

## **Death for Young Adult Audiences: Complexity, Complicity and Critique in *Pretty Little Liars***

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*Opening Titles of Pretty Little Liars – time stamp 00.02*

### **Introduction: Death in the Opening Titles**

The opening titles of *Pretty Little Liars* last around twenty seconds. They feature the corpse of character Alison DiLaurentis being beautified for her funeral. Mascara is applied to motionless eyes, lipstick painted on, high heels strapped, and hair curled. Nails are painted, and then Alison's eyes are gently closed, revealing more makeup on the lids. The camera pulls out to reveal her hands being gently crossed in front of her, a shimmering diamond bracelet on her wrist and a black dress adorning her body. It is revealed she is in a coffin. The four other central characters of the series stand over her, all young women dressed in black and looking equally as glamorous and well composed as the dead Alison. The music playing features the lyrics: 'two can keep a secret, if one of them is dead'. The four young women above Alison stand in a manner reminiscent of a criminal identification 'line up' and their eye contact is conspiratorial. This combined with the lyrics about secrecy and the literal and metaphorical 'covering up' of Alison's body with makeup suggest both a crime and the potential guilt of the other young women featured. These brief, captivating credits with

catchy music ooze glamour and are arguably emblematic of the ways in which popular cultural texts can position death, and perhaps in particular murder, as glamorous. In this article, we analyse *Pretty Little Liars* in terms of a range of debates about death in popular culture, arguing that the series functions to convey several complex and ambivalent meanings about death for young audiences. We show how the series can be read as both reiterating and challenging problematic perceptions of girlhood, womanhood, glamour, and death, often straddling both complicity and critique in its ambivalent representations.



*Opening Titles of Pretty Little Liars – time stamp 00:14*

The series ran for seven seasons from 2010 to 2017. It was developed by I. Marlene King and based on novels of the same name by Sara Shepard. *Pretty Little Liars* focuses on a group of young women named Emily Fields (Shay Mitchell), Hanna Marin (Ashley Benson), Aria Montgomery (Lucy Hale) and Spencer Hastings (Trojan Bellisario), all aged around sixteen in the first season, who are tormented by an anonymous stalker named ‘A’ in the aftermath of friend Alison DiLaurentis’s (Sasha Pieterse) disappearance. Much critical analysis of the show has focused on its representation of gender, sexuality and of girlhood (Crookston 2020; Day and Pennell 2020; Whitney 2017), but despite its omnipresence in the show, little scholarly attention has been paid to the representation of death in the series.

Both the television series and the books that inspired it can be understood to ‘trivialize, condescend to, and pathologize’ its female characters, as it does in its title by referring to them as ‘Pretty Little Liars’ (Whitney 2017, 369). Whitney (2017) explains how this same moniker was used on posters put up by anonymous sources at Columbia University to discredit Emma Sulkowicz, who carried her mattress with her around campus to raise awareness of the physical and emotional burdens of rape. As Whitney (2017, 370) emphasises, there is no ‘equivalence between traumas endured by real-life survivors of sexual assault and those of fictional characters’. Similarly, there is no comparison that can be made between the deaths of young women in the real world and fictional representations of gendered death on screen, despite the existence of parallels. To consider these parallels and relationships is not to equate the real with the imagined, but to examine how fiction represents, negotiates, reiterates, informs, or critiques the events of the culture in which it operates.

In section one, we provide some context by considering the series’ audiences and potential genre positionings, exploring the complexities of ‘looking’ in the series. In part two, we consider the series’ capacity to function as a ‘provocative morbid space’ (Penfold-Mounce 2018) and to engage with ideas about young people, loss, and grief. In the third section, we consider the ways in which the series positions death as glamorous and the gendered dimensions of this representation. In the final section, we examine the politics of death in the series, which often features the deaths of women, in particular the deaths of queer and trans women and of women of colour.

### **Layers of Looking: Audience, Genre and Response**

Despite its positioning as teen television, *Pretty Little Liars* has been popular with broader audiences, in particular the category of 12–34-year-old female viewers (Young ladies love

‘Liars’ 2012). When the series premiered in 2010, ABC Family (now Freeform) was launching it as part of an ongoing strategy targeting older teenagers and twenty-something viewers, and *Pretty Little Liars* has been credited with helping Freeform become ‘a powerhouse among millennials, particularly millennial women’ (Adalian 2017). McNamara (2010) described the series early on in its programming as ‘*Gossip Girl* goes *Twin Peaks* Lite’ and a ‘mildly sinister romp’ featuring girls who were ‘16-going-on-26’. Viewing data, despite the difficulty of breaking down its broad categories, suggests the show went on to be popular with many adults and, given it ran for seven seasons, many of those watching as teenagers matured into adults whilst the show was still in production. By its final season, there had been a 75% increase among adults 18-49 tuning in for the final episode (Patten 2017). By seasons six and seven, a five-year time jump is utilised to age the characters and the series includes increasingly graphic violent imagery and scenes of a sexual nature.

