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FLARR Pages #61: Murder and Mayhem... and How to Teach Them

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FLARR PAGES #61

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File Under:

- Psychology for literary study
- Trauma
- Paranoia
- Psychopathy
- Profiling

“Murder and Mayhem... and How to Teach Them,” Thomas C. Turner, University of Minnesota, Morris

A good question for speculation is, “By the age of 18 how many serial killers and assassins have our young people seen?” Very few, of course, unless you count the scores of fictional characters who are depicted every year on television and in films. They are, for some reason, a point of particular curiosity, and they are appearing in the literature of Spain. Perhaps the most well-known 20th century serial killer is Camilo José Cela’s Pascual Duarte. Just how could these characters be approached in our classes?

In FLARR Page #60 I profiled a fascinating and complex lady assassin by the name of Doña Adela de Otero, a dangerous fencer from a novel by Arturo Pérez Reverte. I thought it best to use profiling descriptions from John Douglas and Mark Olshaker’s *The Anatomy of Motive: The FBI’s Legendary Mindhunter Explores the Key to Understanding and Catching Violent Criminal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999) and from Michael D and C. L. Kelleher, *Murder Most Rare: the Female Serial Killer* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998). I suggest to students a loose outline for taking notes on these types of characters, to include the points highlighted below (FLARR Page #60 includes a detailed analysis of Doña Adela using this outline):

An Outline for Collecting Information On Fictional Serial Killers and Assassins:

- Indications of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse
- Examples of manipulation, domination, and control by the character
- A propensity on the part of the character for cruelty and danger
- A disturbed sense of moral dimension
- A tendency to blame, either fate or others

Additional Concerns:

- Organization (Are the character’s actions mostly planned or impulsive)
- Legal sanity (Does the character have a knowledge of right and wrong?)
- Group Influence (Is the character influenced by a group?)

The results of this analysis will help the student understand these characters more thoroughly as well as the dangers they present to society. The notes can also be used to indicate what kind of society might encourage or allow these characters to present their dangerous behavior. Society has a definite role in the development of these characters (see FLARR Page #60).

After the student thoroughly understands the subject’s character traits and thinking in these profiling terms, it is most interesting to introduce the several psychological concepts: trauma, paranoia, psychopathy. It is much less effective to introduce the concepts first, because reading perception is then skewed toward the psychological concept (other tendencies are missed, such as, for instance, the basic philosophical/ethical stance of the character).

Before attempting a purely psychological analysis, students should note carefully what is actually presented the text regarding, actions, character traits, and moral thinking of the subject. Afterwards, they can apply psychological concepts.

It should be pointed out as well that as interesting as the psychological analysis is, it is not be the only approach to the novel, and it may not be the actual major interest of the author in his writing. In *El maestro de esgrima*, for instance, the principal concern is the vulnerability of Spain, in the figure of Don Jaime, to such a threat as the lady assassin presents. Another approach with doña Adela as a topic, would be to view her as a “femme fatale,” in the literary tradition, or as a picaresque figure, etc.

However there will be certain students who are very interesting in her psychology and wish to chase that theme. The rest of this paper is addressed to that theme and those students.

It should be pointed out that a psychological analysis is only one approach to a character, and one that might not yield the full import of what an author is saying. However, for those who are interested, it is one legitimate way to look at actions, and it usually yields useful results.

A useful question is, “how closely can psychological analysis be applied to a character in literature in terms of categorizing a character in a traditional pattern (e.g. trauma, paranoia, psychopathy)?” It really depends on how much psychological information the author gives. To arrive at a diagnosis a psychologist or a psychiatrist often gives written tests and numerous interviews, which explore the entire life of the person in question. One of the best, most complete depictions of a serial killer in this sense in contemporary novel is that of Pascual Duarte, because we have his development from childhood. In *El maestro de esgrima* we have doña Adela depicted from her younger years as an adult, but little from her childhood. Rather than arrive at a diagnosis, it is best to look at a character as “expressing certain tendencies” of a psychological pattern. It is also true that a character may be suffering from several of these psychological “orientations” at the same time. This is most certainly true of doña Adela as is demonstrated below.

Students may not be able to “diagnose” a character in a novel, but students can certainly find “tendencies” that characters present with regard to some of the basic psychological orientations.

