

**Unconventional Imagery and Gothic Aesthetics: On the Cult Media Characteristics of
Wednesday Season 1**

Class 12 Assessment: Final Research Paper

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1. Introduction

Wednesday (Netflix, 2022) was released through one of the largest streaming platforms in the world, yet its audience responded to it in ways that are more often associated with cult media than with mainstream hits. Viewers imitated its protagonist's dance, circulated its music, quoted its deadpan dialogue, traced its literary allusions and argued about its heroine's psychology. This paper asks why the first season generated that kind of response, and it argues that the answer lies in a deliberate fusion of unconventional imagery and gothic aesthetics, which together produce the qualities on which cult reception depends.

The paper's argument is that *Wednesday* season 1 functions as cult media through five interlocking features: a reworked gothic visual tradition (Rein, 2023); dense intertextuality (Opreanu, 2025); a difficult, outsider protagonist (Zehra, 2024); ostentatious, attention-seeking music and sound (Reyland, 2024); and a distinctive verbal style that must survive translation for a global audience (Fauziah and Simatupang, 2024). The analysis proceeds through close reading of specific scenes treated as case studies. Each case study is paired with the scholarly source that best illuminates it, so that interpretation is supported by literature rather than offered as impression alone.

The paper has the following structure. Section 2 reviews the literature and sets out the analytical framework. Section 3 presents six case studies drawn from the season. Section 4 discusses what the case studies reveal about cult status in the streaming era, and Section 5 concludes. An appendix records episode-by-episode viewing notes.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

2.1 What makes a text cult media

For the purposes of this paper a cult text is understood as one marked by five recurring qualities. It has a distinctive and recognisable style that audiences can claim as their own. It is intertextually dense, so that watching becomes an act of decoding. It centres on figures or worlds that resist easy assimilation, encouraging strong identification among viewers who feel themselves to be outsiders. It invites repeated, attentive and communal engagement through rewatching, quotation, imitation and debate. Finally, it sits in tension between marginality and reach: cult texts present themselves as outsider objects even when produced by powerful institutions. These five qualities structure the case studies below.

2.2 The five sources

Rein (2023), in the chapter on gothic cinema after 1960, treats the gothic as a mode that persists and mutates across decades of film, absorbing new anxieties and styles while retaining recognisable motifs. This supports reading *Wednesday* as a late participant in that tradition rather than a simple imitation of it. Opreanu (2025) examines the series' intertextual depths, and her title already names three of its layers: ravens, outcasts and the ghosts of earlier tales. Zehra (2024) analyses the characterisation of Wednesday Addams through the framework of narcissistic personality disorder, offering a way of explaining the protagonist's combination of grandiosity, detachment and magnetism. Reyland (2024) places the series in a lineage of "ostentatious scoring" running from *The Sopranos* to *Wednesday*, arguing that conspicuous music is a means of engaging the complex television audience. Fauziah and Simatupang (2024) study the translation methods used in the subtitles of the series, drawing attention to how its verbal style is carried across languages.

2.4 How the sources relate

The five sources are not independent. Rein's (2023) account of a gothic mode that has become more ironic and self-aware helps explain why Opreanu's (2025) intertextual layers are experienced as pleasure rather than burden: the series presents its borrowings openly and invites recognition. Zehra's (2024) study of the protagonist complements both, because a character defined by contempt for convention is also the natural vehicle for a text that plays with generic convention. Reyland's (2024) argument about conspicuous scoring links the visual and verbal strategies to the sound world, showing how the series addresses an audience that attends closely. Fauziah and Simatupang (2024) extend the frame to circulation, reminding us that the cult object is encountered by viewers in many languages. Read together, the sources describe a text that is stylistically distinctive, interpretively deep, centred on a difficult figure, sonically conspicuous and globally distributed. These are exactly the qualities listed in Section 2.1, and the case studies test each in turn.

2.3 Method

The method is close reading of selected scenes. The scenes were chosen because each foregrounds one of the five cult qualities, and because together they span the season: the opening episode, the mid-season dance, and the finale. Episode-level notes are given in the appendix. Citations follow the Harvard system. No outside theorists are introduced; the paper deliberately works within the supplied literature.

3. Case Studies

3.1 Case study one: Wednesday's arrival at Nevermore (Episode 1, "Wednesday's Child Is Full of Woe")

The opening episode introduces the school that gives the season its setting, and the sequence of Wednesday's arrival is a compact demonstration of the gothic inheritance Rein (2023) describes. Nevermore Academy is presented as a forbidding, ivy-covered building of towers and shadowed corridors, set among mist and forest. These are staples of gothic space: enclosed, haunted by the past and hostile to newcomers. The image places the series immediately within a visual tradition that audiences recognise, which is the first source of cult pleasure: the viewer knows the genre and anticipates how it will be handled.