The series can be understood in terms of a range of television genres and is an example of the popularity of the hybridised television format. It can be positioned as long-form serial drama, mystery, and thriller and is often described by critics as teen television – an overarching genre which, as Bingham (2013) highlights, has been heavily concerned with debates about representation and anxieties over content and audiences’ maturation. The series can also be understood as an example of Gothic television, which is itself characterised by hybridity (Wheatley 2006). Botting (2006, 2) identifies Gothic literature as having emerged in the eighteenth-century and associates the Gothic broadly with excess and transgression, with fiction in all media concerned with spectres, monsters, corpses, desolate landscapes, fainting heroines, castles and many more ‘stock features’. Wheatley (2006) has provided the first study of the Gothic genre on television, arguing that television has always been an ideal medium for the Gothic’s concern with troubled families and haunted homes. The Gothic

elements of *Pretty Little Liars* are myriad, though perhaps the series preoccupation with death is the most evident – as Davison (2017, 1) points out, ‘Gothicists readily identify death as one of the foremost terrors at the heart of their cultural field of study’.

Wheatley (2006) associates Gothic televisual narratives with a range of qualities prominent in the series, including stereotypical heroes and villains and plots revolving around families seeking to cover up secrets from the past. In *Pretty Little Liars*, dead bodies are buried in back gardens, houses contain mysterious hiding places, and intruders infiltrate homes. Families are tormented by an anonymous stalker who knows about murder cover ups, secret adoptions, and hidden children. As character Mary Drake explains (s.7, e.2, ts: 1.30) ‘families have secrets [...] and sometimes those secrets are actual people’. These plots are extended across the course of seven seasons, supporting Wheatley’s (2006, 17) view that long-form serial drama is the mode in which the televisual Gothic finds its full potential. Intimations of the supernatural and a ‘proclivity towards the structures and images of the uncanny’ (Wheatley 2006, 3) such as doppelgangers, flashbacks, repetitions, and returns are also present, though mainly in Halloween themed episodes, in *Pretty Little Liars*. Supernatural elements are made more explicit in the short-lived spin off *Ravenswood* (2013). However, there is something uncanny always at play in *Pretty Little Liars* in terms of the constant and seemingly impossible technological surveillance the young women who form the focus of the series experience, just as there is something uncanny in the very notion of screen based technological media surveillance itself – for example, when we see adverts for something when browsing the web after having thought or spoken about it (Why We See Digital Ads After Talking About Something, 2021). The emphasis in the series on surveillance, photography, video recordings, and mobile phones as a vehicle for taunting, bullying, and ‘watching’ others make it a text especially amenable to being examined for the meanings it produces about death and screens.

Throughout *Pretty Little Liars*, there is a complex layering of ‘looking’. Wheatley (2006, 21, italics in original) argues that:

Gothic television is a particularly striking example of a genre of television programming which asks *to be looked at*, which demands concentrated attention from viewers (both domestic and scholarly), through its emotional intensity, its complex plotting, and its highly dense and detailed Mise-en-scène.

This is certainly true of *Pretty Little Liars* with its complex plots, melodrama, and rich suburban scenery. The series also asks to be ‘looked at’ via its ample ensemble cast of conventionally beautiful characters whose abundant wardrobes are often featured on Wornontv.net (2022). Yet the series also operates a different politics of ‘looking’. The premise of the series is that the young women at the centre of it are constantly watched and stalked by the anonymous ‘A’, who uses technology as one among many means of harassing and manipulating the central characters. As we discuss later, this politics of ‘looking’ is especially charged when it comes to the representation of dead young women’s bodies in the series.



