

# The Representation of Serial Killers in the Media

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**Reprezentacija serijskih ubojica u medijima**

Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Jadranka Zlomislić

Osijek, 2023

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Supervisor: Dr. Jadranka Zlomislić, Assistant Professor

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## **Abstract**

Serial killers have always attracted people's attention. The media is a key element in shaping human perception around serial killers and it often portrays them as monsters to capture the attention of the entire society. The media's focus is on their lives and the heinous crimes they have committed, which leads to the creation of numerous stereotypes and distorted social perceptions about them. But the media portrayal can go in a completely different direction by romanticizing and glorifying serial killers, which most often leads people to feel sympathy for them. Numerous films and series contribute to such media representation. In addition to films, true crime documentaries are also becoming popular, which aim to educate viewers but also entertain them through various investigative methods and facts related to serial killers and their victims. This paper aims to raise awareness about the acts committed by serial killers and to show their portrayal in the media throughout their lives, and even after their death. Although the media has a responsibility to inform the public about serial killers, while developing awareness of possible dangers, it is also important for the media to establish boundaries between realistic portrayals and portrayals that sensationalize serial killers.

**Keywords:** serial killers, profile, monsters, glorification, media

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## **Introduction**

Serial killers have always been a subject of curiosity and fascination for many people. Throughout history, they have become the main motifs in books, films, series, and culture. The media portrayal has always been the subject of various questions related to human nature, but also about many factors that influence the emergence of a person as a serial killer. This paper will first focus on the definition and types of serial killers. Then the historical context of their actions will be shown, from the earliest days to the most gruesome periods when numerous serial killers such as Ted Bundy, Charles Manson, Richard Ramirez, Jeffrey Dahmer, and many others were active. After that, the profile of a serial killer will be described through numerous characteristics, which are also stereotypes inspired by the media, as well as numerous factors that encourage their development as serial killers. After a detailed analysis of the aforementioned factors, the focus shifts to the cases of the three most famous serial killers, among whom are Ted Bundy, Richard Ramirez, and Jeffrey Dahmer. These serial killers were chosen because each of them has their own carefully chosen victims, their own methods of killing, but also because they were influenced by many different factors through their lives, and that is what differentiates them from one another. The paper will show their life from childhood, describing relationships with their family and peers, then their stages of killing, and at the end, the arrest and trial for the crimes committed. After that, the focus is on the portrayal of serial killers in the media. First, the negative media portrayal will be discussed as well as the fascination and glorification of serial killers in the media that leads to the society's attraction to serial killers. In addition, the topic of their status as celebrities will be explored as well as the numerous stereotypes created about serial killers. The thesis wraps up with the conclusion and suggestions for future research.

## 1. Serial Killers

A serial killer is someone who has killed three or more people, “almost all of whom are usually strangers, over a period of time, and usually with some sort of cooling-off period between killings” (Philbin and Philbin 11). The term “serial” began to be used in the early 1980s for people who repeat a particular crime. Many people often confuse the term serial murder with mass murder because they do not know the difference between the two terms. Tom Philbin and Michael Philbin state that in a mass murder, several people are killed at the same time, while a serial killing includes the killing of several people at different time intervals (18). Also, in mass murder, the victims can be strangers, but also famous people, unlike serial murders, where the victims are mostly unknown people. In cases of serial killers, it is extremely important to mention motives because they help in the classification of murders by type. Holmes and DeBurger list four types of serial killers: the visionary type, mission-oriented type, hedonistic type, and power/control-oriented type (31-33). In the visionary type, “murderers kill as a result of command hallucinations, delusions, or visions whose sources customarily include the forces of good or evil” (Kocsis 124). In this type of murder, the killer mostly relies on the instruments with which he/she kills, and the goal is not to torture or intimidate the person because the killer is in a deep state of psychosis. In the second type, the mission-oriented type, killers try to get rid of certain types of people and therefore kill people based on their race, religion, age, and occupation. That is the reasoning why the famous serial killer Jack the Ripper killed women who were prostitutes. In the hedonistic type, killers find satisfaction in torturing and killing their victims. Under this type, two subtypes of serial killers are classified, namely the thrill killer and the lust killer. The thrill killer enjoys torturing and killing people, and when the person is no longer alive the killer loses interest in the victim. Unlike the thrill killer, the lust killer gets sexual excitement before and after he or she kills a person. “Ritualistic displays of sexual mutilation, facial disfigurement, cannibalism, body dismemberment, vampirism, and necrophilia are routinely featured in this type of homicidal act” (Kocsis 125). The last type is the power/control-oriented type. In this type, the killer wants to dominate and control the person. The fear they feel in their victims gives them a sense of satisfaction, which also motivates them to continue killing.

