

THE DESK OF A KILLER

My installation is meant to reflect FBI profiler Helen Morrison's sentiments about how well serial killers blend into modern society with a chameleon-like ability. This work is based off my essential question, "Why do people become serial killers?" This work also examines why the general public enjoys serial killer related media.

This installation shows how a killer blends in; on the outside, the viewer sees what appears to be the "average Joe's" desk, but upon closer examination, the briefcase on the desk suggests a scene of horror—bloody Polaroid photographs, a bag of hair, necklaces from victims, and a missing person's photo. These elements work together to reflect how easy it is for someone with dark activities to blend in to society.

Why are we enamored with the macabre? This work is meant to confront the public's obsession with killers; instead of watching a documentary about a serial killer, the viewer is tempted to vicariously rummage through another person's belongings. In the grand scheme of things, I want the viewer to understand that being drawn to a dark subject should not be associated with feelings of guilt. Rather, we must deeply explore the psyche of a killer.

Matthew

The Obsession with Serial Killers

Matthew



*“I believe the only way to reform people is to kill them”
-Carl Panzram*

My own interest with serial killers and true crime began in elementary school when my older sister showed me the television program “Deadly Women,”¹ a show about women who have killed. I was immediately hooked on the show. I trained myself to wake up early on Saturday mornings, sometimes around 6:30-7:00 a.m., just so I could watch the show without interruption. I was intrigued by the stories of female serial killers like Aileen Wuornos, Elizabeth Bathory, Rosemary West, and their motives. I soon became involved with other TV shows that displayed more information about violent crimes.

During the summer after 4th grade, I found myself in a small bookstore in Georgia, where I discovered a book titled, Danger: Do Not Enter, it was a book that contained scientific facts, optical illusions, and condensed, edited stories of different things relating to true crime. One page that I stared at was on “Jack The Ripper,” one of England’s most infamous serial killers, who remains unidentified to this day. It gave an overview on his five confirmed victims, and a couple of the people who were the most studied suspects within the search. I went mad researching Jack the Ripper case studies, I frantically searched online for more information, and along the way, I found crime scene photos, which my young mind looked at with morbid curiosity. In January of the 5th grade, my mom allowed me to buy a book on Jack the Ripper, and I was so excited to read it I skipped a friend’s birthday party so I could read this book. With newfound freedom on the Internet, my friends and I would send each other articles about serial killers, and discussed their crimes at all hours of the night. By the 8th grade, I considered “Silence of the Lambs,”² as one of my favorite movies. By the end of the 9th grade, I was sketching dresses based off of the film “Natural Born Killers.”³ However after years of obsessive interest, I still never really learned the details of a serial killer, I was unaware of the psychology behind them, and what defined the serial killer.

The FBI defines “serial murder” as the offending party killing at least four people in a period of time greater than 72 hours, with a “cooling-off” period that separates the subject from “spree killers” and “mass murderers.” While the serial killer is one of the best-established figures in pop culture, it is also engraved in the fears of the general public, and they certainly have good reason. Pop culture has a set profile of the serial killer-- a white male, who is charming, calculating, and charismatic or an unstable maniac who lives in poverty. The environment in which the creation of the serial killer will differ from each



¹ Deadly Women is documentary TV series that

² A film about rookie FBI agent, Clarice Starling I Bill with the help of a different killer.

³ Natural Born Killers is 1996 dark comedy film tl couple.

other, but generally it has two main factors; it may be from various mental disorders that result in a lack of empathy, or a series of childhood traumas that result in the emotional void. It is sometimes a rare combination of the two, found in cases like those of Carl Panzram⁴, who was sent to an abusive boarding school after showing troubling behaviours, including his first charge of public intoxication at the age of eight. One of the most surprising aspects of killers is their almost chameleon-like ability to blend in with their surroundings, Forensic Psychiatrist, Helen Morrison, who has interviewed over 1,000 killers, was shocked at how indistinguishable most of the killers were, remarking that if her eyes were closed, she wouldn't be able to tell them apart. She concluded that the serial killer is "a completely different individual than we have seen before," and "These are basically cookie-cutter people, so much alike psychologically that I could close my eyes and be talking to any one of them." If the general public finds these people to be horrifying creatures who need to be locked up, why has fascination turned the serial killer into a pop culture icon? Hannibal Lecter in "Silence of the Lambs" to Mickey and Mallory Knox in "Natural Born Killers," which has inspired multiple copycat crimes. The fascination is almost hypocritically voyeuristic, we put down these people for their crimes, yet there is a big media circus surrounding crimes; in short, the public wants blood and guts. We also must wonder how the background of people can create a serial killer, and what similar events can be found in their backgrounds, and what profiles are also shared between different killers. Here I will analyze the backgrounds of serial killers in an attempt to answer the question "Why Do People Become Serial Killers?" I believe that events in childhood development, whether it be psychological or man made, can have a big enough effect that it drives people to kill.

