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“The Improbable Made Possible”:

Science Fiction and Social Commentary in *The Twilight Zone* and *American Horror Story*

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Abstract

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The television shows *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) and *American Horror Story* (2011-) earned initial acclaim for their controversial nature in the television landscape of their times. *The Twilight Zone* emerged as creator Rod Serling looked to science fiction as a means to evade stifling corporate censorship that denied him the ability to discuss broader social and political issues pervading 1960s society on television. Five decades later, *American Horror Story* follows *The Twilight Zone*'s paradigm, taking traditional themes of science fiction and placing them within a modern context. In this project, I will be exploring the ways both shows depict race and gender by examining specific episodes. Through this analysis, I hope to reveal the broader role science fiction television plays in the American cultural landscape as a vehicle for progressive social commentary.

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Introduction

Since its advent in the mid-twentieth century, television has often served as a reflection of society. In the 1950s, television shows like *Leave it To Beaver* (1957-1963) and *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) romanticized an idealized image of the white, middle-class nuclear family, asserting an ethos of American domestic aspiration. Due to network television's reliance on corporate sponsors to financially back their programming, shows that emerged in the 1950s and early 1960s were expected to conform to the standards set by these sponsors. This practice often constrained creativity and elicited unwanted censorship, placing sitcoms alongside commercials as advertisements for the reinforcement of American cultural values. As such, television programs under the auspices of network sponsors were mostly unable to utilize the medium to confront social issues and engage in broader political discourse at this time.

The genre of science fiction offered a way for television to evade this censorship through the deployment of metaphors as a means to present broader socio-political themes. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines science fiction as “imaginative fiction based on postulated scientific discoveries or spectacular environmental changes, frequently set in the future or on other planets and involving space or time travel.”¹ The precise term “science fiction” is attributed to writer and publisher Hugo Gernsback, who coined it in 1929 as a way to identify and promote the specific genre of his magazine, *Amazing Stories*.² According to the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, science fiction exists as a subdivision of fantastic literature, its twin genre being supernatural horror.³ These two genres can be ensconced under the term “speculative fiction.” Coined by science fiction writer Robert Heinlein in a 1947 *Saturday Evening Post* article, speculative fiction joins the two variants due to their use of similar themes surrounding anxiety and fear of the unknown.⁴

With literary antecedents dating back to the nineteenth century in the works of Jules Verne, Edgar Allan Poe and HG Wells, the genre further popularized itself amongst radio audiences in the 1930s through serials like *Flash Gordon*.⁵ *Flash Gordon* had also appeared as a series of short films, appealing to youth audiences by offering “thrilling images of other planets and other times that presented an exciting alternative to a dreary Depression-era world that was drifting toward global war.”⁶ By gaining popularity through its literary, film and radio antecedents, science fiction was a viable realm for television in the 1950s. The audiences of the decade would see an inundation of films and television shows belonging to the genre. *War of the Worlds* (1953) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) are quintessential examples of how the genre allowed for political commentary, posing the theme of aliens invading small town America to represent Cold War anxieties surrounding communism. On television, anthology series like CBS’s *Tales of Tomorrow* (1951-1953) featured adaptations of popular science fiction stories by Kurt Vonnegut and Ray Bradbury.⁷ Unlike *Flash Gordon*, these shows appealed to adults, establishing a niche for the genre within the consciousness of a broader audience.⁸

Science fiction has always had a unique connection to American history and society in its ability to utilize metaphor to examine current social and political issues. Particularly for television audiences in the late 1950s, science fiction shows often reflected “the deep ambivalence of that decade toward science and technology,” television itself representing a new domination of technology within the household.⁹ Cultural theorist Scott Bukatman contends that socio-political anxieties surrounding the impending 1960s particularly resonated in these shows:

The constant attention paid to themes of science, technology, nature run amok, alien invasion, conspiracy, disaster and space exploration that [sic] correlate with particular movements in American history such as the development of nuclear weapons, the Cold War with the Soviet Union, the Space Race, the political and social unrest caused by Vietnam, the Civil Rights movement, the growth of the blockbuster and changes to the

Hollywood film industry and the complete integration of computer technology in the network society.¹⁰

With his television show *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964), creator Rod Serling embodied this phenomenon, deftly exploiting metaphors of science fiction to evade censorship constraints and open up a broader discourse on pertinent socio-political issues facing Americans during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Between 1964 and 2011, science fiction would continue to find success on television with shows like *Star Trek* (1966-1969), *Battlestar Galactica* (1978-1979), *Quantum Leap* (1989-1993), and *Lost* (2004-2010), shows that, over the course of fifty years, would challenge the definition of science fiction, welcoming new forms of special effects technologies and more tolerant censorship with open arms.¹¹ In particular, the science fiction shows of the 1990s utilized the genre to explore modern anxieties facing American audiences, as Serling had with *The Twilight Zone*. *The X-files* (1993-2002) specifically touched on contemporary fears surrounding the distrust of government and media, by following the exploits of FBI agents seeking to uncover the truth behind political conspiracies and government cover-ups, raising “questions concerning dominant institutions, ideologies, and values.”¹² While many of these shows episodically followed Serling’s innovative use of science fiction and supernatural themes to highlight broader social and political topics, it was not until *American Horror Story* (2011-) premiered on FX that a distinct, artistic approach was able to redefine the genre for a new generation of viewers.

The Twilight Zone emerged in 1959 as the brainchild of Rod Serling to evade corporate censorship of his television scripts. Serling was one of the most prolific writers in television in the 1950s, earning critical acclaim for the live television drama *Patterns* (1955) and for *Playhouse 90* (1956-1960), the first original 90-minute show ever written for television.¹³ Serling

went on to win Emmys for his work, asserting his prowess and defining television as an art form through his powerful narratives and pithy dialogue. Following this success, Serling was tasked with writing a script for *United States Steel Hour* in 1956, which he titled “Noon on Doomsday.” His story loosely mirrored the 1955 case of Emmett Till, a young African American teenager who had been kidnapped and murdered in Mississippi, his killers having been acquitted by an all-white jury¹⁴. The case was extremely controversial, and network sponsors were less than thrilled about the social activism underlying Serling’s script, particularly in light of the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement. By the time the episode aired in April 1956, the approved version of the script had been “so watered down as to be meaningless,” the Till character now a nameless foreigner killed in New England, the murderer “just a good, decent American boy momentarily gone wrong.”¹⁵ Serling was deeply upset by these revisions, once stating that by the time many of his scripts could be produced, sponsors had “chopped [them] up like a roomful of butchers at work on a steer.”¹⁶ Serling would continue to try to infuse his scripts with socially conscious themes, facing opposition by network censors every time. Serling realized that in order to maintain ownership over his words and his art, he needed to find another option.

Seeing the opportunity in science fiction’s metaphorical allowances, Serling created *The Twilight Zone*. Through *The Twilight Zone*, Serling was able to “[develop] his political and social themes in a safer context,” using allegories to explore salient topics of war, racism, and equality in creative and innovative ways.¹⁷ In an interview on *The Mike Wallace Show*, Serling stated, “There won’t be anything controversial in the new series...I don’t have to fight anymore...for something I want and have to settle for second best...which is in essence what the television writer does if he wants to take on controversial themes.”¹⁸ With *The Twilight Zone*, “the TV censors left [Serling] alone, either because they didn’t understand what he was doing or believed

that he was truly in outer space.”¹⁹ Serling was able to procure newfound artistic control with his new show. As a September 1959 *Variety* article commented, “Rod Serling... appears to have made peace at least with his arch foe, the sponsor, and sees himself now as a onetime angry young man metamorphosed into a petulant, aging one.”²⁰

After four months of production, *The Twilight Zone* experienced a slow but steady beginning on CBS. With stiff competition in the 10PM time slot opposite NBC’s *Gillette Cavalcade of Sports* and ABC’s *The Detectives*, only eighteen million viewers tuned in on October 2, 1959 to watch the pilot episode, “Where is Everybody?,” a much lower number than Serling had initially expected.²¹ Despite this small audience pool, critics loved the show, praising it for its originality and imagination. *Los Angeles Times* critic Cecil Smith touted the show as “the finest weekly anthology series of the season, the one clear and original light in a season marked by the muddy carbon copies of dull westerns and mediocre police shows.”²² CBS nevertheless placed the show on temporary hiatus due to low viewership, but after six episodes, the Neilson ratings indicated that *The Twilight Zone* had garnered a growing weekly audience of close to 20 million viewers.²³ With a concrete loyal fan base, Serling was able to continue with the rest of the season, moving forward with unabashed creative control. *The Twilight Zone* represented a fresh approach to science fiction television and demonstrated its potential as a means for social critique through Serling’s didactic prose.

According to biographer Amy Boyle Johnston in a *Washington Post* interview, “Serling was one of the first people to write about current events. He was taking a major front-page issue and showing the universal appeal of it and showing our own implications. Today that’s a dime a dozen, but when Serling was doing it, that was shocking.”²⁴ Today, *American Horror Story* relies on a similar shock factor to ingrain its critical messages. Emerging in an equally tempestuous

socio-political period of American history, *American Horror Story* sought to challenge television conventions by boldly using science fiction and supernatural horror to guise its critique. Like Serling, the creators of *American Horror Story* were television veterans exploring a new genre. Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk found initial success as a writing-producing duo with the hit television show *Glee* (2009-2015) on Fox, with Murphy finding even earlier success with *Nip/Tuck* (2003-2010). Both of these shows, controversial “dramedies” with fast and esoteric dialogue and sardonic humor, quickly gained cult success. The genres of science fiction and supernatural horror were areas neither Murphy nor Falchuk had narratively explored. Unlike Serling who saw science fiction as a means to evade censorship by sponsors, Murphy and Falchuk’s motive was simply to broaden their artistic horizons. In a 2009 interview in *Entertainment Weekly*, Murphy explained, “I went from *Nip/Tuck* to *Glee*, so I wanted to do something challenging and dark...I’ve always been drawn to darker things...And I always had loved, as Brad had, the horror genre.”²⁵ Falchuk stated in an interview with *Logo* that the goal of the show “is to scare people. You want people to be a little bit off balance afterwards...And you want to deliver iconic images that stay with people.”²⁶ To this point, *American Horror Story* adheres to the definition of speculative fiction, incorporating generic elements of both science fiction and supernatural horror. Although it sells one genre within its title, thematically and narratively throughout its seasons, tropes of both genres are indisputably present.

The structures of *The Twilight Zone* and *American Horror Story* are inherently similar. Both are organized as anthologies, *The Twilight Zone* episodically and *American Horror Story* seasonally. As such, a different narrative and cast of characters are introduced in each episode of *The Twilight Zone* and each season of *American Horror Story*. This anthological structure permits for a more unrestrictive means of storytelling, allowing for new themes and ideas to be

introduced on either an episodic or seasonal basis. The pattern of *American Horror Story* has been to set every other season in a different time period: Season One: *Murder House* was set in modern day Los Angeles, Season Two: *Asylum* was set in 1960s Massachusetts, Season Three: *Coven* takes place in modern day New Orleans, Season Four: *Freak Show* in 1950s Florida, and Season Five: *Hotel* in modern day Los Angeles. The episodic format of *The Twilight Zone* serves as a parable; a point or lesson is proven by the end of each episode, framed by an opening and closing monologue presented by Serling as an allegory for the consideration of the viewer. *American Horror Story*'s approach is less confined, ambiguously introducing controversial topics each season but leaving room for interpretation regarding the nature of the parabolic lesson.

While the creators of both *The Twilight Zone* and *American Horror Story* are undoubtedly credited as the authorial forces behind each series, both parties rely heavily on both a writing and production team to help construct their distinct television universes. For *The Twilight Zone*, Serling was “the most frequent and prodigious contributor, writing the staggering number of 92 teleplays, over half the series.”²⁷ According to Stewart Stanyard in *Dimensions Behind the Twilight Zone: A Backstage Tribute to Television's Groundbreaking Series*, “as much as Rod Serling is remembered as the creator of *The Twilight Zone* and for his vision, writing, narration, and executive producing force, it was the team of wizards that made the series work so well.”²⁸ This “team of wizards” first and foremost refers to his esteemed writing staff, which, along with Serling, was responsible for nearly every episode of the series. The principal members of his writing team were Charles Beaumont, Richard Matheson, Earl Hamner, Jr., George Clayton Johnson, Montgomery Pittman, and Martin M. Goldsmith.²⁹ Beaumont and Matheson were regarded as Serling’s “left and right hand,” as Beaumont contributed a total of

twenty-two scripts and Matheson contributed sixteen, more than any other writer on the show.³⁰ According to *The Twilight Zone* producer Buck Houghton in his book *What a Producer Does*, Serling created a set of guidelines for his writing team that at first served as the “bottom-line basis for buying stories for adaptation and for his own originals” and then evolved into the “rigid standard by which I did my judgmental work on story submittals.”³¹ As such, Serling maintained complete creative control in shaping the way the episodes would look and sound, editing and revising them and ultimately possessing “final cut” privileges. Every episode had to be Serling-approved in order to preserve a certain quality of work.³²

This “team of wizards” also extends to those who helped establish *The Twilight Zone*’s unique visual style. Producer Buck Houghton and cinematographer George T. Clemens, along with a rotating team of directors, helped Serling to establish *The Twilight Zone*’s distinct aesthetic, which was defined through:

Graphic close-ups, angular cropping and chiaroscuro lighting to reduce images to their most basic, iconic forms, and placing actors in sparse, simple set designs (like the props they often turned out to be), these pared-down, star elements made the television set work as a kind of electronic puppet theater, befitting the essentially stagelike [sic] nature of the *Twilight Zone* productions: a series of two-act plays filmed for television.³³

According to Don Presnell in *A Critical History of Television’s The Twilight Zone*, “The story was the thing, not a reliance on special effects and explosions... The black-and-white cinematography—at any given moment ethereal, surreal, or otherworldly—was at once comfortingly nostalgic yet suggestive of other times and places.”³⁴ In particular, one of the most distinctive aspects of *The Twilight Zone* was “its refusal to rely on special effects.”³⁵ As such, *The Twilight Zone* relied on suggestion, with its simplistic, minimalist set and black-and-white cinematography. Thus, in terms of visual style, even without big-budget special effects or

elaborate sets, *The Twilight Zone* was able to evoke a frightening landscape of possibility, which heightened its ability to reveal horror in the quotidian or mundane.