*Season 5, Episode 11, timestamp 1.05 – the liars turn to see footage of Alison being played in the window of an electronics store.*

Positioning the series as an example of Gothic television can aid an understanding of some of the key debates surrounding both *Pretty Little Liars* and the representation of death on screen more broadly. Wheatley (2006, 202) suggests that ‘anxieties surrounding the broadcast of Gothic television’ and ‘fears about bringing death/terror into the domestic viewing space’ can be understood as ‘indicative of broader concerns around the propriety of television viewing as a whole’. Certainly, controversies over the representation of death on screen are tied up with those about television as a ‘deadening’ medium. Giroux (2009, 4) puts forward the argument that television has been central in leading the living to resemble ‘armies of zombies,’ who ‘tune in to gossip-laden entertainment, game, and reality TV shows, transfixed by the empty lure of celebrity culture’. *Pretty Little Liars* alludes to this very notion when character Hanna Marin expresses that ‘watching TV rots your brain’ (s.3, e.24, ts: 15:13). Yet the audiences of *Pretty Little Liars* are often hard at work. According to Barker (2014) there is an element of ‘forensic fandom’ to the series as audiences are encouraged to analyse, seek to interpret clues, and research and collaborate online. The series featured the most tweeted season premiere in television history in 2013 (Kissell 2013) and the ‘massive online presence’ held by the show has been credited with keeping ‘audiences engaged and invested’ (Adalian 2017). There are endless posts, threads and pages dedicated to *Pretty Little Liars* fandom across a range of online platforms and sites, demonstrating high levels of audience engagement.

Barker (2014, 222) notes that *Pretty Little Liars* is representative of broader shifts in how ‘fans, industry forces, and stars interact through media’. Through social media, fan cultures and networks can be seen to enter the realms of ‘civically charged areas and concerns’ (Bennett 2014, 9). This is especially evident in terms of *Pretty Little Liars* when it

comes to controversy over the series representation of a romantic relationship between a student and a teacher, featuring a predatory male authority figure and statutory rape (Crookston, 2020). The extratextual screen spaces of social media have become ones through which fans can negotiate the representations in the series, both of gender and, as this article shows, of death. Although television is often positioned broadly as trivialising, it can operate as a space through which audiences make and remake myriad meanings, regardless of whether they extend this via extratextual engagement. Television is highly present in people's lives, with the Covid-19 pandemic having served to accelerate existing viewing trends with more people watching on-demand services (Ofcom, 2021). As such, the different kinds of knowledge and meanings produced by affective forms such as Gothic television and the ideas they communicate about death deserve attention and critique.

### **Death, Loss and Grief in *Pretty Little Liars***

As mentioned above, death on television matters for a range of reasons. This is partly because all images on television matter. As TV mogul Shonda Rhimes (2016, 236) emphasises, 'the images you see on television [...] tell you about the world. They tell you who you are [...] They shape you'. Perhaps especially in teen television, representations of death can be formative. Television offers a space for negotiating, making sense of, exploring, challenging, and learning different ideas about who dies, how they die, why they die and when they die. Television has been criticised for offering 'sensationalised yet simultaneously trivialised versions of dying and death' (Mannix 2018, 1) and for offering no 'serious consideration of mortality' (Wittkowski et al. 2015, 454). Yet as Teodorescu and Jacobsen emphasise, popular culture as a whole offers an invitation 'to meditate on what death means' and to reflexively explore culture's fascination with death (Teodorescu and Jacobsen 2020, 3). Millar and Lee (2021, 172) have argued that the horror genre in particular can 'intimately capture and



communicate the phenomenology of grief and, in doing so, help the bereaved make sense of their experience'. This suggests that film and television narratives can inform people's experiences, challenging the notion of television as trivial a medium. Teodorescu and Jacobsen (2020, 6) call for critical engagement with death in popular culture that acknowledges the complexity of popular culture and the urgency of understanding how popular culture makes sense of death, often in complicated and ambivalent ways. For example, as *Pretty Little Liars* is a US production viewed by international audiences, this might on the one hand shape people's perceptions of 'American' death cultures, and on the other hand make them reflect on their own cultural portrayals of death and dying. It might offer trivialising representations, but it might also offer highly emotive ones.

Though death on television is rarely acknowledged for its ability to offer moving, considered, and thoughtful engagement with death, Wheatley (2021) has argued that the multiple strands offered in long-form serial drama can allow for grief to be examined from multiple viewpoints, with different characters reacting to loss in different ways. She identifies a turn in contemporary US television that 'shows us that television can be understood as a medium of mourning *par excellence*' (Wheatley 2021). Though *Pretty Little Liars* is certainly not as considered in its treatment of death as the examples discussed by Wheatley such as *This Is Us* (2016–present), it does contain significant moments of reflection on grief and loss. Overall, the series is representative of the idea that 'death is everywhere and nowhere' in contemporary culture (Aaron 2015, 1). It is both littered with death, but at times fails to engage with it beyond spectacle. The series includes twenty real deaths and four fake deaths over the course of 160 episodes (List of deaths 2022). In line with the generic hybridity of the series, corpses emerge as sites of horror, glamour, and mystery. But at times, notions of grief and loss do come to the fore.

