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### Original Citation

Canter, David V., Kaouri, Christina and Ioannou, Maria (2003) The facet structure of criminal narratives. In: *Facet theory: towards cumulative social science*. Univerza v Ljubljani, Ljubljana, Slovenia, pp. 27-38. ISBN 9612370540

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## The Facet Structure of Criminal Narratives

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*In literary criticism Frye (1957) offers four story forms: comedy, romance, tragedy and irony and that he suggests develop into each other in a circular order, analogous to the four seasons. It is hypothesised that this circumplex will also be reflected in the personal narratives that dominate any given criminal's experience of his crimes. This was tested by asking 161 convicted offenders to complete a questionnaire describing their experience of committing a crime. SSA results give some support for a circular order of criminal roles. The study therefore opens the way for linking literary and psychological structures.*

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† The authors would like to thank C. Cross, K. Murray, who helped to collect some of the data.

## **Narrative Theory**

In the last fifteen years, psychologists have emphasized that the stories of human lives, rather than logical arguments or lawful formulations, are the vehicle by which “meaning” is communicated. Out of this has grown the view that like literary constructions, life stories can be analyzed in terms of plots, settings, scenes, themes as well as characters and their dominant roles (McAdams 1988).

McAdams (1988) proposes that life stories are organized around themes of intimacy (or communion) and power (or agency). Individuals high on intimacy express a “recurrent preference or readiness for experiences of warmth, close and communicative exchange” (McAdams 1988, p. 77). The communal themes could be the helper, lover, counsellor, caregiver, and friend. In contrast, people high on power, speak frequently of self-protection, self-assertion, and self-expansion; they express needs for achievement, force, and action. This indicates “a recurrent preference or readiness for experiences of having impact and feeling strong (potent, agentic) vis-à-vis the environment” (McAdams 1988, p. 84). The agentic characters could be the master, father, authority, or sage, who are forceful and have great determination as well as drive.

## **Criminal Narratives**

Canter (1994) was the first to explore criminal behaviour utilising narrative theory. In his book *Criminal shadows*, he suggests that “through his actions the criminal tells us about how he has chosen to live his life. The challenge is to reveal his destructive life story, to uncover the plot in which crime appears to play such a significant part” (Canter, 1994, p.299). Criminal activity can only be understood through in-depth analysis and

understanding of those personal stories, called by Canter (1994) “inner narratives”, as well as through connecting those narratives to characteristic roles and actions.

Canter (1994) claims that offenders are not a random sample of the general population. They are limited people. Therefore, they see themselves as playing particular roles and live particular narratives that are limited by the specific themes that underlie them. It is therefore hypothesised that in any given criminal context there will be a dominant role the criminal will take that relates directly to a recognisable overall narrative.

### **The Circle of Mythoi**

Authorities on literature have often suggested that there are only a limited number of narrative forms. The most widely acknowledged of these is the framework proposed by Northrop Frye (1957), in his book *The Anatomy of Criticism*. He offers four archetypal mythoi that relate to the four seasons of the year: Comedy (Spring), Romance (Summer), Tragedy (Autumn), and Irony or Satire (Winter). According to Frye, “the fundamental form of narrative process is cyclical movement” (Frye, 1957, p.158). As a consequence, Tragedy opposes Comedy and Romance opposes Irony/Satire.

(Insert Figure 1 about here)

In the Comedy, the main characters are young heroes, usually in the pursuit of true love, happiness and stability in life with others, by minimising interference from environmental obstacles. They are generally optimistic and free from anxiety and guilt. Eventually, they are given the opportunity to provide a happy ending to their life story. In daily language the term romance or romantic comedy may be the more usual label, but Frye’s term ‘comedy’ will be used here.

As Summer follows Spring, Romance follows Comedy. In the Romance, an aspect of life is configured as a successful quest, consisting of three stages: a perilous journey with preliminary minor adventures, a climactic struggle, and the final heroic triumph. The protagonist is an ever-moving adventurer who tries to overcome adversity and take control of the new challenges in order to emerge victorious throughout life's journey. The term Romance is therefore a little different from the label 'adventure' that would be more commonly used to describe this form of story.

Autumn and Tragedy follow Summer and Romance. In Tragedy, there are wrathful gods or hypocritical villains who attempt to manipulate the tragic hero to evil ends. The protagonist is generally pessimistic and ambivalent as he has to avoid the dangers and absurdities of life, in which he finds that pain and pleasure, happiness and sadness are always mixed. He is perceived as a victim of his nemesis.

