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Serial Killers, Media Involvement, and the Layers of Masculinity

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Abstract

This chapter explores fictional representations of serial killers with respect to gender and behavioural patterns in Marie Belloc Lowndes' *The Lodger* (1913) and Meg Gardiner's *Unsub* (2018). Both novels draw from true crime events and feature fictionalised representations of two of the most notorious serial murderers in history: Jack the Ripper and the Zodiac. While both murderers' identities are still unknown, they are still commonly read as male – a conception also reproduced by the authors of the two novels. Simultaneously both fictional serial killers showcase instances of media involvement. This chapter argues that these literary representations of serial killers exaggerate stereotypical notions of masculinity similar to true crime narratives and are even more facilitated by the fictional perpetrators' ambitions to 'reach out to the media'. This analysis will be supported by a theoretical foundation of sex differences and (violent) crime in the real world, underpinned by a reflection on gender in true crime. This chapter will then juxtapose fact with fiction and examine to what degree the fictional offenders portray realistic or overdone representations of (male) serial killers.

Keywords

Serial killers, masculinity, gender stereotyping, true crime, media, media involvement

Serial killing is a staple of Western popular media. Although this type of crime is exceptionally rare,[1] it does not fail to attract enormous public interest and media attention which is why we seem so familiar "with the serial killer's domain of violence" nowadays (MacDonald 4). Having become ubiquitous in the late 1970s and 1980s, depictions of serial murderers have been circulating within our cultural discourse in various forms. While real-life cases are naturally covered largely by news media, representations of serial killers have also spilt over to entertainment media, including books, TV shows, films, video games and, most recently, podcasts.

Yet, considering both news and entertainment media, these characters are "almost always 'white' males" (MacDonald 8), whereas most victims are readily pictured as female. This might appear a logical implementation if we consider that about 60% of serial killers' victims are indeed women (Haggerty 181). Further, this paradigm

[1] In the US, serial murder comprises approximately 1% of all homicides committed per annum, potentially even less (Jenkins 13).

also frames serial killing as an act stereotypically represented as inherently masculine which is enhanced by popular media representations, especially in true crime. Overall, "many more media portrayals focus on male serial killers, with an implicit assumption that such violence and aggression is an inherent male trait" (Silva and Rousseau 67). Correspondingly, MacDonald argues that within these portrayals, "[t]he assumed 'maleness' of the serial killer serves to reinforce patriarchal notions of female public activity – particularly female violence – as a disruption to 'natural' order. Traditionally, aggression and violence are associated with masculinity which, within patriarchal constraints, is to be embodied by men" (8).

From this perspective, the male perpetrator does not perform a "radical transgression against gender norms" as compared to female offenders (Binder 75). While a woman's act of violence is predominantly considered a threat for deviating against gender expectations, the male offender does not face the same societal verdict. Instead, many get glorified. Especially true crime narratives have been instrumental in elevating individuals like Ted Bundy, Charles Manson, or Jeffrey Dahmer to celebrity-like status while fortifying gender essentialist notions.

This chapter aims to explore the *gendered* issue of serial killing from a literary perspective and will investigate fictional representations of serial killers with respect to gender and behavioural patterns in Marie Belloc Lowndes' *The Lodger* (1913) and Meg Gardiner's *Unsub* (2018). Both novels draw on true crime events and feature fictionalised representations of two of the most notorious serial murderers in history: Jack the Ripper and the Zodiac. While both murderers' identities are still unknown, they are still commonly read as male – a conception also reproduced by the authors. Often, literary representations of serial killers tend to exaggerate stereotypical notions of masculinity, similar to true crime narratives. These, I claim, are even more facilitated by the novels' fictional perpetrators' ambitions to intentionally seek attention by reaching out to the media. Hence, I argue that the 'media involvement' of these male serial killers serves as an expression of their masculine identities. The following analysis will be supported by a theoretical foundation of sex differences and (violent) crime in the real world, underpinned by a subsequent reflection on gender in true crime. At the same time, this chapter wants to examine to what extent these fictionalised characters' media involvement constitutes an intensification of their embodied masculinity as represented in the novels.

Sex Differences and Gendered Perspectives on Extreme Violence

Statistically, about 85% of all recorded serial killings are perpetrated by men (Wilson 149). This paradigm is also reflected in the majority of academic discourse and media which "gives the impression that men are the only sex that repeatedly kills" which is by no means accurate (Gavin and Porter 146). Yet women exhibit a different relationship to aggression: qualitative studies show that girls' aggression is more

subtle and indirectly expressed compared to boys', usually resorting to gossip, forms of manipulation, slander, or even withdrawal of friendship (Micus-Loos 221). This divergence of aggressive behaviour can also be examined in the ways that women kill.

