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# "Literally Psycho"--Empathy For Those Who Have None, Through The Use Of Literature

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Eastern Kentucky University

“Literally Psycho”—Empathy for Those Who Have None, Through the Use of Literature

Honors Thesis—Artist’s Statement

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment

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By

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## Abstract

“Literally Psycho”—Empathy for Those Who Have None, Through the Use of Literature

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In today’s society, the word “Psychopath” gets thrown around very easily. But does society *really* know what it means to truly be a clinically diagnosed Psychopath? This thesis is all about uncovering the truth about what Psychopathy looks like, how Psychopathy is handled in the courtroom, and why people should not despise, but have empathy for Psychopaths. This was accomplished by writing a thrilling short story about a young clinical psychologist by the name of Dr. T Campbell who is assigned to interview a very charismatic man named Peter Vetrov for the court. Peter has been deemed guilty of 3 counts of murder, and it is our protagonist’s job to attempt a sentence mitigation on the account of Peter’s abnormal mental state. After hearing Peter’s gruesome story during a Forensic Interview, Dr. Campbell diagnoses Peter with Antisocial Personality Disorder with Psychopathic traits. Upon reflection, Dr. Campbell realizes how unfair it is to Psychopaths like Peter to be granted the death penalty when in fact, they cannot help but act on their psychopathic tendencies because of severe abnormalities of the brain’s biological structure. She swears to do whatever she can to end the injustice towards Psychopathy.

Key words: psychopath, psychopathy, empathy, short story, thesis, honors thesis, creative writing, creative thesis, antisocial personality disorder, ASPD, death penalty, literally psycho

For my Honors Thesis, I chose to pursue a creative project because I thoroughly enjoy writing. Ever since I could formulate sentences as a small child, I was writing short stories or narratives of some kind. Another but very equal love of mine ever since I was a young girl was Psychology. I was always interested in people and why they did the things that they did. It was from these two things that my thesis was born.

One cannot simply write on a topic as broad Psychology, so I had to start narrowing my subject matter down. From “psychology” came “disorders.” Then “people with disorders” and “books with people with disorders.” I liked my thought process so far so I asked myself “What type of character do you like to read about and who are your favorite characters/what do they all have in common?”

I immediately began a list of my favorite characters from books and movies. That list included Lestat de Lioncourt from *The Vampire Chronicles* by Anne Rice, Alex Delarge from *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess, and Hannibal Lecter from *Red Dragon*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Hannibal*, and *Hannibal Rising* by Thomas Harris. What linked all these men together? Obviously, the first thing I noticed is that they had all killed someone. They were all very charming, intelligent, manipulative, and domineering. Was there a word to group all these words together? At the time, I had been taking a Forensic Psychology course here at ECU out of my extreme interest of the specific field and when the term Psychopathy was introduced as a diagnostic term, I finally realized that that was what I wanted to do my thesis over. All of these men from these books exhibited traits of Psychopathy. It was a strange feeling for me because I realized I felt such incredible amount of empathy for these characters even though they were incapable of return said empathy to anyone else. Their authors had written them to be that way. They had no choice but to behave in the horrific ways that they did. When I thought of that, the

grand vision clicked in my head (with the help of the Forensic Psychology class). Psychopaths are hardwired from birth to “go against the grain” of society. Their brains are literally incapable of feeling empathy, obeying authority, and even determining the emotions of other people. I learned that the prefrontal cortex, anterior cingulate cortex, the amygdala, and other various brain structures that are involved in decision making, empathy, and emotional expressiveness were either faulty in their biological makeup or were smaller in size than a healthy person’s brain.

Upon this discovery, I was suddenly appalled at the fact that we are performing capital punishment on such persons when they honestly cannot behave any differently. This idea of killing someone over a matter they have no choice in is a moral struggle with me because a part of me believes that if a person with Psychopathy commits a crime, he or she should be put in a psychiatric hospital instead of prison. However, the other more rational side of me realizes that there is no cure for this disorder and no amount of therapy could ever change that. If a psychopathic person commits a barbaric act such as murder, he or she is a danger to society and even though he or she is mentally ill, we can’t be lenient on him or her like we might with a disorder such as Schizophrenia that can be somewhat treated to lessen the symptoms. Criminal psychopaths need the type of supervision that only a high security prison can give. However, I refuse to accept that we should be able to legally kill them. What right do we have to take away someone’s life on the basis of them doing something that they over which had no control?