Throughout history, there have been documented cases of serial killers. The way in which society has labeled them has changed significantly. Many consider Jack the Ripper to be the first serial killer, but Locusta was the first recorded serial killer. She was employed by Nero’s mother to poison Emperor Claudius so that her son could take his place and become emperor. Not long after that, she began to use her knowledge for wrong purposes and was eventually executed. Along

with her, the name Gilles de Rais is worth mentioning. He was one of the wealthiest people in the 15th century and was a faithful supporter of Joan of Arc. After she died, he became interested in magic and rituals. He took children from poor families, raped, tortured them, and finally sacrificed them. In the end, it was found out that he killed more than a hundred people. The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was marked by murders attributed to a person nicknamed Jack the Ripper. The murders associated with Jack the Ripper were “the first to occur in a major city in such a way as to garner considerable police attention and media coverage” (Ramsland 4). Despite the great media attention, the identity of Jack the Ripper was never revealed, but the very thought of that period still terrifies people today. The increase in the number of serial killers took place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to numerous social factors, but also slow police technology. The police’s inability to connect crimes makes it easier for serial killers to commit crimes without being caught. Serial killers can learn from their mistakes, changing their tactics and developing their methods so that they could remain undetected. However, in today’s time, progress in technology and forensic science has changed the course of criminal investigation. The process of connecting cases has been made easier for the police due to numerous tools such as DNA analysis and fingerprint databases. It is important to note that before the development of technology, the media mostly reported cases at a local level, which made it easier for a serial killer to go undetected by killing in other places where no one there knew anything about the killings. All these issues were ideal for numerous serial killers who greatly influenced popular culture and shaped the narratives of books, films, and series.

### **1.1. The Serial Killer’s Profile**

Understanding the profile of serial killers is crucial for psychologists, law enforcement, and society as well. Common traits, psychological characteristics, and behavioral patterns will be presented to provide insight into the minds of the people behind these chilling crimes. The typical profile of a serial killer was “a single, white male; a loner, misfit, underemployed, in his twenties or thirties, who murders after his longstanding deviant sexual fantasies no longer satisfy him and a stressful life event finally propels him into action” (Johnston 14). Nowadays, this is no longer the case, and only 12 percent of people fit this profile (Johnston 14). For the most part, men still predominate as serial killers, but they are of different racial affiliations. Also, sexual desire is no longer cited as the primary motive for serial killers. Joni Johnston states anger, criminal enterprise, financial gain, ideology, power/thrill, and psychosis as other motives that drive serial killers (Johnston 20-23). Of course, each serial killer is different from the previous one and is motivated by something

completely different. Also, it is important to note that most serial killers have families and jobs and lead completely “normal” lives.

Serial killers often possess a range of psychological abnormalities. Typical psychological traits of serial killers are psychopathy, sadism, narcissism, and loneliness (Kocsis 87). Psychopathy is characterized by a lack of empathy and remorse, and the person successfully expresses emotions for his own benefit. There are two types of psychopathy, primary and secondary. Serial killers with primary psychopathy “tend to be more prolific, more successful at manipulating people, and more likely to fit into a community. They may come off as cold, callous, distant, robotic, and smug, but people close to them in daily lives do not usually think of them as dangerous” (Grande 26). Ted Bundy would be a good example of a person with primary psychopathy because he was suave and charming and as a result many people did not believe he was guilty of the murders based on his appearance and demeanor. In contrast to the previous type, serial killers with secondary psychopathy are disorganized, chaotic, and short-tempered. A feeling of alienation and loneliness often appears in the cases of serial killers. Loneliness of individuals leads to physical and mental suffering, and they begin to think that they do not belong anywhere and that they have no place in society. Many serial killers “verbalize feelings of loneliness together with low self-esteem and feelings of shame for not being able to live up to family and societal expectations” (Kocsis 91).