Women make up approximately 10% of registered serial murderers, though it is assumed that some cases – especially sexually motivated killings – may go unnoticed because they are attributed to male perpetrators (Neubauer-Petzoldt 165, 167). According to Harrison et al., "[m]ale perpetrated serial murder . . . is characteristically violent, sexually sadistic, and frequently committed against women" who are typically strangers to them (298). Female serial killers, in contrast, tend to target similar victims from their professional and private environment, that is, people whom they share personal relationships with like their husbands, children, parents, or even patients (Neubauer-Petzoldt 167).

From a patriarchal view, it seems that "fatal violence has a much easier fit with masculinity than it does with femininity" (Wilson 152). While women are typically regarded as sensitive and gentle, men get readily characterised as rational, independent, and dominant (see *Table 1*). Many cultures share similar gender stereotypes concerning masculinity which view men "as stronger, more active, and higher in achievement, autonomy, and aggression" than women (Deaux 291-92). Yet, to "believe [that] men are inherently more violent than women" would suggest a gender-essentialist perspective that exaggerates "male propensity" for fatal violence, normalises violence as an attribute of traditional masculinity while failing to acknowledge similarities across the gender spectrum (Marganski 5).

Masculinity	**Femininity**
Rational	Emotional
Active	Passive
Independent	Dependent
Ambitious	Content
Competitive	Cooperative
Sexually aggressive	Sex object
Insensitive	Sensitive
Analytical	Intuitive
Selfish, purposeful	Selfless, altruistic
Provider	Carer / nurturer

Table 1: Stereotypical Traits of Masculinity and Femininity (Wilson et al. 151).

Much of male-perpetrated violence can be traced back to learned behaviour within and between social groups including gender expectations about what a (wo)man should be(have) like (Wilson et al. 151; *Table 1*). Thus, gender, not biological sex, is

instrumental in shaping and impacting (violent) behaviour. From an early age, "men and boys tend to experience pressure to conform to group norms of stereotypical or dominant masculinity characterized by toughness, assertiveness, and risk-taking behaviors" with anger being the only outlet acceptable to be externalised (Marganski 5). This understanding of masculinity can be translated to "hegemonic masculinity", a concept developed by sociologist Raewyn Connell in 1985, which is built upon

> understandings that men embody diverse relational, context-specific gendered performances that shape and are shaped by an array of alignments to dominant or hegemonic masculinities . . . [which] are also patriarchal and imbued with power that is wielded to marginalize and subordinate women and other men. (Oliffe et al. 474)

Aggression and violent behaviour may then pose as a tried and tested means to exert power and control over 'inferiors', increase self-esteem, or gain social and material advantages (Micus-Loos 221). This behavioural pattern is also activated when masculine identity, and thereby, patriarchal authority is threatened (e.g. instances of rejection, humiliation). On such occasions, men who are inclined to follow hegemonic masculinity ideals may settle for violence to retrieve power and control "as a resource to assert one's masculinity and contest being marginalized or 'othered' [by ostracization, harassment, etc.]" (Oliffe et al. 474). Particularly in the forensic field of mass murder and murder-suicide, some researchers suggest that "M-S[2] is an extreme end-product of failed manhood at work, school, and/or within family milieus" (474). In addition to social and financial stressors, the perceived loss of manhood and victimisation constitute motivating factors for these individuals to kill.

Yet, research on serial murder remains scarce "due to the lack of consensus on a definition, the continued use of primarily descriptive statistics, and linkage to popular culture depictions" (Gurian 544). Nevertheless, there are two studies that investigate the phenomenon of serial killing and sex differences from a scholarly perspective: firstly, Harrison et al. (2019) who proposed and tried a "'hunter-gatherer' model of serial murder"; secondly, a survey of global serial killer cases between 1900-2013 undertaken by criminologist Elizabeth A. Gurian (2017). To assess sex differences in serial killing from an evolutionary-psychological lens, Harrison et al. compared data about 55 male and 55 female serial killers from the US. They were able to determine "that MSKs more frequently act as 'hunters,' stalking and killing targeted strangers in dispersed areas, while FSKs more frequently are 'gatherers,' killing those who are around them and . . . gaining profit from their crimes" (295).[3] The researchers ascertained that male serial killers "more frequently kill strangers they stalk, travelling distances to 'hunt' and kill" (296).[4] Gurian's survey provides similar findings and concludes that solo male serial killers are likely to kill strangers only