Eventually, Winter naturally follows Autumn. The action of Irony is designed "to give form to the shifting ambiguities and complexities of unidealized existence" (Frye, 1957, p. 223). The individual tries to restore or introduce order to chaos and gain perspective on the contradictions of human living. His expedient approach to the realities of the moment is contrasted with the idealistic philosophy of an imagined social structure.

During the Irony phase of the cycle, the idealistic young hero has become the world-weary old king that lives in a world of repulsiveness and idiocy, a world without pity and without hope. Innocence has evolved into experience. Frye explains how this brings us full circle, back into the rebirth of spring. "Tragedy and tragic irony take us into a hell of narrowing circles and culminate in some such vision of the source of all evil in a personal

form. Tragedy can take us no farther; but if we persevere with the mythos of irony and satire, we shall pass a dead center, and finally see the gentlemanly Prince of Darkness bottom side up” (Frye, 1957, p. 239).

This structure has a strong dynamic quality. This movement is what propels each narrative archetype into the next. It is therefore a classic ‘circular order’ , often found in facet studies and known as a ‘circumplex’. It is thus a model that is directly open to test within a facet framework. It implies there will be many hybrids as one type merges into another, but there will be a dominant theme within any area of activity. That theme is hypothesised to reflect one of Frye’s mythoi.

It can be seen also that some of the mythoi place the individual in an active role, agentic in McAdams’ sense. Taking on the world to achieve personal objectives. Most notably in Romance and Comedy that are characterised by satisfying endings, the protagonist achieves some resolution through his own actions. By contrast, in Tragedy and Irony the central character is reacting to circumstances, either a general disquiet with society as in irony or fighting the Gods as in Tragedy. From this perspective the dominant axis of personal narratives is from being a professional, bringing existing skills, knowing what you are doing across to feelings of being a victim who cannot operate in any other way, responding to the depredations of others.

### **The Present Study**

The present study considers Frye’s mythoi within the context of criminal activity. Therefore the roles that are explored are those that a criminal feels describes what he was doing whilst in the process of committing a crime. To test this model criminals’ own

perceptions of their roles narratives, when conducting crimes, were identified from pilot work. The attempt was to identify as wide a range of implicit stories as possible. It was hypothesised that the roles would form identifiable regions and these regions would imply generalised narratives. The relationship of these narratives to Frye's archetypal stories would then be examined. A circular order was predicted. As in all circumplexes it was hypothesised that there would be an implicit radix. In this case the core of the radix would be neutrality or the lack of any engagement with the criminal act.

It must be emphasised that we are dealing with criminals and their illegal actions. Therefore it would be expected that they would not reflect classic stories that have a socially acceptable moral framework. Furthermore, the perspective here is from the viewpoint of the criminal not of society at large. Some interpretation in the light of this perspective will be essential. One further assumption is that by drawing on the full range of criminal activities the full range of narratives will be exposed

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The data examined in the present study were collected from two different sources to provide as wide a range of criminals as possible:

- A sample of 83 male offenders, incarcerated in a local prison in the area of Liverpool, was used from the database created by Ioannou (2001).
- A sample of 78 male offenders, 55 of which were incarcerated in prison and 23 were serving community service, came from the database created by Cross (1998) and Murray (1998).

A total of 161 cases were examined in the present study. All offenders were males with an age range of 16 – 77 (mean 31.66, SD 9.78). They had been convicted for a range of crimes such as robbery, murder, rape, theft etc (see Table 1 for a complete list of the offences and the number of offenders interviewed for each offence type).

(Insert table 1 about here)

### **Material and Procedure**

Both investigations used the same questionnaire developed from pilot work by research associates in the Centre for Investigative Psychology at the University of Liverpool. The questionnaire consisted of the following:

- Introduction: this described the nature of the research and a step-by-step breakdown of the interview format.
- Research Consent Form: this was to obtain written consent from the participants, as well as to ensure complete confidentiality and anonymity.
- Description of crime: this was a list of 9 key questions incorporating events leading up to the crime, what happened during and after the offence and how long after they were arrested.
- Role statements: A list of twenty statements was presented representing the type of the role it was hypothesised the offender was playing. A five-point Likert scale was used in which offenders indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement ranging from strong disagreement (1) to strong agreement (5) with 3 being the mid-point “Neither agree nor disagree”. Such a scale allows for more elaboration on the subject’s answers, providing more detail than a simple yes/no format. Examples of the role statements are: “It was like being a professional”, “It seemed fun” etc.
- Debriefing: this form thanked the offenders for their help and co-operation, assuring them once more of complete confidentiality and anonymity and asked if they had any questions that they would like to ask about the research.



