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Fiction and Reality: Serial Killers as a Product of Postmodern Fiction

by Lauren Phegley

(English 1102)

According to Philip Jenkins, professor and researcher, there is evidence that actual serial killers pattern themselves after fictional serial killers (Jenkins 15). Since the emersion of the ghostly persona 'Jack the Ripper', serial killers have grown in popular culture. Slasher films, true crime novels, and serial killer mysteries reflect the world's growing curiosity with some of the worst criminals. These fictional accounts though have a deeper impact on the actions of actual serial killers. Scholars have argued amongst themselves for years about a definitive definition of 'serial murder' and this has caused issues collecting research and has created a lack of unity among law enforcement and scholars. Serial killers are a reflection of their fictional counter parts, which then influences fictional representations. This paper will use postmodernism as a lens to view serial killers and consider how their identities are created through fictional examples.

Postmodernism is the theory that people are not built on what they choose to be, but are in fact a reflection of the noise, variables, and environments that surround them. It is the idea that the 'self' is not created through choice but that it is a reflection of what is around them. Mark Seltzer, author of *Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*, wrote "By this view, the notion of the 'self' as a delimited agent, immune foreign bodies and 'bounded by the skin' is simply nonsense" (Seltzer 90). Simply put, serial killers do not naturally develop into serial killers, but create a persona reflecting what is outside them. The topic of postmodernity is not the focus of this paper, but rather uses it as a lens to view serial killers, their 'self', and their reflection of fictional serial killers. Looking at the history of terms and definitions surrounding serial murder allows people to understand the complex origin of where such a confusing subject came from.

Mark Seltzer states that the origin of the term 'serial killer' comes from Robert Ressler, a FBI Special Agent in the mid-1970's who created the psychological profiling technique that is still used today. The term was given this name for two reasons: because the crimes are in a series that continue in a repetitive way, and the tension after every kill increases to only make the killer want to murder again (Seltzer 64). Ressler describes the real meaning of 'serial killer' as an internal competition between the repetition of killing and representation of what they think killing should be experienced as (Seltzer 64). The article "The Scene of the Crime: Inventing the Serial Killer" by Alexandra Warwick, develops on the idea that serial killers are put into boxes and definitions by the scholar and mass audiences to help us understand them, but that these are social constructions. Deborah Cameron stated, "[serial killing] is not a natural kind but a discursive construct through which certain acts are made intelligible and meaningful to us" (Warwick 554). When discussing different proposed definitions, it should be remembered that these are artificial containers put on serial killers by people trying to make the concept fathomable. Putting labels on serial killers is important because it allows scholars the ability to understand and study serial killers, but academia should rely on reputable definitions of serial murder.

The term serial killer is relatively new and scholars have been arguing from the time it surfaced exactly what the definition of 'serial killer' is. One of the issues is that it can be viewed from many angles, as described in "The Controversy of Defining Serial Murder" by Samuel Andjorlolo and Heng Choon (Oliver) Chan. Some of the more popularly used definitions have been used since around the early 1990's but have not been updated to reflect the increasingly complex contemporary serial killer. In their Crime Classification Manuel, authors and scholars Douglas,

Burgess, Burgess and Ressler (1992) define serial homicide as “three or more separate events in three or more separate locations with an emotional cooling-off period in between homicides” (Adjorlolo 486). Egger’s (1998) definition proposes a more encompassing criteria which has the categories of “(1) number of murder, (2) gender of the offender, (3) no previous relationship between offender and the victim, (4) murder occurring in different geographical locations and (5) the motive being purely power or dominance over the victim” (Adjorlolo 487). These are only two of the proposed definitions that criminologists have been using to conduct research and collect data. These definitions used by early criminologists are a reflection of the opinionated and biased outlook scholars had that affected definitions of serial murder.

