

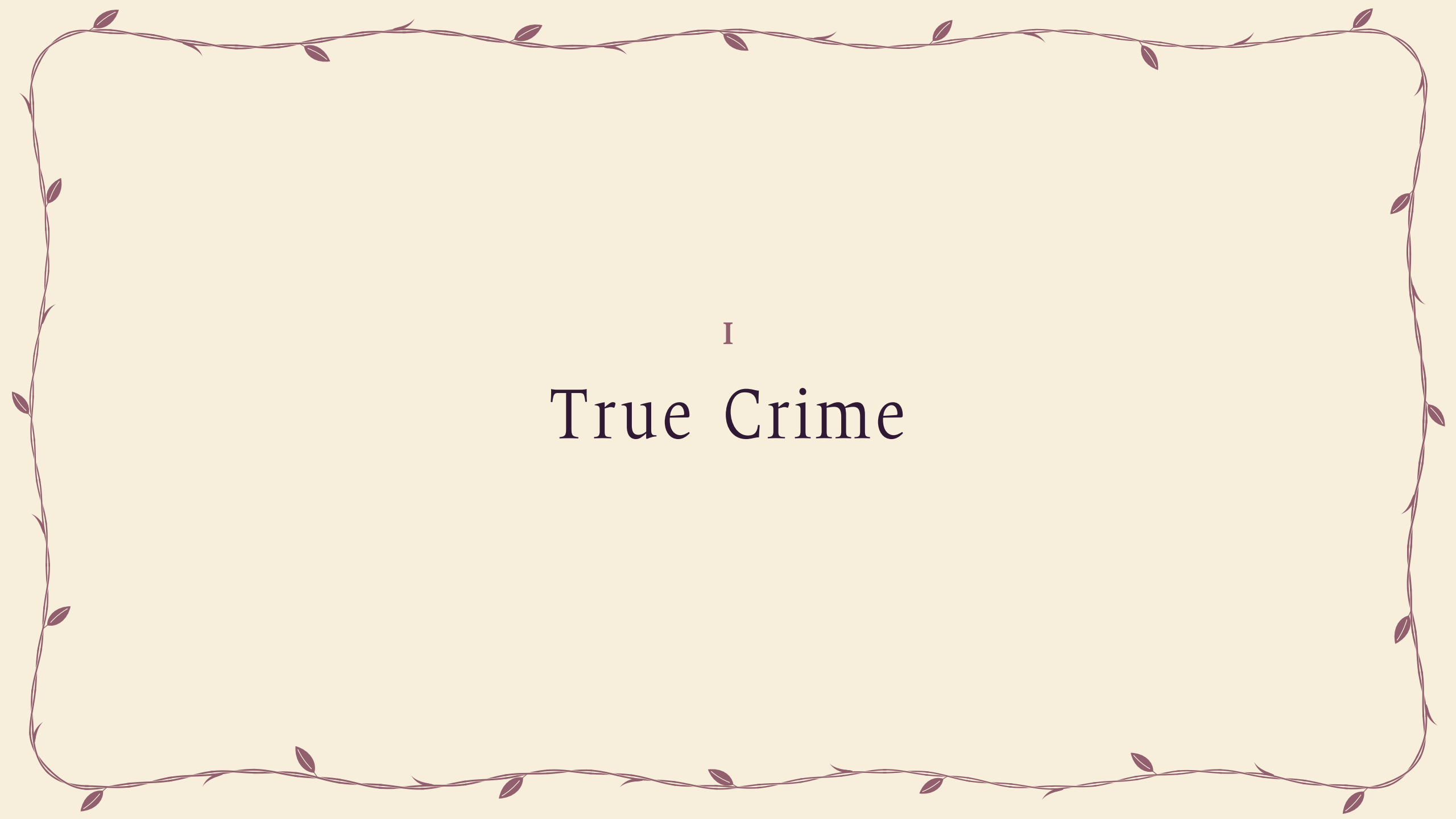
Phil 002: Contemporary Moral Issues

True Crime Documentaries

Sample slides



CAMERON HUBBARD
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
RIVERSIDE



I

True Crime

What Is True Crime?

I I

II

III

IV

True crime is a general of non-fiction media that examines actual crimes.

True crime can be written from a broad variety of perspectives and for a variety of purposes.

However, there are some typical generalizations that we can make about true crime.

When we think about the moral issues of true crime, we will largely be thinking about instances that conform to this paradigm.

History of True Crime

I I

II

True crime has a very long history. It has probably existed in some form for as long as popular writing has.