[2] Abbreviation for murder-suicide.
[3] MSK = male serial killer; FSK = female serial killer.
[4] This method is exemplified by the hedonistic serial killer who is known to lust after strangers and stalk them for personal thrill, sexual gratification, and feelings of power (Harrison et al. 297).

and employ a combination of killing methods, ranging from strangulation, shooting, and stabbing to blunt force (551-52).

Additionally, Harrison et al. found that male perpetrators' predatory behaviour usually consisted of "methodically select[ing] and stalk[ing] previously unfamiliar victims, patrolling and waiting, often for days, for the right time to attack, capture, and force the victim into submission" which implies animalistic undertones (297). Moreover, many of these perpetrators were also shown to have "disarticulate[d] or otherwise butcher[ed] their victims" or collected trophies of their deeds, such as body parts, jewellery, or clothing (298). An example of such a killer would be Jeffrey Dahmer, who not only dismembered his victims and kept their body parts in his apartment but also took photographs of them to keep as trophies. Body dismemberment, by contrast, is not distinctive of female-perpetrated serial murder. Instead, these criminals commonly operate as "quiet killers" and resort to using poison or suffocation which makes it hard for doctors to discern these murders as such, especially within care facilities and hospitals (Neubauer-Petzoldt 168). After all, women's delinquency is not a question of nature but opportunity: historically relegated to the "feminised" domestic sphere and excluded from the world of work, women had above all the opportunity to poison relatives or kill their partners or children (Neubacher 87).

Another striking, yet media-constructed divergence between the sexes is the way they are portrayed by the media. Male perpetrators are often given names that highlight the brutality and uncanniness of their crimes, frequently containing descriptors such as "*ripper, stalker, slasher, butcher* and *vampire*" (Wiest 331). Female serial killers, in comparison, get reduced to their gender with less grave monikers like "Giggling Grandma, Lonely Hearts Killer, Lady Rotten, Black Widow, Angel of Death, Barbie Killer, Death Row Granny" which mirrors the gendered nature of serial killing which is reinforced by the media (Vronsky 3). Nevertheless, some (male) killers also title themselves and actively seek media attention (e.g. Zodiac, BTK, Son of Sam). Indeed, many offenders "desire to make the headlines and realize that sensational murders draw a good deal of [such]" (Fox and Levin 415). In this context, Harrison et al. also detected that most male serial killers in their sample came from lower-middle-class and lower-class backgrounds and displayed lower levels of education; bragging about their crimes may then demonstrate a desire for status elevation (303).

True Crime and Gender: Reinforcing Stereotypes?

> "It's a discounting of the stories of the women in favour of the central hero being the most important character in the narrative . . . and that is the failure to look deeper and think harder about violence against women in our culture." – Ginger Strand in *Ted Bundy: Falling for a Killer* ("Boy Meets Girl", 01:45-02:04)

The statement by author Ginger Strand quoted above highlights the ethical dilemma that true crime deals with. Designed for entertainment purposes and heavily influenced by our late-modern fascination with violence, true crime has jumped on the bandwagon of entertainment and news media. "True crime", according to Murley, "is a genre that claims a strict and tidy relationship with 'reality' or 'truth,' and many of its creators and consumers believe it to depict 'just the facts'" (13). Although the genre suggests an objective standpoint, it frequently misconstrues reality and uses dramatisation and exaggeration to keep up with modern culture's fascination for violent crimes. It "always fictionalizes, emphasizes, exaggerates, interprets, constructs, and creates 'truth,' and any relationship to the facts is mediated and compromised" (13). What might seem like a contradiction to its name has become the recipe for true crime's success.