Definitions of serial murder are often reflections of the biases that researchers held. Though not intentional, misogynistic definitions that limit serial killers to only males ignore the evidence of the few, yet real female serial killers (Adjorlolo 487). James Alan Fox and Jack Levin, authors of “Multiple Homicide: Patterns of Serial and Mass Murder”, state that female serial killers can also be cut out because of definitions that limit motivations to only sexual, as males are usually motivated by sexual fantasy but females overwhelmingly kill people they have a relationship with or are dependent on (Fox and Levin 414). This evidence also refutes the criteria that there should be no previous relationship between offender and victim. In 1997, Hickey reported that 61% of 388 serial killers reported killing only strangers, which leaves 39% of serial killers who killed people they knew such as spouses, children, or patients (Adjorlolo 488). While biases can limit definitions of serial murder, some phrases can make definitions difficult to measure

Some proposed definitions use phrases that are hard to quantify in data. One of these phrases is the ‘cooling off period’ which had been a staple phrase in early proposed definitions (Adjorlolo 488). An example is the previously given definition from Douglas, Burgess, Burgess and Ressler (1992) which states that a serial killer must have ‘an emotional cooling off period in between homicides.’ When collecting data or interviewing serial killers, it is almost impossible to designate if they were emotionally calm from the past murder. The reason it has been removed from most current definitions because it cannot be quantified. Homant & Kennedy (2014) argue that “the main point is that the first killing has temporarily satisfied whatever motives are driving the killer, and the subsequent killings are part of a separate sequence of behaviors” (Adjorlolo 488). Although the main point of the phrase ‘cooling off period’ has merit, without the ability to quantify the unit it doesn’t benefit definitions. As definitions change to better accommodate what a serial killer is, the sheer mass of definitions can be confusing.

One of the issues that comes with the multitude of definitions is that there is no uniform outline of what a serial killer is, since researchers pick a certain definition to abide by, which can throw off data sets. There are three paths that researchers can choose when using a definition. The first path is to not propose a definition, and ignore the issue as if it were insignificant (Adjorlolo 487). These studies do not contribute highly to the subject of criminology without a definition, and the sample is less concrete as the researcher did not abide by a single stringent definition throughout the research. The second path is researchers who choose to utilize current proposed definitions (Adjorlolo 487). This seems to be the best path, except there is no universally accepted definition, causing data to vary from set to set. The third path is where researchers create their own definitions to suit their focus and interest (Adjorlolo 487). This is a dangerous choice as the definition may only be created to fit their thesis and findings. The three paths scholars can take differentiates not only how their data will appear, but picking an inadequate definition can make cooperation between agencies difficult.

Another problem that shows the necessity for a unifying definition is the lack of understanding between law enforcement professionals and researchers. Researchers get data collected from law enforcement, who in turn study scholarship as a way to improve their understanding and abilities (Adjorlolo 487). This interdependence makes it crucial for a proper

definition that applies to both the law enforcement side and the scholarly side (Adjorlolo 487). Without one, data sets may over or under include serial killers because of the confusion with categorization, and prevalence rates of serial killers could be grossly miscalculated (Adjorlolo 487).

As a result of the previously stated issues with some proposed definitions, the research in this paper will abide by the definition put forth by James Alan Fox and Jack Levin for serial murder, “Serial murder involves a string of four or more homicides committed by one or a few perpetrators that spans a period of days, weeks, months, or even years” (Fox and Levin 410). This definition can be used for both law enforcement officers, and researchers, as the number of murders and time periods are quantifiable. There is no biased influence of gender issues, confusing phrases, or mentions of false criteria. A solid definition categorizing serial murder allows for the studying of serial murderers in a scholarly way, even all the way back to the debut of the original serial killer.

Beginning on April 3rd 1888 in Whitechapel, England the reign of terror by the Whitechapel murderer began by the killing of Emma Smith. The murderer continued to kill five more women until November 9th 1888, where Mary Kelly was mutilated in her hotel room. The killer was never caught and has been the focus of many investigations and conspiracy theories. These are revered as the first identifiable serial killer attacks in the modern age. Along with these murders is the emergence of Jack the Ripper, the famous persona taking credit for the killings through letters signed ‘Dear Boss’ (Warwick & Willis xv). Compared to how terrifying it must have been in 1888 onward, now Jack the Ripper is the focus of many tourist attractions, books, and hobbies of ‘Ripperologists’. As the legend of Jack the Ripper has continued to be an interesting tourist trap in England, the notable impact Jack has left on society is what they reveal about the development of serial killers. Serial killers rely on Jack the Ripper as an origin point to learn how to properly develop into a glorified villain.