III

IV

During the Ming Dynasty in China, *The Book of Swindles* collected cases of alleged fraud

In Early Modern Britain, pamphlets and street literature published the details of murders and other grisly crimes.

During the 20th century in the U.S., newspapers heavily covered cases like the murders committed by Leopold & Loeb and Lizzie Borden.

Characteristics of True Crim

I I

II

Recent true crime typically focuses on one of the following:

III

✂ High Profile Court Cases

IV

✂ Serial Killers

✂ Confidence Men and other Scams

✂ Cults

✂ Strange or Unsolved Disappearances

High Profile Court Cases

I I

II

III

IV

Examples of high profile court cases:

- ✿ O.J. Simpson
- ✿ Eric & Lyle Menendez
- ✿ Casey Anthony
- ✿ Jody Arias

Serial Killers

I I

II

III

IV

Examples of serial killers covered in true crime:

- ✿ Ted Bundy
- ✿ Jeffrey Dahmer
- ✿ John Wayne Gacy

Cults

I I

II

III

IV

✿ Heavens Gate

✿ Jonestown

✿ Love Has Won

✿ Scientology

Unsolved Murders and Disappearances

I I

II

III

IV

- ✿ Lacy Peterson
- ✿ Elisa Lam
- ✿ D.B. Cooper
- ✿ Madeleine McCann

Prominent Examples

I I

II

III

IV

- Serial
- My Favorite Murder
- Wild Wild Country
- Unsolved Mysteries
- Last Podcast on the Left
- The Stranger Beside Me

