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Serial Killers

By Sam Vaknin

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by: **Sam Vaknin**

Countess Erszebet Bathory was a breathtakingly beautiful, unusually well-educated woman, married to a descendant of Vlad Dracula of Bram Stoker fame. In 1611, she was tried – though, being a noblewoman, not convicted – in Hungary for slaughtering 612 young girls. The true figure may have been 40–100, though the Countess recorded in her diary more than 610 girls and 50 bodies were found in her estate when it was raided.

The Countess was notorious as an inhuman sadist long before her hygienic fixation. She once ordered the mouth of a talkative servant sewn. It is rumoured that in her childhood she witnessed a gypsy being sewn into a horse's stomach and left to die.

The girls were not killed outright. They were kept in a dungeon and repeatedly pierced, prodded, pricked, and cut. The Countess may have bitten chunks of flesh off their bodies while alive. She is said to have bathed and showered in their blood in the mistaken belief that she could thus slow down the aging process.

Her servants were executed, their bodies burnt and their ashes scattered. Being royalty, she was merely confined to her bedroom until she died in 1614. For a hundred years after her death, by royal decree, mentioning her name in Hungary was a crime.

Cases like Barothy's give the lie to the assumption that serial killers are a modern – or even post-modern – phenomenon, a cultural–societal construct, a by-product of urban alienation, Althusserian interpellation, and media glamorization. Serial killers are, indeed, largely made, not born. But they are spawned by every culture and society, molded by the idiosyncrasies of every period as well as by their personal circumstances and genetic makeup.

Still, every crop of serial killers mirrors and reifies the pathologies of the milieu, the depravity of the Zeitgeist, and the malignancies of the Leitkultur. The choice of weapons, the identity and range of the

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victims, the methodology of murder, the disposal of the bodies, the geography, the sexual perversions and paraphilias – are all informed and inspired by the slayer's environment, upbringing, community, socialization, education, peer group, sexual orientation, religious convictions, and personal narrative. Movies like "Born Killers", "Man Bites Dog", "Copycat", and the Hannibal Lecter series captured this truth.

Serial killers are the quiddity and quintessence of malignant narcissism.

Yet, to some degree, we all are narcissists. Primary narcissism is a universal and inescapable developmental phase. Narcissistic traits are common and often culturally condoned. To this extent, serial killers are merely our reflection through a glass darkly.

In their book "Personality Disorders in Modern Life", Theodore Millon and Roger Davis attribute pathological narcissism to "a society that stresses individualism and self-gratification at the expense of

community ... In an individualistic culture, the narcissist is 'God's gift to the world'. In a collectivist society, the narcissist is 'God's gift to the collective'".

Lasch described the narcissistic landscape thus (in "The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an age of Diminishing Expectations", 1979):

"The new narcissist is haunted not by guilt but by anxiety. He seeks not to inflict his own certainties on others but to find a meaning in life. Liberated from the superstitions of the past, he doubts even the reality of his own existence ... His sexual attitudes are permissive rather than puritanical, even though his emancipation from ancient taboos brings him no sexual peace.

Fiercely competitive in his demand for approval and acclaim, he distrusts competition because he associates it unconsciously with an unbridled urge to destroy ... He (harbours) deeply antisocial impulses. He praises respect for rules and regulations in the secret belief that they do not apply to himself. Acquisitive in the sense that his cravings have no limits, he ... demands immediate gratification and lives in a state of restless, perpetually unsatisfied desire."

The narcissist's pronounced lack of empathy, off-handed exploitativeness, grandiose fantasies and uncompromising sense of entitlement make him treat all people as though they were objects (he "objectifies" people). The narcissist regards others as either useful conduits for and sources of narcissistic supply (attention, adulation, etc.) – or as extensions of himself.

Similarly, serial killers often mutilate their victims and abscond with trophies – usually, body parts. Some of them have been known to eat the organs they have ripped – an act of merging with the dead and assimilating them through digestion. They treat their victims as some children do their rag dolls.

Killing the victim – often capturing him or her on film before the murder – is a form of exerting unmitigated, absolute, and irreversible control over it. The serial killer aspires to "freeze time" in the still perfection that he has choreographed. The victim is motionless and defenseless. The killer attains long sought "object permanence". The victim is unlikely to run on the serial assassin, or vanish as earlier

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objects in the killer's life (e.g., his parents) have done.