The overwhelming majority of true crime narratives portray "white, middle-class killers and victims" (Murley 2), focusing intensely "on both serial killing and murder in the domestic sphere" (5-6). In almost 80% of all true crime narratives, the crime is one or more murders while predominantly white people fall victim to the perpetrators, especially women or children (Sahner 145-46). True crime further represents white women as most likely to fall victim to violent crime, which ignores the fact that women of colour get killed at much higher rates (Webb 163). In addition, this frame suggests that women are essentially most at risk regarding violent crimes; however, men constitute the vast majority of victims globally in different kinds of interpersonal violence, except for sexual offences (Möller-Leimkühler 70).[5]

As mentioned above, serial killing constitutes one of the rarest crimes but is extensively reproduced in popular media. Interest in this sort of violence peaked in the 1990s with genre-defining film productions such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) or *Se7en* (1995) while media-intensive incidents like the trials of Jeffrey Dahmer, Joel Rifkin, and Aileen Wuornos dominated the media landscape (Jenkins 3). These instances not only helped shape our cultural imagination of the violent white serial killer but also assisted in situating this figure as a stock character in contemporary public discourse.

Traditionally, serial killers have been depicted "as individualized monstrous psychopaths" (Schmid 176). Earlier portrayals of such individuals – factual and fictional alike – usually pictured them as "an evil Other, a Gothic monster, or criminal mastermind" and inspired horror in contemporary audiences (Milde 82). However, the prototype of "the serial murderer as sexually motivated killer in culture" only prolif-

[5] Following police crime statistics, two-thirds of all victims of violence are young men; compared to women, they have a three to four times higher risk of becoming victims of violent crimes (Möller-Leimkühler 70). Regarding homicide, men constitute about 80% of victims (Harrison et al. 298).

erated after the Whitechapel murders in 1888 which incited the production of numerous popular cultural texts "which adopted the familiar template set by the murders" (Wattis 284-85). Similar to its nineteenth-century predecessors, modern true crime still heavily relies "on horror and a rhetorical distancing of the killer through the language of monstrosity" (Murley 6). Nevertheless, real serial murderers "tend to look very ordinary . . . [which] makes it difficult to distinguish serial killers from 'normal' men" (Schmid 177). Consequently, true crime frequently accentuates the criminals' transgressions by scrutinising their childhood for premonitions of potential deviance which also "impl[ies] that the apparent ordinariness of serial killers is, paradoxically, the most convincing sign of their wickedness" (177-78).

Although nowadays true crime narratives still aim to portray these individuals as aberrations, another rendition has developed in the late-twentieth century – namely, "the idea of the serial killer as attractive and intelligent, and crucially someone with whom we could identify" (Wattis 288). The newly heightened visuality of serial killers through new sorts of mass media beyond newspapers and true crime books (e.g. TV documentaries, crime dramas) fomented this new kind of "celebritization" as purported by Schmid (2005).[6] By turning these individuals into modern "celebrities", the violent masculine subject becomes "nameable and creates parameters for what this violence looks like" while the violence against the victims becomes peripheral (Compton 58).

Thus, true crime often trades in gender-essentialist views and silences groups perceived as inferior, especially women. From a feminist perspective, Jarvis argues, "the killer/victim dyad produces a polarization of gender norms: the killer embodies an über-masculinity while the victim who is dominated, opened and entered personifies a hyper-femininity (irrespective of biology)" (333). Yet, these gendered power dynamics do not end when the crime has occurred. By commercially exploiting the fascination with violent crime as stories, real violence against people becomes an entertainment factor (Sahner 150). Further, the accumulation of female murder victims in true crime expresses a conservative gender image that distinguishes between passive female victims and active male perpetrators, investigators, or protectors (Harms 4).

Serial Killers, Media Involvement, and Layers of Masculinity in Marie Belloc Lowndes' *The Lodger* (1913) and Meg Gardiner's *Unsub* (2018)

In the following part, this chapter looks at two novels from different time periods that both draw on true crime events and use fictionalised representations of male

[6] A current case would be Netflix's *Dahmer* (2022) and Berlinger's *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (2019). Casting objectively attractive, popular, and charming actors like Zac Efron or Evan Peters helps secure these killers "a place in an American celebrity culture of infamy, which . . . fetishizes, romanticises, and traffics in the 'careers' of such killers" (Murley 5).

serial killers. The subsequent section analyses these fictitious perpetrators with regard to gender and gendered behavioural patterns, particularly scrutinising the ways in which these characters utilise the media and even interfere with them. I argue that their respective 'media involvement' is not only a way to seek attention but to express their respective masculinity.