The first step in their killing spree involves complicated fantasies that serial killers create due to their loneliness. During this phase, the serial killer chooses his victim and carefully thinks about how and in what way to commit the crime. They carefully select victims who fit their preferred victim profile, which may be influenced by personal preferences, past experiences, or specific fantasies. “These victims were not victims of chance, but victims of choice. They were stalked. As Ted Bundy once told me, the victim does not know the killer, but the killer knows the victim” (Keppel and Birnes 144). Serial killers choose their victims in a unique way. For example, some serial killers might be drawn to individuals who resemble someone from their past, triggering unresolved feelings. Others may choose victims who they believe are easier to overpower, seeking a feeling of dominance and control. Also, certain serial killers might target individuals from certain groups out of hatred. Based on their behavior, serial killers can be categorized as either organized or disorganized. Organized serial killers are extremely careful and try to leave as little evidence as possible. They carefully chose the moment to attack, use the same methods and know the area very well, which is why they are able to evade the police for an extended period of time. Unlike organized serial killers, disorganized serial killers are spontaneous, and they are “more likely to choose a victim based on opportunity (a young person walking alone at night, for example), kill with their hands or a weapon found at the scene (such as a rock or piece of clothing) and make no

attempt to hide the body” (Johnston 19). Most serial killers had good communication skills that facilitated access to their victims. When they approached, they would always use the victim’s naive nature to their advantage. After gaining the victim’s trust, serial killers begin their attack. Each of them uses different weapons and methods and they “learn from crime to crime what works best for them to achieve the highest level of satisfaction” (Keppel and Birnes 226). Between murders, serial killers usually take one or more things that belonged to the victim so that they can be constantly reminded of how powerful they are. Some serial killers take body parts of their victims with them. Ted Bundy used to take home the heads of his victims, Richard Ramirez took the eyeballs of his victims, and Jeffrey Dahmer had the skulls, heads, and organs of his victims in his apartment. After the act of murder, an important aspect is the area where the serial killer will leave the body. It is an area far away from the serial killer and his daily activities, and because of that the serial killer has the complete freedom to act ruthlessly and carelessly. Also, that is where the serial killer “will return to from time to time to interject himself into the criminal investigation and gain a ritualistic thrill from being there. This will provide even greater excitement for the killer, because only he knows the secret the police are scouring for” (Keppel and Birnes 194). The mentioned stages illustrate the psychological factors present in serial killers. By unraveling these stages, people can develop productive strategies for preventing, and identifying potential serial killers, ultimately aiming to protect society from their devastating impact.

## **1.2. How Does a Person Become a Serial Killer?**

Whether serial killers are born or raised has long troubled psychologists, but also society. By examining biological, but also social factors, one comes to an understanding of the influence of these factors on the individual’s identity. Childhood is extremely important for every person because the child absorbs the thoughts and actions of the environment and acts accordingly. Children’s emotional development is conditioned by their experiences and interactions. Therefore, it is extremely important to provide children with an environment that will have a positive effect on them. An environment that is harmful to children includes drug and alcohol use, aggressive behavior, exposure to inappropriate content, and unsanitary living conditions. If children are exposed to such an environment, they might develop these habits in their adulthood. Psychiatrists have determined that a serial killer “will have exhibited one or more specific behaviors in childhood: cruelty to animals, setting fires, and wetting the bed” (Philbin and Philbin 16). Needless to say, this does not have to be the case, and there are many serial killers, who did not exhibit such behavior in their childhood. It is believed that most serial killers come from dysfunctional families

and were abused as children. There are many serial killers who were physically, mentally, and sexually abused, such as John Wayne Gacy, Albert Fish, Charles Manson, Edmund Kemper, etc., but there are also those who come from families where there was no abuse, for example Ted Bundy. Bundy himself stated that no event from his childhood affected him and that he did not live in a dysfunctional family: “I grew up in a wonderful home with two dedicated and loving parents, as one of five brothers and sisters. We, as children, were the focus of my parent’s lives. We regularly attended church. My parents did not drink or smoke or gamble. There was no physical abuse or fighting in the home” (Sainthouse 29).

