

Nicole Bell

Professor Comfort

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TV Analysis Paper

Euphoria Special Episode: Jules

Euphoria is a two-season television show made for HBO's streaming platform. The show follows Rue Bennett, a young high-school girl who has found herself in and out of rehab due to her opioid addiction. The plot is centered around her experience while highlighting other characters: Jules, Nate, Maddie, Cassie, Lexi, Kat, McKay. Each character faces a dilemma that captures the theme of self-discovery. Jules Vaughn is the central love interest for Rue and is tied into her journey with sobriety. Jules is balancing feelings of changing sexuality while trying to "conquer femininity" as a transgender girl. Each character is in their own world, and as the season continues to the second, each person's individual storylines become extremely intertwined through betrayal, lies, and cheating.

The show gained major popularity when it originally came out in 2019; however, when COVID-19 hit in 2020, people binge-watched the show. Euphoria stopped production until 2021 when they dropped two, hour long episodes that featured Rue's character for the first and Jules's character for the second. These episodes were unique in the fact that they were both filmed with an extremely limited crew and adhered to all COVID-19 distancing regulations. The episodes were one to two scenes, resulting in limited action and mostly dialogue. This filming style made the time spent watching extremely slow-paced and intimate.

Jules's episode drew me in because of the subject matter it covers and the unique process for the writing. Jules's character is a young transgender woman who is discovering her sexuality as well as what it means to be "feminine." This comes with challenges from those who do not understand the trans experience as well as managing her best friend and partner's spiraling drug addiction. What makes this episode's storyline stand out from others is that the actress who plays Jules, Hunter Schaffer, wrote this episode. She brings authenticity/representation to the storyline in an industry that has been casting cisgender people to play trans roles. She wrote the episode from her perspective, which made it so much more impactful; each feeling is real, and each metaphor is real.

The first major conversation in the episode deals with how Jules defines gender and sexuality. The episode starts with a closeup shot of Jules in a therapist's chair. Her physical appearance differs greatly from her signature look in the regular season. Known for her neon makeup, anime-style clothing, and freshly bleached hair, she is pictured with no makeup, wears clothes with muted colors, and has grown out roots. The physical contrast immediately puts the viewer in a shifted mindset, they feel the internal battles that Jules is portraying through her appearance. The initial discussion is about how she wants to get off her hormones; Jules naturally leads into a dissection of what it means to be feminine. She states, "I've framed womanhood around men, when in reality, I'm no longer interested in men." She continues to explain that the hormones she would quit would be the ones that stop her voice from dropping and her "balls from getting bigger... The kind of shit men wouldn't find desirable." The theme of this episode is surrounded by Jules verbalizing her need to remove her trans identity from heterosexuality. The raw feeling that Hunter Schaffer brings to this scene makes you feel like you're watching a real therapy session while at the same time experiencing the same feelings as her.

Later in the episode, Jules says she admires the ocean because it is strong and feminine, two things she has felt herself grappling with: “I think I want to be as beautiful as the ocean. ‘Cause the ocean’s strong as fuck. And feminine as fuck. And both are what makes the ocean the ocean.” She makes the connection of the ocean being a God and connecting her trans identity to spirituality. She shows how her relationship with Rue is something that has taken over her life, connecting this to the feeling of drowning. The use of the ocean is a beautiful metaphor for the lack of control most teenagers feel as they go through one of the biggest developmental times in their life. Jules adds on the element of defining her gender and sexuality to this universal experience.

The second conversation leads into how she defines and sees love. In the first season, the writers set the relationship of Jules and Rue as codependent. Rue watches as Jules experiences serious sexual violence and threats while Jules watches Rue battle with life-threatening addiction. The codependence is built from a sense of mutual preservation and “support” for each other, as well as two teenagers can. Jules slowly starts to reciprocate romantic feelings for Rue towards the end of the first season, creating confusion in her sexual identity. The codependence of this toxic relationship is analyzed by Jules and her therapist for this special episode. A common misconception about this series is that it uses the Gen Z antics and language as a caricature, specifically in relationships, making it cringey for the viewer. This episode does the complete opposite. The writers, including Hunter Schaffer, perfectly capture the overwhelming need to be the person who helps your romantic partner. This leads to a string of problems that could ultimately be solved with professional help. This episode captures the aftermath of realizing the harm this kind of codependence causes perfectly.

Halfway through the episode, the camera pans to Jules and holds a tight angle as we watch her break down and cry. The camera does not shy away, despite the intense emotion being depicted. We watch the codependence physically break Jules down as a combination of disappointment and exhaustion. She feels like Rue's sobriety is connected to her personal stability; the parallel is drawn between how Rue's overdose scared her and how her mother's abandonment scarred her:

“What if she relapses because I'm not there? But I guess it goes both ways because you know I fell completely in love with her.”

“Don't you feel the same way about Rue as you do your mom?” the therapist queries.

“No?”

“You just said you were angry at Rue for the imbalance she created in your relationship. So, would it be fair to say you resented that imbalance? That the same person who saw you, truly saw you, in the same way your mom did when you were a baby, was also incapable of seeing how her addictions affected you.”

By drawing these two storylines next to each other, the viewer can understand or justify Jules's reaction to Rue. Viewers become empathetic to the apathy she shows in the regular season: her numbness is a result of her past. This character development created a cult following among fans of Jules lovers; the writers made the character someone you can root for.

Addiction, love, sexuality, and gender are the key topics covered in this episode. Jules battles with understanding her own sexuality as well as who she loves; does she love Rue who is battling addiction, or does she love the boy who doesn't understand his own sexuality? Addiction has changed Jules' life, first with her mother and now with her lover. She has lost too many

people to substances. The cultural timing of this episode came right before America began seeing the most restricting legislation against trans people being signed into law. Seeing a young, transgender woman speaking freely about her experience is extremely powerful in contrast to the political air of 2021. If you are looking for authentic queer and transgender representation in popular culture, this show captures it well with Hunter Schaffer's writing and amazing acting. This show does not just depict another queer archetype where the main plot is about various hate crimes. The writers take trans and queerness to a level that invites the audience to dive deeper into the lives of the characters. This show, and this episode specifically, will remain on my Must-Watch list for this reason.