In malignant narcissism, the true self of the narcissist is replaced by a false construct, imbued with omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. The narcissist's thinking is magical and infantile. He feels immune to the consequences of his own actions. Yet, this very source of apparently superhuman fortitude is also the narcissist's Achilles heel.

The narcissist's personality is chaotic. His defense mechanisms are primitive. The whole edifice is precariously balanced on pillars of denial, splitting, projection, rationalization, and projective identification. Narcissistic injuries – life crises, such as abandonment, divorce, financial difficulties, incarceration, public opprobrium – can bring the whole thing tumbling down. The narcissist cannot afford to be rejected, spurned, insulted, hurt, resisted, criticized, or disagreed with.

Likewise, the serial killer is trying desperately to avoid a painful relationship with his object of desire. He is terrified of being abandoned or humiliated, exposed for what he is and then discarded. Many killers often have sex – the ultimate form of intimacy – with the corpses of their victims. Objectification and mutilation allow for unchallenged possession.

Devoid of the ability to empathize, permeated by haughty feelings of superiority and uniqueness, the

narcissist cannot put himself in someone else's shoes, or even imagine what it means. The very experience of being human is alien to the narcissist whose invented False Self is always to the fore, cutting him off from the rich panoply of human emotions.

Thus, the narcissist believes that all people are narcissists. Many serial killers believe that killing is the way of the world. Everyone would kill if they could or were given the chance to do so. Such killers are convinced that they are more honest and open about their desires and, thus, morally superior. They hold others in contempt for being conforming hypocrites, cowed into submission by an overweening establishment or society.

The narcissist seeks to adapt society in general – and meaningful others in particular – to his needs. He regards himself as the epitome of perfection, a yardstick against which he measures everyone, a benchmark of excellence to be emulated. He acts the guru, the sage, the "psychotherapist", the "expert", the objective observer of human affairs. He diagnoses the "faults" and "pathologies" of people around him and "helps" them "improve", "change", "evolve", and "succeed" – i.e., conform to the narcissist's vision and wishes.

Serial killers also "improve" their victims – slain, intimate objects – by "purifying" them, removing "imperfections", depersonalizing and dehumanizing them. This type of killer saves its victims from degeneration and degradation, from evil and from sin, in short: from a fate worse than death.

The killer's megalomania manifests at this stage. He claims to possess, or have access to, higher knowledge and morality. The killer is a special being and the victim is "chosen" and should be grateful for it. The killer often finds the victim's ingratitude irritating, though sadly predictable.

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In his seminal work, "Aberrations of Sexual Life" (originally: "Psychopathia Sexualis"), quoted in the book "Jack the Ripper" by Donald Rumbelow, Kraft-Ebbing offers this observation:

"The perverse urge in murders for pleasure does not solely aim at causing the victim pain and – most acute injury of all – death, but that the real meaning of the action consists in, to a certain extent, imitating, though perverted into a monstrous and ghastly form, the act of defloration. It is for this reason that an essential component ... is the employment of a sharp cutting weapon; the victim has to be pierced, slit, even chopped up ... The chief wounds are inflicted in the stomach region and, in many cases, the fatal cuts run from the vagina into the abdomen. In boys an artificial vagina is even made ... One can connect a fetishistic element too with this process of hacking ... inasmuch as parts of the body are removed and ... made into a collection."

Yet, the sexuality of the serial, psychopathic, killer is self-directed. His victims are props, extensions, aides, objects, and symbols. He interacts with them ritually and, either before or after the act, transforms his diseased inner dialog into a self-consistent extraneous catechism. The narcissist is equally auto-erotic. In the sexual act, he merely masturbates with other – living – people's bodies.

The narcissist's life is a giant repetition complex. In a doomed attempt to resolve early conflicts with significant others, the narcissist resorts to a restricted repertoire of coping strategies, defense mechanisms, and behaviors. He seeks to recreate his past in each and every new relationship and interaction. Inevitably, the narcissist is invariably confronted with the same outcomes. This recurrence only reinforces the narcissist's rigid reactive patterns and deep-set beliefs. It is a vicious, intractable, cycle.