What makes the sequence characteristic of the post-1960 mode Rein (2023) discusses, however, is its self-awareness. The gloom is paired with unexpected colour, most obviously in the vivid wardrobe and décor associated with Wednesday's roommate Enid, and with comic juxtaposition: the heroine's severe black clothing is set against a school that is ostentatiously diverse and, in places, cheerful. Darkness is not simply threatening; it is a style the series stages and enjoys. The gothic is therefore delivered knowingly, inviting the audience to appreciate both the convention and the playfulness with which it is handled. This quality of recognisable style, reworked with irony, is the first cult characteristic and the foundation for the others.

The setting also supplies the season's narrative logic. The history of the neighbouring town and its persecution of the school's ancestors means the past refuses to stay buried, a classic gothic structure. The school's marginal inhabitants, the outcasts, are presented as a community whose strangeness is a source of identity. This anticipates the intertextual argument developed in the third case study.

3.2 Case study two: the pool sequence and the construction of the protagonist (Episode 1)

Early in the opening episode, Wednesday takes violent revenge on bullies who had tormented her brother at her previous school, an act that leads to her expulsion and her arrival at Nevermore. The sequence establishes the character in a few brisk images and is the best single scene for testing Zehra's (2024) account of her characterisation.

Zehra (2024) reads the character through the traits associated with narcissistic personality disorder, namely grandiose self-regard, contempt for ordinary people and limited empathy. The pool sequence displays these traits economically. Wednesday acts alone, without remorse, and with evident satisfaction in her own ingenuity; the aggression is calm and calculated, and its victims are treated as obstacles rather than people. Her deadpan composure afterwards completes the picture. At the same time, the scene does not make her simply villainous. The act is motivated by loyalty to her brother, and the narrative frames the bullies as deserving of punishment. The viewer is invited to enjoy her transgression while also seeing a motive for it.

This ambiguity is precisely what makes her a cult protagonist. A clinical reading such as Zehra's (2024) explains why the character is difficult, but the scene shows why she is attractive: she refuses social convention without apology and the story rewards her for it. Viewers who feel out of step with social expectations can identify with that refusal, and the scene's economy of image, with its stylised violence and unsmiling composure, makes the character instantly reproducible as a costume, a meme or a pose. The fusion of a distinctive look and a distinctive personality is the formula by which cult icons are made, and the later relationships with Enid and Thing complicate the portrait in ways that sustain interpretive debate, since they suggest that her distance may be defensive rather than fixed.

3.3 Case study three: ravens, outcasts and the Poe Cup (Episodes 1 and 2)

Opreanu's (2025) study, which identifies ravens, outcasts and ghosts of earlier tales as central to the series' intertextual depths, supplies the framework for reading the school's identity. The name Nevermore and the raven imagery attached to it recall a tradition of gothic literature in which the bird signifies loss, memory and the intrusion of the uncanny. The school's annual Poe Cup, a competitive event named for the author associated with that tradition, makes the allusion explicit and turns it into a ritual of the fictional community. A viewer who recognises the reference understands the school as part of a literary conversation; one who does not still perceives a stylised gothic atmosphere. The text works on two levels, accessible to the casual viewer but offering extra rewards to the attentive one, which is a hallmark of cult media.

The second term in Opreanu's (2025) title, outcasts, describes the school's student body and the story of its persecution. The narrative echoes earlier stories of misfit schools and persecuted minorities, and the series exploits the viewer's familiarity with those stories. When Wednesday refuses to behave like the conventional newcomer, rejecting friendship and school spirit, she plays against a known template, and the deviation is legible only to an audience that knows the template. The third term, ghosts of tales past, points to the haunting of the series by earlier versions of the Addams Family. Wednesday's braids, black dress and deadpan expression are iconic before the first episode begins, and the series both honours that inheritance and updates it, rewarding older fans with recognition and offering newer viewers an introduction. This layering across generations allows the series to become a shared object across different moments of fandom, which is a powerful engine of cult reception.

3.4 Case study four: the Rave'N dance (Episode 4, "Woe What a Night")

The Rave’N dance is the season’s most widely imitated sequence and the clearest illustration of Reyland’s (2024) concept of ostentatious scoring. Reyland (2024) situates the series in a lineage of prestige and complex television in which music is deliberately conspicuous, addressing an audience invited to listen as well as to watch. The dance scene fits this description. The formal school dance is staged as an eruption of gothic energy, with Wednesday performing a stiff, angular choreography that is at once awkward and mesmerising. The editing foregrounds the relationship between movement and music, and the driving, slightly unhinged rock track sets a tone of playful menace.

Three features make the scene a case study in cult engagement. First, the music announces itself: it is not background but an element the viewer is meant to notice, which makes it portable and memorable. Second, the performance is imitable. The choreography is distinctive and repeatable, and its rapid migration from screen to social media shows the participatory behaviour characteristic of cult fandom. Third, the scene’s incongruity, a deadpan, unsmiling dancer in a colourful, rave-style setting, expresses the same knowing irony that Rein (2023) associates with the later gothic mode. Visual and sonic stylisation operate in tandem, each reinforcing the other.

The dance also shows how the series addresses its audience as active. Viewers who recognise the musical choice, and who understand why it is paired with this image, participate in the construction of meaning. In this way the music contributes to the community-forming effect of cult media, turning individual viewers into a participating audience.