For *American Horror Story* and the modern television landscape, the function of writers has greatly evolved since the days of *The Twilight Zone*. Murphy and Falchuk, as the show's creators, oversee the entire creative process, but assume the more modern role of "show runner." A showrunner is "the person in charge of the daily operations of a show, having both producing and writing responsibilities."³⁶ The term first appeared in a 1992 *Variety* article used to describe producers; "in an era of producer credit proliferation, those on set needed a new, shorter term to separate the person making final creative decisions from other producers."³⁷ *American Horror Story* additionally possesses a writing team, principally comprising of Jennifer Salt, Tim Minear, James Wong and Jessica Sharzer, many of whom simultaneously function as producers.³⁸ As the primary showrunners, however, Murphy and Falchuk serve as the ultimate authority over the scripts for *American Horror Story*, directing the show's creation and vision in a similar manner to Serling with *The Twilight Zone*.

In terms of visual style, *American Horror Story* is inherently reliant on special effects technology. The visual style of the show however greatly differs from *The Twilight Zone*; instead of a minimalist, suggestive set, *American Horror Story* relies on an intricate, extravagant one. Michael Goi, the show's cinematographer, is responsible for aiding Murphy and Falchuk in establishing *American Horror Story*'s distinct visual aesthetic.³⁹ A January 29, 2014 *Vulture* article characterizes *American Horror Story*'s visual style through its "showmanship, a sort of funhouse mirror sensibility, and, most important [sic], an unapologetic love of pastiche."⁴⁰ With disorienting, sweeping camera movements and lavish, intricate sets, *American Horror Story* is anything but suggestive; unlike *The Twilight Zone*, it doesn't have to imply certain horror

aspects, but is actually able to depict them due to advanced special effects. In more recent seasons, *American Horror Story* relies on special effects team FuseFX, which is lead by supervisor Jason Piccioni.⁴¹ Piccioni stated in an interview, “The creative direction comes from Ryan Murphy. He is very clear on what he wants.” Murphy and Falchuk also frequently direct episodes, an act that contributes to their creative authority over episodes.⁴² In this way, despite the help of their essential, valued writing and production teams, Serling, Murphy and Falchuk manage to maintain ultimate authorial control, allowing them to be regarded as the distinct auteurs of their respective works.

Part of what makes *The Twilight Zone* and *American Horror Story* so unnerving is their mundane milieu, using a comfortable and recognizable environment to touch upon common anxieties, revealing horrors deeply rooted in reality. Both *The Twilight Zone* and *American Horror Story* are centered on unsettling and uncanny experiences surrounding every day people and their everyday lives, a practice that invites the viewer to identify with the situations they are watching. By placing their narratives in a familiar and relatable environment often centered on the home, these shows establish a notion of “domestic horror.” By making the domestic space a “site for trauma,” these shows violate the viewer’s conception of the home as a safe place for “comfort and refuge.”⁴³ This virtual infiltration of horror into the domestic space is further reflected by television’s literal intrusion into the home, a new phenomenon for audiences of the 1950s. Today, viewers experience television in a drastically different way. This “post-television era” provides options for the viewer where “actual, mainstream, desirable TV content—is now no longer something you necessarily watch on a television set,” but can also be “original programming you get over the Internet.”⁴⁴ Audiences of *American Horror Story* are no longer

captivated by the novelty of horror brought closer to the home by viewing it on a television set, but the familiarity of settings allows for a sense of domestic horror to still resonate.

Although regarded as a paragon of science fiction, *The Twilight Zone* is in fact a mélange of science fiction and supernatural horror in the same manner as *American Horror Story*. Science fiction and horror are regarded as “twin genres,” due to their dark themes.⁴⁵ Science fiction in itself is horror—the horror of the unknown, the anxiety of the unfamiliar, and the fear of the abnormal. In his book *Science Fiction Television*, M. Keith Booker defends *The Twilight Zone*’s categorical status as science fiction, explaining that despite topical deviations, the series “as a whole still served as a virtual catalog of science fiction motifs, while at the same time demonstrating through its low emphasis on special effects that science fiction [is] a genre of ideas.”⁴⁶ Over the course of five seasons, *The Twilight Zone* touched on concepts ranging from aliens, space exploration, futuristic societies, time travel, magic and advanced technology. In this way, *The Twilight Zone* utilizes these combined aspects of fantasy, science fiction and supernatural horror, demarcating it instead as speculative fiction. The opening narration of the first season places the series within this genre:

There is a fifth dimension beyond that which is known to Man. It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, and it lies between the pit of Man’s fears and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of Imagination. It is an area which we call the Twilight Zone.

The Twilight Zone is designed to be an ambiguous area, teetering between the real and the imagined, “a precarious balance between things and ideas.”⁴⁷ In *Gender, Science Fiction, and the American Security State*, Mark Wildermuth argues that it is precisely the show’s “invocation of another dimension” that “placed it firmly in the realm of science fiction,” in addition to “its capacity to play on fears of the televisual realm’s ability to erode the line between reality and

unreality.”⁴⁸ By placing it in this abstruse realm, *The Twilight Zone* “creates opportunities for exploring the human capacity for interrogating or subverting the ruling cultural paradigm.”⁴⁹ *The Twilight Zone* creates a grey area, where the challenging of societal norms is made possible through the genre of science fiction, and is used to provoke a broader discourse on human nature.

Likewise, *American Horror Story* combines tropes associated with the combination of science fiction, fantasy and supernatural horror. *American Horror Story* often adheres to the basic tenets of science fiction, evidenced by Season Two: *Asylum*’s focus on motifs of aliens and scientific experimentation. Season Three, *Coven*, utilizes themes of magic in conjunction with science, often justifying the supernatural with scientific reasoning. For example, *Coven* presents witchcraft as a “genetic affliction,” aligning it with science rather than magic as a biological condition. Thus, neither *The Twilight Zone* nor *American Horror Story* can be categorized simply as science fiction, as both bear characteristics outside of the immediate definition. Within the contexts of this assessment, however, both *The Twilight Zone* and *American Horror Story* will be defined as science fiction.

The two prominent issues that can be read in the narratives of both *The Twilight Zone* and *American Horror Story* are race and gender. As seen with his work regarding “Noon on Doomsday,” Serling actively sought to tackle race relations in his content, proving himself to be a progressive individual on this issue. Particularly against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement, *The Twilight Zone* is actively forward thinking in its portrayal and discussion of race and prejudice, as demonstrated in the episodes “The Big Tall Wish” and “I Am the Night—Color Me Black.” Similarly, in its treatment of women, *The Twilight Zone* very much reflects the trajectory of American society between 1959 and 1964. In its early seasons, *The Twilight Zone* appeared to reflect the insular and myopic view of women in an objectified, inferior position, as

is evident in episodes like “The Lonely” and “The Lateness of the Hour.” Over the course of the show, and following important societal breakthroughs like the advent of the Women’s Liberation Movement, by 1964, *The Twilight Zone* provided a much more progressive view of women, revealed in the episode “Number 12 Looks Just Like You.” *The Twilight Zone* underscores the notion that as a genre, “science fiction, no matter how distant its setting in space and time, generally comments first and foremost on the here and now, using imaginative settings and scenarios as a means of gaining new perspectives on contemporary problems.”⁵⁰

Although both shows present many similarities, their adherence to the genre of science fiction is very different. *American Horror Story* takes science fiction tropes and places them in a modern context with a fresh perspective, either conforming to or challenging the tenets of the genre as presented by *The Twilight Zone*. Whereas *The Twilight Zone* had served as a critique of the society in which it emerged, *American Horror Story* serves to subvert the generic realm *The Twilight Zone* helped to establish. *The Twilight Zone* took themes from the locus of American socio-political consciousness, and placed them in the forefront of its narratives. Over the course of *The Twilight Zone*, the treatment of these topics evolved as a result of historical changes, reflecting a sense of progressiveness. *American Horror Story* attempts to rather place generic conventions at the forefront, critiquing the effectiveness of thematic tropes within the context of the genre.

In this assessment, I will be analyzing the way *The Twilight Zone* and *American Horror Story* use genre conventions and thematic tropes of science fiction to discuss the issues of race and gender as exemplified through specific episodes. I will specifically be analyzing how *The Twilight Zone*’s portrayal of these two issues evolved as a result of social and political changes occurring between 1959 and 1964. Concerning *American Horror Story*, I will be specifically

examining Season Two: *Asylum* (2012-2013) and Season Three: *Coven* (2013-2014) in their adaptation of the motifs seen in *The Twilight Zone*, analyzing how they are used to highlight issues of race and gender for a modern audience. Furthermore, I am exploring whether *American Horror Story*'s contemporary positioning allows for a more progressive use of genre conventions to depict race and gender. By comparing *The Twilight Zone* and *American Horror Story*, I intend to demonstrate how science fiction works to create an awareness of salient topics for television audiences in an entertaining and thought-provoking way.

Chapter 1: Racial Prejudice and Representation: Aliens, Voodoo and the Other

Race and prejudice are two themes commonly used in science fiction texts. Science fiction allows for ostracized groups to be represented in an implicit manner through motifs, such as altering the species of a character from a human to an alien or monster to symbolize racial difference. In his book *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, film historian Ed Guerrero notes this phenomenon, writing “The social construction and representation of race, otherness, and non-whiteness...[works] itself out in many symbolic, cinematic forms of expression, but particularly in the abundant racialized metaphors and allegories of the fantasy, sci-fi and horror genres.”⁵¹ This is often achieved through the “simulacra for aliens, monsters, mutant outcasts, and the like.”⁵² In *The Twilight Zone*, these archetypes are often employed to indirectly convey a broader statement on racism and prejudice. In a similar manner, *American Horror Story* utilizes these thematic tropes, placing them within a modern context to challenge how they typically are used in the genre.

When the pilot episode of *The Twilight Zone* premiered on October 2, 1959, the curtain was slowly falling on the idyllic 1950s and quickly opening onto the tumultuous 1960s. The burgeoning Civil Rights Movement was quickly coming into the forefront of American consciousness. In 1954, the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* called for the desegregation of public schools, a landmark decision signifying a large step for African Americans towards government-recognized equality.⁵³ The concept of “separate but equal” instituted by the 1896 Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* ceased to be recognized, and African Americans were now able to pursue full citizenship rights armed “not only with morality but with the law.”⁵⁴ This upset Southern white supremacists and functioned to trigger racial unrest throughout much of America, fueling “an intransigent, violent resistance during which

Southern states used a variety of tactics to evade the law.”⁵⁵ The Emmett Till case that Serling had so adamantly tried to infuse into *United States Steel Hour* sparked assertive protesting from black and white Americans alike. By the end of 1955, bus boycotts and sit-ins were occurring in many cities across the United States, led by figures like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks. The integration of Little Rock’s Central High School in 1957 only led to more racial violence.⁵⁶ The Civil Rights Act of 1957 demonstrated Congress’s support of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which functioned chiefly as a voting rights bill and marked the first civil rights legislation passed by Congress since 1875.⁵⁷ The civil rights crucible that was the 1950s was starting to boil over, but television had yet to catch up.

It was rare to see a predominately black show on network television in the 1950s and early 1960s. The early 1950s saw a promising albeit short-lived space for African American actors on television, with pioneers like jazz performer Hazel Scott, the first black woman to host her own network television series in 1950.⁵⁸ A July 1950 issue of *Ebony* optimistically asserted “television offered better roles for blacks than any other media.”⁵⁹ The television show *Harlem Detective* (1953-1954) ran on New York’s WOR-TV, and followed the adventures of two private investigators, one of which was played by a black actor (William Marshall).⁶⁰ Although dramatic shows like CBS’s *Studio One* (1948-1958) and *The Hallmark Hall of Fame*’s production of *Macbeth* in 1954 existed and featured black ensembles of actors, the dominating shows of the decade portrayed more negative images of blacks.⁶¹ *Amos ‘n’ Andy* (1951-1953) was a sitcom that followed the adventures of Harlem cab driver Amos and his “gullible and rotund friend” Andy.⁶² Although making strides as the first black cast in a television program and presenting characters with “a host of personalities such as black doctors, lawyers and storekeepers,” *Amos ‘n’ Andy* was ultimately pulled from the air due to protests over the depiction of African

Americans as “big-lipped, bug-eyed, nappy-headed and stupid,” stereotypes reminiscent of the minstrel shows of the nineteenth century.⁶³ *Beulah* (1950-1952) premiered on ABC as the first comedy series to feature a black woman in a starring role, and although progressive in industrial terms, often relied on similar stereotypical images of blacks, and was openly criticized by the NAACP.⁶⁴ *The Nat King Cole Show* (1956-1957) served as the first black show in a network series, but was unfortunately short lived; NBC was forced to cancel it due to its inability to acquire sufficient national sponsors, who were frightened by boycotts in the South and diffidence in the North due to its then controversial nature.⁶⁵ As television evolved throughout the decade, leading roles for black actors became less prominent, and central characters were rarely if ever played by people of color. Thus in 1959, the cultural landscape in which *The Twilight Zone* debuted was one very much mired in the socio-political climate of the era, which Serling sought to challenge through his new series.