The Lodger (1913)

The Lodger starts with the Buntings, an elderly lower-middle-class couple out of service, who offer lodgings in their home to earn their living. They rent a room to the mysterious Mr Sleuth – a "long, lanky figure of a man, clad in an Inverness cape and an old-fashioned top hat" (Belloc Lowndes 19). He has "a dark, sensitive, hatched-shaped face" and frequently rubs "his long, thin hands together with a quick nervous movement" (23). Although Sleuth seems rather dodgy from the novel's beginning, Mrs Bunting regards him as a proper gentleman which secures him not only accommodation but a questionably strong trust from his landlady. This is surprising in so far as at the same time that Mr Sleuth finds lodgings with the Buntings, a notorious killer – "The Avenger" – roams London and terrorises its residents.

From the onset, Belloc Lowndes subtly nudges the reader to find the necessary evidence to conclude that the lodger and the Avenger are indeed the same person. For instance, he has no belongings aside from cash and a leather bag he never leaves unaccompanied. Later, the witness statements support that the killer was always seen with a bag in hand where he presumably hid his murder weapon (50, 183-84, 211). Sleuth, a self-proclaimed "man of science", further aggravates his conspicuous behaviour by performing "all sorts of experiments [at night]" (23), reminiscent of Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Whenever the "Avenger" strikes, the lodger is out the same night and feigns being ill the following day (64, 71, 147), growing more nervous and behaving even queerer when he hears the newsboys shouting about the Avenger's latest deeds (112, 151-52).

Sleuth's "mask of sanity" finally falls when he, Mrs Bunting, and her stepdaughter visit Madame Tussaud's where they meet Chief Commissioner Burney accompanied by friends, whom he tells about the police's ongoing investigation. Overhearing Burney talk about a suspect who escaped from the asylum "with extraordinary cunning and intelligence" (242-43), the lodger feels betrayed and flees, believing his landlady responsible for giving him away to the authorities. This apparent deceit by the one person he trusted activates Sleuth's aggressive, dangerous 'serial killer alter ego' and turns him into a monstrous figure: "there came a terrible change over his pale, narrow face; it became discomposed, livid with rage and terror" (243). His transformation is complete when he throws his last threats at Mrs Bunting:

> "Do not think to escape the consequences of your hideous treachery. I trusted you, Mrs. Bunting, and you betrayed me! Put (sic!) I am protected by a higher power, for I still have

> much to do. . . . Your end will be bitter as wormwood and sharp as a two-edged sword. Your feet shall go down to death, and your steps take hold on hell". (244)

Overall, the lodger displays a high emotionality and sensitiveness which rather fit with notions of a deviant and somewhat feminised masculinity which is also evident in descriptions of his "sensitive face", frequent emotional outbursts, and altogether nervous demeanour. In addition, Sleuth exhibits a fanatic religiousness which is manifested in his abhorrence of alcohol and "queer kind of fear and dislike of women" (44). The latter further suggests a degree of misogyny that is also depicted in his killer persona and respective killings. His deviant masculinity, hence, is similarly riddled with misogynist tendencies as normative masculinity.

As the Avenger, Sleuth acts as a visionary serial killer with a misogynist ideology. He kills dipsomaniac women and pins "three-cornered piece[s] of paper, on which was written, in red ink, and in printed characters, the words, 'THE AVENGER'" to his victims' clothing (12). Apart from a stark sense of mission, this method suggests a desire to gain recognition and claim his victims as possessions and mark his trophies. Also, the fact that the murderer deliberately chooses his own sobriquet conveys a certain self-proclaimed grandeur and that he has a purpose to fulfil – to avenge. Moreover, the term 'avenger' in itself possesses a masculine connotation which can also be found in the *OED*[7] (emphasis added): "*He* who avenges (the injured or the injury). / *He* who takes vengeance on, or punishes (the offender)." Even in the *OED*, the term 'avenger' is associated with a certain maleness and violence as exemplified by the words "punished" and "injury". Similar links are drawn in the observation of the murderer's killing scheme: "'he moved swiftly and silently Westward [for his next murder] . . . choosing a time when the Edgware Road is at its busiest and most thronged, did another human being to death with lightning-like quickness and savagery'" (Belloc Lowndes 138). This description vividly lends the Avenger's violence animalistic undertones and hints at predator-like schemes characteristic of male serial killers as proposed by Harrison et al. and Gurian. Moreover, we learn that the criminal only kills alcoholic women but fails to dispose of his victims' bodies. Consequently, the killer must have either aimed to draw attention or was interrupted by pedestrians before finishing his plans. Considering that the Avenger leaves his signature, "'the usual now familiar triangular piece of grey paper—the grimmest visiting card ever designed by the wit of man'", pinned to his victims' corpses suggests that the first option seems more probable (139).