Below are thumb-nail descriptions of trauma, paranoia, and psychopathy and how doña Adela presents some of these tendencies. The descriptions provided should be useful not only with regard to serial killers and assassins, but also in relation to many other characters in literature.

Trauma

The information included here on trauma comes from Tian Dayton’s book, *Heartwounds: The Impact of Unresolved Trauma and Grief on Relationships* (Deerfield Beach, Florida: Health Communications, Inc, 1997) and in part from Martha Stout’s characterizations of trauma in *The Paranoia Switch* (New York: Farar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007). Dayton quotes an article by E. Lindeman for a definition of trauma: “sudden, uncontrollable disruption of affiliative bonds” (Dayton, 41). Dayton goes on to say that ideals are shattered, trust is violated, and unless the disruption is dealt with directly through proper grieving, the feelings associated with the trauma will emerge elsewhere uncontrollably and unexpectedly (Dayton, 40-41). Survivors of unprocessed trauma react to new stresses as if they were actually re-experiencing the old trauma and pump out the same adrenalin which caused the original flight/fight—freeze survival reaction (Dayton, 52-53). Victims do not separate the past from the present very well (Dayton, 7). Each situation becomes a threat or danger, an occasion for intense involvement or with-

drawal, overly exaggerated, given the circumstances (Dayton, 12). So, these victims are “wired for intensity, troubled with nuance” (Dayton, 13). In any situation which triggers an all or nothing response, adrenalin pumps, and situations become black and white. Martha Stout in her new book, *The Paranoia Switch*, explains that memories of trauma are recorded differently in a different part of the brain, as “incompletely processed,” and “ignored by the integrating and meaning-making (higher) systems of the brain” (Stout, 52). So these memories come back as “isolated sensory images and body sensations” when triggered in new situations” (Stout, 53). Stout notes that victims of trauma “may truly feel that danger is imminent again, and behave accordingly” (Stout, 54).

Some of the coping mechanisms for unresolved trauma or loss which are pertinent to assassins (especially doña Adela types) are: replacement, idealization, emotional numbness or flattening, risk taking behavior, hypervigilance, anger, and, additionally, “inability to accumulate restitutive and gratifying experiences” (Dayton, 46). Replacement refers to the act of immediately substituting for a loss without proper processing, where issues are not examined or resolved by grief (Dayton, 29). Idealization occurs as a defense or coping strategy when victims of inconsistent treatment ignore the bad features of the victimizer, pretending they do not exist (Dayton, 43). Another defense is emotional numbness, where victims become “unavailable for deep feeling on a consistent basis” (Dayton, 22). This tendency is described as a kind of “flat, unexpressive affect within the person and in their responses to others” (Dayton, 29). Anger and disillusionment are common tendencies and victims are often hypervigilant, attempting to avoid similar painful situations (Dayton, 24). On the other hand, some victims become risk-takers, or sensation seeking individuals (Dayton 35). Trauma survivors have an inability to “accumulate restitutive and gratifying experiences” (Dayton, 46). Grief work needs to take place so that the “beauty, intimacy and pleasures of life can once again be absorbed” (Dayton, 46).

Trauma and doña Adela de Otero

With reference to doña Adela de Otero and the general orientation of trauma victims, the following can be said:

- Adela suffers severe trauma when she is abandoned by her lover in a foreign land; she is desperate and considers suicide (she is at the point of throwing herself in a river). Her lover is “replaced” by a benefactor, and it appears that she has not sufficiently grieved the loss of her original lover (the intensity is still with her).
- That she is re-living the original trauma in the decision to help her benefactor seems evident, she accepts an extremely dangerous assignment. The original trauma appears to play a large part in her

actions; she once again fears losing her protection. In Adela's case, however, there is a promise of financial gain, should her assignment be successful, a "sub-motive" complicating the analysis (she does not act out of trauma alone).

- The intense re-living of the original trauma presents itself when she fences with don Jaime in the form of a burning anger, one indicator of unresolved trauma. Her disregard for her own personal safety while fencing is a risk-taking behavior, a type of behavior which may be a part of the aftermath of unresolved trauma.
- Adela has difficulty with nuance, she is unable to recognize that don Jaime is not like other men that she has met, all men are selfish and unfair in her "black and white" world.
- Adela idealizes her benefactor to a certain extent, ignoring his bad qualities, such as the fact that he has sent her into extremely dangerous situations, which is a counter indicator to real care.
- She suffers from emotional numbness, does not experience pleasure in her triumphs, and feels that she does not exist (i.e. does not have a history of experiences which are "gratifying" and meaningful in her history).