Serling’s penchant for social critique is evident through *The Twilight Zone*’s explicit depiction of racially charged themes. As previously noted, the use of attributing another species to a character often served as a way to express racial commentary in science fiction. This effect can also be procured through the thematic practice of “othering.” Othering can be defined as the alienation of a group or individual as a class in opposition to the self, establishing a distance between the normal and the deviant.⁶⁶ Thus, the viewer is intended to self-identify with the norm, and the deviating subgroup is to be pejoratively interpreted as the “other.” Political theorist Bertell Ollman defines this theory in the way that it “places the acting and acted upon individual in the center of this account. In this theory, man himself is offered as the vantage point from which to view his own relations.”⁶⁷ To this point, the othering in *The Twilight Zone* is used to incite a critical look at racism and its destructive societal consequences.

Due to its metaphorical nature, othering is a more “traditional” motif of science fiction, allowing *The Twilight Zone* to indirectly address issues of racism without explicitly doing so, for example, through dialogue. Within the context of the show, othering is typically used to indicate a dichotomy between monster and human, demonstrating both the instinctual aversion to difference in a normative society and the fear of identification with the familiar in the other. An example can be seen in the episode, “Eye of the Beholder” (Season 2, Episode 6, November 11, 1960). The story follows Janet Tyler (Maxine Stuart), who has undergone multiple treatments in order to cure her “hideously abnormal face.”⁶⁸ Completely veiled in bandages, she nervously waits to see if her eleventh treatment is effective, as it is the maximum number of experimentations permitted by the government. If unsuccessful, she will be forced live in a “special area in which people of your kind have been congregated,” a segregated community of “others” who share her unfortunate affliction. Deeply disturbed by the prospect of being separated into “a ghetto designed for freaks,” Janet questions this marginalization stating, “What is this state? Who makes all these rules and traditions and statutes that people who are different have to stay away from people who are normal? The state isn’t God; it hasn’t the right to penalize somebody for an accident at birth.” The twist ending occurs after the doctors discover the procedure was ineffective, removing the bandages to reveal Janet’s conventionally beautiful, normal face. It is then revealed that the doctors, the “normal” people, in fact bear pig-like, nightmarishly grotesque faces. This episode served to highlight the subjective nature of normality, and criticize the desire for conformity, the rejection of difference, and the concept of segregation in American society at this time in an absurdist way.

The literal use of aliens to convey a similar critique can be seen in the episode, “The Gift” (Season 3, Episode 32, April 27, 1962). “The Gift” follows Pedro (Edmund Vargas), an

isolated young boy who begins a friendship with Mr. Williams (Geoffrey Horne), an alien who crash-landed in his provincial Mexican village. The bigoted residents immediately believe the alien to be dangerous, attempting to kill him even though he states that he “comes in peace” with a “gift for humanity.”⁶⁹ Pedro is the only person in the village to listen to Williams and show compassion for him, empathizing with his marked status as an ostracized stranger. Nevertheless, the army is called and shoots Williams, burning and destroying his gift. At the end of the episode, the gift is revealed to be a chemical formula for a vaccine against all types of cancer. Serling’s final monologue presents the proverbial lesson of the episode, “Madeiro, Mexico. The present. The subject: fear. The cure: a little more faith. An Rx off the shelf, in *The Twilight Zone*.” This episode highlights the toxicity of racism and the damaging consequences of prejudice. Through both “Eye of the Beholder” and “The Gift,” Serling critiques the inherent societal need to have “‘outsiders’ to stigmatize and feel superior to.”⁷⁰ In this way, *The Twilight Zone* presents discrimination and xenophobia as an entrenched fear of others, playing on the racial anxieties surging through America during the 1950s and 1960s.

Racial prejudice was also presented more explicitly in *The Twilight Zone*, through the use of African American actors and politically germane dialogue, rather than through the traditional aligning of race with an alternative species. The episode “The Big Tall Wish” (Season 1, Episode 27, April 8, 1960) exemplifies an early attempt to overtly bring race to the forefront of American television. The story follows Bolie Jackson (Ivan Dixon), an aging boxer preparing for a match. His young neighbor, Henry (Steven Perry), idolizes Bolie, and makes a “big, tall wish” that Bolie will win his match that night. Right before the fight, Bolie injures his hand. During the match Bolie is knocked down, but miraculously switches places with his opponent, winning the match. When Bolie returns home, he has no memory of how he managed to win, or how his hand

suddenly healed. Henry confesses to Bolie that his “big, tall wish” was the reason for Bolie’s victory. Bolie, deeply disturbed by this, chastises Henry that he is far too old to believe in magic. Henry recoils, testifying that the only way a wish can work is if you believe in it. Upon vehemently rejecting the idea, Bolie is transported back to the scene of the fight; his hand still injured, he loses. After the fight, Bolie returns home and visits Henry. In this alternate sequencing of events, neither has any memory of the other match in which Bolie won. Witnessing the failure of his wish, Henry pronounces he no longer believes in magic or wishes.

Penned by Serling, this episode is notable in regards to race on many levels. For one, the principal cast is solely made up of African-American actors, a rare practice for an explicitly non-racial narrative on 1960s network television.⁷¹ Serling deliberately made this move, underscoring his personal progressive philosophies. Serling once stated, “Television, like its big sister, the motion picture, has been guilty of a sin of omission...Hungry for talent, desperate for a so-called ‘new face,’ constantly searching for a transfusion of new blood, it has overlooked a source of wondrous talent that resides under its nose. This is the Negro actor.”⁷² From a narrative standpoint, “The Big Tall Wish” never explicitly discusses race in its dialogue; however, having an ensemble cast comprised predominantly of African-American actors was an “unmistakable feature for audiences of the 1960s, who were living through the immediate, painful efforts at integration.”⁷³ Serling, having “long been a champion of equality,” once expressed his belief that “it matters little, when a human being cries out, the color or creed of that human being.”⁷⁴ In this way, Serling was finally able to imbue his art with his passion for the pursuit of social equality. This was a groundbreaking episode not just for *The Twilight Zone* but for network television as a whole, demonstrating the progressive nature of Serling’s work and the potential the genre held as a vehicle for social commentary.

The belief of wishing and magic instilled in a young character reveals a hopeful and optimistic reflection of the changing world in which the episode emerged in. In the beginning of the episode, Bolie attributes his hardened perspectives to a lifetime of getting beaten up boxing, explaining “a fighter don’t need no scrap book...if you want to know what he’s done, what he’s fought, you read it in his face. He’s got the whole story cut into his flesh.” When Henry first tells Bolie his plan to wish for his victory, Bolie reproves Henry’s naïve belief in magic, stating “Little boys with their heads full up with dreams...When do they suddenly find out that there ain’t any magic? When does somebody push their face down on the sidewalk and say to them, ‘Hey, little boy, its concrete. That’s what the world is made out of, concrete.’” As a six year old, Henry obviously possesses a different worldview than that of an aging, worn-out boxer. Despite Bolie’s admonishment, Henry deeply defends his belief in magic and the power of wishes, insisting that “if you wish hard enough, and believe, it’ll come true.” Angered by Henry’s naiveté, Bolie rebukes, “Someone’s got to take you by the hair, and rub your face into the world, till you get a taste and feel of the way things are, don’t they? I’ve been wishing all my life...I got a gut ache from wishing, and all I’ve got to show from it is a face full of scars.”

These exchanges can be read in a variety of ways. Boxing can be literally interpreted as fighting and violence, with Bolie serving as a symbol of disenfranchised blacks in America, weary from years of fighting for their equality in an unequal country. Bolie, a self-proclaimed “tired old man trying to catch that bus to glory,” can also represent the older generation of freedom fighters trying to create a better future for their children. Henry is representative of the younger generation; optimistic and hopeful that one day there will be equality. Henry could also signify the burgeoning generation of civil rights activists who bore witness to the contentious 1950s and would be growing up in the 1960s, a decade representing hope for change. These

themes evince the progressive approach *The Twilight Zone* took in its initial season, Serling almost anticipating the changes America would experience in the years following 1959.

Adhering to the episodic structure of *The Twilight Zone*, the ending of “The Big Tall Wish” is a didactic parable of the consequences of a loss of ideals. Serling ends the episode with the aphorism, “Mr. Bolie Jackson, who shares the most common ailment of all men: the strange and perverse disinclination to believe in a miracle, the kind of miracle to come from a little boy; perhaps only to be found in *The Twilight Zone*.” Under the guise of magic and wishes, social mobility and change are revealed as underlying themes in this episode. Bolie’s pessimism is a testament to the unrest of blacks in America at the time of the episode’s debut to the barriers of social advancement. The idea of holding on to dreams would resonate with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have A Dream Speech,” which would be delivered on August 28, 1963.⁷⁵ In this way, “The Big Tall Wish” displays Serling’s willingness to discuss the necessity of strong ideals, particularly amongst a sub-group of Americans faced with prejudice and social injustice, further demonstrating Serling’s ability to push the boundaries of television through the genre of science fiction.

The theme of racial prejudice is approached in a very different way in the episode “I Am the Night—Color Me Black.” By the time the episode aired in the final season on March 27, 1964, America had undergone a series of changes concerning civil rights that irrevocably changed how television dealt with race. Starting in 1961, television began to see the effects of the progressive nature of the burgeoning decade. President John F. Kennedy oversaw the institution of major industrial changes for television, appointing the Federal Communications Committee, which mandated television stations enforce affirmative action policies.⁷⁶ The depictions of riots and protests around the nation captured by news stations and broadcast to

network audiences contributed to a more prominent awareness of the Civil Rights Movement and shifting terms of equality.⁷⁷ In 1963, Martin Luther King delivered his “I Have A Dream Speech,” verbalizing for America the necessity of equality. Thus, by the final season of *The Twilight Zone* in 1964, Serling’s ability to more openly discuss his views on race and prejudice were far less restricted. As a result of America’s cultural changes, Serling took advantage of this artistic freedom, capitalizing on a new liberalism in his scripts.

The narrative of “I Am the Night—Color Me Black” follows small town Sheriff Charlie Koch (Michael Constantine), who is charged with overseeing the execution of Jagger (Terry Becker), an unpopular and ostracized man convicted for the murder of a “cross-burning, psychopathic bully.” There is much debate surrounding Jagger’s conviction, as the man he killed was a known bigot and the act was purportedly committed out of self-defense. On the morning of the hanging, the sky turns pitch black. Although the enveloping darkness concerns the town, Jagger’s hanging is still set to occur. Moments before the execution, the town reverend (Ivan Dixon), gives a sermon ascribing the darkness to the hate and injustice in the world, particularly the hate spewed by the vitriolic town towards an innocent man. Jagger is hanged anyway, the darkness now completely enfolding the town. The sheriff turns on a radio broadcast that cites similar occurrences around the world: “at 2:00 this afternoon a dark cloud suddenly appeared over a street in Dallas, Texas. The mayor of West Berlin verified the fact that a rectangle over the Berlin Wall has suddenly gone dark.” The litany of cities affected by darkness continues, naming Budapest, Birmingham, Alabama, Shanghai, the “entire northern section of Vietnam,” and Chicago, Illinois. Serling’s final monologue states, “A sickness known as hate; not a virus, not a microbe, not a germ—but a sickness nonetheless, highly contagious, deadly in its effects.

Don't look for it in the Twilight Zone; look for it in a mirror. Look for it before the light goes out altogether."

Issues of racism and prejudice are explored much more explicitly than they had been in season one's "The Big Tall Wish." It is notable that the Reverend, the only seemingly innocent person in the entire town, is played by an African American actor—Ivan Dixon, the same actor who portrayed Bolie Jackson in "The Big, Tall Wish." The motive of Jagger, the self-proclaimed "village idiot who tries to be his brother's keeper," is self defense towards a bigot "who handled the whipping of some poor scared colored guy." Jagger is ostracized by the myopic town for his liberal idealism and open condemnation of prejudiced behavior, marking him an idiosyncratic and unwelcome member of the community. To maintain the status quo, the town develops a unified yet intrinsically wrong prejudice against Jagger simply because he is different. The overtness of Serling's commentary is further evidenced through the nature of the crime itself—the lynching of a black man. This had been the specific action that Serling had been unable to include in his script for *United States Steel Hour*, and its appearance in *The Twilight Zone* demonstrates the strides American television had made by 1964.

Many of the cities listed in the episode served as direct references to locations of salient current events; "a street in Dallas, Texas" referring to Kennedy's recent assassination in November 1963, the Berlin Wall to the Cold War, North Vietnam to the concomitant Vietnam War, and Birmingham to its significance in the Civil Rights movement, dubbed by Martin Luther King in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" as "probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States."⁷⁸ In fact, Serling would once again reference Birmingham in a 1968 speech at Moorpark College in California, speaking of African-American girls "bombed to pieces in a Birmingham church" and "three young civil rights workers...slaughtered in Mississippi," further

denouncing “Senator Strom Thurmond’s opposition to anti-lynching legislation.”⁷⁹ The tone of the episode borders sentimentousness, with dialogue imputing “It’s important to get with the majority...that’s the big thing nowadays, isn’t it Reverend? That’s all there is, is the majority...The minority musta died on the cross, two thousand years ago.” According to reviews in *A Critical History of the Twilight Zone*, this episode was not received well. Critics saw the writing as pretentious and pedantic, the visual metaphor of blackness was deemed “too obvious”, and the title itself sounded “like somebody begging to be noticed.”⁸⁰ The broader implications of this episode are found in the progressive evolution of content that *The Twilight Zone* was now able to portray. Thus, by the final season, Serling was able to explicitly and unabashedly utilize science fiction to plainly insert his own social commentary into his scripts.

