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Evil or Insane? The Female Serial Killer and Her Doubly Deviant Femininity

Helen Gavin

Abstract

It is 16th century Hungary, and young peasant girls are going missing. They have been offered well paid work in the Castle Czejte, Transylvania and then never seen again. The king sends an army to the castle where they report finding mayhem and bloodshed. There are witnesses aplenty to testify against the Countess Elizabeta Bathory; the villagers certainly thought she was evil. Describing atrocities over a twenty-five year period, it sounds like the peasants were happy to get their own back on a woman who was probably medically and legally insane, and just possibly the nobles were happy to accept this testimony as fact, because she was the heir to the throne. Leap forward a few hundred years, and modern cinema sees us depicting Elizabeta and her modern day sisters-in-blood as truly evil or as monsters. These women are not monsters, but people who have done monstrous things. The evil epithet is the result of being members of a very rare class, one of history's least understood but perpetually fascinating creatures, the female serial killer. Women who kill multiple times are guilty not just of serial murder, but of being women who step outside of the persona that society creates for them. This doubly deviant position makes exploring the minds of these women important, not just because they have killed, but also in order to understand the ways in which aberrant femininity is constructed as evil. This paper examines women who kill, then kill again.

Key Words: Serial killers, evil, typologies, coercion, deviant sexuality, insanity.

1. Introduction

It is tempting to suppose that the serial killer is a modern phenomenon, because the first time this term was used was in the 1930's. However, simply because they were not named as such does not mean that serial killers have not been with us for some time, they may have just not been subject to the same scientific attention as now. The descriptions of murder and mayhem found in folk tales still appear to be stories about serial killers, albeit supernatural in nature.¹ Many include women as the central evil character, the murderer. For example, Hansel and Gretel encounter a witch who wishes to eat them; it is unlikely they are her first potential victims. However, real life serial killers are much more likely to be male, choosing predominantly female victims. When we encounter a female serial killer, the

surprise is not just her rarity, but also her ordinary nature. She is no witch or evil queen, she is just a woman

When there is a spotlight on a female serial killer, she is represented as if she were the only one. Aileen Wuornos was convicted of the murder of seven men, and is regularly referred to as America's first and only female serial killer.² The impression persists that men are the only creatures who repeatedly kill, and that women serial killers are almost non-existent. It is difficult to find explanations in the literature surrounding serial killing without reference to men. Can those theoretical examinations be applied to the women and girls who kill, then kill again, and again?

2. Childhood

It is clear that abuse figures largely in the childhoods of male serial killers, and female serial killers may follow this pattern. Wuornos claimed that each of her seven male victims had raped, or attempted to rape her. As a plea of self-defence, this statement did not work, but examination of her upbringing goes some way to explaining her actions, and the view she may have had of men. Wuornos' teenage mother abandoned her children when Aileen was nine months old. Aileen and her brother were adopted by her grandparents, and there has been speculation that her grandfather sexually abused her. Clearly, the household was not ideal for young children, with alcohol abuse and violence a daily occurrence.³ Aileen had few friends due to the chaotic nature of the home, and her own unpredictable temper. She learnt very quickly that having sex with neighbourhood boys would bring her rewards; almost inevitably, she became pregnant at 14, her son taken away from her before she could see him. In retrospect we can see this was a tragic start to life, and a tragedy waiting to unfold.

In Wuornos' case, it is difficult to determine whether her behaviour was due to any genetic predispositions to alcoholism and violence she inherited from her absent father, or the exposure to violence, cruelty and incestuous and promiscuous behaviour in her upbringing. What is clear is that she blamed the behaviour of the men she killed, claiming multiple violent rapes at the hands of those she offered sex for pay. Biopsychological theories would suggest that her upbringing meant any genetic predispositions to violence were inevitably expressed. She also showed below average IQ, high impulsivity, low attention span, and high psychopathy. Such anomalies taken together suggest a cortical dysfunction, possibly a result of drug and alcohol use by her mother whilst pregnant, and also Wuornos' own drug use. This cannot be separated from Wuornos' lack of engagement in school, and lack of any social support, together with her own tendency to fail to accept responsibility, and the distorted belief, reported by Myers et al that she was saving her victims' families from violence at the hands of the men.⁴ It is easy to see Wuornos as a victim, but the chaos of her childhood does not mitigate the fact that she was a serial killer.