Additionally, the culprit also employs letter-writing to draw attention from the media and police. One such letter is sent to the police "signed 'The Avenger,' in just the

[7] This online entry was revised in July 2023 and now reads "a person" instead of "he" in the depicted examples which was not the case at the time when this chapter was originally produced. Hence, in this part, I refer to the non-revised entry and not the latest version that can be found on the current website.

same printed characters as on that bit of paper he always leaves behind" (87). The author ultimately leaves open the press's reaction to this correspondence and though the letter's contents are not disclosed, this deliberate act of seeking attention by correspondence implies that the Avenger has intended to irritate the authorities and gain recognition. Sleuth also follows up on his crimes in the newspaper to countercheck his persecutors' progress but feels disturbed whenever there are indeed new traces (214, 224). Yet, while his ways of reaching out to the media are too implicit to make conclusive remarks, I would still consider him for this analysis because he represents an active 'media influencer' who partakes in his own mythologisation. His ways to draw media attention may seem indirect and subtle but effective enough to keep him in the newspaper headlines and help shape his serial killer persona in the public eye.

Indeed, the public's verdict demarcates the Avenger as a true incarnation of the "evil Other" and readily reads him as male. Mr Bunting, for example, comments on the Avenger as being a "man's dead to all human feeling—saving, of course, revenge'" (192). Detective Chandler further proposes the criminal is either a sailor who can up and leave without a trace, a butcher from the Central Market who is naturally used to killing, or an escaped lunatic (231) – all male. In all public assumptions, we find stereotypical links between violence and masculinity: the idea of vicious brutality, apparently analytically planned, and passive female victims inspire this certain "maleness". Further, the image of the 'wicked madman' also dominates in Belloc Lowndes' novel since she deliberately frames the Avenger as an asylum escapee (242-43). Hence, Sleuth's impulsiveness and rage may be caused by an alleged mental illness which renders him a hybrid on the verge of hypermasculine violence and murderous impulse control disorder. At the same time, Sleuth/Avenger is hybridised by his deviant, somewhat feminised masculinity and sensitive appearance as opposed to his violent, hypermasculine 'serial killer alter ego'. By feminising the murderer, the author utilises another othering mechanism that further marginalises the criminal and shows a rare case of deviant masculinity.

Unsub (2018)

Moving on to Gardiner's *Unsub*, the novel revolves around the life of Detective Caitlin Hendrix who is assigned the "Prophet" case – an unidentified serial killer of eleven people formerly active from 1993-98 (18). Having remained dormant for twenty years, the Prophet makes a sensational return through a gruesome double murder marked by his typical signature which is exemplary of his *modus operandi*:

> [H]e'd take two victims at a time and pose them in grotesque scenes, like mannequins in display windows from hell. The way he'd etch his signature into their flesh: the ancient sign for Mercury [☿], messenger of the gods, guide to the underworld. He sliced into one victim with a box cutter and poured liquid mercury into the wound. (17)

This passage is not only indicative of the killer's brutal, strategic, sadistic, and well-organised killing mechanisms but also highlights how the offender wants to be portrayed: as "Mercury, the messenger. The Prophet" (3). While the moniker "Prophet" is given to him by the press (36), the perpetrator prefers to be affiliated with the Roman god Mercury who is mentioned further in the context of Dante's *Inferno* – the killer's playbook. Here, Mercury personifies "'[t]he messenger of death, punishing a world that heaven hates'" (261). Thus, by materialising the "Nine Circles of Hell" as depicted in Dante's *Inferno*, the Prophet hopes to punish "humanity with all the contempt and creativity that poetic justice required" (280). Seeking out victims who embody sin (similar to Fincher's *Se7en*), the killer uses a different killing method in every episode and stages them accordingly. Considering the Prophet's strong sense of mission, the killer appears to be very strategic, ambitious, and purposeful. Carving in his badge, the Mercury symbol, also illustrates the killer's sadism and desire for possession similar to the Avenger.