Family history is also an important element in the development of a child’s life. Understanding an individual’s family history can provide valuable insight into their development, including potential behavior patterns. In the case of Jeffrey Dahmer, his mother’s side had problems with alcohol, while his father’s side did not have any mental illnesses. On the other hand, Jeffrey had similarities with his father Lionel (Pietras 558). His father was a chemist and he saw that Jeff had a great interest in the bones and entrails of animals from an early age. They often collected roadkill together, and his father showed him how to dissect and properly preserve bones. This knowledge that he got from his father Jeffrey later used to get rid of the body more easily. Namely, his father was just like his son from childhood, calm, passive and withdrawn. As a child, he was extremely fond of fire, but explains his behavior as normal. When he was an adolescent, he had various dreams and fantasies that made him question his character. Lionel, like his son Jeffrey, had conflicts within himself, but he decided to focus on the good in life, which helped him succeed.

Adolescence is also an important period that is crucial for the development of a person. During that time, people develop physically, but also mentally. Adolescence can be a difficult time for individuals because they often struggle with internal conflicts. There are certain signs during adolescence that serve as indicators or warnings of future violent behavior, for example: “animal cruelty, bullying peers, getting into frequent and violent fights, early criminal activity, expulsion from school, heavy substance abuse” (Johnston 64). During adolescence, individuals’ express interest in their body, in people of the opposite sex, and in sexual activities. Curiosity is a normal thing in sexual development as teenagers currently want to explore and understand their desires. In many cases, this sexual curiosity can manifest itself as voyeurism, which also appears as an indicator of future violent behavior.

Many believe that brain injury, if experienced during childhood when the brain is still developing, may contribute to the development of their atypical behavior. The frontal lobe is the most sensitive place in the brain and as such it controls “our emotions and therefore our intellects”

(Pope 221). More specifically, it is believed to be the center which recognizes future consequences of behaviors, chooses between good and bad actions, and suppresses or overrides responses, particularly impulses, which would be unacceptable in a social setting” (Sainthouse 26). Ramirez suffered two head injuries when he was still a child. Due to these injuries, he started having epileptic seizures at the age of eleven. It is possible that the brain injuries he received in childhood, incidents he experienced in his family, drug usage, and the environment influenced his becoming a serial killer.

Unlike him, Ted Bundy did not experience any brain injuries, nor was he exposed to violence in his childhood. In Bundy’s case, it would be necessary to delve into his genetics. Namely, “Bundy had a loving family, but low levels of MAOA, which could have triggered his high levels of aggression” (Hernandez et al. 2). Ted was troubled from an early age, but what contributed to his change in behavior was when his first girlfriend left him. Many psychiatrists also claim that Bundy had psychopathic characteristics. This can be seen from the fact that he did not feel remorse, that he used his charm and manipulation techniques to control his victims.

The question of whether Bundy was a born or made serial killer is the subject of ongoing debate. Although there is no definitive answer, it is believed that a combination of genetic predisposition and environmental factors influenced the development and creation of Bundy as a serial killer. The same applies to Dahmer. He was influenced by various elements such as family history, the loneliness he felt as a child, and the bad relationship between his parents, etc. That was also stated by Jeffrey’s father: “I am not so sure, because I have come to believe that some of the compulsions that overwhelmed my son may have had their origins in me, and the things I might have done or not done with him” (Dahmer 169). If these serial killers had been provided with the necessary help on time, their lives could have turned out differently. Ted Bundy could have fulfilled his dream of becoming a lawyer, contributing positively to society, while Jeffrey Dahmer could have learned to communicate with others and form relationships properly. Instead, they choose the wrong path, causing harm not only to themselves but also to their victims who, like them, could have led fulfilling lives. Although it is uncertain whether serial killers are born or made, the only thing that can be established is that the aforementioned serial killers are complex individuals whose lives are marked by numerous factors that contributed to their creation. Even if they were not prevented in time, their lives still serve as a reminder for society to help those with similar genetic or environmental factors.