American Horror Story integrates *The Twilight Zone*’s methods for dealing with race and prejudice, challenging the traditional tropes utilized by Serling and placing them within a modern context. Season two of *American Horror Story* is titled *Asylum*, the story centered on Briarcliff Manor, a church-run mental institution in Massachusetts in 1964. *Asylum* incorporates various science fiction tropes throughout the course of the season, from alien abduction to scientific experimentation. The overall tone of the season is particularly dark, and the horror of it all is rooted in the fact that it takes place in 1964. Murphy presents the time period as particularly myopic and socially intolerant, providing an appropriate temporal setting for the unsettling situations that await the central characters. Particularly when placed alongside *The Twilight Zone*, Murphy’s retrospective depiction of the decade constitutes an unsettling evaluation of Serling’s narratives.

Over the course of the season, *Asylum* tackles themes of sexism, homophobia, racism, the abysmal state of mental health institutions, the treatment of those with disabilities, and the battle

between science and religion within the context of the 1960s. Founded by Monsignor Timothy Howard (Joseph Fiennes), Briarcliff Manor is officially run by Sister Jude (Jessica Lange); however, scientist Dr. Arden (James Cromwell) and psychiatrist Dr. Thredson (Zachary Quinto) oversee and treat the patients. Each patient is deemed an outcast in society, whether criminally and mentally insane or not—some are simply there because they don't conform to society's concepts of normality. In the pilot episode, "Welcome to Briarcliff" (Season 2, Episode 1, October 17, 2012), Dr. Arden, the archetypal mad scientist, asserts his professional ethos, "This is my time—the time of science!" In this way, *Asylum* seamlessly incorporates traditional science fiction motifs into its narrative, such as the typical mad scientist, yet works to subvert their established generic use over the course of the season.

One of the main story arcs follows the plight of Kit Walker (Evan Peters), a young gas station attendant who is married to Alma (Britne Oldford), a black woman. In 1964, interracial marriage was illegal in most of the United States. It would not be until 1967 and the landmark Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia* that laws against miscegenation would be overturned.⁸¹ As such, Kit and Alma cannot publically admit to marriage. One night at the gas station, Kit is closing up when a group of his friends barge in, asking to borrow his gun to scare a black man who "tried to mess with" one of their friend's little sisters. When Kit refuses to join them, his friends question him about the rumors around town suggesting that Kit has hired a maid, wondering how he is able to do so on the salary of a gas station attendant. Upon returning home, we see him slip on his wedding ring and lovingly embrace Alma, referring to her as "Mrs. Walker." Kit professes his desire to tell people about their marriage, exclaiming, "We didn't commit a crime, we drove to Provincetown and got married." Alma insists on keeping it a secret, assuring him "the world will change one day," to which Kit comments, "the world is wrong."

This scene serves to set the stage for the racial intolerance of 1964 Massachusetts, and how it will affect Kit's story. Thus, within the context of his town, Kit is an outsider, deviating from societal norms willingly and to the dismay of his peers, establishing his status as the "other."

Instead of using the traditional metaphorical trope of aliens to represent race, *Asylum* instead places both in the same story line. That night, the radio goes static and strange lights appear through the bedroom window. Kit, fearful the men from the gas station have discovered his secret marriage, runs outside with a gun. When he gets outside, he hears Alma scream, and a blinding light emerges from the sky. As he runs inside to find Alma, he notices everything in the house is magnetized and stuck to the ceiling, and Alma is nowhere to be found. Kit is then abducted, and in flashes, we see him in a white room, naked, and being operated on. After his abduction, the aliens drop Kit into an isolated part of the woods that had consequently been used by the mass murderer, Bloody Face, as a place to dispose of his victim's bodies. Authorities find Kit there, and commit him to Briarcliff thinking he is Bloody Face, because no one will believe his alibi that he ended up there because aliens had abducted his wife. By placing the visible issue of racism within the alien story line, *American Horror Story* subverts the typical generic concept of aligning the two, highlighting the modern ability of television to portray race outside of the binaries of 1960s science fiction rules.

Over the course of *Asylum*, it is revealed that the aliens are in fact benevolent. This is reminiscent of *The Twilight Zone*'s "The Gift," as it presents the idea that "others" are not always threatening and dangerous. After Kit is brought to Briarcliff, the aliens take an interest in the institution, as they are frequently seen over the course of the next episodes kidnapping patients and experimenting on them. These experiments are consistently performed in the best interest of the subject, intended to aid them in some way. For example, one patient who suffers

from a mental disability is abducted, and is returned with increased intelligence. The aliens possess advanced technology, typical of the aliens of *The Twilight Zone*. At Briarcliff, Dr. Arden finds a microchip in Kit's neck, which he believes to be the work of Communist agents, referencing the fear and suspicion of technology in the 1960s. Thus, *Asylum*'s placement of aliens alongside issues of race, rather than using one to mask the other, subverts the typical generic conventions of science fiction as seen in *The Twilight Zone*.

Asylum also utilizes the "us versus them" mentality that is imbued in *The Twilight Zone*'s "Eye of the Beholder."⁸² Briarcliff itself serves as a reflection of the hospital in "Eye of the Beholder," in which deviants undergo scientific treatment in order to conform to societal standards of normality. In *Asylum*, several inmates are placed at Briarcliff in the hopes of "fixing" disabilities or uncontrollable traits that simply were deemed unacceptable for society. This reflects the lack of control of Janet's abnormality in "Eye of the Beholder," where she is forced to undergo surgery as a result of a birth defect. Rather than associating the horror with physical disfigurement, *Asylum* instead places it in the periodization. In *Asylum*, journalist Lana Winters (Sarah Paulsen) is forced to undergo electroshock therapy to cure her of her homosexuality. *Asylum* places social issues at the forefront of its narrative, and the simple fact that it is set in the 1960s, when sexual orientation and mental disabilities were seen as problems to be fixed, insures an added level of horror. According to a *New York Times* review of the pilot, this tone serves as a "sign of Mr. Murphy's involvement...you get a steady and sometimes distracting drumbeat of liberal social critique; there are the persecuted lesbian couple and an inmate whose problems begin with his interracial marriage."⁸³ Thus, the traditional science fiction tropes seen in *The Twilight Zone* are subverted by *Asylum*, evidenced in the positioning of

aliens in juxtaposition to a racial storyline and the dehumanizing nature of Briarcliff's treatment of its patients.

Season three of *American Horror Story* reflects the more explicit treatment of race and prejudice expressed in *The Twilight Zone*'s "I Am The Night—Color Me Black." Season three, titled *Coven*, follows a coven of witches residing in present day New Orleans, focusing on Miss Robichaux's Academy for Exceptional Young Ladies, a school for young witches to develop their powers, run by Cordelia Foxx (Sarah Paulsen). More racially charged than *Asylum*, one of the primary themes of *Coven* surrounds the battle between witchcraft and voodoo. Witchcraft is associated with the white coven of witches who transplanted to New Orleans after the Salem Witch Trials led by Fiona Goode (Jessica Lange), Cordelia's mother. Voodoo, a religion with its roots in Africa and the Caribbean, is associated with Fiona's equal, Marie Laveau (Angela Bassett), the proclaimed Voodoo Queen of New Orleans.⁸⁴ Thus, there is an inherent racial dichotomy at play in *Coven*, a power struggle between the native Voodoo and the infringing white practices of magic.

Racial prejudice is inherent in *Coven* through the opposition of these two groups of witches. Marie's story is explicated through various flashbacks, starting in 1833 New Orleans. Because she is immortal, she has been witness to racial strife in New Orleans for close to two hundred years. While Marie's modern day enemy is Fiona, her historical enemy is Madame Delphine LaLaurie (Kathy Bates), a wealthy New Orleans socialite who was notorious for her sadistic and barbaric treatment of her slaves, even by the standards of 1830s Louisiana. In the pilot episode, "Bitchcraft" (Season 3, Episode 1, October 9, 2013), it is revealed that Delphine had tortured and killed Marie's lover. In retaliation, Marie gives Delphine a love potion that in actuality curses her with immortality. Marie then has Delphine's family killed, and buries her

alive in an unmarked grave. The feud between Marie and Delphine is revitalized when Fiona, hoping to discover the secret to eternal life, resurrects Delphine from her grave. Thrust into modern society, Delphine is forced to understand the changes regarding civil rights that have developed over the course of the last 180 years.

In the episode “Fearful Pranks Ensurue” (Season 3, Episode 4, October 30, 2013), Marie’s personal encounters with racism are further explicated in a flashback to 1961. This flashback follows Henry, the son of Marie’s friend Cora, who is lynched by a group of white men on his first day at a newly integrated high school. The camera cuts to Marie and Cora at the hair salon, discussing racial tensions in New Orleans and how they are hopeful for change due to the progressive nature of Kennedy’s presidency. Marie, more wary than Cora, states, “The White Citizens Council of New Orleans warned the city about the Congolese raping their daughters, and the Burr heads being forced into their schools.” Cora, more optimistic than Marie, proclaims “I have faith in the future.” The camera then cuts to the image of Henry, hanging from a tree. In retaliation, Marie performs a voodoo ritual that sends zombies to attack the men responsible for Henry’s murder. The narrative then jumps to 1971, where viewers learn of a truce made between the white witches of Salem and Marie’s voodoo practitioners to end ten years of territorial conflict, ensuring “no more bloodshed at one another’s hands; the rest of the world was cruel enough.” The treaty established territorial lines that no member of either side could cross, which is broken when Fiona discovers Delphine’s grave on Marie’s territory, serving as the catalyst for the renewal of racial tensions. Thus, the racially charged backdrop of *Coven* sets the stage for *American Horror Story*’s social commentary under the motif of magic. Both Marie and Delphine are based on historical figures, although the storyline itself is entirely fictional. One review in *The Atlantic* commended this aspect of *Coven* for “connecting historical oppression to modern-

day strife, fleshing out the awfulness of slavery, and making a comparison between sexism and racism.”⁸⁵

Voodoo as a trope was seldom used in *The Twilight Zone*, but its rare occurrence in the episode “The Jungle” (Season 3, Episode 12, December 1, 1961) provides an interesting comparison to *Coven*. The episode follows engineer Alan Richards (John Dehner) who is working on a hydroelectric dam project in an African village. He and his wife, Doris (Emily McLaughlin), recently visited the drilling site, where a shaman warned them “the land was being wounded and said that those involved would pay for their actions.”⁸⁶ Fearful of this admonition, Doris smuggled voodoo relics back to New York hoping they will protect them. Appalled by his wife’s superstition, Alan burns the relics, bearing the consequences and the revenge of the African witch doctors. After a dead goat appears outside of his apartment and his cab driver drops dead, the episode ends with a lion appearing in his bedroom, having already killed his wife, pouncing to kill him. In this episode, voodoo is presented as pure superstition, and its alignment with African culture is nothing if not racially insensitive. For example, Alan dismisses Doris’s relics as something for “weak people, ignorant, uncivilized people who don’t know any better.” Throughout the episode, drumbeats are associated with the power of voodoo, and Alan fearfully walks past a shop with a sign reading “party costumes,” featuring a jungle tableau with a black man wearing tribal vestments. His wife even defines her fear simply as a fear of “Africa,” reflecting the similarly posed sentiments of *Coven*’s framing of magic as a dichotomy between white magic and black voodoo.

In *Coven*, the episode “The Replacements” (Season 3, Episode 3, October 23, 2013) juxtaposes Delphine’s 1830s worldview with the modern day to highlight the advancement of African Americans, although it is mostly unsuccessful in its efforts. Fiona brings Delphine back

to Miss Robichaux's Academy, where she is left alone to watch television. Referring to the television as a "magic box" of lies, she is distressed to see President Obama delivering a speech. When Fiona enters, Delphine cries, "Why, oh Lord my God, have you forsaken this once proud country? Somebody in there just said that that Negro is the President of the United States." Fiona explains, "I voted for him—twice; we've also had black secretaries of states, Supreme Court justices, and even the poet laureate." Despite this, Delphine is catatonic, stating "I've seen enough of this world; I'll take no part in a country that has a darkie in the White House." Delphine tries to defend her racist ideologies, contending that she was a "woman of my time," that not only was it a different time, it was "a different world." To make her pay for her inhumane crimes, Fiona makes Delphine the housemaid, specifically the "slave" of Queenie (Gabourey Sidibe), the only black student at Miss Robichaux's. As such, the focus of Delphine's punishment is her education from ignorance to awareness, and to accept the progressive nature of modern society.

