

In this way, the series constructs the relationship between three parental figures and three children in a contrasting way, positing a central difference between those who respond to the liberal model and those who deviate. While all three parents care about the fate of their children, they do not necessarily endorse the model they serve. On the contrary, while the non-liberal models create victims but functional human beings, the liberal one creates the "monster" alluded to in the title of the series.

## 5. Raising a Murderer

Towards the end of the Dahmer series, one of the most recurring narrative points is why Jeffrey became a serial killer. To answer this question, Lionel searches for the "signs" that might have alerted others. However, his intentions are always viewed with suspicion because of the narrative construction, which juxtaposes contradictory scenes. For example, while Lionel expresses his intentions to his second wife, Shari, and to Jeffrey, the narrative intercuts scenes in which he boasts of his gifts as a writer or his annoyance at the seizure of royalties from his memoirs, revealing that his ego is more relevant than the truth.

This exercise in contrast allows us to explore the features that are present or absent in the Dahmers' family dynamics in comparison with those of the Hughes and Sinthasomphone. An example of this can

be seen in the opening sequence of the chapter *Silenced*. The sequence takes the audience into an operating theatre where Shirley, the mother, is in labour, accompanied by her mother. Her first words at the birth of Anthony are joyful: "Yes, Tony, you're perfect. While Joyce Dahmer cannot be happy to be pregnant, Shirley is overjoyed. The maternal rejection that Jeffrey experiences is diametrically opposed to Shirley's affection for Tony.

This affection is reflected in the acceptance of Anthony's sexual orientation and hearing impairment by his entire family. During the first Hughes family dynamic, in the after-dinner episode *Silenced*, Anthony's sister asks him if he has managed to date anyone. A few scenes earlier it was established that Tony is gay, so it is implied that this someone is a man. Tony's sexuality, although known to his entire family, is not questioned or rejected. On the contrary, it is normalized and even discussed as a matter of course. In the same chapter, not only does his sister ask him about a new partner, but his mother asks him to be careful in view of the increasing number of AIDS cases. The acceptance of Tony's sexual identity is such that even the family's religiosity does not clash with it. On the contrary, a religiosity is presented that is not in conflict with sexual identity. In Tony's words to his mother, "I will always try to make you and the Lord proud" (10:43).

In contrast, Jeffrey's sexual orientation is a point of conflict and rejection from several sides for most of the series. In the episode *Please Don't Go*, the first conversation between Jeffrey and his grandmother, Catherine, is about finding a woman for Jeffrey at the church services his grandmother attends. Jeffrey, uncomfortable with the conversation, just nods and drinks from his beer. The pressure to find a woman is constant from his family, even to the point of hypersexualizing ordinary situations, as in the episode *Making a Dahmer*. Father and son fish; Lionel is determined to teach Jeffrey how to put a worm on the hook. To do this, he asks him to imagine the back of the worm and insert the hook there. After a laugh, Lionel continues: "Maybe it's a worm. And you're just sticking it in. I bet that's all you and your friends talk about" (05:11). Jeffrey looks uncomfortable. Lionel changes the subject.

Far from accepting Jeffrey's homosexuality, Lionel sees it as a complete failure of his paternity. The chapter *Blood on His Hands* develops this perception. After being arrested (and released on bail) for drugging Konerak, Lionel worries about what Jeffrey is keeping in a box that once contained his father's most memorable achievements. His fear that he is keeping "gay pornography" is allayed when he finds heterosexual pornographic content. Moments later, he confesses to Sherry that he has noticed several signs of his son's social dysfunction, ranging from exhibitionism at a carnival to the questions about his sexuality that arise from finding a male mannequin in Jeffrey's bed. For Lionel, Jeffrey's possible homosexuality is the explanation for his behaviour, although the series makes it clear that it is the repression of this sexuality and paternal abandonment that leads him to kill and eat his male victims so that they won't "leave" his life.

Abandonment, repression and rejection form the trinomial that frames Jeffrey's relationship with his parents, and serve, at least within the series, as the key to understanding the logic behind the murders that are witnessed. *Doing a Dahmer* features the first death depicted in the series. Jeffrey kisses Steven, and Steven rebukes him: "Why did you do that?" (37:30). Jeffrey doesn't know what to say and changes the subject. The tension builds and is reflected in the camera set-up, as the camera moves from a fixed to a shaky handheld shot. Steven wants to leave; Jeffrey wants to stop him at all costs: "...I don't want you to leave" (37:59). Steven's escape is interrupted when Jeffrey hits him in the back of the head, killing him.