Not only did I suddenly become so passionate about psychopaths for the reasons above, but I realized something else too. In my life, I’ve had to deal with dozens of not so nice people (unfortunately in my family). I’ve had a really hard time trying to forgive them for the wrongs they have committed against me. But, in order for me to move on and live my life to the fullest potential, I had to forgive and try to have empathy for them. That is really hard but also quite

necessary. If I can work up the courage to have empathy and forgive these truly horrible people in my life, then I and others should have the courage to have empathy for those who have none—psychopaths. Not only is it a weight off our shoulders to forgive and have empathy towards psychopaths, it's also only fair to them. They are still human beings after all and deserve understanding and awareness at the very least. All in all, this thesis is me letting go of my past. If I can forgive and have empathy for a psychopath, I can forgive and have empathy for anyone.

With all of this in mind, I had to formulate a story that could capture my message about psychopaths. What I decided on was having a young Forensic Psychologist (what I'm wanting to pursue as my own career) interview a man she diagnoses as a psychopath. Upon interviewing him, she begins to have strong feelings of empathy for him and desperately wants to help him get off death row. Not only should the story capture a vital message about empathy and forgiveness for people we may not originally see as deserving of it, but the story should also be a learning experience as to what psychopathy really is. I thought this would be an important concept as I feel that not many people truly know what it means to be a psychopath. With that being said, they definitely don't know about the biological aspects of psychopathy, so I thought it was important to include an explanation of that embedded in the story to help aid in the understanding.

Not only was all of this important in itself, but it was also important to me as a writer that the story not only be informative, but also an enjoyable literary experience. When I was a senior in middle school, my AP English IV teacher told me that my writing was unique because he could actually hear me talk through the words on the paper—that there was character in my writing. He was always impressed with what I was able to come up with in terms of my writing. Being an avid reader, I give most of that credit to my favorite author, the Master of Horror,

Stephen King. The reason he is so successful and loved by so many is not only because he comes up with amazing stories with in depth and interesting plots, but because of his style of writing. He is so descriptive and loose in his writing—something I always strive to be in my own work. An example I like to give to describe this phenomenon is like when an author wants to say “The door opened.” Instead of just saying that the door opened, say something Stephen King-esque like “The decrepit mahogany door slowly swung open, the rusted hinges creating an ear-splitting scream that caused Ralph to cringe in fear.” It takes more effort to write this way, but the reader gets much more enjoyment from it which makes writing in this elongated fashion all worthwhile. Writing in this style also helps put the reader in the scene with the characters. As a writer, you need to be able to stop and think about what you are about to write and make sure when you read it back, you are able to clearly envision what you had just seen in your head. If you can’t, neither can your reader. So, you need to go back to add more details. I kept this in mind while I was writing.

Every creator has his or her muse. I was no different. Two important areas of my life are writing and music, so it comes as no surprise that this is where my muses came from. I put small homages in my short story as a way of thanking certain people or characters for helping me writing a coherent sentence. In honor of Stephen King, I tried to write as descriptively and interestingly as possible. The looks and partial name of my psychopathic character was made to resemble the late Peter Steele. The journal entry at the end of the story, entitled *Journal Entry 43*, may have the reader wondering “What about the other 42 entries?” This is, in fact, a homage to Ville Valo when in his song *Shatter Me with Hope*, he sings “Turn to page 43 and you’ll know how I feel.” Some things are hard to explain to someone, especially if they are sensitive in nature. This journal entry number 43 is my psychologist character explaining how she feels

about everything she has just experienced in a safe environment—her personal journal. It is also in this entry that my personal feelings about the subject come forth more organically than they could in a formal paper. As for my three character inspirations (Lestat, Alex, and Hannibal), I put in sections of dialogue or behavior from my psychopath character that could be seen as a “tip of the hat” to them as characters.

The entire process of writing the short story did not take exceptionally long as I tend to get in a state of “flow” when I write (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). This means I get so absorbed in what I write that hours go by and they feel like minutes—I don’t sleep, eat, or take breaks because I am so enthralled with what I’m doing. Once I found my inspirations, I completed the backbone of the story in two days in late July 2016. After I returned to school that following August, I decided to make a few stylistic changes and stretch out some parts I felt were not up to par with my “Stephen King basic guide to writing.” After all was said and done, the final product only took about a week to write.