Several of the deaths in *Pretty Little Liars* adhere to what Wheatley (2021) defines as ‘spectacular death on screen’, in which audiences are left ‘with a body, flayed, dismembered, bleeding and decomposing, but with no sense of how or by whom that body (or the person who once inhabited it) might be mourned’. However, other deaths, such as that of Alison DiLaurentis (before it is revealed she is alive), Maya St. Germain, Mona Vanderwaal (before it is revealed she is alive), Wayne Fields and Jessica DiLaurentis are more profound, with the loss experienced by their loved ones being felt at different points in the series. As Teodorescu and Jacobsen (2020, 3) have argued, ‘if popular culture involves the risk of promoting vicarious and trivialized experiences of mortality and unrealistic images of death, it also offers possibilities to explore meanings death and to discover resources for an authentic understanding’. Though at times this is clearest when comparing different texts, it is also possible to see these two approaches within the same televisual texts. For example, in *Pretty Little Liars* the ambivalence toward death in popular culture is evident within one series.

Though deaths of parents, friends, and romantic partners are all explored in terms of their emotional resonance, the early seasons are particularly preoccupied with the death of Alison DiLaurentis as the central characters grapple with their complex relationships with the friend they have lost. Wheatley (2021) has discussed how long-form serial drama utilises flashbacks as a mechanism to depict grief, allowing the times before and after a loss to be compared narratively. *Pretty Little Liars* adopts this technique to explore the complex emotions that characters have about those who have died – feelings of guilt, responsibility, loss, love, fear, and anger are explored. The series also uses the character Dr. Anne Sullivan, a therapist, to add verisimilitude to its depictions of grief and loss. Terms such as ‘traumatic loss’ and ‘ambiguous loss’ are used and defined for audiences and different responses to

bereavement are discussed amongst characters. In this sense, the series can be understood as producing what Penfold-Mounce (2018) calls a ‘provocative morbid space’, a space in which questions about mortality, death, grief and loss can be raised, considered and discussed.

As in many Gothic texts, characters often connect with and discover more about their dead loved ones after their death via objects – physical or digital – or via dreams and hallucinations. In this sense, the series echoes the theory of continuing bonds (Klass, Silverman and Nickman 1996). The relationships of the living with the dead in the series are ongoing and ‘interactive’ (Klass, Silverman and Nickman 1996, 349). Though the characters must continue with school, sports, family life and their time-consuming relationship with the anonymous stalker ‘A’, either being taunted by them or seeking to unveil them, loss remains a constant theme. Again, echoing Klass, Silverman and Nickman’s (1996, 351) view that after a bereavement ‘the deceased are both present and not present at the same time,’ in the structure and narrative of *Pretty Little Liars* the dead are never forgotten though they may not always be on screen. However, psychologists and fans have both criticised the series for its problematic depictions of mental illness, which are often highly sensationalised and lacking in depth (Bocci 2018; The show mental illness 2018). It is important not to pathologise grief by positioning it as a mental illness, but it is also important to acknowledge that within the series and more broadly grief can be tied up with ideas about mental health. What Teodorescu and Jacobsen (2020, 7) call the ‘inherent ambivalence of pop-death’ is evident here in a series that can simultaneously be flippant and thoughtful about death and the emotional landscapes of loss. Whilst *Pretty Little Liars* offers several informed, emotive, and powerful depictions of loss and grief in young people’s lives, it also contains a plethora of more problematic representations, especially when it comes to gendered representations of the dead.

### **Glamour, Murder and Beautiful Female Corpses in *Pretty Little Liars***

hooks (2020 [1994]) has argued that often ‘the death that captures the public imagination in movies, the death that sells, is passionate, sexualised, glamorised and violent’. The same can be argued of television. Foltyn (2008, 165) has situated images like those in the *Pretty Little Liars* opening titles as examples of ‘corpse porn’ or ‘corpse chic’. She suggests that the twenty-first century ‘is the corpse’s cultural moment’, with ‘fashion magazines feature striking, eroticized tableaux of ‘cadavers’ modeling clothing’. In season six of *Pretty Little Liars*, photographs of Aria, Hanna, Emily, and Spencer laid out as corpses on metal medical trolleys are featured, providing an example of the kind of visual tableaux Foltyn is concerned with. The photographs were taken by ‘A’, the girls’ anonymous stalker, when they were kidnapped and kept in an underground bunker referred to as ‘The Dollhouse’. Foltyn (2008, 166) has argued that, especially in television crime dramas, sexually charged images ‘move beyond the erotic into the pornographic in ways more subtle than a snuff film’, comparing such imagery with the most controversial of relationships between death and the screen – that of snuff, in which murders or suicides are filmed for voyeuristic pleasure. Similarly, Penfold-Mounce (2016) has argued that a rise in TV ‘Crime Porn’ effectively glamorises and normalises violence against women.