Table 2 provides a full list of the role statements that were presented to the participants in the interview .

(Insert table 2 about here)

### **SMALLEST SPACE ANALYSIS OF ROLES**

The data obtained from these interviews were analysed using a non-metric multidimensional scaling procedure known as Smallest Space Analysis (SSA-I; Lingoes, 1973). The three-dimensional SSA of the roles of offenders was used. It had a Guttman-Lingoes coefficient of alienation of 0.12 in 26 iterations, indicating a good fit. On the plot to be discussed (Figure 2), each point is a variable describing one specific role of the offender. The closer any two points are, the more likely it is that the roles they represent will relate to each other.

### **Regional Structure**

By examining the SSA configuration (Figure 2), it is apparent that the roles of offenders could be differentiated into four distinct themes. These have been associated with Frye's four story forms in such a way that do reflect a circumplex. This framework is open to consideration and is presented here as a first set of hypotheses for debate and future consideration.

#### **1. Adventurer**

The four elements that can be conceptually linked as Adventurer-type roles are:

1. It seemed fun, 2. I found it interesting, 3. It was like being on an adventure, and 4. I was acting like a hero.

This type of offender could be described as an individual that sees himself as a hero and perceives the experience of crime as an interesting and enjoying adventure.

The role of the adventurer criminal appears to reflect the comedy story form where the main character is trying to find fun and interest in life with others, by overcoming environmental obstacles. He experiences enjoyment of re-organising social processes to his benefit; His adventurous personality “has the neutrality that enables him to represent a wish-fulfilment” (Frye, 1957, p.167). Therefore, during his exploration he achieves personal happiness and satisfaction. In a similar way, the adventurer-type criminal satisfies himself by committing offences. He is propelled into criminal activity as a means of obtaining desired objects or people. Thus, his crime becomes an interesting and pleasurable experience, an adventure.

## 2. Revenger

The five elements that can be conceptually linked as revenger-type roles are:

1. It was like being in control, 2. It seemed right, 3. I was acting out of revenge, 4. It seemed like the manly thing to do and 5. I found I couldn't help myself.

This type of offender justifies his criminal behaviour, feeling that it is right and the manly thing to do so as to take revenge. He also feels in control of the situation and has the sense that he couldn't help himself.

The role of the revenger could be related to the romance story form. The essential element of plot in romance is struggle. The hero faces constant change and new challenges throughout life's journey. He embarks on a quest and fights for revenge by taking control of the dangers. “The conflict assumes two main characters, a protagonist and an enemy. The more demonic the enemy, the more divine the hero” (Frye, 1957, p.187). The quest-romance is the victory of fertility over the waste land. The precious items such as food and drink, body and blood, the union of male and female are brought

back from the quest, and the hero has taken revenge. He becomes the judge and decides to behave in a cruel way and punish because this is the right and the manly thing to do. His criminal activity “pathos or death struggle” aims at “the anagnorisis or discovery, the recognition of the hero” (Frye, 1957, p. 187).

### 3. Victim

The five elements that can be conceptually linked as victim-type roles are:

1. I was doing it because I had to, 2. It was like being a victim, 3. It seemed like the only thing to do, 4. I was acting like I wasn't part of it, and 5. I was doing harm.

This type of offender can be described as the victim of the situation, who does not regard himself responsible for and part of his crime. However, he has no other choice, but to commit his offence and he acknowledges the fact that he is doing harm.

The role of the Victim reflects the story form of tragedy where the main imago is the “extraordinary victim” who confronts dangers in life arousing pity and fear. He is generally pessimistic for being defeated by the experiences of the world; yet, his misfortune is not wholly deserved. The punishment exceeds the crime. Therefore, this character remains admirable. Similarly, the victim-type criminals perceive themselves as instruments of divine external factors. They resign their actions to “necessity, circumstance, fate, accident, or any combination of these” (Frye, 1957, p.207).

### 4. Professional

The five elements that can be conceptually linked as Professional-type roles are:

1. It seemed routine, 2. I was doing a job, 3. It was like being a professional, 4. I found that I knew what I was doing and 5. I was acting like a criminal.