The episode "Head" (Season 3, Episode 9, December 11, 2013) continues the focus on educating Delphine, this time under Queenie's tutelage. After her beheading by Marie Leveau, Delphine lives as a dismembered head who is transported by box wherever she goes. Queenie oversees "sensitivity training" for Delphine, making her watch all eight hours of *Roots* and a "film festival" featuring *Mandingo*, *The Color Purple*, and *B*A*P*S*, films that serve to inundate Delphine with a contemporary history of black culture. In this way, Queenie seeks to "cure" Delphine of her ignorance, not letting her leave "until I educate you about those people you tortured: my people." Delphine attempts to drown out the "jungle music" of the films by singing "Dixie." Queenie then puts on footage of the Civil Rights Movement, asserting, "if this doesn't touch your soul, you don't have one." The episode ends as Delphine is overcome with emotion,

breaking down in tears as “Oh, Freedom” plays over images of violent protests. During this sequence, the camera cuts to Marie’s hair salon. Marie had hired a witch hunter to kill the Salem witches, but instead, he enters the salon and shoots all of the women working there, as “Oh, Freedom” continues to play. At the end of the episode, Marie offers a new truce to Fiona, seeking alliance as a united front against all-male witch hunters. By placing a historical character into contemporary society to highlight modern progressive changes and using voodoo to denote African American culture, *American Horror Story* attempts to use these motifs to imbue a racial lesson into its narrative. This attempt, however, was not received well, and appeared almost as pedantic and sententiousness as *The Twilight Zone*’s “I Am The Night—Color Me Black.”

Most reviewers did not respond positively to the treatment of racial prejudice in this episode. In a *Slate* review, television critic Willa Paskin writes:

Is there any American nightmare more potent at this moment than the one about white people dismissing, denigrating, and murdering black people for no reason and with no consequences? Set a scene about exactly that to “Oh, Freedom” and you have some pretty radical social commentary for Wednesday nights at 10p.m. Unless it’s just radical hot-button pushing.⁸⁷

In this way, *Coven*’s attempt appears problematic and sensationalist at times. The fact that the witch hunter that enters the salon is a white man specifically perturbed critics. Paskin found this to be the most troubling aspect of the episode, where “a white man bursts into a black woman’s home and slaughters a number of black people to the lyrics ‘And before I’ll be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave, and go home to my lord and be free.’”⁸⁸ The critics’ reviews surrounding the use of *Roots* to remove Delphine’s racist mindset reflects the critical opinion on the dialogue in *The Twilight Zone*’s “I Am The Night—Color Me Black,” deeming it pedantic and sanctimonious. The potential progressive reading this held was quickly overturned, as it is later revealed that Delphine was not crying because she was moved by the images of the Civil Rights

Movement, but was crying simply because she was just “really, really racist,” establishing herself as the “same brutal monster she was in the beginning.”⁸⁹

Many critics felt the treatment of black characters was the most problematic aspect of the entire season. In one review, television critic Chloe Stillwell wrote, “the choice to venture into Voodoo isn’t radical. And its possible to do a Voodoo versus Salem storyline without being racist, but the way *Coven* played up every black stereotype made a mockery of the idea.”⁹⁰

Queenie herself is a mélange of stereotypes: her power is that she is a human voodoo doll, and her magical ability was passed down to her by her ancestor, Tituba. Queenie’s backstory is that she worked at a fried chicken stand in Detroit before finding her way to Miss Robichaux’s. Despite the fact that Marie Laveau serves as a central character who wields extreme power in the world of *Coven*, the treatment of Queenie as a caricature of black stereotypes undermines that progression. Marie Laveau’s characterization is also questionable, as she owns a hair salon called “Cornrow City” in the ninth ward, while the white witches live in a mansion. Critics questioned these aspects, asking, “If the women of color on *Coven* served as a commentary on racism, what exactly was the show trying to say?”⁹¹ At the same time, Queenie and Marie establish a bond over their shared identity, Marie offering for Queenie to live with her instead of in a house with an “immortal racist,” living as “second best to some pretty little white girl.” Marie states, “The only reason we’re in this country is because our great-great-grandpas couldn’t run fast enough.”

Although the narrative goes on to have the two conflicting groups come together in opposition to male aggressors, rectifying the racialized opposition and serving as a resolution, the intent of *Coven*’s racial commentary appears misdirected. While *Coven* utilizes science fiction tropes of magic and voodoo in an effort to reevaluate the way they are used for racial representation, the effect is not entirely positive. *Coven* proves that even a modern lens is

imperfect, although viewers today would expect a contemporary television show to have the foresight to be progressive.

Thus, in both *Asylum* and *Coven*, *American Horror Story* utilizes the genres of science fiction and supernatural horror in unconventional ways to broaden the thematic representation of racism and prejudice. *Asylum*'s treatment is more subtle compared to *Coven*, using aliens and scientific experimentation to mirror *The Twilight Zone*'s social discourse in the episodes "Eye of the Beholder" and "The Gift." *Coven* uses motifs of magic and voodoo to comment on racism, reflecting *The Twilight Zone*'s "The Big, Tall Wish" and "The Jungle." Despite the fact that *Coven* emerged within a modern, progressive historical context, its messages often fell short, as seen through the stereotypical portrayal of Queenie and naïve use of pop culture as a means to cure violent racism. In a similar sentiment, the negative reception of *The Twilight Zone*'s "I Am the Night—Color Me Black" represents the fact that, by 1964, the American public did not need a sermon to let them know that racism was wrong. Regardless of these questionable reviews, both *The Twilight Zone* and *American Horror Story* as a whole signify an innovative use of science fiction to critique social and political issues.

Chapter Two: The Shifting Role of Women: From Robots to Witchcraft

Since its literary beginnings, science fiction has often been marked as a “men’s genre,” due to the fact that the majority of it was often written, published, or read by men, but also because the subject matter often reflected a male perspective. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* goes so far as to describe the genre as being “by men for men, or sometimes for boys.”⁹² Reflecting this ideology, a common trope of science fiction often features “men as scientists and women as their experimental subjects.”⁹³ In this way, when science fiction first began to proliferate on television in the 1950s and 1960s, women were often represented as artificial beings that were created in an image of perfection and then controlled by men. This reflected the post-war mentality of suburban America, where women reluctantly reassumed their position in the domestic space as wife and mother after finding new liberation in the workforce during World War Two. The inspirational image of Rosie the Riveter from the 1940s was replaced by the 1950s image of June Cleaver; instead of embodying the strong, determined female figure, women were now expected to personify the demure and contented housewife. In this way, the trope of the “artificial woman” became a mainstay in television programming in the 1950s, featuring “female androids and robots, doll-like women and female mannequins that seemed alive.”⁹⁴ Similar archetypes continued to pervade science fiction television shows for the next five decades, providing “revealing glimpses of the country’s cultural preoccupations and changing attitudes toward women themselves.”⁹⁵

The Twilight Zone reflected this mentality in its early seasons, often placing women in subordinate positions or in narratives surrounding the domestic space. By its final season in 1964, the show’s treatment of women reflected a more liberal perspective as a result of American cultural changes, and even challenged societal expectations of femininity that previous tropes

worked to enforce. Over the course of Season Two: *Asylum* (2012-2013) and Season Three: *Coven* (2013-2014), *American Horror Story* challenges the traditional tropes of science fiction regarding the depiction of women in radically explicit ways. Both *The Twilight Zone* and *American Horror Story* engage with the shifting role of women in society, whether it is surrounding expectations of perfection and the complacent role of the housewife in the 1960s, or the hyper-sexualization and blatant objectification of women on television in the new millennium.

Television of the 1950s had seen an inundation of sitcoms focusing on the nuclear family. Shows like *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) and *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963) reinforced the image of the woman as the perfect wife and mother in the insular home and helped to ingrain this idea in American popular culture. In *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs*, Lynn Spiegel argues, “The domestic situation comedy was, by its very nature, predicated on the gender conflicts of the American family.”⁹⁶ These types of sitcoms dominated American television at this time, projecting a reality for white, middle-class women who were expected to effortlessly run the household while her husband was at work, tending to the children and upholding the household as a bastion of perfection.

According to Mary Beth Haralovich in “Sitcoms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker,” the “historically specific social subjectivity of the middle-class homemaker was engaged by suburban housing, the consumer product industry, market research, and the lifestyle represented in popular ‘growing family’ sitcoms” of the era.⁹⁷ The defining characteristic of these women was perfection; “her kitchen floors gleamed, her children’s noses never ran, and she herself was trim and lipsticked from morning ‘til night.”⁹⁸ In her book *Feminism and Pop Culture*, journalist Andi Zeisler labeled this phenomenon as “the curse of the happy

housewife.”⁹⁹ This quest for perfection was often the singular goal of the televised housewife, projecting a stifled worldview of domestic imprisonment. Lacking agency to pursue work outside of the home or to actively assert desires that did not include marriage or motherhood, the housewife figure provided a dismal glimpse into the opportunities for women in society during this period. While these homemakers were by no means the only images of women presented on television at the time, the most prevalent setting for episodes of *The Twilight Zone* was a middle-to-upper class domestic milieu.

In its early seasons, *The Twilight Zone* presented women in a similar light to the housewife-centric narratives of popular sitcoms. Women rarely, if ever, were featured as central protagonists, and when they were, they were often presented as vapid or fragile. In this way, gendered stereotypes pervade most early episodes of *The Twilight Zone*. One popular trope that was often used in association with the rare female protagonist was that of the hysterical woman who, after witnessing something unusual, is deemed crazy and delusional until she is ultimately validated in the episode’s conclusion. This is played out in various episodes, such as “Mirror Image” (Season 1, Episode 21, February 26, 1960), which follows a young woman, Millicent Barnes (Vera Miles), at a bus station. When her bus is running late, she asks an attendant what time it will arrive, to which he irritably notes that this is the third time she has asked this question. Perplexed, she goes to the bathroom and as she looks in the mirror, she sees an exact duplicate of herself outside. When she expresses this to a bystander, he thinks she is crazy and calls the police. It is not until she has been escorted out of the station and he is alone that he sees his own doppelganger running out the door, thus confirming her claims. Although some critics insist that there are feminist undertones in this trope, as the woman is ultimately validated and proven correct, the woman in question is consistently portrayed as weak, easily frightened, and is

essentially victimized for the majority of the episode. The fragile treatment of female characters is also explicitly confirmed through dialogue, seen in the episode “The Midnight Sun” (Season 3, Episode 10, November 17, 1961), which follows the plight of two women who are the final inhabitants of a city at the end of the world. After returning from the grocery store and carrying her bags up the stairs, one remarks, “that’s the first time in my life I was ever sorry I was born a woman; this is all I was strong enough to carry.” This line microcosmically reflects the sentiments of the period in which *The Twilight Zone* emerged, on the eve of the Women’s Liberation Movement and against a television milieu of delicately passive housewives. In most cases within the world of *The Twilight Zone*, women were categorized in specific archetypes that served to reflect the world around them.

One episode of *The Twilight Zone* that exemplifies the show’s early treatment of women is “The Lonely,” premiering on November 13, 1959 as the seventh episode of the first season. Penned by Rod Serling himself, the episode follows the plight of James A. Corry (Jack Warden), a convicted criminal serving a fifty-year sentence for a crime he committed in self-defense. In solitary confinement on a distant asteroid nine million miles from Earth, Corry is isolated in a tin shack amidst a desert of dust and sand, eagerly awaiting a pardon. After Allenby (John Dehner), the sympathetic captain of a supply ship, arrives to tell Corry he did not receive a pardon, he leaves him with a box in an act of pity. This box contains a robot named Alicia, created to look exactly like a woman, “capable of speech, reason and emotions.”¹⁰⁰ Upon opening the box, Corry reads the direction pamphlet, which states, “You are now the proud possessor of a robot built in the form of a woman. For all intent and purpose this creature is a woman.” This line defines the precise way early episodes of *The Twilight Zone* treat female characters; that, for all intents and purposes, their characterizations fulfill the expected duties of womanhood, by placing them in

the domestic space, or ensuring that their personal goals are restricted to easily achievable, everyday situations.

Alicia's first autonomous action is bringing Corry a glass of water, which he ardently rejects, dismissing her and verbally assaulting her simply for being a robot. His diatribe is bitingly condescending, and it is uncomfortable to watch how aggressively he treats her. Corry is physically abusive towards Alicia, throwing her down on the ground and grabbing her harshly. Although viewers are to understand that she is a robot, it is hard to distance the viewing experience from the fact that she in actuality is a woman. Corry justifies his aggression in a vitriolic monologue, explaining that his hatred of her stems from his loneliness, and since she is inhuman she is incapable of aiding his isolation, but only serves to worsen it. He lashes out at her yelling, "I'm sick of being mocked by the memory of women," throwing her to the ground and reproaching her as "a reminder to me that I'm so lonely I'm about to lose my mind." Prostrate on the ground, Alicia looks up at Corry sobbing, and explains that she was programmed to feel loneliness too. It is only then that Corry apologizes, and helps her off the ground.

The narrative then jumps eleven months forward, Alicia and Corry now happily living together in domestic bliss. Through narration, Corry admits that he has come to love Alicia, and no longer feels lonely. One night while stargazing, they notice that Allenby's ship is returning. The next morning, Allenby and his men arrive with the news that Corry's sentence was reviewed, and he has been granted a pardon. There is no time for celebration, as Allenby hurriedly explains that they must leave immediately. Allenby had picked up seven passengers along the way, which limits Corry to fifteen pounds of baggage. When Corry contends that Alicia is far heavier than fifteen pounds, Allenby tells Corry that he must leave her behind on the asteroid. This incites an argument between the two men, Corry explaining that Alicia is not a

robot and must join them, adamantly refuting that she is “gentle and kind...she kept me alive.” After begging Alicia to “show them” that she is a woman, an uncomfortably and ambiguous request, Allenby shoots her directly in the face. The camera pans over Alicia’s body, her face now torn open to reveal a cavity of wires and springs. Allenby assures Corry that on Earth he won’t need the companionship of a robot anymore; he is going home and “only leaving behind loneliness.” As they depart, Serling’s final monologue intones, “Without use they will disintegrate...all of Mr. Corry’s machines, including the one made in his image, kept alive by love, but now obsolete in the Twilight Zone.”