The *Nature vs. Nurture* argument has an impact on various killers, and shared elements in their backgrounds. May it be childhood trauma, or psychological shortcomings, certain events or triggers in childhood development can have such a significant impact on a person's life. Traumas such as abuse and neglect can have an impact on different areas of the brain, like the pleasure and reward centers, as well as the cortex of the brain--the area responsible for things such as memory, thinking, and the ability to regulate emotions. People exposed to trauma, as children are also prone to high-risk behavior, including leading lives of crime.

Prolific serial killer Ted Bundy was born out of wedlock to a young mother and unknown father in 1946 in Vermont. To counter the shame of this, his grandparents decided that they would be known as his parents, and his mother as his older sister. Reports of his childhood behavior differ from being relatively popular, to self-imposed isolation. The loner aspects of his behavior fit with the accusation of murdering his first victim at age fourteen⁵, which he had feverishly denied, but as a teen he was a peeping tom. His modus operandi was to place a cast on either his arm or his leg, and approach college-age women with long dark hair that was parted in the middle --the look of his college girlfriend who broke his heart-- and ask them for help carrying things. After getting the woman into his car he would handcuff her, and then rape her before beating her to death. He escaped custody multiple times, including for a period of a

⁴ Serial killer active in the early 1900's, claimed to have sodomized 1,000 men, and was charged with 21 murders.

⁵ Anne Marie Burr disappeared from her home along Ted Bundy's paper route when she was 8 years old, her father says he sighted Ted in a ditch the morning of her disappearance, but he has repeatedly denied involvement, and the only evidence tying him to the disappearance is circumstantial. He however stated that there were some crimes he could not speak about because they were either too close to home, victims were too young, or close to family, of which Burr fits into all three of the categories.

couple of months during which he committed several more murders. He was eventually executed by electric chair in 1989.

On the other end of the spectrum Nannie Doss, an American female killer, experienced a hard upbringing, combined with a childhood head injury that she believes led to her desire to kill. Her father believed that hard farm work held priority over school, and therefore she never was able to gain the knowledge of other children her age. At the age of seven she suffered a traumatic head injury when she hit her head on a metal bar while on a train ride with her family, she blamed her murders on this injury. She reported being molested multiple times while adolescent, and was obsessed with the idea of the perfect romance, stating, "That's about it, I was searching for the perfect mate, the real romance of life." The desire for a perfect romance began her string of crimes, in which she mainly targeted family members, including her first mother-in-law, multiple husbands, children, as well as grand-children. While Ted was a product of nature, and Nannie was a product of nurture, there are cases where both are present in the killer.

Carl Panzram, as noted in the introduction experienced a combination of both psychological disorder, and childhood trauma. Born into a farming family, he performed several dangerous activities, such as arson, and had his first public drunkenness charge at eight years old. At age eleven, he was sent to a boy's reform school where he suffered numerous abuses, and eventually burned the building down. Due to all of these traumas, he became angry at the world, and confessed to killing 21 people including children, his view on the only method of reform being murder granted him his final wish he was executed in 1935, thus affirming his belief in reform by death.