This type of offender could be described as an individual, who is acting professionally, perceives his crime as a job, therefore part of the routine of his life and he acknowledges his criminal behaviour. He is engaged in criminal activity in a qualified, specialised manner, which implies that he could be portrayed as a highly skilled, intelligent and competent individual who bases his actions on his criminal experiences.

The role of the professional criminal can be associated with the irony story form where the main character is trying to gain perspective on the discrepancy between appearance and reality. Thus, the hero loses his innocence and evolves into “the mythical patterns of experience” (Frye, 1957, p.223). He becomes an expert, capable of perceiving the world in a way not apparent to the audience. In order to reveal what they are incapable of seeing for themselves, the hero may have to resort to the obscene, the shocking, and the outrageous. Frye accurately reports that in a patriarchal society there is greater value in vicious character assassinations than in praise of acts of kindness. Thus, the hero is shown functioning in his--and society's--favourite role, the role of the criminal. This is a conventional world, respectful of the wisest of men who prudently keep their own counsel. Irony needs “wit or a sense of the grotesque or absurd and an object of attack” (Frye, 1957, p.224), therefore intelligent creatures that are obsessed with war and destruction, corrupted by power.

However, as illustrated in Figure 2, the variable ‘criminal’ appears to be in the region of victim, whereas it belongs to the region of professional. This suggests that the offenders may have interpreted differently this item from the researcher. According to the researcher’s point of view, the statement ‘I was acting like a criminal’ refers to the offender’s admittance of his criminality at the crime scene, whereas in this case, it seems

like most participants feel that other people cause them to act as criminals, however they do not regard themselves criminals but victims. This interpretation of the outcome could be also supported by the fact that “criminal” is situated very close to the variable “I had to”, which implies that the offender puts the blame of his criminal behaviour on other forces

### 5. Indifferent

The element ‘I found that I didn’t care’ could arguably be interpreted as region in its own right, as it does not co-occur with any other role to any significant degree. Moreover, offenders seem to have experienced their criminal activity in an apathetic and completely uninterested manner.

More specifically, there is a relationship between Adventurer and Comedy (Spring), Revenger and Romance (Summer), Victim and Tragedy (Autumn) as well as between Professional and Irony (Winter). Figure 3 illustrates that Adventurer opposes Victim and Revenger opposes Professional. Thus, it can be supported that “narrative involves movement from one structure to another” (Frye, 1957, p.158).

(Insert Figure 4 about here)

## **DISCUSSION**

Patterns that did emerge from the SSA suggested that offenders have acted out different narrative roles while they were offending: Adventurer, Professional, Revenger, and Criminal, supporting use of SSA to reflect narrative forms within co-occurrence of roles. The further proposition that the four roles: adventurer, professional, revenger and victim would relate to Frye’s (1957) four story forms: comedy, romance, tragedy and irony, was also supported by the examination of the SSA plot. Furthermore the dominant axis of the

plot is from the agentic professional doing a job across to the role of reactive victim who could not help himself.

The Adventurer theme describes offenders who perceive their criminal behaviour as an enjoying and fascinating adventure. They are seduced by their desire for other people's belongings and when they complete their crime, they experience a euphoric appreciation of its significance.

The Revenger criminal is the type of offender who feels that he is doing the right and the manly thing by offending; having the sense that he could not help himself. It is he who has been wronged and, in gaining revenge, is defending moral equality. The role of the revenger offender could be associated with Frye's (1957) Romance story form. The hero struggles for revenge and victory by taking control of the new challenges because he feels that he has to bring back what belongs to him, so as to escape humiliation.

The Victim type of criminal perceives himself as the victim of the situation. He reacts with violence because this seems to be the only alternative solution. Sykes & Matza (1957) refer to criminals often being in a state of 'drift' between offending and not offending. Most experience desperation and low control over their life and commit their crimes as a result of peer pressure. Moreover, they accept that their behaviour is wrong, and at the same time use various techniques such as denial of responsibility and denial of injury in order to "neutralise" their guilt and justify their actions. This role reflects the story form of tragedy where the main character is the "extraordinary victim" who has been defeated by fate and circumstances; yet, his punishment is not wholly deserved.