Characteristics of True Crime

I I

II

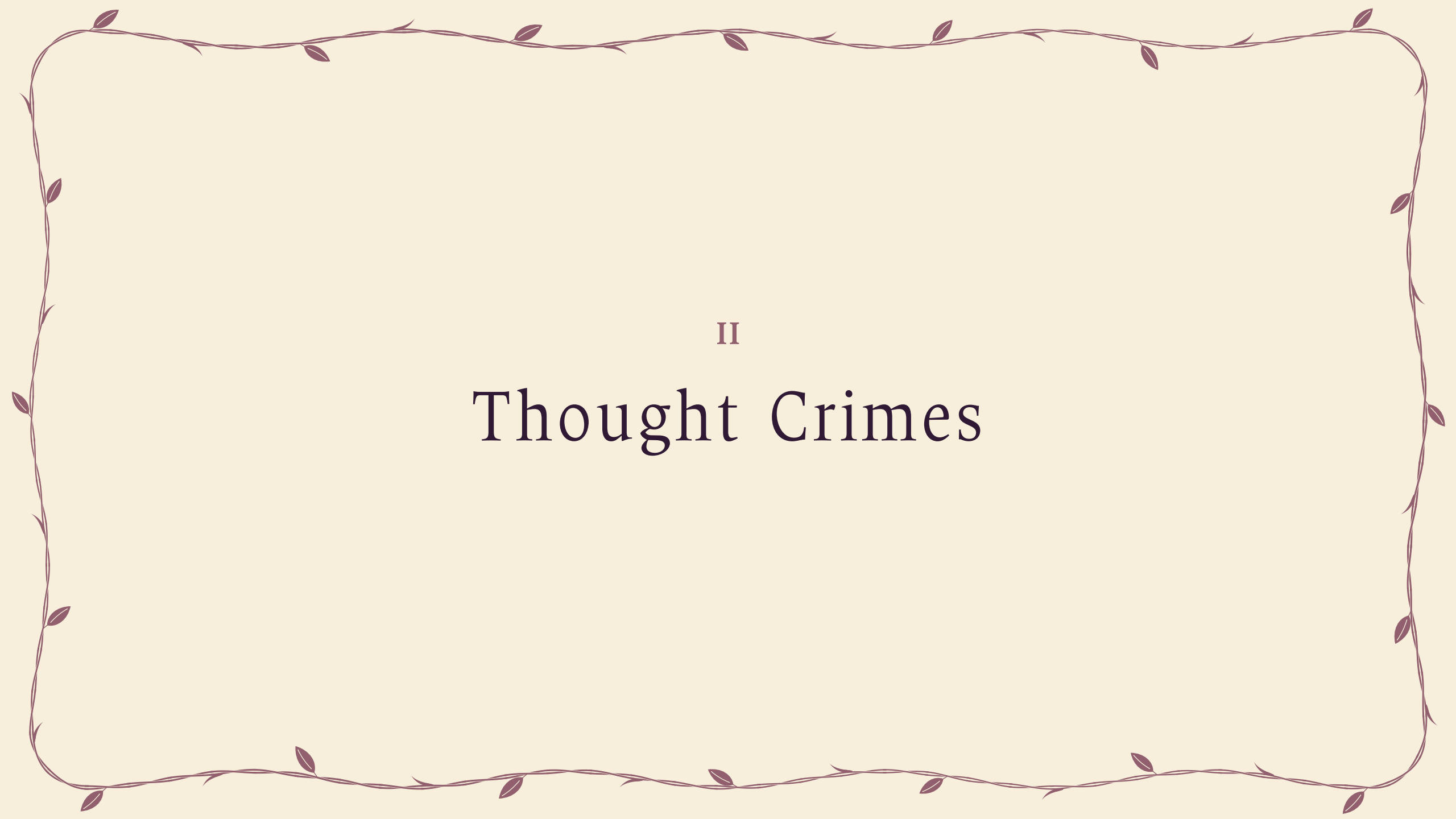
III

IV

Many modern true crime documentaries share the following characteristics:

- ✿ They are highly stylized
- ✿ They deliberately cultivate anticipation
- ✿ They advance a new or controversial take on the events

All of this suggests that they are created at least partly with an eye to entertainment value.



II

Thought Crimes

The Case of Gilberto Valle

I

II

III

IV

Gilberto Valle was a NYPD officer who was originally convicted of conspiracy to commit kidnapping.

The conviction turned on posts Valle made on an internet forum about wanting to kill and eat his wife.

The question– from a legal point of view– was whether this constituted an overt act, i.e. a step in a concrete plan.

Valle and Freedom of Expression

I

II

III

IV

There are obviously many ethical issues to discuss in Valle's case. For instance, is it unethical to have dark fantasies even if one doesn't act on them.

Still, we will focus on the question of freedom of expression. Should the government allow internet websites like the ones Valle participated in to operate?