Serial killers are widely believed to have developed after the emergence of the Whitechapel murderer and Jack the Ripper (Warwick 554). What is often misunderstood is that the Whitechapel murderer and Jack the Ripper are two completely different beings or personas. “The Whitechapel murderer is simply the person who committed the crimes, whereas Jack the Ripper is the title of a far more complicated accretion: the discursive construct arising from those killings” (Warwick 554). It is understood that serial murderers have existed long before 1888, but the emergence of Jack the Ripper signified a new age in killers. Although Jack has not been proven to have also been the Whitechapel murderer, the way they played with the media, used mind games, and even possibly were responsible for sending a liver to the Chairman of the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee with a note saying ‘From Hell’ is the beginning of creating a persona around them (Warwick & Willis xvi). Serial killers now create the persona they want people to see them as, they act as performance artists. The murder is only part of the production, as they are developing into the inventions of what they want to be. While developing their acts, they attempt to be unique but end up being just another serial killer desperate to be noticed.

The emergence of Jack the Ripper began the theory of ‘extraordinarily ordinary’. The case of the Whitechapel murders has an interestingly large amount of historical record, especially containing letters from concerned citizens (Warwick 564). Citizens viewed the murderer as an ‘other’: someone from out of town, a Jewish immigrant, or a poor peasant. They also viewed the murderer as someone who was one of them, which caused unease in the public because the murderer’s ability to appear and disappear indicated he was local. Serial killers are either highly skilled enough to evade detection, or have the ability to blend right in to the background of modern life, being invisible (Warwick 564). Most serial killers can hardly be called extraordinary, except for extraordinarily disturbed. The theory of extraordinarily ordinary began with Jack the Ripper and continues to be part of modern serial killer studies. Victorian news wrote about Jack the Ripper not only because of the civilian interest, but because of the Jack’s inability to be identified, which they used to twist the narrative anyway they wanted.

Since the beginning of the Whitechapel murders, media and news compared the killer to different understandings of evil from fiction, such as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (Warwick 559). To keep people's interest, and to sell papers, the news world connected familiar faces to the murderer creating ludicrous theories that started creating a narrative for Jack the Ripper. Serial killers have actually used the fictional characters of Jekyll and Hyde as an example of themselves and as a way to describe their crimes (Warwick 559). It is clear that Gothic literature and Romanticism from the nineteenth century has a deep impact on serial killer's ideas of what 'evil' is, how they identify themselves, and how they create a narrative of their crimes (Warwick 559). Literature affects people's actions, but serial killers also affect the creation of literature.

As previously stated in the beginning of this analysis, serial killers often copy the actions and personas of their fictional counterparts and vice versa (Jenkins 15). The difference between fact and fiction in the serial killer sphere has been blurred since the Whitechapel murders. Nicholas Rance, author of "Jonathan's great knife": *Dracula* meets Jack the Ripper" an article in Alexandra Warwick & Martin Willis's *Jack the Ripper: Media, Culture, and History*, argues the case that the character Dracula was actually influenced by Jack the Ripper and the Whitechapel murders. It states, "On a more forthright note, however, the ensuing argument will be that the Jack the Ripper case was preoccupying Stoker as he contemplated writing *Dracula*, which is then duly permeated by impressions or fantasies devolving from the case" (Warwick & Willis 124). *Dracula* was published in 1897, but the beginning of the book's existence began in 1890. Gothic fiction from the late – nineteenth century saw the creation of detective novels and mythical monsters, such as Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Jekyll, Dracula, which without a doubt were influenced by Jack the Ripper (Warwick 563). The East London Advertiser wrote in 1888: "It is so impossible to account... for these revolting acts of blood, that the mind turns as it were instinctively to some theory of the occult force, and the myths of the Dark Ages rise before the imagination. Ghouls, vampires, bloodsuckers, and all the ghastly array of fables which have been accumulated throughout the course of centuries take form, and seize hold of the excited fancy" (Warwick & Willis 126). Not only did emerging authors see the relationship of serial killers to fictional monsters, but mass audiences understood the importance and relationship of them also. The relationship of serial killers identifying themselves in fictional monsters is a postmodern approach to viewing people as a product of outside influence.