## **2. Most Infamous Serial Killers**

Throughout history, many names have been associated with the most heinous crimes, highlighting the dark side of human nature. Ted Bundy, Richard Ramirez, and Jeffrey Dahmer are among the most famous and terrifying serial killers that ever existed. They are not only known for their bizarre crimes, but also for the fact that they left a mark not only on the victims and their families, but also on the entire society. In addition to the description of their lives, attention is paid to crimes and victims in order to raise awareness of the possible dangers associated with these individuals as well as the possibility of preventing future tragedies.

### **2.1. Ted Bundy**

Within the records of serial killers and their criminal activities, one name stands out clearly, and that is Ted Bundy. Bundy was born November 24, 1946, in Burlington, Vermont as the eldest child in his family (Pietras 310). Although Bundy did not experience abuse, the secret about his parents took its toll on him. Bundy believed that his mother was his sister, and this fact only confirms how early experiences influence the development of an individual and their thoughts and beliefs. Bundy was extremely withdrawn as a boy but changed in high school when he became extremely popular. However, darker aspects of human nature were starting to grow within him, leading him towards a troubling way of life. During that time, he stole, forged tickets, and developed voyeuristic tendencies. His dual behavior shows how often people judge others based on appearances, but behind the façade and false smiles might be those suffering deeply. Soon, he fell in love with a girl named Diane Edwards (Estep 116). She was beautiful and sophisticated and Ted “couldn’t believe someone from her ‘class’ would have an interest in someone like him” (Pietras 312). When she realized that Ted was not as ideal as he presented himself, she decided to leave him. That event broke Ted and he completely changed his behavior. The behavior change was because he “had a fear of being humiliated in his relationships with women” (Rule 233). Afterward, he met Elizabeth Kendall at a bar (Pietras 315). Elizabeth, a single mother, was quickly drawn to Ted. Following that, Ted decided to study law, and he started to be actively involved in politics and volunteer work. Not long after that, Bundy reconnected with his girlfriend Diane, while still in a relationship with Elizabeth. Their brief affair ended with Ted leaving and trying to humiliate her as she had humiliated him when she left him. Based on his behavior, Bundy can be classified as an organized serial killer. His approach would involve manipulation on his part and exploitation of his victims’ vulnerabilities. After many girls started disappearing, law enforcement released a drawing



depicting a mysterious individual identified as Ted, driving a Volkswagen bug, and targeting female students. Bundy's girlfriend Elizabeth decided to report him to the police, but based on his political background, the police did not even want to investigate the case. Law enforcement initially ignoring Bundy's possible role because of his political background shows how systems often protect individuals from accountability, while at the same time failing the whole society. Guarding individuals with influential backgrounds not only denies the victims' rights but also destroys people's trust in the police and the entire justice system. Also, the fact that he was able to switch from a great student and politician to a cold-blooded killer is an indication that evil is not always easy to recognize. This causes us to doubt our ability to understand the intentions of even those we think we know well. Bundy remained unnoticed until he was arrested. While in prison, Bundy managed to escape twice. The second time Bundy escaped, he broke into the sorority house and killed two girls and injured three. The last victim Ted Bundy killed was a twelve-year-old girl, Kimberly Leach (Estep 141). Peter Vronsky states in the book *Serial Killers: The Method and Madness of Monsters* that at that time Ted Bundy reached a "burnout" phase where he tried to increase the number of murders, but as the number of murders increased, the killings became reckless and disorganized (151). The characteristics and traits of the latest victim differ from the usual profile of victims that Bundy targeted for his assaults. By changing the profile of his last victim, it is evident that Bundy became addicted to killing. It did not matter to Bundy who that person was, but it was important to him that he could dominate that person. According to Ann Rule's book *The Stranger Beside Me*, most of Bundy's victims were young Caucasian females who were slender, attractive, had long hair parted in the middle, were single and very intelligent (86–87). Many believe that Bundy targeted girls resembling his first girlfriend, Diane Edwards. According to this theory, it is suggested that Bundy may have been influenced in his choice of victims by residual feelings of rejection. Bundy chose to treat women like they were worthless to hide the insecurities that plagued him deeply. By demeaning women, Bundy likely gained power and control that he felt he did not have in other aspects of his life. Bundy spent years on death row and often spoke to psychologists, reporters, and detectives about the possible methods and procedures used by serial killers. During the conversation, he stated: "We serial killers are your sons, we are your husbands, we are everywhere. And there will be more of your children dead tomorrow" (Schechter and Everitt 53). Through that statement, Bundy aims to highlight the fact that many individuals who may not fit the typical perception of a murderer can still be capable of committing such heinous acts. That was true of Bundy as well. He was "attractive, educated, and like us—that is, those of us who represent some kind of middle-class aspirations linked to the promise held out by our belief in a college education and hard work" (Vronsky 115). Bundy