There is a set of psychological difficulties referred to as ‘Adopted Child Syndrome.’⁵ This is not endemic to adoptees of course, but examining the incidence of adoption amongst serial killers would seem to suggest that it is high.⁶ This is a non-causal relationship that has been observed, as some of the most notorious male serial killers have been adoptees, for example Kenneth Biachni, Ted Bundy and David Berkowitz. The list of women is a little shorter, but they number some of the more infamous cases, Wuornos being a prime example. She was adopted, and her adopted family brutalised her.

3. Society

As well as developmental theories, there are compelling social explanations for serial murder. The more sociological in nature suggest that high crime rates are a result of societal problems and that serial murder is no exception. This may not hold completely true for some of the more lurid of the serial killers’ behaviour, but a society that allows sex workers and runaways to remain unprotected may need to take some blame. In addition, inadequate socialisation may be a direct result of a societal breakdown at a micro level. Serial killers rarely come from a background of understanding and caring, but usually one of abuse and neglect, teaching the child that his (or her) world is one of pain and rejection. But so many abused children fail to become serial killers; if abuse and poor socialisation were an adequate explanation the world should be rampant with hate, and female serial killers. It is more likely that the experience of inadequate socialisation feeds into a complex interaction between psychological and biological predispositions and development. There is however, one societal position that begs to be considered in our examination of the female serial killer.

Some of the most notorious female serial killers are seen as subservient to their male partner, which feeds into the questions of normative gender roles. Some of these women have killed within partnerships; whilst they are viewed as monsters because they are women who kill, they are also viewed as less likely to be blamed for initiation of killing.⁷ Other female serial killers are described as either the comfort type, ones who provided services to those they killed, or as healthcare workers taking mercy killing a little too literally. In this case, it would seem that many women have potential access to victim types that fit these typologies of female killers. So, why are serial killers predominately male? Feminist positions suggest that violence against women is misuse of power by men socialised into thinking that control over women is a right. Serial killer victims are predominantly female and sexual murder is seen as an extreme example of the violence designed to override woman’s choice about sex, life or death, what Caputi calls a patriarchal act of sexual terrorism.⁸ The high levels of sexual sadism that is seen in male serial killers killing women is of the most revolting kind, but some suggest that this establishes in the male murderer a viable if skewed, sense of his own worth.⁹ As such, it illustrates the difficulty of determining where violent behaviour originates,

the family, peer groups or media. Wherever it is an inherent part of the learning about social interaction, the lack of a wave of female serial killers could be due to differential male and female socialisation. If women/girls are taught to be compliant and deferential in the various levels of social learning processes, then it is not surprising that the majority of female serial killers are in subservient partnerships.

4. Deviant sexuality

According to Stone, when we think of serial killers, the image we have is of serial sexual homicide, compulsive killing for sexual release of one nature or another.¹⁰ Paraphilia features strongly in the serial killer population. Prentky et al identified high incidence of paraphilia and paraphiliac fantasy in serial killers, and Dietz et al suggested that a large proportion of male serial killers exhibit more than one paraphilia, some of them clearly not harmless, involving death, dying and murder.¹¹ Necrophilia and erotophonophilia feature largely in the life histories of some serial killers, but are they as equally attractive to the female serial sexual murderer?

Necrophilia in females is extremely rare, notwithstanding any practical difficulties (which are reportedly possible to surmount). Moreover, there is no recorded instance of a female necrophile killing to achieve her goal of a dead and supremely compliant partner, unlike the men who litter the pages of lurid tabloids and academic journals alike. There is no female equivalent of Jeffrey Dahmer or Ed Gein. Are there female erotophonophiles? Erotophonophilia is a paraphilia dependent on erotic satisfaction from killing. It is closely linked to sexual sadism; where the sadist is female, it is thought that the onset is later than in men, so developmental theories may not be as compelling as explanation, and, often, this sadism is triggered by relationships with men who want to be dominated.