It is important to study the research conducted to show exactly what Psychopathy is and how I used this data to my advantage in my short story. To begin with, it is important to understand that as of today, Psychopathy is not a stand-alone diagnosis. In fact, it is diagnosed as a very specific and severe form of the personality disorder of the erratic cluster, Antisocial Personality Disorder. ASPD is actually a misnomer as having the disorder does not mean that you avoid social situations. ASPD is the adult manifestation of the childhood disorder, Conduct Disorder. In order to be diagnosed with ASPD, one must show a pervasive pattern of disregard for the safety and will of others since before the age of 15, have impairments in self functioning and impairment in interpersonal functioning. Impairments in self functioning may manifest as egocentrism or failure to conform to the law. Impairments in interpersonal functioning may manifest



as a lack of remorse or incapacity for love. Individuals with ASPD must also display factors of antagonism like manipulateness and callousness as well as factors of disinhibition like irresponsibility and impulsivity. These traits must be stable across time, must not be better understood as normative for the individual's developmental stage or socio-cultural environment, and must not be due to substance abuse. Once a person has been clinically diagnosed with ASPD, he or she has a 1-2% chance of also being diagnosed with psychopathic traits (Neumann & Hare, 2008). Because levels of ASPD are higher in incarcerated populations simply because of the nature of the disorder, chances are higher (15-25%) of a psychologist meeting a Psychopath within that setting (Hare, 2003).

In 1941, Dr. Hervey Cleckley, a psychiatrist, published the book *The Mask of Sanity* which would forever change the way the scientific community saw Psychopathy. It was Dr. Cleckley who gave the psychiatric community a standard for determining if an individual was a Psychopath that we still use to this day. According to Dr. Cleckley, the 16 criteria are as follows:

1. Superficial charm and good intelligence
2. Pathological egocentricity and incapacity for love
3. Untruthfulness and insincerity
4. Lack of remorse or shame
5. General poverty in major affective reactions
6. Unresponsiveness in general interpersonal relations
7. Sex life interpersonal, trivial, and poorly integrated
8. Failure to follow any life plan
9. Poor judgement and failure to learn from experience
10. Unreliability
11. Specific loss of insight
12. Inadequately motivated antisocial behavior, fantastic and uninviting behavior with drink and sometimes without
13. Absence of delusions and other signs of irrational thinking

14. Absence of nervousness
15. Fantastic and uninviting behavior with drink and sometimes without
16. Suicide rarely carried out

The list of sixteen items that Cleckley collected was just that—a list of possible criteria a person with Psychopathy will likely possess. It was not until the 1970's when Dr. Robert Hare created the Psychopathy Checklist (PCL) and later the Psychopathy Checklist—Revised (PCL-R) that the scientific community had a way to standardize testing for these individuals. The PCL-R is comprised of two factors of symptoms. Factor 1 symptoms include Interpersonal and Affective behaviors and Factor 2 symptoms includes Impulsive Lifestyle and Antisocial Behavior. The complete list of symptoms is as follows:

1. Glibness/superficial charm (Factor 1)
2. Grandiose sense of self worth (Factor 1)
3. Pathological lying (Factor 1)
4. Lack of remorse or guilt (Factor 1)
5. Shallow affect (Factor 1)
6. Callous/Lack of empathy (Factor 1)
7. Promiscuous sexual behavior
8. Lack or realistic/long term goals (Factor 2)
9. Impulsivity (Factor 2)
10. Irresponsibility (Factor 2)
11. Failure to accept responsibility for actions (Factor 1)
12. Criminal versatility
13. Need for stimulation (Factor 2)
14. Conning/Manipulative (Factor 1)
15. Parasitic lifestyle (Factor 2)
16. Poor behavioral controls (Factor 2)
17. Early behavioral problems (Factor 2)
18. Many short term marital relationships

19. Juvenile delinquency (Factor 2)
20. Revocation of conditional release (Factor 2)

Each symptom is worth 2 points on the scale, meaning there are 40 points possible. If an individual receives more than 30 points on the checklist, he or she is clinically classified as a Psychopath. As revolutionary as this checklist was, it still did not answer the question: why do psychopaths behave this way and why are there people with Psychopathy? It was not until later that the scientific community was confronted with a new type of information regarding the pathology of the Psychopath—their brains.