Discussion

I

II

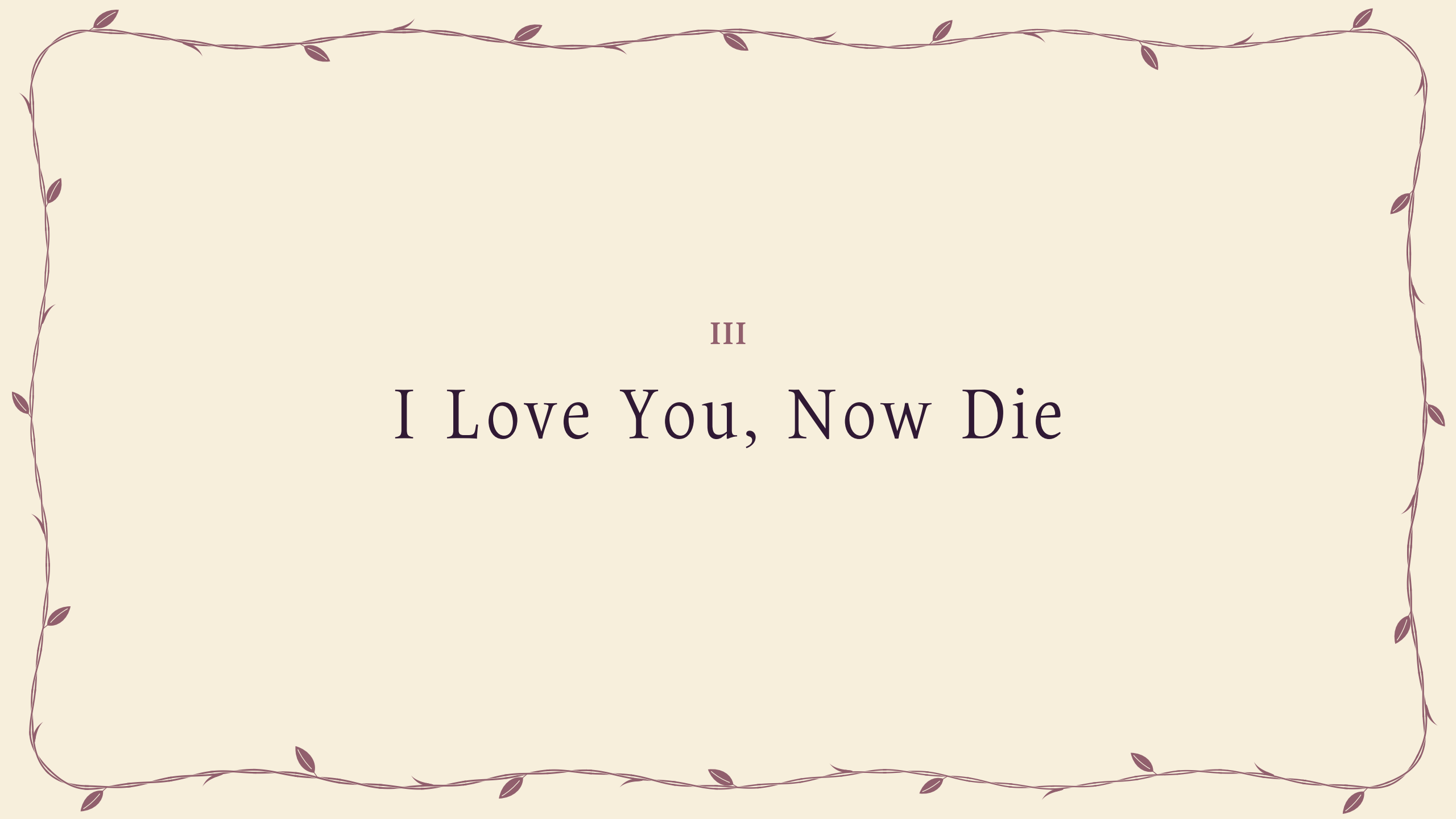
III

IV

What would John Stuart Mill say regarding this?

What would Jeremy Waldron say?

What do you think?



III

I Love You, Now Die

The Case of Michelle Carter

I

II

I III

IV

Michelle Carter's case is regards text messages she sent to her boyfriend, who was experiencing severe depression, encouraging him to commit suicide.

Carter also encourage him to go through with the act at the time he was carrying it out.

Carter was convicted on involuntary manslaughter.

Michelle Carter & Freedom of Expression

I

II

I III

IV

As with Gilberto Valle's case, there are many aspects of the case that raise distinct ethical questions.

For instance, we can separate the questions of whether Carter was morally wrong to act as she did from the question of whether the state ought to criminalize her actions.

There are also questions about the morality of suicide and the effects of mental illness on moral culpability.

Again, however, we will just focus on the questions of freedom of expression.