Thus, lust murder represents the integration of sexualised violence and murder. Freudian concepts of unresolved sexual conflict, infantilisation, and maternal over-protection or rejection, are scattered about the literature as some form of explanation, together with hatred of a significant female as an unresolved Oedipal conflict. Thankfully, there are alternative, and more sensible explanations from positions such as learning theory, suggesting access to violent pornography and subsequent orgasmic conditioning as the culprits. None of these psychological positions suggest that women would be included in the pantheon of erotophonophiles. There are very few female killers that exhibit or admit to sexual arousal from the act of killing. Silvio et al suggest that such women are overwhelmingly found within killing teams, rather than as solo killers.¹² They present gender role socialisation as the most likely theoretical explanation of this finding, rather than any physical or fundamental, psychological difference.

5. Biology

There must then be some explanation for why we cannot find women providing the sexual reasons for serial killing. Are men and women just so biologically different that they cannot kill in the same way and for the same reasons? Is evolutionary dimorphic presentation of aggression a possible explanation? If violence is a complex behavioural adaptation, can it explain serial murder? There is no evolutionary advantage to be gained from killing the types of victim seen here, the death of a prostitute provides no territorial or genetic gain. It also does not explain any female serial murderer, as, according to evolutionary theories, it is male humans who have evolved the physiological and psychological means to effect personal violence of this nature. It is also difficult to draw any comparative biological evaluation of murderous violence in a modern society when distinctions in sex roles are becoming blurred.

However, there are other biological hypotheses to consider in serial murder. A considerable minority of male serial killers have shown a history of head trauma and abnormality. For example, abnormality in brain areas associated with emotion and impulsiveness and inhibitory control are well documented. Money suggests that there may be a pathological confusion or conflation of sexual arousal and attack messages along certain neurological pathways.¹³ In addition, the thalamus and hypothalamus may have a direct role in aggression as well as the ability to distinguish negative and positive stimuli. Abnormality here may explain the inability to form close personal relationships, a definite warning sign for serial killers surely.¹⁴ This is the 'he kept to himself and never bothered anyone' syndrome, presumably right up to the point at which the drains start to smell. The hypothalamus also interacts with the reticular activating system (RAS), and abnormality may mean that otherwise stimulating activity does not reach the cortex, explaining chronic under arousal in the psychopath. Anti-social behaviour then follows in order to increase cortical levels of arousal; does this mean that thrill-oriented serial murder, and escalation of intensity and frequency of murders is a manipulation of the environment in order to seek arousal? It might be as Sears, points out many serial murderers become compliant and biddable in captivity, contrasting with the arousal seeking hypotheses.¹⁵

Perhaps a clear picture can be drawn from the neurochemical level of examination? Endogenous hormones and neurotransmitters are implicated in aggression, and show clear sex differences in both production and action. This position can be extended to include serial murder, but any hypotheses of similarity in biochemistry of male and female serial murderers have never been tested.

We are not getting very far in either an explanation for serial murder, or an examination of female serial killers. Perhaps the typology of female killers is something which should be examined rather than why they are different to men. With a few exceptions, our lady killers are more likely to fall into categories that fit gender stereotypes of comfort, subservience or caring.

6. Comfort serial killers

Comfort serial murderers kill for profit in order to fund a comfortable lifestyle, but also can be said to be providing comfort as a means to ensnare victims. A review of the writings on female serial killers by Frei et al showed that, amongst the very sparse literature, it is difficult to categorise by patterns and/or motives, but that the most common motive identified is material gain.¹⁶ Perhaps the most vilified profit killings are those done by women who were trusted with the lives, literally, of the vulnerable. During the 1980's, Dorothea Puente ran a boarding house for elderly or mentally handicapped residents in Sacramento, California. She was, however, pocketing a large portion of their monthly benefits payments. This deception was netting her somewhere in the region of \$6000 a month. Some of the tenants started to disappear. In 1988, police calling to enquire after one missing tenant found the body of another in the house, and seven others in the garden and basement. No-one thought this little white-haired old lady could be implicated, and she was allowed to wander off.