A very important study in 2014 by Dr. L. M. Cope and colleagues showed that, in fact, the very mass of paralimbic grey matter within the brain of a Psychopath was of a statistically reduced size than in non-Psychopaths. In this study, it was also found that the reduced mass in the orbitofrontal cortex, parahippocampal cortex, temporal poles, and left hippocampus was negatively correlated with the amount of psychopathic symptoms. The same results were found across age and gender gaps. This means that the frontal lobes of a true Psychopath were made prenatally reduced (when compared to someone without psychopathy) because of a mutation in the genes the parents sent to them in their conception. This reduction in matter would account for many of the Psychopath's symptoms such as impulsivity, irresponsibility, lack of realistic goals, and shallow affect. Furthermore, it was found that brain activity was reduced from what it should have been in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and anterior temporal cortex when Psychopaths were shown moral versus non-moral violation pictures. This means that even though the Psychopaths knew which of the pictures were worse than the others, brain scans showed that viewing moral and non-moral violations made no difference in their brain waves whereas in control groups there was a clear distinction between the two (Harenski et al. 2010.) So, what we

have learned is that the psychopathic brain is smaller than a healthy brain, resulting in many antisocial/psychopathic behaviors and also the connections within in the brain show up to be faulty in the areas they do have. This is something that does not have anything to do with environmental factors—suggesting that some people are born with the disposition to become psychopaths even if their home life and environment was as healthy as possible. Studies show a positive correlation between the severity of childhood maltreatment and psychopathic traits (meaning the higher the maltreatment, the more severe the psychopathic symptoms). (Dargis et al. 2015). If these mistreated, predisposed children do grow up to be criminals (which is very likely), their antisocial, sociopathic, and psychopathic symptoms could potentially cause a harsher sentence. If the prosecution mentions the term psychopath in a case, studies show that this mentioning of the term psychopathy could have a considerable impact on the outcome of the case. Many times, the prosecution will use this terminology to show how dangerous the criminal is and to prove how likely the perpetrator is to repeat future criminal acts if let free. Rarely does the defense use the term psychopathy in its aid because of the bad connotation the word psychopathy holds (Edens & Cox, 2012). Just the nature of psychopathy is enough to incarcerate an individual. Psychopaths do know right from wrong; however, because of their biological abnormalities, they cannot help but act on their antisocial tendencies. I do not think it fair, however, that they should receive a harsher sentence than a person without Psychopathy because that is discrimination towards a person with a mental illness that they biologically cannot help. Despite how cruel the individual may be, psychopaths deserve their basic human rights. To reiterate, behaving cruelly is not a disqualifier to getting out of the death sentence for a psychopath because the psychopath is hardwired to behave this way—meaning they cannot help but act on these impulses, no matter how cruel we may view them.

Another important aspect that needs to be addressed is the aspect of a Psychopath having moods. In my short story, the psychopath alludes to the idea of having moods. Having moods requires the person to be able to experience high levels of emotions. Psychopaths biologically cannot experience this affect (the reasons why described beforehand). So, no, Psychopaths do not internally experience mood. The key word in this sentence is *internally*. Psychopaths are master manipulators, and therefore can make a person believe they are experiencing emotions such as happiness or anger when in fact, they are not. However, all these emotions or moods are completely superficial. Hooking up a Psychopath to an EEG for example demonstrates how flat their internal affect really is. Think of an ocean and how wild and untamed the top is—with the hurricanes, high wind, and massive waves. However, if you dive miles and miles underneath the ocean's surface, you'll find an eerie stillness that opposes the violent warzone going on miles above. This is the same juxtaposition found in Psychopaths.

So, what is the result of all this information? Can there be a treatment plan that works for individuals with Psychopathy so that perhaps they and we can live in a healthier and stigma free world? The founder of the basic characteristics of Psychopathy, Dr. Cleckely, did not seem to think so. He said that Psychopaths lack the emotional attachments that is crucial for a successful psychotherapy treatment program (Cleckley, 1941). To test this theory, multiple studies were conducted. Ogloff, Wong, and Greenwood in 1990 organized a study in which they attempted to treat Psychopaths and non-Psychopaths with therapy. However, the results showed that Psychopaths had less clinical improvement than did the non-Psychopaths and they also were less motivated as well as left the study early (Ogloff et al. 1990). Rice, Harris, and Cormier in 1992 conducted their own test of the subject and not only did the Psychopaths not gain any relief from the therapy sessions, they actually grew to be “better” psychopaths—this meaning their