Andrei Chikatilo, better known as the "Rostov Ripper," was born at the end of the Ukrainian famine in the mid-1930's⁵, the effects of which lasted until his adult life, claiming he had never eaten bread until he was twelve, instead getting his fill from leaves, nuts, and sticks. His parents also told him that his older brother was taken by neighbors and cannibalized, and this unconfirmed event led him to cannibalize some of his victims. He also reportedly was born with hydrocephalus, increased amounts of water on the brain; this led to bed-wetting into his adolescence, a common trait in the backgrounds of serial killers⁶. He got an education degree, and became a teacher for a short period of time, but was eventually dismissed after parents complained that he was sexually abusing their children. After this firing, he began his killing spree, he would usually lure his victims to a remote area and killed. His victims all shared similar mutilations⁷, which led police to believe that they were dealing with a serial murderer. Though he was a suspect early on, police misidentified his blood type, and he was released. Chkatilo was eventually caught and convicted of 52 murders and he was executed in 1994. The stories of Andrei and Ted are similar in a way, they both experienced family and relationship troubles that may have sparked killing sprees, while Carl and Nannie come from farming families, and both suffered traumatic injuries in their childhoods.

⁶ The trifecta of behaviour in youths that may foreshadow potential serial murder later in life is comprised of arson, cruelty to animals and humans, and bed wetting into adolescence.

⁷ Boys were castrated and women had their sexual organs sliced out, while tongue tips and other organs had appeared to have been sliced out as well.

So what can we learn from the profiles of killers and what similarities do we see within them? There are four distinct types of killers:

Visionary	Missionary	Hedonistic	Power and Control
View themselves as a god-like figure who must destroy a certain group	Similar to Visionary but do not experience auditory or visual hallucinations	Separated into three subtypes ⁸	Satisfaction is given to the killer through the act of killing.

From these four main types come four subtypes:

Medical Caretakers who kill	Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy	Random Killers	Serial Murder as an Outgrowth of other Criminal Activity
Doctors/Nurses/Caretakers who kill their patients. Women usually fall into this category	More difficult to identify as offender are most likely competent liars, and deaths can be attributed to conditions such as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)	Do not adhere to the set rules of serial killing	The original crime may have been something like robbery or rape, but develops into serial murder

Many people also assume that serial killing is the product of mental illness. While mental illness does play a bit-part in the production, it is the lesser cast member to the behavioral disorders that are common in killers. Most killers lead normal lives with families, even living with psychotic or sociopathic disorders. On a personality assessment titled “Adverse Childhood Experience Scale” the majority of the population will receive a “1” or “0”, based on experiences in their youth, these experiences include: childhood sexual abuse, parental abandonment, and feelings of being unloved or unwanted. However killers usually score between “8”-“10”⁹. Criminal profilers have compared this to a shark attack, when a shark attacks someone, they will receive medical attention, these killers have experienced psychological shark attacks and got no medical care. However a high score does not always equate to an unstable adult, Jack Shonkoff, a professor in Child Development at Harvard University states that. Most backgrounds of killers will show a strong personality disorder that is either coupled with or is brought on by traumas sustained during childhood.

⁸ Hedonistic are divided into the three subcategories of Lustful, Thrill Seeker, and Comfort Seeker, the motivations on based on sexual gratification, the thrill of inducing pain or fear, and personal gain

⁹ Based on a scale of 1-10

During freshmen year of high school, my friend's dad who taught at the school jokingly asked me why his daughter was up in the middle of the night speaking with me about serial killers. I simply responded that we both found serial killers interesting and he walked off shaking his head. This short interaction made me question why was I attracted to the notion of researching serial killers? Why did movies, books, TV shows involving serial killers pique my interest more than popular activities other kids my age enjoyed? Aileen Wuornos, posthumously praised by some as a revolutionary figure in modern counter culture, was executed in 2002 for the murder of seven of her clients while she was a prostitute. Wuornos was a homosexual sex worker who was abused by men when she was young; she came from an underprivileged background, who was diagnosed with numerous mental illnesses. The Feminist blog website, feministrag.com, fancies her as a "beautifully humane and intelligent woman," who's life was tragically cut short by society and its limitations. In the 2003 Academy Award winning film *Monster*, a movie based on her crimes, Aileen is portrayed as a lost soul, a woman who was burned by life, and after a horrific rape, believed that all men who pick up prostitutes have the intent to rape or kill their newfound passengers. In an interview that took place before her execution, she expressed displeasure at the movie based on her life, stating "You sabotaged my ass, society, and the cops, and the system... a raped woman got executed. It was used for books and movies and shit."