*Season Six, Episode 8 – Time Stamp 24.28. Photographs of Aria, Hanna, Emily and Spencer laid out as dead bodies on slabs are presented at a gallery by ‘A’, replacing Aria’s photographs of china dolls.*

The crime dramas discussed by Foltyn (2008) and Penfold-Mounce (2016) are intended for adult audiences and tend to include images of women semi or wholly nude, bloodied, and disfigured. *Pretty Little Liars*, with its predominantly young, female audience base discussed above, features corpses that are typically clothed and beautified. Bronfen’s (1992) psychoanalytic exploration of how visual representations can be both aesthetically pleasing and simultaneously morbid, drawing on the long history of images that combine beautiful women and death, supposes that such representations can be understood as symptomatic of a more systemic issue. In *Pretty Little Liars*, a broader culture of valuing women for their physical appearance, their photographability, and for being inanimate and pliable, is conveyed. The images of corpses featured in *Pretty Little Liars* are typically not as graphic as the corpses featured in TV ‘crime porn’ (Penfold-Mounce 2016), though as the seasons progress, they do become increasingly so. Instead, the images in *Pretty Little Liars* tend to take on a doll-like quality. This positions women as lacking in agency and indicates fantasies of them as easily manipulated.

The photographs of the four young women on metal medical trolleys put by ‘A’ in an art gallery replaced photographs of china dolls taken by Aria. She perhaps chose them as subject matter because her experience of being stalked and manipulated by ‘A’ made them resonant. The title underneath the new images of the four young women laid out like corpses features the words ‘Stolen Dolls’. In the opening titles discussed at the start of this article, Alison Dilaurentis’s body is reminiscent of a lifesize doll being dressed. When the girls are kept in a compound, it is referred to as ‘The Dollhouse’ and they are ‘played’ with by ‘A’ via a series of psychological and physically torturous games as if they are ‘real’ dolls. So,

throughout the series, images of the young women as dolls emerge. With frequent visual and linguistic comparisons to dolls throughout, the series seems to be drawing on cultural fantasies of conventionally beautiful young women as inanimate, deadened objects to be exploited and manipulated. The young women become reminiscent of the title of Walter's (2010) *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*, which argues that the notions of choice, empowerment and liberation have been co-opted under capitalism and patriarchy to sell women sexualised, airbrushed and narrow visions of femininity.

Whilst images of the beautiful, glamorous, and inanimate dead young woman recur in the series, the young female characters featured are also positioned as 'buying into' these cultural images in a way that signal many of the central debates of feminism. Whitney (2017 353) has argued that Shepard's book series, on which the television series is based, 'productively critiques narrow postfeminist constructions of girlhood though it remains complicit in postfeminist consumer ideology'. The same consideration can be applied to the representation of relationships between death womanhood in the television series, where a range of ambivalent and complex cultural fantasises are brought into play. This is especially evident in a flashback in which the central characters are aged between fourteen and fifteen, featuring the following dialogue (s.1, e.8, ts: 2:46):

*Aria: [flash-back of happy times, group basking in the sun] I wish we could just choose the age we wanted to be, and just... stay there.*

*Alison: The only way to do that is to die young. Leave a beautiful corpse.*

*Emily: Don't joke.*

*Alison: It's not a joke. Oh, come on. Haven't you guys ever thought about how deliciously tragic it would be to die in some... incredibly mysterious way? It would be superior.*

*Spencer: Is that really how you wanna go, Alison?*

*Alison: Not just yet.*

*Hanna: Don't talk like that.*

*Aria: It's gruesome.*

*Alison: It's not gruesome. It's immortality, my darlings.*

*Aria: [back to reality, as they look down at the centerpiece of the memorial] Where did she get that from, a movie?*  
*Spencer: Ali was a movie.*

The cultural message internalised by the characters and being conveyed to audiences is that a woman is at her most culturally desirable and fascinating at a young age, and when the victim of a tragic, untimely and mysterious death. As Knox (1998) has examined, a fascination with murder has long been a staple of US culture, and Alison knowingly recognises that for a young woman such as herself – white, wealthy, in a small-town community – dying and leaving ‘a beautiful corpse’ like that featured in the opening titles would attract massive public attention and fascination, giving her a kind of immortality. If she lives and ages, she will become increasingly inconsequential in a culture that values and equates youth, beauty, and glamour. This cultural message can be identified in a wide range of media from news to film, television and social media that demonstrate a long held and often reiterated fascination with dead young women, and which has received critique from many including Bronfen (1992) and Dillman (2014). The series repeats this message for its often-young audiences without perceptible critique.

