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Hannibal is gay representation done right

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Forensic psychiatrist Dr. Hannibal Lecter. The character is played by Danish actor Mads Mikkelsen. PHOTO COURTESY OF @NBCHANNIBAL ON INSTAGRAM.

The NBC series "Hannibal" is renowned as queer art. This is predominantly due to the final (for now) season, which made explicit what many fans had already picked up on in the prior two seasons: the romantic relationship between Hannibal and Will. In its broadest sense, the relationship is unethical (Hannibal is Will's therapist). When you move beyond that feature of their relationship, you'll find it gets significantly worse, and then even worse than that. Somehow, however, it maintains itself as being great (dare I say exquisite) gay representation.

I'll use this opportunity to get the obvious out of the way: Hannibal is indeed a cannibal, which is bad, and not something an adjusted human being should be able to find representation in. Also worth mentioning is that his cannibalism, unlike in well-known movies such as "Bones and All," is not a metaphor for love, it really is just as bad as it is. That being said, it can be almost entirely ignored in this conversation, as odd as that may seem. While the series itself naturally revolves quite significantly around Hannibal's proclivities, the love between Will and Hannibal oddly does not.

The emphasis of their relationship is on the deep connection and understanding they share, which is contingent on the build-up to even hinting at romantic interest. It's immediately apparent that something draws the pair together. Hannibal is intrigued by Will's ability to empathize "with anyone" as he claims, although that declaration is up for conjecture, but he's also intrigued by the perceived darkness Hannibal picks up on despite Will's best efforts. In further conversations Hannibal finds himself deeply interested in and curious about Will, which is evidenced in Hannibal's scheming to put Will in various predicaments to see how he responds (yes this involves framing him for murder, but he knew he'd be able to get Will out of wherever that led him).

This supposed professional curiosity is very quickly revealed to be far from it. Hannibal decides with relative brevity that he'd rather Will be free from the insane asylum, as he finds himself missing him intensely, staring at the chair Will once occupied before framed for multiple murders (whose fault is that?). This is not before Will realizes that Hannibal rhymes with cannibal and that may be far from a coincidence. Feeling betrayed by his therapist (?) Will requests another murderer he happens across (if Maryland is really dominated by these sorts is a question I won't look into) to kill Hannibal, which through the power of love luckily is unsuccessful, but also hurts Hannibal's feelings. Hannibal's response to this act is, in a very fittingly odd (evil) manner, an act of love, he sends a serial killer after Will. Both as a way to get even and thus move past their misdeeds to one another, but also to urge Will to be more open and honest with himself, as well as to prove Hannibal's true love and acceptance of Will. While on the surface it may seem as though Hannibal wanted to kill his crush, it was in reality a twisted act of love. This is a clear example in how the series uses fantasy/metaphor to explore feelings of love, using a gay relationship as the foundation.



Hugh Dancy poses as his character Will Graham in the NBC television show "Hannibal." Will Graham is a criminal profiler with a unique psychological ability allowing him to adopt the mind of a murderer after visiting the crime scene, helping him understand them.
PHOTO COURTESY OF @NBCHANNIBAL ON INSTAGRAM.

Hannibal is exposed to the darkness in Will that he's spent his whole life obfuscating each time he expresses pride and acceptance. He tells Will repeatedly that he sees him fully and he stays. For queer viewers, who are often made to feel as though loving someone of the same sex is akin to the acts committed by a certain somebody in "Hannibal," seeing a pair as ostracized and misunderstood as Will and Hannibal (again ignoring the literal actions taken by them) finding love and acceptance is indescribable.

Their sexuality wasn't hinted as being queer until after the characters' personalities and relationship were already established, which also means their stories don't revolve around that, allowing for fully developed characters. The lack of labels on the orientation of all the characters also allows for a recognition that love goes beyond sex.

While there is an absence of a kissing scene between Hannibal and Will on screen, the intimacy shown between them throughout the series shows that reducing love, including romantic love, to acts of sexual intimacy is doing a disservice to it. Hannibal and Will's inseparable bond and Hannibal's willingness to sacrifice everything established as being what he lives for, for Will is much more interesting and indicative of love than leaning on a straightforward symbol like a kiss. It is verbalized in numerous ways that Hannibal is in love with Will (and shown visually — I mean Hannibal was drawing them as Achilles and Patroclus, come on).

Media often times leans on these acts of physical intimacy to quickly express romantic love, for queer relationships it's often not that easy, not only because there's a strong stigma of expressing that love publicly, but also because there's a sense of a requirement of deep trust and care in even venturing to take the risk of expressing love to another. In refusing to act as though those barriers are non-existent or irrelevant, "Hannibal" presents love with all its facets, including those that may seem easier to ignore. The complexities and nuances of queer love aren't ignored in an attempt to present it as equal to heterosexual love, rather the difficult parts are expressed through metaphor.

Love in this series is not clear and without chaos. It is immeasurably messy, complicated, and painful, but it is unwavering. The pair isn't made to fix one another (they make each other significantly worse), and they are both far from perfect (don't think I need to expand on that one). Overall, the series is made up of terrible things happening left and right, Hannibal and Will should under no circumstances be admired or used as a reference for what a healthy relationship looks like, but they do love one another and that love is explored in a non-stereotyped or confined way.