The theme of this episode suggests that female companionship is simply an accessory. Corry refers to Alicia as “simply an extension of me; I hear my words coming from her, my emotions—the things she has learned to love are those things that I have loved.” It is this precise reason that makes Corry believe Alicia is a woman and not a robot, the simple fact that she is comfortably subsidiary to his lifestyle. This description suggests a societal perception of what women *should be*, gentle and kind and willing to listen and obey. The episode reveals a strikingly misogynistic message, by aligning womanhood with specific expectations and effortlessly and violently discarding a female character without repercussions. Alicia serves as a primary example of how women are represented in the early seasons of *The Twilight Zone*, relying on the science fiction archetype of the feminized robot.

Another episode of *The Twilight Zone* that aligns womanhood with the metaphor of robots is “The Lateness of the Hour.” Premiering on December 2, 1960 during the second season, the story follows Jana (Inger Stevens), a young woman living with her parents in a lavish home run by domesticated robots. These robots, created by her scientist father, Dr. Loren (John Hoyt), look exactly like humans and function precisely in their designed roles—a maid, a butler,

a cook. Jana grows increasingly disturbed by her parents' reliance on these robots and on their insisted isolation from society in their insulated home.

Everything in the Loren's home is done according to a strict schedule, which Jana questions, suggesting they eat dinner at a different time, or go out to a restaurant. This desire for deviation concerns her parents, and she is forced to explain the motive of her intent simply stating "it would be different." Jana's declaration of dissatisfaction resoundingly reflects the intentions of the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, in which women challenged their traditional expectations in search of social, political and economic equality.¹⁰¹ Jana states similar sentiments, decrying, "We're atrophying in here! We sit here day after day, and year after year, while that clock just turns and turns, and we decay with every minute of the time." Her parents seem to neither care nor understand her dissatisfaction and are disconcerted by her sudden unhappiness and rebellious behavior. While Jana argues that her confinement has made her an "unsocial, unworldly, insulated freak," her father argues that by doing so he has "kept you from harm, I've protected you against disease, and insulation in the twentieth century is no crime—it's a service." He argues that her confinement has allowed her to never have to "look into the face of war, or the face of poverty or prejudice; you've been isolated...but what you think is imprisonment just happens to be asylum and security and survival." The perspective held by her father regarding the advantages of domestic isolation could be read in alignment with the opinions of figures like Phyllis Schlafly, the conservative activist who opposed the feminist movement and aggrandized the benefits of women remaining as housewives and out of the workforce, seen through her ardent opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment during the 1970s.¹⁰²

Jana's revulsion towards her parents' obdurate worldview resonates with the outlook held by the generation of women coming of age in the 1960s. Her parents, Victorian in both their dress and in their manner, do not understand her desire to break free of their isolated way of life. Her parents' sole focus is on perfection; her father has created an ideal world within their home, inventoried by Jana in a sardonic litany, from the room kept at the optimum temperature of 72 degrees, to "the windows for the most efficient light and proper ventilation...and the ceilings, for the most desirable acoustical qualities—everything built to perfection, everything designed for the perfect life." The perfection desired and acquired by her parents is reflective of the post-War idealism of suburban America, "structured within definitions of gender and the value of home life for family cohesion...establishing the value of domestic architecture and consumer products for quality of life and the stability of the family."¹⁰³

Jana ultimately blames the robots for making her unhappy; their mindless roles around the house are the antithesis of what Jana wants. When her mother accuses her of acting childish, Jana replies that she is acting like "a woman who wants something more out of life." Eventually, Dr. Loren concedes and dismantles the robots. Jana excitedly assures him that this will open up many opportunities for them, speaking of her hopes for the future and of having grandchildren. When her parents react negatively to this statement, Jana realizes that something is wrong. Her parents don't want her to have children, because she can't—she's a robot; just as the maid had been designed to be a maid, she had been designed to be a daughter. Upon this realization, Jana is despondent. Too saddened to let his daughter live in a tragic depression, yet too selfish to get rid of her completely, her father dismantles her and reprograms her as a maid.

Jana as a character makes strides compared to the robotic Alicia, as she is both the protagonist and seemingly active and in control of her desires, yet the end of the episode foils the

feminist undertones that could have been. When Jana excitedly lists the new possibilities that lie in her future once the robots are gone, she effusively states, “We’re going to give parties, and we’ll take trips and we’ll make friends, and I’ll find a young man, and before you know it we’re going to have grandchildren.” It’s disheartening to hear that upon being given freedom from domestic confinement, it appears her goals are to once again return to the same domestic confinement. While the literalized domestic isolation of the Loren’s can be read as an exaggerated metaphor for the domestic sphere of the 1950s, it also implies a critique on the generational gap and their views toward the feminist movement. In this way, “The Lateness of the Hour” suggests nascent feminism on behalf of *The Twilight Zone* in terms of the characterization and motivation of Jana, yet narratively remains mired in the myopic worldview of America at this time.

Between 1960 and 1964, America underwent a series of liberal changes regarding the role of women in society. In the spring of 1960, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the marketing of the oral contraceptive, Enovid.¹⁰⁴ Led by Margaret Sanger and Katharine McCormick, the development of the pill not only promised a reliable form of contraception, but also allowed women access for the first time “to an effective form of birth control that did not require men’s cooperation or even their knowledge.”¹⁰⁵ In the two years following the approval of Enovid, 1.2 million American women were taking the pill daily, and by 1964 it was the most popular contraceptive in the U.S., being used by more than 6.5 million married women and “untold numbers” of unmarried women.¹⁰⁶ The development of the pill served as a symbol of the promise and potential for women to gain control not only of their own bodies, but also of their lives. The pill made it easier for women to have careers by giving them the ability to plan and space the birth of children, allowing women to take full advantage of

educational and professional opportunities.¹⁰⁷ Because of the oral contraceptive, women discovered a new empowerment that allowed them to not only control their fertility, but also the direction of their lives.

In 1961, President Kennedy created the President's Commission on the Status of Women.¹⁰⁸ Chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, the commission was charged with the task of "evaluating and making recommendations to improve the legal, social, civic and economic status of American women."¹⁰⁹ The establishment of this commission assisted in paving the way for the Women's Liberation Movement of the mid-to-late 1960s by establishing a connected network of women and opening up public discourse on women's inequality in America. On October 11, 1963, the President's Commission on the Status of Women released a report called *American Women*, calling for a variety of reforms such as "an end to sex discrimination in hiring, for paid maternity leave and universal childcare, and for judicial recognition of women's equality under the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution."¹¹⁰ The report sought to take women out of the confines of the domestic space and place them into society as "equal participants in the public and economic realms."¹¹¹

Following this report, 1963 underscored two additional unprecedented changes to the role of women in American society. On June 10, 1963, President Kennedy amended the Equal Pay Act, prohibiting wage discrimination based on gender.¹¹² Perhaps the most significant event that verbalized women's unhappiness with their stasis of inequality was the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, which highlighted the societal pressures placed upon women to stay at home and raise families. Friedan emphasized the unhappiness of college-educated women in the suburbs. *The Feminine Mystique* was a landmark publication deconstructing the myth of the "happy housewife" as "healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her

husband, her children, her home.”¹¹³ Friedan sought to identify the symptoms of what she called “the problem that had no name,” acting as the voice for so many women who wished to declare they wanted “something more than my husband and my children and my home.”¹¹⁴ Women were now challenging their societally designated roles, seeking new, liberated means of fulfillment.

The episode “Number 12 Looks Just Like You” can be read as *The Twilight Zone*’s attempt to remain current in the changing tides of America. By the time the episode premiered on January 24, 1964 in the final season of the show, the world had greatly changed since season two’s “The Lateness of the Hour.” Unlike the misogynistic undertones of earlier episodes in which women had little-to-no agency, this episode reflects the shifting views of women resulting from the various political changes concerning them in the previous four years. This episode is perhaps the best example of a feminist trend in the world of *The Twilight Zone* and blatantly challenges pervasive societal pressures and expectations of perfection in women. Compared to the frantic Millicent in “Mirror Image,” the robotic Alicia in “The Lonely,” and the hopeless Jana in “The Lateness of the Hour,” “Number 12 Looks Just Like You” depicts a principled, educated, driven female protagonist.

The episode follows the plight of nineteen-year-old Marilyn (Collin Wilcox), who in the year 2000, is preparing for her “Transformation,” a “mandatory process in which people are scientifically made beautiful in exactly the same likenesses.”¹¹⁵ Able to choose from a list of options indicated by a number, a person must select which physiognomy is to his or her liking; with only a limited number of options, most people look exactly the same. Marilyn does not wish to undergo the Transformation, which concerns her mother Lana (Suzy Parker), who brings her in to see a variety of doctors. When Marilyn is forced to stay at the hospital due to a supposed

“psychological imbalance in not wanting to be beautiful,” she tries to escape, but ultimately undergoes the Transformation.

The tone of this episode is ironic and almost flippant. Serling’s introductory monologue playfully poses, “Given the chance, what young girl wouldn’t happily exchange a plain face for a lovely one? What girl could refuse the opportunity to be beautiful?” Even though it is explained that both men and women must undergo the Transformation, the choice to have the protagonist be female strengthens the episode’s overarching critique. The episode features only four actors, three of which play characters that have undergone the Transformation and thus play multiple roles, reinforcing the bleakness of Marilyn’s situation. In fact, Suzy Parker, a professional model, was cast as “Number 12,” intensifying the idealized image procured by undergoing the Transformation.¹¹⁶

Early in the episode, it is revealed that Marilyn’s father recently died in an accident, driving her to seek counsel in other family members and friends. When her uncle (Richard Young) comes to talk sense into her, she insists that she wants to “stay ugly.” Her uncle questions why she doesn’t want to be like everybody else, and Marilyn delivers perhaps one of the most standout aphorism in *The Twilight Zone* canon: “Is that good, being like everybody? Isn’t that the same as being nobody?” Her “radical ideas” and subversive nature are attributed to her non-conformist father, who also had been in opposition of the Transformation. Although he underwent the Transformation, he confided to Marilyn that he believed it to be a tragic loss of individuality, stating “when everyone is beautiful, no one will be, because without ugliness there can be no beauty.” It is later revealed that Marilyn’s father killed himself when they took away his identity.

Another theme suggested by the episode is women's expectation of happiness. When Marilyn first voices her concern over the Transformation, her mother suggests she simply drink a cup of "instant smile." When Marilyn discloses her unhappiness to her uncle, he too suggests she "take a nice cup of instant smile." Marilyn hysterically refuses, yelling "I don't feel like smiling all the time, sometimes I want to cry or frown." This suggests Serling's challenging the concepts of perfection, which had been contested to a degree in "The Lateness of the Hour," concerning the incessant expectation of happiness for women, brushing off their restlessness and dissatisfaction as something that a cup of tea could change.

When Marilyn is taken to the first specialist, Dr. Rex (Richard Long), he blames Marilyn's anxieties on a fault of the older generation, who "haven't given her any definite reason why she must wait until the age of 19." The second specialist, Dr. Sigmund Friend (Richard Long), explains the origins of the Transformation, created to eliminate inequality and injustice, because physical unattractiveness was seen as "one of the factors that made men hate." The Transformation provided a way to eliminate "the ugliness of mankind," further allowing for longevity of life and perfecting of ailments and illnesses. Age is thus seen as an imperfection, and the Transformation serves to indefinitely extend youth. Marilyn still refuses to undergo the Transformation, citing Dostoyevsky and his writings on "real beauty" and the "dignity of the individual human spirit" to defend her principles. This defines Marilyn as a smart, educated female character, a significant improvement from the robotic women of earlier episodes.

The ending of the episode is unsettling, as when Marilyn attempts to escape, she accidentally ends up in the operating room. However, when she is caught, she is holding the number "8," leaving room for interpretation as to whether she intended to escape or if she had decided to go through with the Transformation on her own accord. The episode ends with

Marilyn, now transformed to look exactly like her best friend Valerie, admiring her new self in the mirror. The delivery of Marilyn's final line, "the nicest part of all, Val—I look just like you!" is almost pointed, as if perhaps she underwent the Transformation to highlight its conformist nature. Serling's final narration concludes, "a portrait of a young lady in love, with herself. Improbable? Perhaps. But in an age of plastic surgery, bodybuilding, and an infinity of cosmetics, let us hesitate to say impossible. These and other strange blessings may be waiting in the future, which, after all, is the *Twilight Zone*." As disconcerting as the ending is, the openness of it leaves room for interpretation that possibly Marilyn has an agenda and did not mindlessly discard her principles.

Marilyn as a character is perhaps the most revealing aspect of the episode that represents a change in the depiction of women within the realm of *The Twilight Zone*. Marilyn is smarter than all of the characters, regardless of gender. She references books and complex theories that are beyond her mother, her uncle, her friends, and most importantly her doctors, who are all male. Marilyn's rejection of societal norms and her wanted deviation from expectations is revolutionary compared to the robotic representation of women in previous episodes. Like Jana in "The Lateness of the Hour," Marilyn represents a younger generation, challenging the status quo and the reasons behind the ways of society that older generations won't explain. Marilyn's focus isn't on domestic life or acquiring a man, but rather is on herself and promoting individuality. She is the central protagonist, and while she is "othered," she is deliberately made to be; she isn't victimized, but is only made to look crazy because of the absurdity of her oppressors and the vapidness of the society that she is in. Instead of remaining stagnant in its representation of women, "Number 12 Looks Just Like You" represents *The Twilight Zone's* response to the cultural changes regarding the status of women in the 1960s, using science fiction

motifs of futuristic societies and technical advancement to critique the pervading positioning of women in society.