According to his persecutors, the murderer – later identified as Titus Rhone – is someone with "social skills . . . [who] could probably lure people into his orbit with charming talk, before he isolated and killed them" (142). He does not kill impulsively but strategically plans his deeds by drawing maps of the victims' neighbourhoods, including potential escape routes if he needs to flee (142). These characteristics demonstrate an evil mastermind at work who hides in plain sight behind his apparent ordinariness and charming appearance similar to modern portrayals of serial killers. Throughout the novel, the murderer chooses strangers whom he stalks before attacking them. The catalyst for Rhone's crimes, aside from his apparent vision, derives from an experience of rejection by Giselle Fraser – his first victim – whom he also calls "The Tease" (284):

> The jogger who smiled at him, who said hi to him, then ignored him. . . . Leading him on, then running with another man and never speaking to him again. Whispering with the other guy, and laughing . . . at him, undoubtedly. . . . When he first began, Giselle the Tease had lured him into acting out of season. (284)

His first murder is marked by injured pride, misogyny, and a perceived loss of manliness. Since Rhone was unsuccessful in securing his desired sexual partner and felt humiliated, he resorted to murdering the person who threatened his masculinity to regain his power. Similar to mass murderers, the formerly weak man now takes up the role of "punisher" to restore the social order in his hegemonic ideology. Another way the Prophet implements control is evident in his predatory behaviour when obtaining his victims. For instance, in the case of Stuart Ackermann, he observes his target with binoculars from inside his black pickup (33); in yet another scene, he spies upon the police investigating one of his crime scenes (244). Both instances highlight the murderer's extreme predatory antics which supports the hunter-typi-

fication posited by Harrison et al. The Prophet's predatory behaviour is further highlighted when he murders Ackermann to stage the Sixth Circle by chasing his victim through the woods and shooting him with bow and arrow (49).

Overall, the Prophet enjoys "to test and taunt" (19). He tortures not only his victims but also their families via phone calls and videotapes of their beloved. The Prophet deliberately plays with people's feelings and deceives them by "[g]iving hope, [while] dangling the lure" which again demonstrates his perverse desire to exert control over his victims, persecutors, and the public (40). Moreover, the Prophet's crimes are characterised by an extraordinarily high media presence, including a media persona he predominantly shaped himself. Already at the beginning of his criminal career, Rhone "sent recordings [of his victims being tortured] to the police and television stations" (39). He frequently contacts the KDPX TV station by letter, including one addressed: "RUSH TO NEWS EDITOR" (63). The note inside, however, only consisted of a URL that subsequently leads to a website "designed to be accessed once, then to self-destruct" (65). On the one hand, this example shows how technophile the murderer is and how he has improved his skillset over the years; on the other hand, this act is yet another method to mislead the police and taunt them. Another scene in which this behaviour is emphasised is the Prophet's live call to the "Chaz and T-Bone" radio show. Even on the phone, the killer keeps taunting the investigators by saying "'Time is ticking, ticking . . . You got nothing'" (202), and "'Where are the sirens? Is that what I hear?'" to show off his superiority (208). Consequently, broadcasting his minutely planned show on the radio and internet is "all a mind job, meant to embarrass law enforcement and terrify the public" in which the culprit thoroughly succeeds (103).

All in all, the Prophet sends twenty-seven communications to the press and police. Several of these letters not only contain threats by the killer but passages quoted from literary works (e.g. Milton's *Paradise Lost,* T.S. Eliot's "East Coaker") and the Bible. Although these messages are not encrypted like the Zodiac's, they form a code – an acrostic that spells the phrase "Abandon Hope, All Ye Who Enter Here" from *Inferno* (255, 257). Throughout the novel, Titus Rhone grows bolder with his correspondence "[to] clarify to the bumblers in law enforcement and the media what his grand plan entailed" (282). He recruits *East Bay Herald* reporter Bart Fletcher by posing as an insider at the Alameda Sheriff's Office only to dispose of him after Fletcher served his purpose (248, 285). Moreover, the Prophet also shares an element with Mr Sleuth – keeping up with the news: while Mr Sleuth is anxious to know whether the police might be on to him, the Prophet's "palms itched with anticipation . . . [while] counting down to the next outpouring of poetic vengeance" (282).

Overall, Gardiner's Prophet provides an abundance of features that can be attributed to stereotypical masculinity ideals. He is a strategic, analytical thinker who follows a

purpose: a fantasy he wants to perfect that is supplemented by an urge to kill and a desire for power and possession (273). The Prophet embodies the evil mastermind which has become a popular trope in modern fictional portrayals of serial killers since Thomas Harris created Hannibal Lecter. By corresponding with the media, the Prophet succeeds in staying relevant and in the limelight. Moreover, activities like calling the victims' families or radio stations, playing videos or sending letters to reporters and TV stations fuel the killer's self-esteem and competitiveness. By reaching out to the media the way he does, Rhone ultimately brings more anguish to his victims' families, keeps the public in constant fear, and puts himself on the pedestal of power. In this sense, he embodies an idealised version of hegemonic masculinity that aims to dominate those deemed inferior by him.