Paranoia

Relevant information on paranoia is taken from Martin Kantor's *Understanding Paranoia: A Guide for Professionals, Families, and Sufferers* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004). Kantor states:

"In patients with post traumatic stress disorder the traumatic content is relatively major compared with the minor contribution made by paranoid fantasies of having been mistreated, with the reverse holding true for patients with a paranoid personality disorder. Also, true victims of PTSD tend to dwell on the trauma more than on complaints about those who have traumatized them. In contrast, when a markedly paranoid element exists, the post traumatic symptoms tend to resemble serious interpersonal complaints" (Kantor, 45).

Kantor names the core elements of paranoia to be "hypersensitivity and suspiciousness and the tendency to blame others for all one's troubles" (Kantor, xvi).

Also important is the aspect of delusion or hallucination (Kantor, xv). Paranoid personality disorder is defined as a "fixed system of false notions about the world and the people in it" (Kantor, 41). For the purposes of this study (doña Adela), the definition of "secondary delusion" is appropriate, that is, a delusion which has "antecedents in life" (Kantor, 23), rather than one which is purely interior. Such delusions may at least be "partly right" (Kantor, 62). Sufferers may have a fixed, "overvalued idea" as well (Kantor, 76). Kantor defines a delusion as an "obsession based on the degree of insight present, as meas-

ured by the extent to which the ability to reality test is retained" (Kantor, 14). Some delusions are fixed and impervious to change (Kantor, 62).

Kantor describes the individual suffering from paranoia as having personalization tendencies, "Patients with paranoid personality disorders tend to personalize the actions of others to the point that they come to believe that others play a central role in their lives, even when those others' thoughts and actions in fact have little or nothing to do with them" (Kantor, 52).

In making a distinction between normal and pathological, Kantor asks questions about whether the delusions are continuous or intermittent, whether paranoid elements intrude in all areas of life, whether the delusions can be successfully challenged by new information, whether the paranoid ideas are fairly standard ones, whether the paranoia is harmful (Kantor 77-78).

In summary, Kantor's list of paranoid personality traits includes the following which are pertinent to doña Adela and others like her: distrustfulness, excessive vigilance, overreactivity, blaming tendencies, a proneness to be biased, judgmental, and rigid, vagueness in distinguishing interior thought from what is actually seen, rationalizing tendencies that protect one's own notions (Kantor, 24). He also mentions anger, withdrawal, and flattening of emotions, as well as a "cold paranoid fury" (Kantor, 9-11).

Paranoia and doña Adela de Otero

With reference to Adela de Otero and the general description of paranoia, the following can be said:

- Adela de Otero seems to have extended her original trauma (abandonment) to a belief that the world is a very dangerous place and that all men in particular are dangerous, deceitful, and out for themselves. She suffers from a deep-seated anger, which sometimes appears as a cold fury in her fencing. At other points she is withdrawn and suffers from emotional flattening.
- Her delusions appear to be secondary ones, based to a certain extent in reality, or, alternatively, on fixed or overvalued ideas, from which she takes some very extreme actions (assassinations).
- When Don Jaime, through his reasoning and his actions, disproves her basic contentions, she is still unable to give up her pre-determined line of action. Her beliefs are rigid. She can not give up false notions. She does not test reality in view of new information.
- The process of personalization is strong in her, even in her positive beliefs (she sees her benefactor as central to her life, assumes she is central to him, but she is not central to him, he puts her in grave danger).
- Adela de Otero has an extensive belief in the role of fate in her actions; she does not accept personal

responsibility for her situation. She blames fate.
 •Her beliefs are persistent and harmful. She is taking
 “preemptive strikes,” resulting in deaths.

Additionally, Douglas states that assassins tend to be functional paranoids (Douglas and Olshaker, 274):

“...their paranoia may be describe as highly organized or methodical delusional system that may be convincing if you accept the basic (but delusional) premise that everyone is out to get a particular individual and is ready and able to do him harm, then it becomes a convincing argument that this individual should strike out and neutralize these enemies before they can act against him.” (Douglas and Olshaker, 274-275)

Adela’s statement, “One can never be too unfair with men...,” suggests that she suffers from paranoia (Pérez-Reverte, 72). However, she tries to affect a genuine attachment with don Jaime, a man that she might possibly trust, but the circumstances are wrong for their relationship. Later she assumes the worst from don Jaime, that he is going to blackmail her benefactor, but he is unaware of the contents of an incriminating letter, and, of course, Don Jaime, a true gentleman, could not be a blackmailer. Adela has enough paranoia to assume the worst in almost all men, but she works in a team and trust her benefactor, so the paranoia cannot be completely overwhelming. Not everyone is out to get her, just almost everyone and especially men.