Like *The Twilight Zone* in its later episodes, *American Horror Story* seeks to challenge the way women are portrayed on television. In the late 1960s and 1970s, television censorship and restrictions became more lax, reflecting the changing societal and cultural norms. The liberality of this period can be seen as a result of the Women's Liberation Movement, the Gay Rights Movement, and the sexual revolution, which was a "convergence of social movements, scientific developments and legal liberalizations [that] led to a markedly different sexual climate."¹¹⁷ This motivated a challenging of traditional codes of behavior surrounding sex and relationship, which was reflected in the television programming of the time.¹¹⁸ According to Elana Levine in her book *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television*, despite its longstanding history as a "family" medium, American television of the 1970s was "wallowing in sex," containing "innumerable references to the new sexual culture" of the decade while simultaneously contributing to it as a cultural form by bringing an acceptance of it into the mainstream.¹¹⁹

One result of this new culture of television was seen through the sexual objectification of women, a practice that began to permeate many genres as a way to promote "proper femininity," reflecting an inherently masculine perspective.¹²⁰ Coined by film critic Laura Mulvey as the "male gaze," this phenomenon placed "woman as image, man as bearer of the look."¹²¹ This often personified itself in the "female sex symbol," popularized in shows like *Charlie's Angels* (1976-1981), which placed women as empowered and successful outside of the domestic space, yet ensured that the success of the female characters was intrinsically reliant on her attractiveness. This often limited the way women could "think about the relationship between

power and attractiveness to men and about the importance of fitting cultural expectations of age, race, class and sexual orientation.”¹²²

This sexualization heavily infiltrated the realm of science fiction television in the 1970s, making it an extremely limited arena for progressive female characters, even if from a narrative standpoint they were making strides forward. By the late 1960s, *Star Trek* presented audiences with Lieutenant Uhura, a black, female communications specialist on the Starship Enterprise, who represented “the ideal of women finding meaningful work outside of marriage and family.”¹²³ 1970s science fiction programming saw television shows like *Wonder Woman* and *The Bionic Woman*, which presented women as simultaneously “wielding both physical and intellectual power.”¹²⁴ Due to the nature of science fiction, these women were often imbued with special powers and placed in futuristic settings, which appeared progressive compared to the depiction of women in previous decades. Although these shows placed women at the forefront of their narratives in empowered roles, they still relied heavily on sexually objectifying them through costuming and presentation.

Over the course of the next three decades, the image of women on television would shift drastically in a more progressive direction. Changes for women socially and politically rendered a new agency surrounding them. In 1973, the Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade* determined that state laws preventing women from terminating a pregnancy violated their right to privacy, giving women significant control over their reproductive lives.¹²⁵ Third wave feminism, or post-feminism, took root during the 1980s, challenging the ideologies of the second wave feminism of the 1960s by shifting its focus to broader issues of sexuality, media representations of women, the glass ceiling and international politics.¹²⁶ Television shows began focusing on career driven women, like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), whose central character was an

unmarried and independent career woman.¹²⁷ The 1980s continued this trend, with shows like *Murphy Brown* (1989-1998) and *Designing Women* (1986-1993) that featured powerful, driven, economically successful women. In this way, between the late 1970s and 1990s, television served to reflect the socio-political climate of their respective decade, making gradual strides towards progressive depictions of female characters.

Television of the 1990s reflected an even more progressive approach to female representation through shows like *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), presenting independent, sexual liberated, single women navigating the professional sphere, “still sorting out their relatively recent invasions into traditional male work bastions.”¹²⁸ Science fiction television of the 1990s reflected this new cultural milieu with breakthrough programming that served to challenge the hyper-sexualized conventions of women in science fiction television up until this point. *The X-files* (1993-2002) followed special agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully as they investigate unexplained paranormal cases. Scully is rational and realistic, whereas her male counterpart is the one who is perceived as delusional. This is extremely progressive, especially compared to *The Twilight Zone*’s “Mirror Image” and the commonly used trope of women as hysterical and not to be taken seriously. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) presented television audiences with a protagonist who was a teenager by day and a vampire slayer by night, mirroring the “ongoing parable of the modern woman’s greatest conflict: the challenge to balance personal and professional life.”¹²⁹ In this way, science fiction television was slowly making strides regarding female-centric storylines that were reflective of the progressive nature of the decade.

These factors served to set the stage for *American Horror Story* in its unprecedented use of science fiction and supernatural horror to provide a platform for strong female centered

narratives. Through the genre, *American Horror Story* highlights broader social issues, re-contextualizing the fears surrounding them even though most of the time the fictional world in which it takes place often disturbing resembles our own. In an interview with *Vulture* in 2013, Ryan Murphy openly acknowledged that *American Horror Story* does in fact possess feminist undertones. In regards to Season Three: *Coven* in particular, he stated it “is really about female power.”¹³⁰ A tendency of *American Horror Story* as a whole is to brutalize characters or situations in order more emphatically relay a broader message. Television critic Anne Helen Peterson notes this phenomenon stating that the show “treads a knife-edge between feminism and misogyny.”¹³¹ In this way, Murphy uses *American Horror Story* to test the limits of the genre in order to create a more indelible effect.

Both Season Two: *Asylum* and Season Three: *Coven* heavily utilize genre conventions to comment on the role of women on television and in society. One story arc of *Asylum* concerns journalist Lana Winters (Sarah Paulsen), who originally goes to Briarcliff in 1963 to do an exposé, and then is committed under false pretenses. The remainder of the season follows Lana through a variety of horrific experiences, from electroshock therapy to “cure” her lesbianism to kidnapping and rape by a mass murderer, which causes her to become pregnant. Perhaps the most graphic moment of Lana’s plight is her attempt to give herself an abortion since Briarcliff as a 1960s, Catholic institution will not, a statement reinforcing the importance of the *Roe v. Wade* decision of 1973. By the end of the season, however, Lana’s ambition and resilience allowed her to survive these experiences, as she is the only surviving protagonist by the final episode. Lana serves as a feminist symbol in *Asylum*, combating adversity and ultimately finding success as a result of her strength.

Asylum's Sister Jude (Jessica Lange) serves as a foil character to Lana, also imbuing the season with a feminist undertone. Sister Jude's constant struggle throughout the season is the fact that she is a woman, and that although in charge of Briarcliff, she is powerless simply because of her gender, a fact that her male coworkers constantly remind her of. For example, during an exorcism a priest asks her to leave the room, explaining that it is "no place for a woman," to which she replies, "I'm stronger than you think." When she is almost fired, a guard tells her, "Men are never going to be okay with a woman taking charge." Jude argues with the evil scientist Dr. Arden (James Cromwell) over control of the patients, threatening, "I will always win against the patriarchal male." The pointed dialogue spewed by sister Jude includes maxims like, "Don't you ever let a man tell you who you are or make you feel like you are less than he is." Lana and Jude are progressive both within the context of 1963 and for the audiences of 2013. Thus, *Asylum* presents two strong, determined female characters that even in the face of brutality and adversity ultimately find success due to their female identity.

According to a review in *Vulture* following *Asylum*'s finale, the season underscored Murphy's "obsession" with women, "our history, our haters, the injustices done to us, our against-the-odds ambition."¹³² In fact, a line from the pilot episode is repeated in the finale to solidify its thematic message, Jude's admonition to Lana of "the loneliness, the heartbreak, the sacrifice you'll face as a woman with a dream on her own." Thus, *Asylum* served as the feminist reckoning science fiction television needed, actively combating the pervasive images of women on television by presenting gritty, strong female protagonists with broader agendas that didn't concern goals of romance or physical perfection. Despite this, *Asylum* simultaneously raised many questions concerning *American Horror Story*'s treatment of women. Television critic

Madeleine Davis explained how, despite the brutal treatment of characters like Lana, people still wanted to watch the show:

So what makes *American Horror Story* okay for a feminist like me to watch? I have a theory: The women of AHS are strong as hell. They are the kinds of women who, when punched in the face, will spit out a bloody tooth and then throw a punch of their own. I'm not watching because I like to see them brutalized. I am watching because I like to see them fight back.¹³³

In this way, the plights of women in *American Horror Story* work to convey a broader feminist message, highlighted through their individual strength and perseverance. As *The Twilight Zone* had begun to do in “Number 12 Looks Just Like You,” *Asylum* sought to challenge traditional expectations of female characters in a brazen, unapologetic and sometimes-unsettling manner.

In anticipation of the next season, producer Tim Minear teased that *Coven* would bear “a feminist theme throughout.”¹³⁴ *Coven* sought to continue *American Horror Story*'s streak of promoting empowered images of women within a science fiction milieu through the motif of witchcraft. Witchcraft as a narrative device has long been deemed as a way to convey broader feminist messages. In an article from *The Guardian*, journalist Anne Donahue explains that witches in pop culture “reflect the feelings of isolation, confusion, or the need to band together for a greater good—especially if you are a woman.”¹³⁵ The witch figure presents a woman “using powers to change a world that doesn't like her in the first place. A witch tale is a feminist fantasy because it's about having a physical, mystical power than can create real, dangerous change in a world that would rather take power away from them.”¹³⁶ In this way, *Coven* presents its female characters as active, powerful women who are acutely aware of the way their powers can be used to assert their feminine identity.

Premiering on October 9, 2013, the pilot episode, “Bitchcraft,” introduces Zoe Benson (Taissa Farmiga), a teenager who discovers she is a witch after her boyfriend suffers a fatal

aneurism when they have sex for the first time. Alienated from her family, she is sent to Miss Robichaux's Academy for Exceptional Young Ladies in order to cultivate her powers. Zoe, naïve yet pragmatic, is forcefully made aware of her "genetic affliction" and her inability to control it, stating, "The world isn't safe for a girl like me, but maybe I'm not safe for the world either." Zoe, othered by her family, is isolated due to her powers that although genetic, skip generations in her family. Her parents do not understand her situation nor wish to, and thus force her to leave. This is reminiscent of the treatment of Jana in *The Twilight Zone's* "The Lateness of the Hour" and Marilyn in "Number 12 Looks Just Like You," in which they too are alienated from their families because their parents do not understand them.

After arriving at Miss Robichaux's, Zoe meets fellow student Madison Montgomery (Emma Roberts), an aggressive and entitled movie star notorious for her risky behavior and hard-partying lifestyle. Madison has the power of telekinesis, once making a spotlight fatally fall on a director simply because he criticized her acting ability. In "Bitchcraft," Madison and Zoe attend a frat party at a local college. Madison immediately gets separated from Zoe after being recognized as a celebrity. Left alone, Zoe is approached by fraternity president, Kyle (Evan Peters). Earlier in the episode, Kyle gives a speech to his brothers, explaining that since they had been in trouble with administration for poor behavior, he will remain sober for the night to oversee the party. Thus, Kyle is presented as responsible and willing to subvert social norms to do the right thing. The camera then cuts to Madison, who doesn't notice a frat brother drugging her drink. After a while, Zoe begins to worry about Madison, and sends Kyle upstairs to look for her. Kyle then finds Madison unconscious, being gang-raped while various members of his fraternity film it on their cellphones. The boys attempt to flee the scene of the crime, and Kyle follows them onto a bus, which speeds away as Zoe runs after it. Madison, now conscious but

physically shaken, wobbles onto the empty street, using her powers to flip over the bus, causing it to burst into flames. The next day, the news states that six boys died, but that two are in critical condition. When the news does not identify which of the boys are alive, Zoe attempts to find out by going to the hospital. When she discovers that the survivors are Madison's assaulters and not Kyle, she has sex with the unconscious rapist, killing him.

Some critics of "Bitchcraft" felt that this brutal depiction of rape was wanton and excessive, especially in light of various real-life news stories of similar nature, such as the 2012 Steubenville rape case involving an underage girl under the influence of alcohol who was raped by her peers, who then documented the event on social media.¹³⁷ The episode was especially relevant to this, as the trial was taking place contemporaneous to *Coven's* premiere. Television blogger Francesca Lewis found the promiscuous depiction of Madison particularly problematic, calling the scene "gratuitous and needlessly graphic, while also pointing to the slut shaming implications of having a sexy, aggressive and drunk woman raped."¹³⁸ Many critics felt oppositely, defending the depiction of rape as a brave attempt at de-stigmatizing the subject matter on television. Critic Alison Herman praised "Bitchcraft," stating, "writing female characters into situations where they're brutalized isn't sexist in and of itself; it's often an opportunity to comment on the systems that brutalize them."¹³⁹ Thus, Madison's refusal to be victimized and choice to instead use her powers for retribution against her rapists suggests a feminist tone. *Coven* is anything but subtle in its commentary on rape culture, introducing a level of abjection that is rare for television and often uncomfortable to watch. In this way, Murphy and Falchuck imbue *American Horror Story* with a quality of "hard-to-watch-ness," taking the viewer out of their comfort zone but using their discomfort to reveal broader critiques. By mixing the supernatural theme of witchcraft with a real world milieu, *Coven* implies that

although characters like Madison are empowered through their magical abilities, they are not immune to the harsh realities of being a woman. *Coven* does not glamorize or sensationalize these events, but rather brutalizes them in order to convey a broader meaning.