Conclusion

This examination has shown that even in cases where the identity of the perpetrator is completely unknown, the typical male perpetrator profile is perpetuated. Similar to modern depictions of the "superstar serial killer", their fictional counterparts also exhibit distinctly stereotypical character traits but differ in the way these novels apply archetypes to them. Belloc Lowndes' Avenger is still more akin to the nineteenth-century tradition which favours Othering by a "language of monstrosity" to distance the killer from society. This is done through a strong feminisation as well as the subtextual notion that the serial killer is a madman on the loose. This twofold hybridisation is more in keeping with the discourse on violent criminals as monstrous figures rather than the modern image of the charming, socially capable celebrity-like serial killer that continuously graces the screens of our cinemas and streaming services. Of course, Gardiner's Prophet is dreaded for his atrocious crimes but is still portrayed as a wicked mastermind reminiscent of Harris' Hannibal Lecter, who is described as charming, socially capable, and exceedingly cunning. This character personifies the modern celebrity-like serial killer as purported by Schmid (2005) – a figure to admire and abhor. Moreover, we get to glimpse inside the killer's mind, feelings, and experiences of rejection which may warrant sympathy from the reader.

Overall, each novel's serial killer protagonist is stereotypically male, white, violent, and middle-class with misogynist ideologies. They target predominantly (white) women and, in the Prophet's case, men he regards as threats or weak. Both characters are renowned for their assertiveness, brutality, strength, and independence. From their point of view, both killers are providers of vengeance and recompense. Measuring up to Wilson's table (*Table 1*), Sleuth as well as Rhone behave strategically and analytically when "at work". Both follow a stringent purpose that encompasses their lives which they aim to fulfil. Conversely, the Avenger is more act-focused than the Prophet, who frequently resorts to torturing techniques and staging

his victims in degrading positions. It has been highlighted that both murder protagonists appear realistic in the way that they display hunter-like behavioural patterns as proposed by Harrison et al. (2019) and thus resemble typifications also drawn in criminology: both Avenger and Prophet kill strangers in different places and use hands-on tactics like guns and knives to kill. However, both perpetrators are depicted as overly intelligent and do not come from lower-class backgrounds, which is in opposition to empiric data.

Additionally, both fictional serial killers actively seek media attention but for different reasons. While the Avenger employs the media more indirectly by, for instance, anxiously counterchecking news reports and leaving his "visiting cards" at the crime scenes, the Prophet is more daring: he wants to punish and take revenge but also enjoys fearmongering, playing with other people as well as subjecting himself to a race with the police. All of his correspondence to the press and police perpetuates a constant mockery of state authorities, particularly the investigators' failure to identify and catch him. In contrast, Belloc Lowndes' Avenger does not display such traits. Although he is seen following up on his crimes in the news and leaving his "card" for the press and police to find, his acts of reaching out to the media appear rather characteristic of his deviant masculinity. This is in stark contrast to Gardiner's Prophet who almost singlehandedly feeds the media circus by contacting different media outlets, leaving personal notes on crime scenes, and becoming part of the media himself by hacking and broadcasting content. Rhone's way of reaching out to the media, therefore, emphasises strong nuances of hegemonic masculinity including insensitivity, ambitiousness, and competitiveness. Hence, in the case of the Prophet, this act can be read as an intensification of hegemonic masculine identity.

Overall, there seems to be a divergence in masculinity portrayals and a shift from deviant to hegemonic masculinity from 1913 to 2018, which is also evident in the way these fictionalised male serial killers harness the media and aim to seek attention. While reaching out to the media is employed as a determinant of normative masculinity in Gardiner's novel, media involvement in Belloc Lowndes' *Lodger* is more subtle and characteristic of his deviant masculinity. To conclude, in these literary examples, publicity and the urge for it are closely interwoven with hegemonic masculinity but also play a modified role in deviant masculinity. While normative masculinity is characterised by an overt inference with the media and taunting mechanisms, deviant masculinity, while also being interspersed with an urge to gain recognition, is also interlaced with anxiety. So, the conclusion of my analysis is – the more hegemonic the masculinity, the more self-assured the handling of the media of the fictional perpetrator.

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