Psychopathy I

Blair, Mitchell, and Blair, *The Psychopath: Emotion and the Brain* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) state that “...the classification of psychopath can be an extension and one form of refinement of the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, IV) diagnosis of CD (Conduct Disorder) and ASPD (Anti-social Personality Disorder)” (Blairs and Mitchell, 15). They go on to say that psychopathy identifies one form of pathology associated with high levels of antisocial behavior; individuals who present with a particular form of emotional impairment (Blairs and Mitchell, 15). The idea of psychopathy appears to be in a state of constant examination and revision.

In a two factor model for psychopathy Harpur et al (1989) suggest: **Factor 1: Interpersonal / Affective Items** (glib/superficial charm, grandiose sense of self worth, pathological lying, conning/manipulative, lack of remorse or guilt, shallow affect, callous/lack of empathy, failure to accept responsibility for own actions, **Factor 2: Impulsive, Antisocial Lifestyle Items** (need for stimulation/proneness to boredom, parasitic lifestyle, poor behavioral controls, early behavioral problems, lack of realistic long-term goals, impulsivity, irresponsibility, juvenile delinquency, revocation of conditional release. Other items which do not fit the categories: promiscuous sexual

behavior, many short-term marital affairs, criminal versatility (Blairs and Mitchell, 9)

A Cooke and Michie study in 2001 (see Blairs and Mitchell, 10) suggests a three factor categorization which seems to recognize more the role of emotions: **Factor I Arrogant and Deceitful Interpersonal Items** (glibness/superficial charm, grandiose sense of self-worth, pathological lying, conning/manipulative, **Factor II: Deficient Affective Experience** (lack of remorse or guilt, shallow affect, callous/lacks empathy, failure to accept responsibility for own actions, **Factor III: Impulsive and Irresponsible Items** (need for stimulation/proneness to boredom, parasitic lifestyle, lack of realistic, long-term goals, impulsivity, irresponsibility. Other factors not in the categories: poor behavioral controls, promiscuous sexual behavior, early behavioral problems, many short-term marital relationships, juvenile delinquency, revocation of conditional release, criminal versatility.

Adela de Otero and Psychopathy I

Adela de Otero seems to present the following tendencies:

- Glibness/superficial charm (at point for manipulation)
- Conning/manipulative (many instances)
- Callous/lacks empathy (many deadly instances),
- Shallow affect (can not feel sometimes)
- Lack of remorse or guilt (for maid)
- Failure to accept responsibility for own actions (blames fate)
- Parasitic lifestyle (depends on benefactor; this may be a characteristic of many 19th century women, however, she is not married to her benefactor and accepts his generosity, does not evolve separate goals)
- Criminal versatility (involved in conspiracy and many different crimes)

Each of the 20 factors is assigned a value of 0-2 points on the PCL-R (Psychopathy Checklist, Hare, 1991) and APSD (Antisocial Process Screening Device, Frick and Hare, 2001) (see Blair and Mitchell, 7). A score of 30 and above constitutes a diagnosis of psychopath (Blairs and Mitchell, 17). Unfortunately we have no early history of Adela, nor do we have an idea of her as a young adult, so a complete inventory can not be made. It can safely be said, however, that she present some characteristics of psychopathic behavior, particularly in relation to emotional impairment. It is also safe to say the author, Pérez-Reverte, has a deep understanding of such behaviors.

Psychopathy II

In Chapter 8 of their book *The Psychopath: Emotion and the Brain*, James Blair, Derek Mitchell, and Karina Blair present a “neurocognitive account of psychopathy.” They propose a dysfunctional

amygdala which leads to impairment of emotional learning, including a lack of guilt and lack of empathy. Impairment of passive avoidance learning (to include reduced amygdala activity) and of recognition of fearful facial expressions are additional characteristics. Emotional dysfunction does not cause, but increases the probability of antisocial behavior (Blairs and Mitchell, 110-111).