Comfort serial killers also include the so-called black widows. 41 year old Japanese businessman Yoshiyuki Oide was happily planning his wedding when he was found dead in his car from carbon monoxide poisoning. He had transferred five million yen (about £42,000 or \$65,000) to his fiancée days before his death. The fiancée, Kanae Kijima was subsequently suspected of involvement in the murders of up to six other men, netting her over ¥200,000,000 (£1.3M or \$2.2M)

A woman who kills for profit is much more common than a woman who kills for sexual gratification or sheer revenge. The lone female killer is much rarer than the woman who kills with a partner.

7. Couples who kill

On the 23rd May, 1934, Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker were shot to death by police in Louisiana, the culmination of one of the most spectacular manhunts of the time. They were understood to have committed 13 murders, usually during the commission of armed robberies. Barrow was also suspected of killing two police officers and kidnapping a couple in Louisiana.¹⁷ When Parker met Barrow she was already married to an imprisoned killer; it is clear that she was attracted to Barrow for being a dangerous person. The paraphilia of being sexually aroused by someone who has committed an outrageous or horrific crime is called Hybristophilia but it has also been dubbed the Bonnie and Clyde syndrome.

Some women do attach themselves to men and fall into a downward spiral of behaviour that the world sees as depravity. Notable examples include Myra Hindley, the female part of the Moors Murderers, who abducted, sexually assaulted, tortured and murdered at least five children between July 1963 and October 1965. At her death, in prison, Hindley was dubbed the most evil woman in Britain, an astonishing epithet for someone who never actually killed anyone, even though she was complicit in the murders. Another notable pairing of interest is the

West, Fred and Rosemary (known as Rose). These two managed to rape and murder at least 10 women and girls, including their own daughter and step-daughter, over a 20-year period. The subservient nature of the woman is less clear here, as Rose was undoubtedly the killer in at least one case. A more probable case study for the subservient partner is Karla Homolka, who drugged her teenage sister and gave her as a present to her husband, Paul Bernardo, because he wanted to deflower a virgin. Together they were responsible for the deaths of several women during the 1990's. There are unconfirmed reports that Homolka has been diagnosed with *hybristophilia*.¹⁸

So we have the picture of our female serial killer as the subservient partner to a murderous husband or make lover. Not all such pairings are heterosexual though, which makes the argument around male dominance a little shaky. Gwendolyn Graham and Cathy Wood met when they both worked as nurse's aides. They became lovers, practicing sexual asphyxia, but also murdering as a sexual game. They openly boasted about the murders, but no-one believed them, except Wood's ex-husband, who contacted the police. Graham was convicted of five murders, Wood was charged with one count of second-degree murder and one count of conspiracy to commit second-degree murder.¹⁹

So, we may not be able to identify the majority of female serial killers as subservient partners to men, but we do have a hint at a further category, the caring professional.

8. Angels of Death

Nurses feature prominently in serial killing, the caregiver who intentionally harms or kills the people in her care. This is murder from a position of power; the 'angel' often claims that victims were suffering and ending life is an act of mercy. Neutralization theory suggests the killers understand what they are doing is wrong but that the helping behaviour neutralises the wrong doing.²⁰ The alternative explanation is an issue of mental health. In 1991, Beverley Allit killed four children and attempted to kill at least a further three in the Grantham and Kesteven Hospital, Lincolnshire, where she was a nurse. She administered large doses of insulin or injected air into her victims. She received several life sentences and is detained in a secure psychiatric hospital. She is in hospital, not prison, as she has been identified as being mentally ill with a factitious disorder, known as Munchausen syndrome by proxy, a somewhat controversial diagnosis.