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This abandonment is also a key motivation for the murder of Anthony Hughes in the episode Silenced. Jeffrey has taken a hammer to beat him after Tony tells him he has to leave. He promises to come back, but Jeffrey doesn't seem convinced. "I won't disappear" (39:09) he writes him in a note, taking Jeffrey's hand to his heart and kissing it. Tony leaves the apartment to Jeffrey's confusion. Later in the episode, the sequence reaches its climax. Tony returns to get his keys. Jeffrey lets him pass; his smile blurred. A close-up shows Jeffrey's hand holding Tony's note, while in the background of the shot, in a wide and blurred shot, Tony looks over the bed. (Figure 11).

**Figure 11.** Jeffrey Dahmer holding Tony's note.



Source(s): Netflix, 2022.

The sequence cuts to a close-up of Jeffrey, the camera zooming in on him, taking us inside his psyche. (Figure 12).

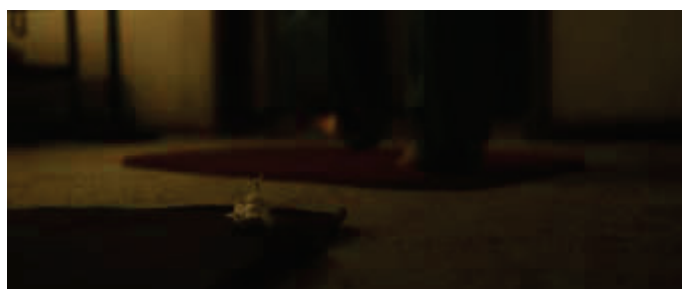
**Figure 12.** Jeffrey Dahmer's closeup.



Source(s): Netflix, 2022.

Jeffrey gasps. The camera returns to his hand, which is now clenching the note in a fist. He drops it as he walks purposefully into the room, hammer in hand. (Figure 13).

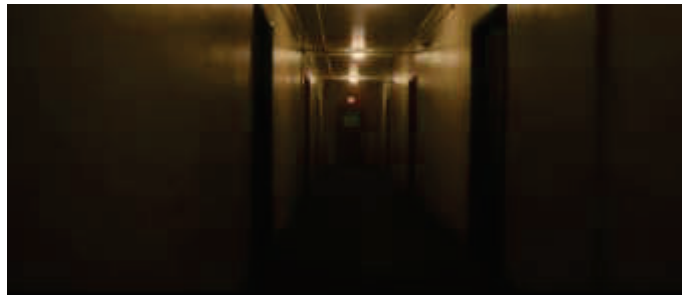
**Figure 13.** Jeffrey's crumpled note on the bedroom floor.



Source(s): Netflix, 2022.

The scene cuts to the corridor of the building in silence (Figure 14).

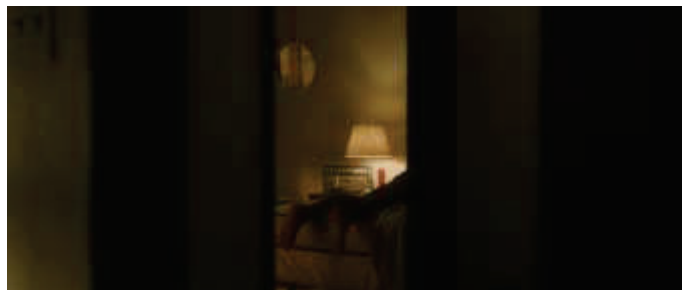
**Figure 14.** Silent hallway.



Source(s): Netflix, 2022.

When the camera returns inside, Tony is lying dead on the bed. (Figure 15).

**Figure 15.** Tony lies death on the bed.



Source(s): Netflix, 2022.

Finally, the other two murders shown in the series, whose victims we do not know the names of, occur because of Jeffrey's homosexual oppression. In *A Good Boy's Box*, Jeffrey is repeatedly kissed by a young man. The sequence cuts to the next morning when Jeffrey, hungover, wakes up alone in his underwear next to a half-naked young man. The sexual encounter between the two is implied, similar to what happens in the episode *Blood on His Hands*. There, Jeffrey tells the police the modus operandi of his murders at his grandmother's house. The only time we see him kill is when he is naked on top of one of his victims, who is also naked. After hanging him, she lies down next to him, embracing him like the mannequin he once robbed. The homosexual relationship is not only implied and emphasized, but also leads Jeffrey to kill her as a form of atonement for his guilt.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusions

The *Dahmer* series presents the viewer with a critical exercise in the family models that operate in American society, in order to ask at what point it is possible for a person to become a murderer. To do so, it deliberately places those responsible for family cohesion at the centre of the story: father, mother and children. Hence the interest of this analysis in recognising that, although the series is titled *Dahmer* and Jeffrey is the focus of the marketing campaign, the moral questions that the audience must also ask themselves fall on other characters.