Yet the series is not entirely ‘unknowing’. In the dialogue above, when Aria asks ‘where did she get that from, a movie?’, it signals a reality in which it is simultaneously complicit – that for many women, images of themselves, of who they might potentially be, come to them through the media in film, television and advertising. More broadly, the series often positions the young women in situations where the men in their lives shift from being positioned as safe and loving to being a threat. Character Aria, for example, endures periods of believing (along with audiences) that her older boyfriend/teacher and her father might be Alison’s murderer. This obliquely signals the reality of a world in which women are most likely to be killed by their partner or someone they know (BBC 2020). Others have also noted

parallels between the series and the realities of gendered violence. For example, the gender of the harassing character 'A' is ambiguous and complex in the series. Whitney (2017, 365) points out the ways in which 'A' might be read as masculine, given the similarities between 'A's behaviour and that of misogynistic online trolls.

As the series progresses, A' has many identities. The true identity of 'A' remains unclear and alters throughout the seasons. At times 'A' is potentially a male, female or a trans character. The series positioning of 'A' as a trans woman has been the subject of much criticism about the series harmful representation of trans identities, to be discussed in the next section. Yet it is also clear that 'A' is the audience. A number of different camera and editing techniques are utilised to create the impression that audiences are seeing through 'A's eyes, whilst the identity of 'A' remains anonymous. Whitney (2017, 367) notes that the use of techniques to represent 'A-as-audience' effectively engages 'everyone, including the audience, in A's shaming, blaming gaze', and that in doing so it encourages us as audiences to 'interrogate our own misjudgements of adolescent femininity'. In this sense, the series emphasises that it is not men or women individually, *per se*, but an entire culture whose gaze upon women can be interpreted as complex, ambivalent and predatory. As with many cultural texts, *Pretty Little Liars* can be read as both reiterating and challenging problematic perceptions of girlhood, womanhood, glamour and death, straddling both complicity and critique. Characters and audiences are positioned as 'knowing' in relation to dominant cultural messages about gender, beauty, and mortality, though the extent to which the series goes beyond utilising images of dead young women to do more than attract audiences with their aesthetic appeal is questionable. What the series' popularity confirms is that highly gendered images of death and glamour continue to effectively coalesce in the realm of representation to attract widespread audience appeal.



### **‘Death discriminates’ in *Pretty Little Liars***

As Coward-Gibbs and Michael-Fox (2021) have argued, cultural texts about death and the dead often reflect and serve as commentary on key debates about gender and sexuality. The focus of *Pretty Little Liars*, as discussed above, is on dead young women – especially the murder of the young white woman Alison DiLaurentis. As one fan and self-titled ‘PLL theorizer’ has noted, based on their own analysis of the deaths in *Pretty Little Liars*, ‘death discriminates’ in the series (Fics and Thoughts 2016). As we will discuss in this section, the sheer number of young women who die in *Pretty Little Liars* can be read as political in and of itself, communicating societal ambivalence about women and their ‘disposability’ in culture (see Dillman, 2014). However, it is queer and trans women who are most likely to die and do so violently in the series.

The killing of queer characters in television series and films has been dubbed the ‘Bury Your Gays’ trope. This trope typically involves the violent deaths of lesbian and bisexual women. The naming of the trope and the discourse surrounding it serves to draw attention to a pattern of introducing queer characters only to kill them off, providing a call to action to reconsider such representations. *Pretty Little Liars* had in 2016 ‘killed more queer and trans women than any other TV show’, overtaking the series *True Blood* (2008-2014), which previously held this troublesome title (Hogan 2021). The series outraged many fans in its representation of a trans woman as mentally unstable, murderous, and finally as experiencing a violent death (Matthews 2015; Rullo 2015). Hogan (2021) suggests that although many men also die in the series, *Pretty Little Liars* failure to fully flesh out many of the queer and trans characters it kills off is reflective of a broader cultural tendency to privilege white men. This is especially evident in *Pretty Little Liars* when character Ezra Fitz is positioned in a positive, redemptive light despite clear examples of stalking, predatory

behaviour, and statutory rape, but queer and trans women are left underdeveloped, represented negatively and then violently killed in the series (Hogan 2021).