Correspondingly, in some cases of serial killers, the murder ritual seemed to have recreated earlier conflicts with meaningful objects, such as parents, authority figures, or peers. The outcome of the replay is different to the original, though. This time, the killer dominates the situation.

The killings allow him to inflict abuse and trauma on others rather than be abused and traumatized. He outwits and taunts figures of authority – the police, for instance. As far as the killer is concerned, he is merely "getting back" at society for what it did to him. It is a form of poetic justice, a balancing of the books, and, therefore, a "good" thing. The murder is cathartic and allows the killer to release hitherto repressed and pathologically transformed aggression – in the form of hate, rage, and envy.

But repeated acts of escalating gore fail to alleviate the killer's overwhelming anxiety and depression. He seeks to vindicate his negative introjects and sadistic superego by being caught and punished. The serial killer tightens the proverbial noose around his neck by interacting with law enforcement agencies and the media and thus providing them with clues as to his identity and whereabouts. When apprehended, most serial assassins experience a great sense of relief.

Serial killers are not the only objectifiers – people who treat others as objects. To some extent, leaders of all sorts – political, military, or corporate – do the same. In a range of demanding professions – surgeons, medical doctors, judges, law enforcement agents – objectification efficiently fends off attendant horror and anxiety.

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Yet, serial killers are different. They represent a dual failure – of their own development as full–fledged, productive individuals – and of the culture and society they grow in. In a pathologically narcissistic civilization – social anomies proliferate. Such societies breed malignant objectifiers – people devoid of empathy – also known as "narcissists".

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Animal Cruelty: The Key to Serial Minds

By C. Bailey–Lloyd/LadyCamelot

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What makes a common person a Serial Killer? According to research, serial killers exhibit what is known as the 'Triad of Warning Signs in Childhood.'¹

Indicators include:

- * Firestarting, invariably just for the thrill of destroying things
- * Cruelty to Animals: Most children can be cruel to animals, such as pulling the legs off of spiders, but future serial killers often kill larger animals, like dogs and cats, and frequently for their solitary enjoyment rather than to impress peers.
- * Bedwetting beyond the age when children normally grow out of such behavior.

One of society's more notorious serial killers, Jeffrey Dahmer explained that wanted to remove 'free will' from his victims so that they would stay with him. In his past, he suffered from abandonment and was afraid of loss and any social upheaval. Another one of his extremely displaced characteristics was that he suffered from low self–esteem. His parents divorced during his teens, and when he did go to college, he performed badly. Upon examination of three psychologists, Dahmer was found to be manipulative, resistant and evasive.² Further studies of Dahmer revealed that he could not tolerate rejection or abandonment; and that control was the number one factor for him. One clue to his unusually sick behavior was that even in his relationships, Dahmer did not gratify his sexual partners – instead, Dahmer always expected to be pleased by them.

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According to Pat Brown's Book,

Killing for Sport: Inside the Minds of Serial Killers

'...serial killers are of

Ted Bundy, who murdered at least 36 women, was known for his expressed desire to acquire things. From theft, to the importance of social standing, he pined to break free from the working class from which he was born. Additionally, he 'needed' to possess expensive items as well. Per research, Ted came from a single-parent home, was a severe sexual deviate; and women threatened him. He felt the need to not only control them, but to incapacitate them as well. As a teenager, Ted Bundy became known for his violent temper.

But what do serial killers like Dahmer, Bundy and others like them have in common?

*'Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, Andrew Cunanan, David 'Son of Sam' Berkowitz, and Albert 'Boston Strangler' DeSalvo were ALL cruel to animals before they started hurting people.'*⁶ Subsequently, killer teenagers Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold (Columbine HS), and Kip Kinkel were also known for their past

history of animal cruelty. In the study from of *'The Care of pets within child abusing families,'* presented by DeViney & Lockwood, 88 percent of the homes where animal abuse had occurred, children were also abused.

In conclusion, I summarise this important literature from the San Francisco Chronicle commentary by Margo DeMello:

Youthful violence toward animals is a very serious issue, and it needs to be taken seriously by not only animal advocates like myself, but by those who are concerned about violence in our society." – Margo DeMello, Ph.D.,

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