As mentioned in the analysis, Lionel, Jeffrey's father, expresses the main reflection of the series: the causes that motivated his son's transformation into a serial killer. The fact that he is one of the main characters is no coincidence, as it allows us to enter into the liberal family model that is exposed and criticized in the chapters that make up the series. This point of entry allows us to make a connection with the first remark on the failures of the liberal family: the limited vision of liberal parenthood. As exemplified in the textual analysis, both the maternal and paternal figures in *Dahmer* demonstrate the impossibility of the liberal model to accommodate the social experiences of both sexes.

On the one hand, paternity in the *Dahmer* family is a matter of mollycoddling. Although Lionel is a qualified man, prepared for an intellectual job that gives him a certain social prestige, the seduction of status in the public sphere becomes the motivating factor for neglecting his paternal activity. To make up for this absence, Lionel

becomes a self-satisfied father to Jeffrey, to the point of encouraging him to engage in a cruel practice, taxidermy, without any moral guidance. However, the children are not Lionel's main concern, and he even leaves the family to "run away" with his mistress. We can therefore say that he puts his own pleasure before his necessary function within the family. This individualism, a characteristic that frames the first failure of the liberal vision, allows Lionel to have the image of a provider, even though he neglects his parental role. At the same time, the role that society has assigned to Lionel limits Joyce's ability to develop her motherhood; in this sense, the series not only shows Joyce as a woman incapable of exercising her authority in the family, but also sees marriage and her role as a mother as prescriptions that make her full development impossible, choosing to abandon this "contract" and deny her relationship with Jeffrey.

Lionel and Joyce's inability to exercise their parental role not only represents the unravelling of the liberal model, but also points to the second failure of this system: its limited function. Unable to make sense of the covenant implicit in marriage, both parents rely on the state to provide their children's upbringing and education. In the case of Jeffrey Dahmer, Lionel and Joyce rely primarily on the education system to do what is necessary to provide him with the tools for social development. When it fails, Lionel decides that it is the army that can provide that support. But even this institution "fails" in this attempt. Even though the state does not provide any improvement for Jeffrey in either case, Lionel remains reluctant to take on his parental role and delegates him to work. Although Jeffrey lives with his grandmother, this is conditional on him getting a job that will allow him to support himself. Although this too proves inadequate in Jeffrey's formative process, in his first legal charge the judge determines that it is society, through work, that Jeffrey needs to correct his path. The series goes further, suggesting that even the legal system, which promotes the reformation of the individual for social reintegration, is unable to achieve this. In prison, instead of repenting, Jeffrey becomes an idol who receives donations from his "fans". It can therefore be said that neither of the two premises is fulfilled in the end. Neither the liberal system presented, nor the family provide the emotional stability or socialization necessary for Jeffrey to function in society; nor does the state provide the tools expected from the professionalization of the individuals who occupy these teaching positions. Both structures therefore fail Jeffrey.

The inoperability of this pairing reveals the third flaw in the liberal system: social engineering as a regulatory framework. While the series constantly presents the institutions of the state as ordering the behaviour of individuals, it is clear that in the individual's quest for self-realization there is little room for her desires, which are usually at odds with those of the state. For example, although Joyce does not want to be a mother, it is the marriage pact and a health institution that determine her choices, and the same can be said of the pressures Jeffrey faces in terms of the expectations placed on him: a relationship, his education, his professional future. This constriction of the person, in which "self-realization" is sought, as long as it is embedded in the state's expectations of the individual, only feeds the construction of archetypes that correspond to archetypal models that have proven to be valid within the liberal model.

According to the conclusions drawn from the textual analysis of the series, this failure of the liberal system manifested in the Dahmer family contrasts with the other two families analyzed in the series, which are perfectly integrated into American society. The textual analysis shows with this dichotomy a favourable treatment of the Dahmer victims, and just as in their case homosexuality is unforgivable and disgusting, in Konerak's case it seems to go unnoticed, while in Tony's household everyone seems to accept it without any objection, except for the fact that he gets AIDS. Jeffrey's family is much harder on the protagonist and perpetrator of the macabre events than the co-stars are on their victims. On the other hand, the apparent dysfunctionality of Dahmer's family contrasts with how functional - albeit probably with worse economic conditions and social welfare - those of his victims are. Regardless of how integrated these immigrant families were in reality, the show's director proposes a double slant - that of the acceptance of the son's homosexuality and that of the family's integration into American society - which is novel and seems aimed at increasing the viewer's empathy for the killer's victims, thus avoiding their possible re-victimization. This discursive strategy, based on the unequal representation of the victim and the perpetrator and probably guided by a moral duty towards the victims of the serial killer, stands in contrast to other series, also based on real events, in which empathy between the viewer and the perpetrator is easily generated. This is the case with series about drug traffickers, in which the context appeals to a disintegration of the protagonist and his origins, thus justifying the commission of the crime and the ruthlessness of his acts towards his victims (Domínguez Partida, 2022).

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