The Professional criminal sees himself as an expert when committing his offence. He refers to his cruel behaviour as a job; therefore he acknowledges and justifies his offences without caring about the consequences, as it is part of the routine in his life. The role of the professional reflects an ironic story form where the protagonist loses his innocence, becomes more experienced and intelligent and chooses to be disgraceful, since he lives in a world of repulsiveness and idiocy, a world without pity. "Satire takes for granted a world which is full of anomalies, injustices, follies, and crimes, and yet is permanent and undisplaceable" (Frye, 1957, p.226). Social conventions are stripped away in order to unmask the essentially animalistic nature of humanity.

It had been further proposed that the structure of the roles would reflect Frye's (1957) Circumplex of the four Myths. The results of the SSA supported this hypothesis, finding that on the one hand, Adventurer and Comedy (Spring) opposes Victim and Tragedy (Autumn) and on the other hand Revenger and Romance (Summer) opposes Professional and Irony (Winter). Therefore, criminal narratives do reflect a circumplex, moving in a cyclical way; innocence and adventurous nature evolve into experience and professionalism. "The fundamental form of process is cyclical movement, the alteration of success and decline, effort and repose, life and death which is the rhythm of process" (Frye, 1957, p.158).

### **Implications and Conclusion**

From one generation to the next, people find meaning and connection within a web of story-making, and storytelling. Through life stories, human beings help to create the world they live in at the same time that it is creating them (McAdams, 1988). Essentially,

understanding the person means understanding the person's 'storied self-concept' (Bruner, 1987).

This study only lays out one possible way of studying criminal narratives. Further research should attempt to replicate and further develop the present findings using larger samples. The variables used to conceptualize offenders' roles also need to be developed and clarified. For example, terms like hero and victim encapsulate many ideas and therefore tend to sit on the boundaries of regions. One interesting development would also be to examine criminal narratives from a female perspective and investigate whether male and female offenders experience different roles when committing their crimes.

In addition, the present study investigated roles of offenders without particularly distinguishing between the different types of crime committed by the participants. Future research could examine whether different crime categories such as Property, Drug, Violence and Sex Offences could be associated with distinct roles of offenders.

This study does show the value that the fact approach has in enabling us to compare models from very different realms of discourse, helping to find fundamental parallels between the structures of fiction and the structures of life. Narrative theory has much to offer in the comprehension and analysis of criminal behaviour. As Canter (1994) states "We need to learn to identify the distinguishing features of these evil narratives in order to recognise the men who write them".



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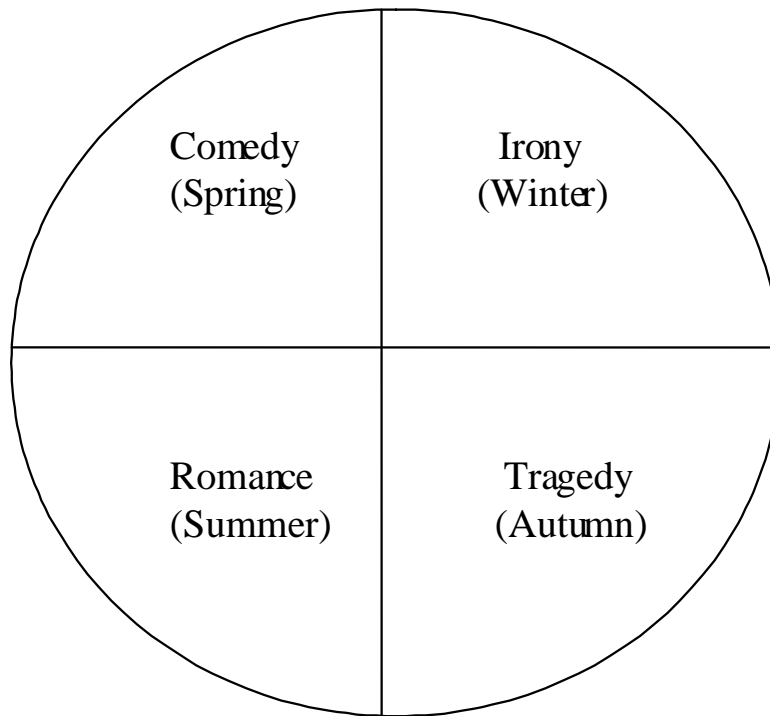
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**Figure 1**