Anthony King, author of "Serial Killing and the Postmodern Self" analyzes the idea of how serial killers establish their self in a postmodern world. Regular people institute routine in order to create a self that forms a super-ego around a set of practices associated with themselves. Serial killers are threatened by routine, the threat of becoming just like everyone else. "The mass threatens to consume them, sweeping away their individuality as they become part of the anonymous, routinized crowd. The very process which constituted the modern self now threatened the serial killer. Consequently, the serial killer's self is in crisis" (King 112). The very process of routinization is what threatens serial killers, as they are afraid of becoming just like the masses. This stands out because while serial killers are afraid of becoming like others, and attempt to become unique, they also use routines established by fictional and past serial killers because they themselves have no personal identity to hold on to (King 112). A fictional example of the 'mass in person' is Patrick Bateman, the serial killer from Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. Ellis highlights Bateman's shallow existence through which he is threatened by anonymity (King 116). "For, instance, in describing the eventual murder of Elizabeth, Bateman notes that the blood which moments before has been sprayed in his eyes is now 'splattered against the tempered glass and the laminated oak panels in the kitchen" (King 116). The consumer comforts are correlative to Bateman's shallow existence based on items that had been hiding his secret desire to kill. Using the consumer comforts to feel superior and unique backfired as the satisfaction was temporary. No matter how many or how nice the product, Bateman was still invisible. Bateman fights the threat of anonymity by giving in to his internal drives and killing in horribly graphic ways. Bateman's self was built by this violence, not

threatened by it (King 116).

For serial murderers, killing is a way to distance themselves from the general public, allowing them the illusion of significance. King compares it to soldiers, who follow a strict regimentation and kill in order to blend in with their troop (King 112). Standing out is a sign of weakness and failure for soldiers, but for serial killers it is the opposite. Serial killers kill to be noticed in the whirling mass of people. The act of killing is self-affirmation, and recognition that the killer is unique and special. Serial killers are built from the violence and blood of their victims, because by taking the life of another, it allows the killer to overcome the anonymity of an institutionalized society (King 112). While trying to be individual by killing, serial killers also attempt to fit into the society of serial killers by reading and studying themselves and others.

Serial killers not only read, but they specifically read biographies of past serial killers, fiction, and scholarly opinions on criminology and psychology (Warwick 558). The issue is that there is no clear division between fact and fiction for serial killers. Serial killers not only learn about perceptions of serial killers, but they internalize the ideas and reflect them (Seltzer 107). They reflect the mass audiences and academic notions of what serial killers are and create themselves to become more like it. Although some may do it knowingly, many don't understand they are doing so, and assume that they are naturally becoming an authentic 'serial killer' (Seltzer 107). What is and is not authentic for serial killers is not a matter of intended purpose, but separating fact from fiction, which is almost impossible to do. One example is Colin Ireland, a British murderer who wrote in solitary confinement: "I decided it would be fun to carry out something I labelled 'reinforcing the stereotype'. I had my radio with me... on hearing [the staff] I would leap up and change the station to a classical one. I would be on my bed before the door opened, my book or paper open, and as the door opened I would glance in a superior fashion around the edge of the reading material. 'Yes officers?' I would enquire in my best Hannibal Lector cold, distant, but polite voice" (Warwick 558). Ireland is an example of someone who is knowledgeably reinforcing the stereotype of serial killers, but he chose a fictional one, once again backing up the point that fictional serial killers are accepted as reality.