Christopher Duett, a writer at VICE magazine, recounts his interest in a 2014 article in which he recalls being pen pals with serial killers and multiple criminals. When corresponding with the "Night Stalker", Richard Ramirez, he echoed Helen Morrison's sentiments that serial killers blend in with the general public easily, stating:

The letter itself was actually rather boring. He came off as polite and fairly normal, save for a bit where he asked me to send him photos of women at the beach. He asked me what kind of cars I liked and what kind of music I listened to.

In Oliver Stone's 1994 satirical crime film, *Natural Born Killers*, a ratings hungry newsman named Wayne Gale, relentlessly pursues Mickey and Mallory Knox, a serial killing couple taking their crimes on the road to kill people cross-country. The reporting of Wayne allows Mickey and Mallory to be raised in status, as they soon amass a following of fans who watch their every move as reported by Gale. In one scene, after being caught, Mickey and Mallory are being hounded by a horde of screaming fans as a reporter asks, "What do you have to say to your fans?" Mickey nonchalantly replies, "You ain't seen nothing yet." Eventually, Mickey and Mallory start a riot in their prison, and take Wayne hostage. He eventually begins to show signs of Stockholm Syndrome, becoming a killer himself through the environment. In what will become his final journalistic accomplishment, his interview with Mickey and Mallory ends in them murdering him, when he appeals that they always leave one witness, they respond that the witness is his camera. This is representative of the general public's obsession with blood and guts.

In his book *Why We Love Serial Killers: The Curious Appeal of the World's Most Savage Murderers*, Scott A. Bohn provides reasoning for why people enjoy serial killers. The average human feels the spectrum of emotions that most serial killers do not, such as love, shame, and pity, therefore we cannot fathom what drives someone to abduct, torture, rape or kill, and want to interpret their actions. He compares that the effect serial killers have on adults is the

same effect as monster movies have on young children, it is adrenaline-pumping scares for fun. He also notes that many adults will feel guilt for feeling an interest in serial killers. He also states that the serial killer represents a threat to the basic human need, survival, showing a lack of care for other humans' lives; they pose a grave risk to our safety. The high coverage and glamorization of serial killing, as shown in *Natural Born Killers*, turns these killers into well known cult-like celebrity figures. The serial killer is a popular figure in pop culture because of a stylized media representation, as well as representation of an unattainable set of skills that is not known to the general public.

The creation of a serial killer can happen in multiple environments, and these events are highly stylized in media depictions. In a social context, the serial killer is important, as they obviously pose a threat, but they also represent a psychological opportunity to view a personality that can't feel remorse for their actions. However the public won't expect that at the core of humanity, we all have a desire to kill. Scientists have found that early humans were very violent; "What it is saying, in the broadest terms, is that humans have evolved strategies for solving problems with violence," says Mark Pagel, a professor in evolutionary biology. However the society in which one lives can have an affect on how violent one is, José María Gómez, an author working associated with this research says "Lethal violence is part of our evolutionary history but not carved in stone in 'our genes.'" In a VICE article published in 2016, Joshua Surtees interviews numerous girls who are sexually attracted to killers. A 17 year old, who wishes to stay anonymous states that she was interested in killers when she was young:

"I was watching a documentary about Jeffrey Dahmer and I thought he was attractive, even though he was gay. It took me a while to realize I actually liked him because he killed and ate people."

Another woman interviewed stated:

"I wouldn't necessarily say that. Violence is just exciting. If I was to have a killer as a boyfriend it would make me excited, you know? It's a bit like Russian roulette—my turn could be soon and he could kill me. Spice things up a bit. Conventional stuff is boring."

A final woman, commenting on her role as a feminist, and a woman attracted to men who raped and killed said:

"My feminism condemns what they have done and obviously does not want it to happen again to more women—or anyone, for that matter. I am horrified at the actions, but interested in the deep 'why?' factor. Some are attractive physically. I will give them that. But I'm more interested in the psychology."

Throughout this paper I have allowed myself to reflect upon events from my childhood that formed my interest in the macabre. I still may not have the answer to why I am attracted to this subject, but I feel that I am one step closer. And that it allows me to understand.