As audiences are complex, it is not always possible to establish what kinds of responses representations might engender in viewers. As part of an experimental vignette study, Birchmore and Kettrey (2021) randomly exposed participants to an unfavourable portrayal of sexual and gender minority characters. Birchmore and Kettrey (2021) were surprised to find that, among the women in their sample, exposure was associated with more favourable attitudes toward sexual and gender minority individuals and less sexist attitudes, especially when the women viewing the trope already had sexual and gender minority friendships in their lives. While more favourable attitudes towards these characters may be welcome, it is problematic if to achieve this sexual and gender minority characters need to die. Similarly, not all participants in the study did develop more favourable attitudes. What this study does show, however, is that unfavourable representations do not *necessarily* engender unfavourable attitudes in audiences.

Day and Pennell (2020) have also shown that audiences' engagement can constitute far more than passive consumption in their research focused on *Pretty Little Liars*. Their analysis of fan engagement via Twitter demonstrates that queer young women's use of social media to discuss the show includes both praise and critique, examining the homonormative constructs present in the show, resisting heteronormative portrayals of sexuality and utilising the series as a space through which to create a 'sustainable queer community' (Day and Pennell 2020, 165). How audiences can critically engage with the politics of representation in the show is also evident in one *Pretty Little Liars* thread on Reddit started by a trans fan criticising its divisive representation of a trans character (From a trans perspective... 2015).

The extensive thread includes personal experiences and responses showing support for the original poster, with many fans critiquing the executive producer's defence of the plotline as awareness raising and humanising (Wieselman 2015). Here it is evident that audiences can respond critically to harmful and problematic representations on screen. What this shows is that whilst *Pretty Little liars* (and other cultural representations) might be complicit in harmful representations and discourses about gender, sexuality and death, audiences themselves may be on hand to offer critique, in particular in online, digital spaces.

Some of the series' representations are further complicated by the intersectional politics of on-screen depictions. Day and Pennell (2020) note that fans commitment to the Emily and Alison pairing in *Pretty Little Liars* can at times downplay the fates of other queer characters and especially queer characters of colour, including Maya St. Germain and Shana Tring, both queer Black young women killed in the show. As hooks (2020 [1994]) emphasised, the racial politics of Hollywood has historically been 'such that there can be no serious representations of death and dying when the characters are African-Americans'. hooks cites a range of examples in film where Black characters are brutally and violently killed and Black lives positioned as 'worth nothing', highlighting how even the prolonged slaughter of a black child in the film *Paris Trout* (1991) did not lead to any public protest in the US against the images in the way visual representations of white counterparts did. Mbinjama-Gamatham (2021) has emphasised that in recent years there has been a shift in the representation of Black women on screen, moving away from depicting Black women as 'evil' and toward representing them as powerful, educated and determined. In *Pretty Little Liars*, the picture is complicated. Maya St. Germain certainly is a powerful and determined character and many fans have cited Maya's death as the 'saddest' in the series (pll deaths 2019). Shana Tring, however, is an underdeveloped character cast as dangerous and violent

with little convincing motivation. In a motif that signals the politics of death in the context of a hypermediated visual culture, both young women return in the series via a kind of digital haunting. Maya St. Germain provides clues to help solve her death via a passworded video diary website she maintained, and Shana Tring's body is on show in a video of her funeral watched on repeat by her guilt-ridden killer. Like these characters, whose visual images haunt the series after their demise, harmful depictions of the violent deaths of queer, trans and Black women haunt the legacy of *Pretty Little Liars* as a series that has, overall, been seen as progressive in its representations, in particular of queer young women.

Despite the ways in which the series has been seen as progressive, the fact that so many women die in *Pretty Little Liars* can be read as reflective of a broader cultural discourse in which women are positioned as 'disposable and replicable in the era of neoliberalism and globalization' (Dillman 2014, 2). Dillman (2014) argues that the proliferation of dead women on screen in the 2000s, which has evidently continued into the 2010s and beyond, is connected to profound ambivalence about women's changing roles in society. This ambivalence is often evident when visual representations of dead women embody a 'contradictory logic' that both 'recognizes feminist goals and speaks through feminist codes, but that ultimately serves the status-quo, androcentric, dominant culture' (Dillman 2014, 2-3). *Pretty Little Liars* can be read as emblematic of this contradiction. Its emphasis is on seemingly autonomous, intelligent, ambitious, powerful young women but it soon becomes clear they are all being perpetually manipulated and endangered by the elusive and violent hands of 'A'. Consequently, 'A' can be read as a stand in for an enduringly patriarchal society. As Hogan (2015) emphasises, *Pretty Little Liars* is a story about 'existing for the male gaze'. The fact that the voyeuristic and surveilling 'A' is positioned as so ambiguous in terms of gender – as both a threatening male and as stereotypical north

American ‘mean girl’, as possibly the central characters’ brothers, fathers, boyfriends, teachers, or girlfriends – only serves to reiterate the extent to which young women can be understood to operate within a culture of ubiquitous threat in which men and women alike can maintain the hegemonic status quo.