Discussion

I

II

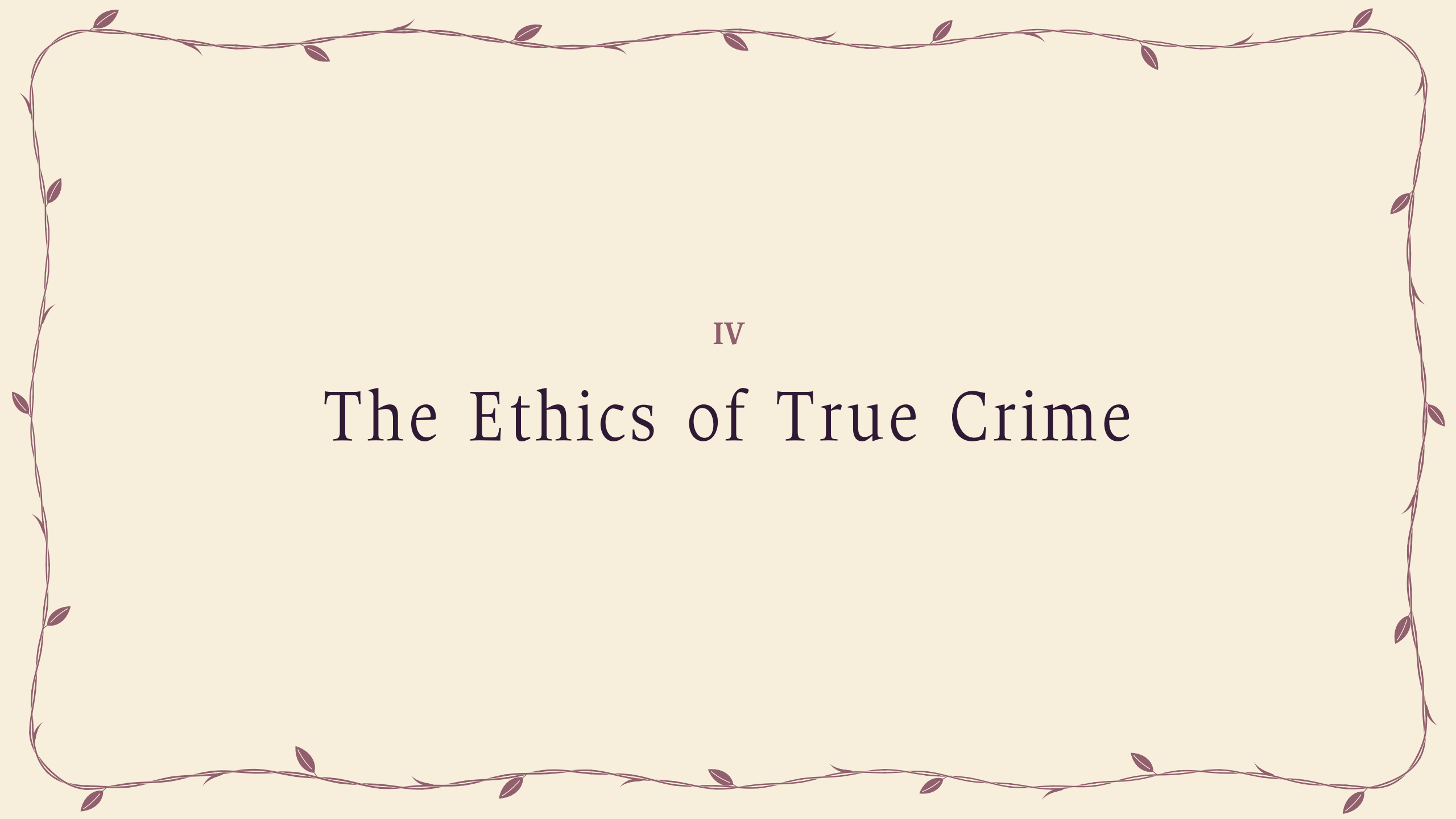
I III

IV

What would John Stuart Mill say?

What would Jeremy Waldron say?

What do you think?



IV

The Ethics of True Crime

Ethical Issues: Production vs. Creation

I

The popularity of true crime media raises a variety of salient ethical questions.

II

III

We will divide those questions into two categories: questions about the production and existence of true crime media & questions about the consumption of true crime media as entertainment.

IV

Ethical questions about the production of true crime media focus on the media objects themselves– whether it is ethical to make them or for them to be distributed.

Ethical questions about the consumption of true crime media focus on the person reading, watching or listening. These ask whether there is something unethical about that activity.

Ethics of True Crime Production

I

Probably the most obvious and well-discussed questions about true crime are questions in this category, as they often have analogs in other areas of public ethics.

II

III

Such questions include:

IV

- ✎ Does true crime exploit victims and their families? (analog: general journalistic ethics)
- ✎ Does true crime glamorize the perpetrators of crimes and encourage violence? (analog: Horror film censorship debates)
- ✎ Does true crime warp public perception of crimes and how to handle them (analog: general journalistic ethics)
- ✎ Does true crime retraumatize victims and their families?

I

II

III

I IV

The NYT piece by Annie Nichol covers some of these issues. These are important and substantive ethical questions, so I wanted to at least bring them up.

However, because they are so under-discussed, this unit will be about questions concerning the ethics of true crime consumption.

Ethics of True Crime Consumption

I

II

III

I IV

The question I am interested in asking in this course is whether there is something morally wrong or suspect with the consumption of true crime media, apart from whether that media is morally bad in other ways.

Part of the impetus for asking this question is that I am personally a fan of many true crime platforms. In discussion regarding these, I have found people unwilling to reckon with or unaware of the possible ethical implications here.

When such questions are addressed, the stock answers are broadly unsatisfying. For example, some people say that they watch true crime as a way of learning how to stay safe, despite the facts that the paradigmatic true crime cases are among the most unlikely crimes to be a victim of and that they do not exhibit such scrupulosity with respect to much more likely crimes.

Why Could The Consumption of True Crime Be Bad?

I

II

III

I IV

Let us take it for granted that at least part of the reason that people engage with true crime is because they find it entertaining, i.e. interesting, stimulating, etc...

Is there something wrong with deriving entertainment value from true crime? We will look at a cluster of related reasons why there could be.

Reasons True Crime Consumption Might be Wrong

I

II

III

I IV

- ✿ The entertainment value derived from true crime expresses something morally bad
 - Cruelty (Nietzsche)
 - Schadenfreud (Smith & van Dijk)
- ✿ Engagement with true crime invites us to empathetically with vicious people (Bailey)
- ✿ Deriving entertainment value from true crime requires us to regard other in a way that violates their dignity (Velleman)

The background of the slide features a large, faint, circular seal of the University of California, Riverside. The seal contains a star at the top, an open book in the center, and the words "UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA" and "RIVERSIDE" around the perimeter. The word "ET VERE BE" is also visible at the bottom of the inner circle.

End