The particular use of date-rape drugs in this episode reflects a broader modern issue that is not exclusive to television alone, but is a reality that once seemed to be something out of science fiction. “Love potions” figure heavily in the science fiction canon, exemplified by *The Twilight Zone* episode “The Chaser” (Season 1, Episode 31, May 13, 1960). This episode follows Roger Shackleforth (George Grizzard), a man desperately in love with Leila (Patricia Barry), a woman who will not love him back. Roger seeks the help of Professor A. Daemon (John McIntire), who suggests he purchase a love potion. Daemon also offers a reversal potion should Roger change his mind about Leila, which he dubs “glove cleaner,” a “nice, non-descriptive title, completely colorless, tasteless, unidentifiable and sure...it’s swift and leaves no trace, it’s perfect for its purpose.” Read through a modern lens, this sales pitch is uncomfortable and resonates with the description for any current date-rape drug. Roger does not buy the glove cleaner, and administers the love potion by slipping it into a glass of champagne when Leila isn’t looking, which she then drinks. Despite Leila’s ardent rejections of Roger, openly stating, “I don’t love you, I don’t want you here, I don’t even like you at the moment, now please go!,” when the potion kicks in she retracts her statement, apologizing for her “cruelty” and throwing herself at him. By the end of the episode, Roger has grown tired of Leila’s constant affection, purchasing the glove cleaner, which he again disguises in a glass of champagne. As he hands it to her, she announces she is pregnant; shocked, he drops the glass on the floor. Although the episode’s intention was comedic, it is undeniably unsettling when read through a modern lens. This trope of love potions is directly challenged by *Coven*’s depiction of date-rape drugs. In *Coven*, date-

rape drugs still imply misogynistic control, but Madison usurps this by using her own powers to kill her attackers, indicating a sense of female empowerment that Leila lacked. *Coven* thus brings this trope out of the safe fantasy world of science fiction and into a realistic and disturbingly tragic one. In the world of *The Twilight Zone*, love potions seem harmless, but within a modern context when rape-culture pervades much socio-political discourse and lived experience, its narrative intention is questionable.

Coven also challenges the ways in which age and beauty standards intersect with futuristic technological advancement as presented in *The Twilight Zone*'s "Number 12 Looks Just Like You." The overarching theme of the season is the search for the next "Supreme," the most powerful witch who oversees the Coven, bearing "countless gifts, some say all of them." As a Supreme ages, she begins to lose her powers, which subsequently grow stronger in her successor. The current Supreme in *Coven* is Fiona Goode (Jessica Lange), the mother of the headmistress of Miss Robichaux's, Cordelia Foxx (Sarah Paulsen). Fiona is ruthless, charismatic, and witty, afraid of nothing but aging and subsequently losing her power. In "Bitchcraft," viewers first see Fiona at a research center that specializes in anti-aging medications. Although the scientists have discovered a potential treatment, Fiona's doctor explains that it won't be approved for at least two years. Fiona demands it anyway, and five days later is livid when it hasn't worked. Fiona then attacks her doctor, sucking his youth out of him until he is a decaying corpse, providing Fiona momentary youth as she admires herself in the mirror, which fades instantly. Vanity is a major character flaw in Fiona, pandering to characterized notions of female obsession with youth and beauty. However, *Coven* subverts this notion by ensuring that Fiona's "obsession" is rooted in her reluctance to give up her empowered role as Supreme. Instead of having her fear of losing attractiveness reliant on how others perceive her, it is focused on the

preservation of her omniscience. This conception of age and beauty reflects “Number 12 Looks Just Like You,” in that one of the many “advantages” of the Transformation is to eradicate age as an imperfection, indefinitely extending youth. In this way, the use of the science fiction themes of futuristic technology, or in *Coven*, scientific breakthroughs concerning age and beauty, provides a platform for social commentary on societal standards concerning women.

Likewise, *Coven* subverts the trope of women in relation to robots in the episode “Boy Parts” (Season 3, Episode 2, October 16, 2013). After Zoe kills Madison’s rapist, Madison wants to “return the favor” by bringing Kyle back to life through a resurrection spell. The girls break into a morgue, where they find piles of the dismembered body parts of the victims from the bus incident. With an array of options, Madison suggests, “we take the best boy parts, we attach them to Kyle’s head, and we build the perfect boyfriend.” The girls thus take control of creating an artificial man, reconstructing body parts until Kyle is a combination of male “perfection.” Kyle comes to life as a Frankensteinian monster, who must be taught how to speak and to function. This is a complete deviation from *The Twilight Zone*’s reliance on the feminized robot trope, and on women being controlled and artificially constructed to be perfect. Kyle becomes a sort of pet for Zoe and Madison; they are completely in control of him at all times. In this way, *Coven* subverts the traditional themes presented in *The Twilight Zone*’s “The Lonely,” where Alicia was an accessory to Corry, who must teach her everything in a similar manner to Zoe’s relationship with Kyle. While the tone of *Coven*’s treatment of the artificial male borders on sardonic camp, it nevertheless works to subvert the genre while still paralleling common themes.

Wherein *The Twilight Zone*’s “The Lonely” and “The Lateness of the Hour” presented women as objects, with Alicia literally as a gifted item to Corry and Jana being specifically manufactured as a daughter, *Coven* challenges this female objectification as a commodity. In the

episode “Fearful Pranks Ensur” (Season 3, Episode 4, October 30, 2013), Fiona kills Madison because she believes her to be the next Supreme. The butler, Spalding (Denis O’Hare), is ordered to dispose of Madison’s body, but instead takes her body to his bedroom, where he dresses up her corpse and interacts with her as if she is a doll. Spalding’s disconcerting charade is short-lived, as Madison’s body begins to decay. The gruesome depiction of Madison’s deteriorating body serves as an emphatic lesson that women are inherently human, and not inconsequential objects. Although Spalding desires to have Madison be an artificial figurine, she is not; unlike *The Twilight Zone*’s Alicia in “The Lonely,” where Allenby shoots her in the face and her beautiful visage is revealed to be a mechanical cavity, Madison is a human, who rots and decays just like everybody else. Thus, the jarring depiction of Madison’s body works to subvert the trope of female objectification, highlighting the problematic nature of it within science fiction.

Although *American Horror Story*’s approach is imperfect and almost borders misandry, exemplified through the double-edged nature of Zoe’s retribution against Madison’s rapists, the overall intention of *Coven* can be read as an attempt to present empowered female figures. While *Asylum* overtly challenges the television norms of female sexualization by placing its characters in unattractive and brutal situations, *Coven* takes common tropes and subverts them in a modern context to reveal broader feminist themes. The women of *American Horror Story* are far from perfect, and far from idealized; they are each intrinsically flawed, yet possess an agency and control displayed in their reactions to difficult, if not brutal, situations. As forward thinking as *The Twilight Zone* was in terms of its futuristic projections, much of the series’ treatment of women was mired in the social conventions of its time. As the seasons progressed, there is evidence of nascent feminism in the representation of women. Juxtaposed with science fiction themes of robots and futuristic technology, the role of women in *The Twilight Zone* reflects the

broader changes in American society at the time, underscoring a gradual progression toward acceptance of female individuality. Whereas *The Twilight Zone*'s use of science fiction motifs mirrors the treatment of women in 1960s society, *American Horror Story* uses these traditional generic conventions to heighten the impact of their critique within a modern context.

Conclusion

In *The Twilight Zone* episode “The Fugitive,” Rod Serling states, “Fantasy is the impossible made probable; science fiction is the improbable made possible.”¹⁴⁰ In this way, science fiction has the inherent ability to make the mundane horrifying; rooting the fantastic in science allows viewers to believe that what they are seeing is within the realm of possibility. *The Twilight Zone* and *American Horror Story* achieve their intended effects by centering their narratives in a familiar milieu; by identifying with everyday characters in their everyday lives, viewers associate the horrors presented in the narratives with horrors deeply rooted in reality. In a sense, these shows extrapolate on potential consequences of present situations through generic metaphors. In *The Twilight Zone*, the Twilight Zone as a location itself is a realm of possibility, at times serving as a portal to the future and at others as a region of moral cognizance. For Serling, *The Twilight Zone* served as an area of progression, where he was able to assert his liberal ethos outside of the restrictions of corporate sponsors.

The Twilight Zone's depiction of race and gender reflected the sentiments of the age, each episode a testament to its periodization. *American Horror Story* has the privileged perspective of the present from which to base its critiques, yet relies on its predecessors to bring to light the way generic conventions work in the conveyance of salient topics. *The Twilight Zone* was foundationally based on Serling's desire to discuss provocative topics in his scripts. In *The Twilight Zone*, race proved to be perhaps the most pervasive theme found throughout its five seasons. Whether exploring it implicitly through metaphors of monsters and aliens in “Eye of the Beholder” and “The Gift,” or explicitly from both an industrially and narrative stance in “The Big Tall Wish” and “I Am the Night—Color Me Black,” Serling was able to promote progressive discourse on racial prejudice and its consequences against the backdrop of the Civil

Rights Movement. *American Horror Story* reflects a similar sense of social responsibility in its use of science fiction as a gateway for critique, recycling motifs and placing them in a modern context. *Asylum* subverts traditional tropes in placing aliens alongside a racial storyline, and roots much of its horror in its periodization in the 1960s. *Coven* pits two types of witchcraft against each other, defining them by racial identity, and lifts the theme of voodoo out of its racist generic pigeonhole evidenced in *The Twilight Zone*'s "The Jungle." Although both shows fell short in some regard, either due to heavy-handed scripts or tactless characterizations, their penchant for social commentary is commendable in its brave critiques on racial prejudice in creatively innovative ways.

The depiction of women in both *The Twilight Zone* and *American Horror Story* is approached similarly. Reflecting the progressive socio-political changes experienced over the course of 1959-1964, the depiction of women in *The Twilight Zone* evolved over its five seasons. In its early seasons, women were portrayed as fragile, dependent and controllable creatures, associated with the motif of robots in "The Lonely" and "The Lateness of the Hour." By its final season, *The Twilight Zone* put forth strong and independent female characters like Marilyn in "Number 12 Looks Just Like You," who questioned the rules and traditions of society in order to maintain her distinct individuality, a much more fitting model of womanhood for audiences of 1964 experiencing the feminist movement. *American Horror Story* itself is built around its female characters. *Asylum* presents inimitably strong heroines who deviated from the typically sexualized image of women in science fiction television. *Coven* presented an entirely female-centric narrative, linking female power to intelligence and resilience, and not to attractiveness. *Coven*'s dark narrative of date-rape drugs parallels the traditional motif of love potions, showing that, when placed in a modern context, some generic conventions should be updated if they are to

have an effect on contemporary audiences. *American Horror Story* ultimately provides a progressive feminist narrative, ensuring an empowered place for female characters in modern science fiction television.

The current television landscape is home to multitudes of science fiction programming. Many popular paragons of science fiction are experiencing second lives, with *The X-files* returning to television in January 2016 as a testament to its cult significance.¹⁴¹ *The Twilight Zone* itself even experienced two brief revivals, in 1985 and again in 2002; both however were short-lived. In today's "post-television era," science fiction has found a home on streaming services, with Hulu's *11/22/63* and Amazon's *The Man in the High Castle*.¹⁴² The recent popularity of dystopian film franchises like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* have reintroduced the genre to more mainstream film audiences. The British television show *Black Mirror* perhaps serves as the best example of the continuation of *The Twilight Zone* and *American Horror Story*'s approach to science fiction, utilizing an anthological structure to examine contemporary societal issues. Today, science fiction texts almost unanimously incorporate the genre to make broader critical statements, exploring topics ranging from mental health to iPhones, to terrorism. The popularization of science fiction on television today invites questioning about where the genre might go in the future. With continual advancements in special effects technologies and new platforms for consuming content, science fiction still appears as a realm of possibility.

Science fiction is markedly an auteur's genre—neither *The Twilight Zone* nor *American Horror Story* would be what it is without Rod Serling or Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk. Murphy and Falchuk continue to find success with *American Horror Story*. Now preparing for its sixth season, *American Horror Story* narratively and aesthetically continues to break new boundaries in drastic and exciting ways, with an increased focus on art direction, star power and

production value. Murphy and Falchuk have extrapolated on their success in the realm of horror with *Scream Queens* (2015-), a show entirely devoted to horror cinephilia and campy humor, appealing to a younger audience. Their most recent endeavor is *American Crime Story* (2016-), an anthological series tracing real life tragedies, with the first season focusing on the O.J. Simpson trial.¹⁴³ Thus, Murphy and Falchuk continue to be inspired by traditional genres, exploring them with a modern lens to create original programming for contemporary audiences.

After *The Twilight Zone* was cancelled in 1964 due to low ratings and budgetary constraints, Serling attempted to find another creative outlet. In 1969, he created *Night Gallery*, an anthology series set in a museum during its after hours, relying on elements of Gothic horror rather than science fiction.¹⁴⁴ *Night Gallery* would last until 1973, after which Serling sporadically and futilely continued to write for television. No work of his would ever achieve the same cultural significance as *The Twilight Zone*. In 1975, Serling died suddenly from a heart attack; at fifty, Serling's prolific and remarkable writing career was abruptly cut short. Serling's legacy continues to live on in television through the syndication of his popular shows on SyFy and Netflix. The lasting effect and cultural influence of *The Twilight Zone* is evident in the narratives of today's science fiction shows, preserving its place in television history. It is interesting to speculate how else Serling may have been able to contribute to the genre had he lived to see the advancements of science fiction television today.

The Twilight Zone and *American Horror Story* both mark progressive approaches to television within their respective periods. While *The Twilight Zone* had been specifically designed to use science fiction as a means for social discourse, *American Horror Story* followed its paradigm and expanded upon it for a modern audience. By using science fiction motifs to highlight issues of race and gender, both television shows provide broader perspectives on

contemporary problems. *The Twilight Zone* and *American Horror Story* redefine science fiction as a mode for artistic expression, showing the possibilities the genre holds as a vehicle for social commentary.

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