Not only do serial killers reflect fiction but they reflect specifically fictional works made for commodity consumption (King 117). The serial killers acts are continually changing into more gruesome ways because they reflect works such as *Red Dragon* and *The Silence of the Lambs* both by Thomas Harris (Jenkins 89). Serial killers increase in violence not because it pleases them, but to mirror villains for mass audiences. When real serial killers become like the horrifyingly gruesome fictional characters, their value is reaffirmed because they have lived up to the delusional standard of a 'real' serial killer. Another place where the line between fiction and fact is blurred is in true crime literature where case studies of serial killers refer to fictional serial killers, especially the works of Thomas Harris, as real entities (Jenkins 89). Hannibal Lector has been cited in journals, completely ignoring that he is a character, and has become one of the most popular references of serial killers (Jenkins 89). On a 1992 book studying Randy Craft, the comment "the true story of a real life Hannibal Lector" was posted. Serial killers are reflections of fictional characters from mass produced works, but people then begin to confuse the two because they are so intertwined.

Academics are confused on what is actual serial killer behavior, as a result of the continual winding between fact and fiction. Holmes and Holmes state about academics who decry fiction as a lie, "Some works of fiction, such as Thomas Harris' *Red Dragon* and *The Silence of the Lambs* are often more realistic – and more accurate – than true-crime books. Many academics decry the themes in Harris' two books, but these are the same academics who have neither spoken to nor interviewed a murderer, much less a serial killer" (Warwick 559). Serial killers read fictional interpretations, and manifest those personas as an attempt to mirror them. The mirroring causes academics to confuse what is natural 'serial killer' behavior and a representation of fiction murderers. In current times, there would need to be a qualitative longitudinal study analyzing a variety of serial killers, and even

then it would be difficult to decipher their persona. Warwick commented that Holmes and Holmes “Also fail to consider that murderers can, and do, read, and that the reflection of the novels in the interviews is not necessarily proof of the truth of either, but possibly the infinite reflection of fiction” (Warwick 559).

As previously shown serial killers are reflections of fiction, but the interaction between fiction and fact in serial killers results in a ‘looping effect’ (Seltzer 107). As the media reports on serial killer crimes and fiction are produced out of this inspiration, they in fact are glorifying the killer and sensationalizing the act of murder. The serial killer then reads these portrayals and tries to follow the outline of how to be a serial killer. “The killer’s experience of his own identity is directly absorbed in an identification with the personality type called ‘serial killer’: absorbing in the case-likeness of his own case” (Seltzer 107). As the cycle continues, the issue is that people get bored of monotony, and serial killer fiction has to become increasingly attention grabbing, containing outrageously violent and intense representations of evil. Real serial killers will read these portrayals and attempt to reflect what a ‘true’ serial killer does. “The discourse is a circular set of citations, dominated by seriality and repetition, and participated in by killers and profilers, writers and readers” (Warwick 558). The cycle of real serial killers and fictional representations will continue to increase in violence as long as mass audiences continue to demand more exciting entertainment and the glorification of violence. This cycle is not because serial killers are necessarily mindfully copying fiction, but processing their place in society.

Instead of producing original crimes, serial killers are processing and converting fictional accounts and others peoples interpretations of themselves. Although people like to assume that all actions are a result of choice, people are subconsciously processing the environment, information, and experiences through their actions. Seltzer states “One effect of such a collapsing of the distinction between production and processing is a collapsing of the distinction between the life process and the machine process” (Seltzer 76). Life process is using data collected from experiences and making an individual choice, while the machine process is reflecting the data that has been inserted and acting on it. Humans act on a mix of machine process and life process, depending on the prescribed to theory, and so serial killers are subject to reflecting their inserted data. As previously explained, the looping effect is a result of serial killers responding to representations of themselves. While responding, serial killers are also processing the information into actions, instead of producing an original choice. Serial killing is not wholly an original crime, producing a subconscious persona to reflect fictional expectations. The erosion of the difference between productions of actions and processing is connected to the mixing of fact and fiction, especially for serial killers.