symptoms worsened (Rice et al. 1992). However, it was found that their so called “treatment” was highly unconventional. Upon further inspection of the Rice studies by Karen D’Silva, it was discovered that the Psychopaths in the study were subjected to what was called “Defense Disrupting Therapy” which included techniques such as nude encounter therapy sessions that would sometimes last for two weeks straight as well as being forced into taking LSD and drinking alcohol by the researchers. All of this was meant to “challenge the patient’s unconscious thoughts” (D’Silva et al. 2004). Obviously, generalizing the results gained from the Rice study was problematic. But if treatment (of the proper technique) was implemented, could Psychopaths be helped? It is best to remain optimistic and instead of thinking that they cannot, we must believe that they can be until more extensive research undisputedly proves otherwise. In the meantime, what can be done to lower the stigma towards individuals with Psychopathy? Not a lot of answers are out there. Anderson & Kiehl (2014) suggest we teach our young people about Psychopathy and intervene at an early age those who are showing psychopathic traits in order to maybe prevent further symptoms from developing into adulthood. In the Sörman et al. study (2014), it is shown how the views of a Psychopath can be changed by just educating the public on what being a Psychopath truly means. Forensic mental health professionals in the study said that psychopaths are more likely to be criminals, but they did not view the majority of them to be “evil.” They also said that just because Psychopaths are who they are does not mean that they should be treated any more harshly than non-psychopathic criminals because they are, in fact, mentally disordered.

With this view of Psychopaths, I believe that the world would be a less stigmatizing place not only for Psychopaths, but for all mental disorders. If I can add to the fight against the misunderstanding of one of the most misunderstood mental disorders in the world with my

creative thesis, I will have achieved my goal of a brighter and more accepting world concerning mental disorders. That was the main goal in writing the short story—to educate the general public on what Psychopathy truly looks like, why they behave the way that they do, why we should have empathy for them, and how we can start treating them more appropriately. I truly believe I have accomplished what my main mission was.

Firstly, I have shown the reader in great detail what a person with Psychopathy would behave like by taking Dr. Cleckley and Dr. Hare's checklists of Psychopathy and putting those characteristics into a character to portray a Psychopath as accurately as possible. In the story, I also included a brief biological discussion of the Psychopath's brain biology in hopes that the reader would take interest and be surprised enough to perhaps follow up on that idea and do their own research. It is my hope that the readers are as surprised as I was when they read about the biological deficits of Psychopaths—the deficits that make a Psychopath do the things that they do. I included a journal entry from my psychologist character at the end of the story to show how and why we should have empathy for Psychopaths. I hope that by reading that section, the reader will become more open minded and accepting. I tried to make the journal section flow organically and be very passionate so that it hopefully tugs on the heart strings of the reader at least a little bit. Finally, I suggest that we do not execute capital punishment for Psychopaths. It is unfortunate that Psychopathy is an incurable disorder and would be a waste of everyone's time and money to place them in a psychiatric unit where the sole purpose is to try to get better. Criminals need to be punished for their crimes—society needs justice—but it is unjust to lawfully kill a person who hadn't the choice to behave in such criminal ways. If the Psychopath is a violent offender and the court deems it fit for them to serve life in prison, so be it. Psychopaths are a danger to society after all, need the supervision that a prison could give, and

would commit an offense again if given the chance. But let the justice end there. Let them serve life in prison (or however long the court deems necessary), just do not take away their life. You would not kill an anxious person for doing anxious things or a schizophrenic person for hearing voices, so you should not kill a Psychopathic person (a legitimate and documented mental disorder) for acting on their psychopathic tendencies.

In order for the world to be a more accepting place for people with mental disorders, we as the enlightened scientific community have the important duty to educate the public on these disorders so that biased filters like the media do not distort the way people think of disorders. Psychopathy is only one of the many psychological disorders that has been treated unfairly in our culture. It is time to give Psychopathy the recognition it is due. People must understand that individuals with Psychopathy have no choice but to behave the way that they do because of the pathological abnormalities of their brains. We must cultivate the minds of the public to express empathy towards Psychopaths, not only because it is the kind and enlightened thing to do, but also so that they are treated fairly and accordingly to the law—especially in the court systems. By reading my creative thesis, I hope to enlighten the public on what it means to have Psychopathy and why they deserve our empathy and understanding. I feel that if we can create a following of people who can express empathy for those who have none, that we can create a following of people who can express empathy for anyone—not just people with mental disorders. It only gets better from here.



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