9. Female serial killers

Are we getting closer to an explanation for our female serial killer? We can agree that the most likely motive for a female serial killer is financial gain and security. However, although there are typologies that include gain, we must also include the insane or rage filled, like Wuornos, the rare hedonistic pleasure seeker like Bathory, and the 'disciple' who kills to please a charismatic leader or partner,

like Hindley. What is clear is that the female serial killer is a rare and unusual creature, and that our perception of her is bound up with notions of femininity, subservient womanhood and evil.

Notes

¹ Helen Gavin, 'The damsel in distress: not as sweet as she is painted?' Paper presented at the 4th Global Conference on Evil, Women and the Feminine, Prague, Czech Republic, May, 2012. This paper on evil women in fairy stories suggests that such tales contain warnings about the dangers from serial killers in communities that could not protect themselves or their children.

² Cable News Network (CNN)

<http://archives.cnn.com/2002/wuornos.execution/> [retrieved 1.2.13] 2002

This report incorrectly identifies Aileen Wuornos as America's first female serial killer.

³ Wade C. Myers, Erik Gooch, and J. Reid Meloy, 'The Role of Psychopathy and Sexuality in a Female Serial Killer,' *Forensic Science* 50.3 (May 2005): 1-6. 4.

⁴ Ibid. 6

⁵ David Kirschner, 'The Adopted Child Syndrome: Considerations for Psychotherapy,' *Psychotherapy in Private Practice* 8.3 (1990): 93-100.

⁶ James Alan Fox and Jack Levin, *Overkill: Mass Murder and Serial Killing Exposed* (New York: Plenum Press, 1994), 24.

⁷ Helen Gavin, 'Mummy wouldn't do that' The Perception and Construction of the Female Sex Offender,' *Grotesque Femininities: Evil, Women and the Feminine*, ed. Maria Barrett (Oxford: ID-net Press 2010). 7

⁸ Jane Caputi, 'The Sexual Politics of Murder,' *Gender & Society* 3 (1989): 437-456. 439

⁹ Andrea Dworkin, 'Pornography: The New Terrorism,' *New York University Review of Law & Social Change* 8 (1978): 215

¹⁰ Michael Stone, 'Serial sexual homicide: biological, psychological, and sociological aspects,' *Journal of Personality Disorders* 15.1 (2001): 1-18.

¹¹ Robert Prentky, Ann Burgess, Frances Rokous, Austin Lee, Carol Hartman, Robert Ressler, and John Douglas, 'The presumptive role of fantasy in serial sexual homicide,' *The American Journal of Psychiatry*. 146.7 (July 1989): 887-891.

¹² Heather Silvio, Kathy McCloskey and Julia Ramos-Grenier, 'Theoretical consideration of female sexual predator serial killers in the United States,' *Journal of Criminal Justice* 34.3 (2006): 251-259.

¹³ John Money, 'Forensic sexology: Paraphilic serial rape (biastophilia) and lust murder (erotophonophilia),' *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 64 (1990): 26-36.

¹⁴ Donald Sears, *To Kill Again: The Motivation and Development of Serial Murder* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1991) 20

¹⁵ Ibid. 29

¹⁶ Andreas Frei, Birgit Völlm, Marc Graf and Volker Dittmann, 'Female serial killing: review and case report,' *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health* 16.3 (September 2006): 167–176. 167

¹⁷ The Federal Bureau of Investigation in the USA (2011) holds an archive in which Bonnie and Clyde's crimes are described. <http://vault.fbi.gov>

¹⁸ Stephen Williams, *Invisible Darkness: The Strange Case Of Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka* (Toronto: Random House Publishing Group.,2009). 20

¹⁹ Tobin Buhk and Stephen Cohle, *Skeletons in the Closet* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007).25 .

²⁰ Graham Sykes and David Matza, 'Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency,' *American Sociological Review* 22.6 (1957): 664-670. 667

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