Serial killing is a rare crime, yet the topic has a high percentage of representation in fictional and documentary media (Warwick 555). Historically criminologists have suggested that during the late 1960’s there was a dramatic increase in the production of serial killers (King 113). Although this has been analyzed and found to have many shortcomings, as when a murder was counted more than once on the record (Jenkins 22-31). The increase in serial killer statistics was a result of competing bureaucratic agencies, looking to appear the most ‘hard on crime’ and advocacy groups supporting victim’s rights (Jenkins 49). Even if there wasn’t a rise in the number of serial killers during the 1960’s, the idea of serial killers became more noticeable in popular culture (King 113). The idea of serial killers actually became so prominent that people began to think that there were hundreds of serial killers operating at a time (Jenkins 49). This combined with the inflated statistics succeeded in creating what seemed to be an enormous social threat, one that gained the attention of the government.

Fiction has not only affected real serial killers, but it has also affected the bureaucratic policy made about serial murderers (Jenkins 81). In the 1970’s the Behavioral Science Unit (BSU) was founded within the FBI National Academy in Quantico, Virginia (Jenkins 55). The BSU characterized the terms such as ‘serial crimes’ and ‘serial murder’, and began exploring the popular

topic of profiling violent offenders (Jenkins 55). Only ten years after the emergence of the BSU, the topic of multiple murder was the theme of more American films in 1980 and 1981 than the previous two decades combined (Jenkins 55). Jenkins states, “It is difficult to know whether the bureaucratic law enforcement attitudes toward serial murder preceded or followed changes in popular culture” (Jenkins 81). Serial murder was taking hold of Americans entertainment interests, which in turn affected policies.

Government policies are created because of the opinions of citizens and cultural attitudes towards an idea or issue. One of the reasons that the FBI created a functional department almost completely dedicated to serial killers and multiple murderers is that people were focused on them and they were an important part of popular media. “Constructionist studies often place major emphasis on the interpretation and dissemination of problems through the new media, but fictional and popular works also play a decisive role in determining cultural attitudes in an area like serial murder, and relevant works include novels, films, comics, true-crime books, and even trading cards” (Jenkins 15). Without these works increasing the public’s interest in serial killers, there would not be nearly as big of a force behind studying them and stopping them.

The confusing cocktail of fact and fiction has even managed to saturate the highest levels of scholars, as professional criminologists and FBI profilers often refer back to fiction instead of actual cases when making arguments (Warwick 556). It is as if the FBI are fighting mythical beasts, as FBI profiler John Douglas discusses his “storytelling ability” and wrote “our antecedents actually do go back to crime fiction more than crime fact” (Warwick 556). When scholars cannot even separate fictional accounts or choose not to, this is an indication into why regular citizens think Hannibal Lector was real or that Jack the Ripper was from an old Victorian novel.

When academics not only choose to ignore reality, and knowledgeably mix fiction and fact within scholarly work, it undermines the integrity of the field. David Canter is such an example, who stated “there is something to be learned from fiction. That it is possible to set up a detective process that seeks to unfold a criminal’s story... not driven solely by the need to establish what can be presented as fact in court” (Warwick 556). Although these are just books and statements, it has been shown the influence of words on people, as Canter and Douglas travel to train and teach law enforcement officers on their methods. Teaching off of fictional examples undermines the goal of the academics as they seem to be basing their learning off of fiction, making them no better than people at home pondering theories about *Criminal Minds*.

Serial killers have captured America’s attention, from the books and movies, to government policies. It has been shown that real serial killers produce a reflection of fictional serial killers in order to fit the mold of what is expected of a serial killer. This in turn inspires fiction in order to glorify and sensationalize serial killing for entertainment of the masses. Fact and fiction are blurred because real serial killers read and learn from fictional and past serial killers. Government policies and academic studies are often based on fictional ideas of how serial killers behave. The fiction created for American entertainment purposes has a deeper impact on the way serial killers identify, murder, and behave. A postmodern analysis of the identity development of serial killers through literature and film allows for larger assumptions to be drawn about people, namely that we are only in partial control of creating our ‘self’.

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