

The New York Times: “Ed Gein: An All-American Nightmare” [C1]

Ed Gein, l’assassino che ha ispirato i mostri più iconici del cinema horror, è il protagonista della nuova stagione della saga “Monster” di Ryan Murphy.

When writer and producer Ryan Murphy was eight, his parents left him to babysit his little brother. (This was the 1970s; these things happened.) Proudly in charge of the family television and TV guide, Murphy chose a movie to watch. That movie was Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho. No eight-year-old, alone at night, should watch that shower scene. “I went berserk,” Murphy, fifty-nine, recalls. “I screamed and cried, and I had to call my grandmother to come and help me.” A few days later, he went to the library. An encyclopedia confirmed that while Psycho, based on a novel by Robert Bloch, was a work of fiction, it had a basis in fact: the gruesome crimes of a Wisconsin man named Ed Gein. Some of us repress our primal wounds. Others, like Murphy, create a limited series about them. *Monster: The Ed Gein Story*, the third installment of Murphy’s Monster franchise, premiered on Netflix last October. Co-created and written by Ian Brennan, this season trains a dark lens on Gein, who is played by Charlie Hunnam, a charismatic English actor best known for starring as the muscular leader of an outlaw motorcycle gang on *Sons of Anarchy*. A killer of outsize infamy, Gein is definitively responsible for only two deaths. (He was charged with a single killing and later confessed to one more.) But Gein also had a practice of disinterring the recently deceased and making masks, clothing and household items from their skin and bones, a gruesome ritual that kindled the interest of writers and filmmakers. In addition to Psycho, his crimes inspired the character Leatherface in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and Buffalo Bill in *The Silence of the Lambs*. He has also been the subject of documentaries, true-crime books, horror comics and more. It makes sense that prestige television would eventually come for Gein. Viewers have a seemingly insatiable appetite for stories, true and false, centered on the more outrageous aspects of human nature — an appetite that Murphy, with his *American Horror Story*, *American Crime Story* and Monster franchises, has made a late career of whetting. But hasn’t Gein already had his turn in

the spotlight? Not exactly. Monster, however **grisly**, attempts to locate the man behind the movie monsters, the face beneath the skin masks. "There are ugly things here, but they were all done by a man — **by all accounts**, a really strange, interesting man," Brennan said. Gein is in his way an American original, a **homegrown boogeyman**. Harold Schechter, the writer of the graphic novel *Did You Hear What Eddie Gein Done?* as well as **Deviant**, a comprehensive true-crime account of Gein's life, considers Gein the first all-American monster. "Gein was responsible for creating this distinctly American kind of horror," Schechter said. He was a man of the Midwest, a farmer. He **babysat** local children. He played the accordion. The unanswerable question at the dark heart of any season of *Monster* is whether a so-called monster is born or made. With Gein, there is good evidence on both sides. Raised by a fervently religious mother who attempted to isolate her sons, he also had schizophrenia. But children of abusive parents rarely become murderers, and the vast majority of schizophrenics never engage in violence. Murphy and Brennan have their own theories about why Gein **desecrated** corpses, some of them related to Gein's exposure, through **pulp magazines** and adventure comics, to images of Nazi atrocities in World War Two. But these are, of course, just theories. (And an opportunity for some **lurid** scenes starring actress Vicky Krieps as war criminal Ilse Koch, who was accused of **commissioning** household objects made out of the skin of prisoners.) Murphy and Brennan claimed that their interest was less in that **alleged** sickness than in Gein's treatment by the criminal justice and mental health care systems. "To me, what's interesting is not so much the crimes but everything else that surrounds the crimes," Murphy said. "If you walk away from Ed Gein and all you want to talk about are the two murders, well, that says a lot about you." This American moment is a provocative one in which to reconsider Gein. His crimes took place in the decade before his arrest in 1957, a postwar period that is now viewed, particularly by many conservatives, through a nostalgic **haze**. Schechter sees him as incarnating the **dissociative split** in 1950s American life — **gilded** postwar prosperity on the one hand, the shadow of World War Two on the other. An added benefit of making Gein a main character: that his crimes were perpetrated seventy years ago means that the **odds** of retraumatizing victims' families, a point of **contention** in previous seasons,

are low. As Murphy was beginning to consider whom he might cast as Gein, he saw a paparazzi photo of Hunnam and intuited some resemblance. That resemblance isn't obvious, but it was enough for Murphy to invite Hunnam to dinner at the Chateau Marmont, in Los Angeles. As they ate, Murphy dilated on the coming season of *Monster*, and Hunnam was moved by his intensity. "I found myself just thinking, 'God, I love this guy; I really hope I have an opportunity to work with him at some point,'" Hunnam recalled. That point came quickly. At the end of the dinner, Murphy asked if Hunnam would consider playing Gein. Without thinking too much — and Hunnam, who often adorns his conversation with Latinate phrases and literary references, described himself as a person who always overthinks — Hunnam agreed. He felt that Murphy's vision favoured psychological exploration over sensationalism. He began his research. And then he panicked, overwhelmed by the enormity of Gein's deeds. But when he received the scripts, he relaxed, at least a little, persuaded that this version wanted to see the killer's humanity. If Hunnam found it challenging to portray that humanity, he welcomed that challenge. "That terror of the darkness of this was replaced by a terror of feeling like this is going to be impossible," he said. "And that just felt like the perfect place to be." Most people will struggle to understand the 'why' of Gein's actions, even as true crime fans may recoil, pleasurable, at the 'how.' His story, in life and in *Monster*, is a story of some of the most extreme things a human can do. But Murphy, who seems to have recovered from his childhood fright (or is this season just one elaborate coping mechanism?), thinks that viewers might find the show comforting. "I personally believe that it's a place to put your anxieties in a very dark world, and to perhaps talk about some of the fears in your own life," he said." Published in The New York Times on 30 September 2025. Reprinted with permission.

Glossary

- **household items** = oggetti domestici
- **kindled** = risvegliare
- **boogeyman** = uomo nero
- **lurid** = scabrose
- **primal wounds** = ferite primordiali
- **alleged** = presunta
- **dissociative split** = scissione dissociativa
- **overthinks** = rimuginare troppo
- **gruesome** = raccapriccianti
- **installment** = capitolo
- **this season trains a dark lens** = puntare uno sguardo cupo, osservare attraverso una lente oscura
- **outlaw** = fuorilegge
- **Chainsaw** = motosega
- **whetting** = stimolare, stuzzicare (l'appetito)
- **haze** = velo (di nostalgia)
- **recoil** = indietreggiare
- **outsize** = straordinaria
- **deeds** = azioni
- **fright** = spavento
- **seemingly** = apparentemente
- **by all accounts** = a quanto si dice
- **homegrown** = nostrano, locale
- **desecrated** = profanare
- **odds** = probabilità
- **recalls** = ricordare
- **grisly** = macabro
- **babysat** = fare da babysitter
- **dilated** = dilungarsi
- **Latinate phrases** = latinismi
- **overwhelmed** = sopraffatto
- **outrageous** = atroci
- **pulp magazines** = riviste pulp, sensazionalistiche

- **commissioning** = commissionare
- **contention** = disputa
- **coping mechanism** = meccanismo di difesa
- **went berserk** = impazzire, dare di matto
- **Deviant** = depravato
- **gilded** = dorata