3.5 Case study five: subtitled voice and the global audience (Episodes 1 and 4)

The deadpan dialogue in the pool aftermath and the dance preparation sequences demonstrates why the series is a demanding text for translators. Wednesday’s speech is terse,

ironic and macabre, and its humour depends on rhythm and understatement as much as on literal meaning. Fauziah and Simatupang (2024) analyse the translation methods used in the series' subtitles, and their study makes visible the choices that determine how non-English-speaking viewers experience such lines. A subtitle that is too literal can flatten the irony; one that is too free can lose the allusion or the macabre register.

This matters for cult status because the series' global reach is part of its identity. For a text to become a global cult object, its distinctive voice must survive translation. Where subtitles preserve the cadence and bite of Wednesday's delivery, the character remains recognisable across languages; where they flatten it, part of the cult appeal is lost. The problem is closely related to the intertextual depth discussed in the third case study, since allusions to gothic literature depend on shared cultural knowledge that not every audience possesses. Subtitlers must either carry the reference over, risking clutter, or let it fade, risking impoverishment. The negotiation between faithfulness and accessibility is, in effect, a negotiation between the text's depth and its reach. That the series nevertheless travels so successfully suggests that its visual, sonic and characterological strategies are robust enough to sustain cult engagement even where verbal nuance is partly lost.

3.6 Case study six: the finale and the monster as outcast (Episode 8, "A Murder of Woes")

The season's final episode resolves its central mystery by revealing that the creature terrorising the town, the Hyde, is a student, Tyler Galpin, and that he has been manipulated by a hidden antagonist who exploits the persecution history of the school's community. The reveal is a useful final case study because it draws together the gothic, intertextual and characterological strands discussed above. In Rein's (2023) terms, the monstrous figure is a long-standing resource

of gothic cinema; here the monster is not simply an external threat but a human being, and his monstrosity is bound up with grievance and manipulation. The gothic motif of the double, the person who contains a hidden self, is made literal.

Read through Opreanu's (2025) emphasis on outcasts and ghosts of earlier tales, the revelation shows the series reusing familiar narrative patterns in order to complicate them. The audience expects the persecuted outcasts to be the story's heroes and the townspeople its villains, and the finale unsettles that expectation by showing violence emerging from within the persecuted group's own history of resentment. Wednesday's role as amateur sleuth, working through clues with macabre detachment, also fulfils the detective strand that the series braids together with gothic horror and the school story. For a cult audience, the pleasure lies partly in tracking these braided traditions and noticing when one subverts another.

The episode also tests the protagonist reading developed in the second case study. Wednesday's grudging acceptance of the friendship of Enid and others, and her visible discomfort at being seen to care, complicate a purely narcissistic characterisation of the kind Zehra (2024) discusses. The tension between a hardened exterior and hints of an interior life invites viewers to read beneath the surface, and that invitation is the kind of interpretive labour that sustains cult engagement.

4. Discussion: Cult Status by Design

Taken together, the case studies show that the cult qualities of *Wednesday* are not accidental. The reworked gothic imagery of the first case study supplies a distinctive style. The pool sequence and the later development of the protagonist supply the outsider figure with whom viewers identify. The Poe Cup and the raven imagery supply intertextual density. The dance

supplies an invitation to imitation and communal participation. The subtitling case shows the global dimension in which the fifth quality, the tension between marginality and reach, becomes visible.

That tension deserves emphasis. The series is a corporate product designed for mass distribution, and its outsider stance is offered to an audience of millions. Its strangeness is carefully calibrated to be marketable. This does not invalidate the cult label, but it suggests that cult media in the streaming era emerge within the mainstream rather than against it, using its infrastructure to build intense, participatory communities around deliberately distinctive objects. The sources reviewed here each describe one mechanism of that process: stylistic distinctiveness (Rein, 2023), interpretive depth (Opreanu, 2025), identification with a difficult protagonist (Zehra, 2024), sonic conspicuousness (Reyland, 2024) and circulation across languages (Fauziah and Simatupang, 2024).

5. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the first season of *Wednesday* functions as cult media through a convergence of unconventional imagery and gothic aesthetics. Close readings of the arrival at Nevermore, the pool sequence, the Poe Cup and raven imagery, the Rave’N dance, the subtitled dialogue and the finale showed how each of the five cult qualities is produced on screen and how each is illuminated by the supplied scholarship. The gothic tradition is inherited and reworked with irony (Rein, 2023); the series is layered with references that reward attentive viewers (Opreanu, 2025); its protagonist is both repellent and magnetic (Zehra, 2024); its music invites participation (Reyland, 2024); and its voice must be negotiated across languages (Fauziah and Simatupang, 2024).

In response to the core question, the series earns cult status not despite its mainstream platform but through aesthetic strategies that deliberately produce strangeness, density and an invitation to interpret. A limitation is that the study rests on five sources and a single season, and that it interprets the series rather than measuring audience response. Future research might extend the analysis to later seasons and to fan-generated material. Within these limits, the evidence suggests that *Wednesday* season 1 is best understood as the product of a coherent aesthetic project in which unconventional imagery and gothic style are the foundation of the series' cultural life.

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