The character of Melissa Hastings in *Pretty Little Liars* is a pertinent example of the complex and contradictory logic that can surround women and death on screen. Melissa finds a partially obscured body that resembles Alison DiLaurentis and, believing her younger sister Spencer has killed Alison, buries the body. She is not aware that the person she is burying is unconscious rather than dead, incorporating the Gothic trope of being buried alive into the plot. She is also not aware that the body is not that of Alison DiLaurentis, but instead of escaped psychiatric patient Bethany Young. On the one hand, sisterly solidarity is being emphasised, as Melissa is seeking to protect her younger sister by covering up a crime that she thinks she has committed. However, audiences are also aware that she is motivated by a hatred of Alison for having had a romantic relationship with her former fiancée Ian. Ian’s predatory role as an adult man in a position of authority (a hockey coach to the young women) in instigating and maintaining a romantic relationship with Alison, a minor at the time, is never questioned. Throughout the series, underage young women are held as wholly culpable for becoming involved in romantic and sexual relationships with older men. They are positioned as independent, worldly young women able to make their own choices, not as young women (legally, children) who can be exploited. Similarly, the deaths of young women in the series are often then positioned as a consequence of their own behaviour. In this the series echoes a pattern Day (2017) identifies in both *Pretty Little Liars* and other popular cultural texts, wherein the death of a ‘mean girl’ functions to police young adolescent women and as a warning against transgressing accepted boundaries of behaviour. If the

young women in *Pretty Little Liars* die, it is because they have lied, cheated, or otherwise engaged in ‘improper’ behaviour. Whilst *Pretty Little Liars* might offer progressive representations of queer young women and potentially relatable representations of death and loss in young people’s lives, the series is also both tied to and engaged in reiterating ambivalent cultural and social attitudes about women and death.

## **Conclusion**

*Pretty Little Liars* is an excellent example of the complexity and ambivalence that a popular cultural text can afford the treatment of death. Representations of death in *Pretty Little Liars* can be understood at times as glamorising and trivialising, and at others as informed and emotive. The series demonstrates both complicity with and critique of wider cultural discourses about death, glamour, gender, womanhood, and culpability. Several of the representations of death in the series are problematic in their glamorisation of the dead female corpse. Queer and trans women and women of colour are more likely to die than others in the series, drawing attention to the politics of death in the series and of its extratextual contexts. Dillman (2014) and Penfold-Mounce (2016) have both argued that representations of dead women on screen are naturalising, with violent depictions of death on screen having ‘consequences that constrain women and reinscribe androcentrism’ (Dillman 2014, 3). Here we have shown that even when representations of dead women are not graphically violent, they might serve to reinforce highly gendered notions of what it is to be a woman and to reinforce cultural myths about the glamour and attraction of dead young women.

In this article, *Pretty Little Liars* and its predominantly young female audience has been positioned as an example of a hybridised television format adhering to the conventions of what Wheatley (2006) defines as Gothic television. Teen television is often considered

frivolous or trivial, as is television itself more broadly. This article and much of the research it draws on have sought to challenge such assumptions. We argue that television aimed at young audiences and its depictions of death are far from trivial. Fan, critics, and academic responses to the series demonstrate that audiences can respond in very different ways to televisual texts. Representations may, even when unfavourable, have unexpected reactions amongst audiences, and representations themselves can be ambivalent, straddling complicity and critique. Whilst *Pretty Little Liars* can be seen to convey problematic messages about death, glamour and gender, it can also be understood to afford what Penfold-Mounce (2018) calls a 'provocative morbid space', a space in which questions about mortality, death, grief and loss can be raised, considered and discussed. As Joyrich (2020) states, it is vital to think through both the 'possibilities and pitfalls of television'. Where television has the capacity to 'yield troubling confusions, with a high potential for misinformation' it can also 'inspire imaginative resources and responses' and offer 'productive ways of thinking, feeling, and working through difficult times'. *Pretty Little Liars* is a series emblematic of a range of debates about death on screen: its gendered dimensions, its representational inequality, its capacity to provoke audience engagement, and its myriad meaning making capabilities.

## Television Series

*Ravenswood* (2013) Developed by I. Marlene King. Original Network: ABC Family/Freeform.

*Pretty Little Liars* (2010-2017) Developed by I. Marlene King. Original Network: ABC Family/Freeform.

*This is US* (2016 – present) Created by Dan Fogelman. Original Network: NBC.

*True Blood* (2008-2014) Created by Alan Ball. Original Network: HBO.

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