**Erve's (1957) "Theory of Mythos"**



**Table 1**

**Number of offenders interviewed for each offence type**

<i>Type of offence</i>	<i>No of offenders</i>	<i>Type of offence</i>	<i>No of offenders</i>
Burglary	23	Indecent exposure	2
Robbery	30	Affray	1
Drugs offences	21	Arson	3
Indecent assault	7	Assist move body	1
Murder	20	Attempted rape	1
Rape	10	GBH	1
Assault	4	Kidnapping/violence	1
Fraud	10	Manslaughter	1
ABH	3	Possession of fire Arm/violence	1
Violence	9	UTMV	2
Theft	5	Driving offences	5



## **Table 2**

### **A full list of the role statements**

1. It was like being a professional
2. I was doing it because I had to
3. It seemed fun
4. It seemed right
5. I found it interesting
6. It was like being on an adventure
7. It seemed routine
8. I found I couldn't help myself
9. I was acting like I wasn't part of it
10. It was like being in control
11. It seemed like the manly thing to do
12. I was acting like a criminal
13. It was like being a victim
14. I was acting like a hero
15. I found that I didn't care
16. I was acting out of revenge
17. I was doing a job
18. I found that I knew what I was doing
19. It seemed like the only thing to do
20. I was doing harm

**Figure 2**

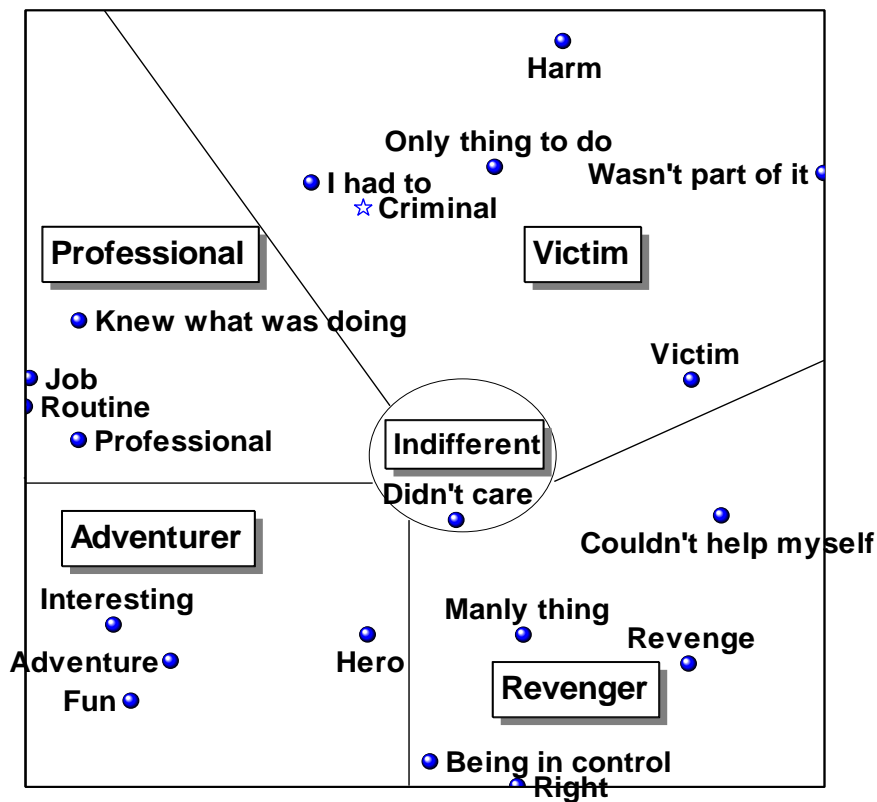




Table 3

**Roles Associated with Each SSA Region**

<b>THEMES</b>	<b>ROLES Statements</b>
<b>Professional (Irony)</b>	I found that I knew what I was doing
	I was doing a job
	It seemed routine
	It was like being a professional
<b>Adventurer (Comedy)</b>	It seemed fun
	I was acting like a hero
	I found it interesting
	It was like being on an adventure
<b>Revenger (Romance)</b>	It seemed right
	I found I couldn't help myself
	I was acting out of revenge
	It was like being in control
	It seemed like the manly thing to do
<b>Criminal (Tragedy)</b>	I was doing it because I had to
	I was acting like a criminal
	I was acting like I wasn't part of it
	It seemed like the only thing to do
	I was doing harm
	It was like being a victim
<b>Indifferent</b>	I found that I didn't care

**Figure 3**

**Frye's (1957) "Theory of Mythos" in association with Roles of offenders**