What follows is a brief characterization of some of the studies concerning psychopathic individuals from this source (Blairs and Mitchell, 111-140). These individuals react less to expressions of sadness, imagined threat scenes, anticipated threats, and evocative sounds (e.g. baby crying) (Blairs and Mitchell, 116). These individuals react in a reduced fashion to emotional words, (Blairs and Mitchell, 119), may not learn to withhold action when the action should involve punishment to themselves, (Blairs and Mitchell, 120), consequently may not recognize sad or fearful faces in others as aversive conditions, as punishment to themselves as well (victim's stress association), to be avoided, and pain inflicted on psychopathic individuals as punishment may be associated with the punisher, e.g. the parent, rather than with the individual's own action against another, say to another child in the family (Blairs and Mitchell, 126). These individuals show reduced comprehension of situations likely to induce guilt (there is impaired formulation of stimulus-punishment associations) (Blairs and Mitchell, 127-128). They may be able to determine logically what is conventionally wrong, but do not feel what is morally wrong, pain in another (Blairs and Mitchell, 127). Furthermore, these individuals may not be able to reverse their task responses when negative stimuli are introduced (they are impaired in the detection of contingency change) (Blairs and Mitchell, 135).

Adela de Otero and Psychopathy II

Further applications of psychopathic characteristics to Adela de Otero:

- Of the above characteristics the most salient is Adela de Otero's recognition of conventional rules, as opposed to her lack of real moral empathy. Maids, who do not matter in her view, can be killed as long as it is done with little suffering (conventional rule: people should not suffer when they die; lack of morality: no real feeling for the actual life of her maid).
- Adela fights Don Jaime with little regard for her own safety (which may include disfigurement in fencing). She does not react to the anticipated threat or punishment.
- Adela can not easily recognize contingencies (that, for instance, Don Jaime is actually not just another self-serving man)
- When she considers her situation, she lays the entire blame on "fate," and takes no responsibility for her actions. She does not feel guilt.

Again, in Adela de Otero Pérez-Reverte has developed a truly fascinating character, especially from the psychological perspective. He seems to understand the complexity of such characters and how such trouble individuals can be dangerous to society.

With regard to teaching the thumbnail sketches should be very useful in identifying psychological problems not only concerning serial killers and assassins, but also with other character that present these tendencies, in mild or extreme forms.

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FLARR History: Original Ideas about FLARR (September 1, 1973)

PROPOSED RED RIVER VALLEY FOREIGN LANGUAGE ORGANIZATION

- 1) Name The name of the organization will be chosen by the entire group, and will reflect the geographical area to be served.
- 2) Membership All interested in the teaching of foreign languages from an area roughly defined as the Red River Valley region of Minnesota and North Dakota. (While others will not be excluded, the focus of activities will necessarily be limited by the distance factor.)
- 3) Purpose To serve the foreign language teachers at all educational levels as a central communication nerve for the dispensing of information, the promotion of educational and social activities and conferences, and the expanding and upgrading of the effectiveness of foreign language programs in the area.
- 4) Structure The structure is designed to implement the purpose. The executive will consist of three officers elected at the time of the annual spring meeting (the fall meeting for the first year, with short identifying sketches to be presented with each nomination):
 - a) President - charged with presiding over general meetings, overall responsibility of the organization and specifically with a liaison function between the parent organization and any local groups which may be formed;
 - b) Vice-President - replaces the President when necessary and is charged with the responsibility for programs (meetings, workshops, speakers, etc.);
 - c) Secretary-Treasurer - in addition to normal tasks of such an office, he will be charged with collecting, editing and distributing items of use to the profession.

Each officer will be assisted by a committee representative of the membership and its interests and to be chosen by him. It is anticipated that most of the planning and work will be done by these committees.
- 5) Dues Initially \$2.00 per member to cover costs of material and postage. (It is suggested that a registration charge be made for each meeting, reduced for members). Hopefully, external funding will be available for major undertakings.
- 6) Meetings Two annual meetings, one as early as feasible in September, the other the third week in March, plus any additional conferences, workshops, etc., that the group may feel necessary.
- 7) Local groups It seems likely that teachers will wish to involve themselves in smaller groups with more geographical cohesion and more immediate response to local needs and interests. Such groups will be encouraged and assisted by the parent organization.