confessed to 36 murders, but it is believed that he had more than a hundred victims (Rule 349). Terrified of death, Bundy wanted to make an agreement days before his execution, offering to help locate the other bodies in exchange for postponing his death sentence. It is important to remember that individuals who may lack empathy are still capable of experiencing strong emotions, like fear. His request was rejected, and on January 24, 1989, at 7 a.m., Bundy was executed in the electric chair (Pietras 367). Many people eagerly gathered outside the prison, and following the execution they celebrated by setting off fireworks. Bundy's life is an indication of the deep struggle that takes place within the individual, highlighting the dark side of human nature. His case shows that the people we trust the most can have bad intentions. Therefore, it is extremely important to study such cases more deeply so that people know how to act if they meet a person with a similar profile.

## **2.2. Richard Ramirez**

Ricardo Leyva Muñoz Ramirez, also known as Richard Ramirez, was a serial killer born on February 29, 1960, in the city of El Paso, Texas, as the youngest among five siblings (Estep 176). Richard's father was a hard-working man, but he was aggressive and often took his anger out on his children by beating them. Richard's father instilled in him a deep-rooted fear that, tragically, became evident as a leaning toward violence as he got older. His cousin, a Vietnam War veteran, played a significant role in Richard's life. He introduced Richard to Satanism, and the two of them spent days together smoking marijuana and discussing the practice of Satanism. His cousin also showed him graphic photographs from the war, where he was involved in gruesome acts of sexually assaulting women and posing with their severed heads. A major turning point occurred for Ramirez when his cousin killed his wife in front of him. Richard "was introduced to this violence at a very vulnerable period, when his personality and sexual identity were developing, which no doubt gave rise to an association between sex and violence for Ramirez, as well as deviant sexual fantasies" (Lyon and Tan 274). After his arrest, Richard became depressed and slowly began to alienate himself from his friends and family. Not long after that, he decided to withdraw from his high school while fully embracing the dark path of Satanism. In addition, he began to use more substances and developed an unhealthy lifestyle which was mostly seen through his neglect of personal hygiene. Throughout his childhood, one can see how much Ramirez lacked a mentor and a positive role model who would have redirected him in a healthier and more constructive way. Ramirez chose his victims at random and would "beat them with hammers, tire irons or available objects, shoot them, stab them with knives, or slash them with a machete" (Brett 270). Ramirez's lack of planning and organization is a clear indicator of belonging to the category

of disorganized serial killer. Typically, he would use a firearm to kill the male victim, with a primary focus on sexually assaulting the female victim. However, he also ended the lives of women in some cases. For Ramirez, the “man was just an impediment and not part of the fantasy; the woman was the real object of desire” (Pietras 417). Ramirez’s focus on women reveals his distorted perception of gender roles and overall power dynamics. Like Bundy, women for Ramirez were just objects over which he established power and fulfilled his fantasies, and in order to fulfill his fantasy he had to kill men, who were only an obstacle for him. While murdering, Ramirez started incorporating satanic elements into his crimes, which eventually became one of his distinct signature characteristics. Ramirez would mark pentagrams on the walls and victims’ bodies. Additionally, he would demonstrate his dominance and control by compelling many of his victims to swear to Satan. Satanism provided freedom and power to Ramirez and he “believed that no matter what he did, no matter what risks he took, Satan would protect him” (Estep 179). Inserting Satanism into his murders leads to sensationalism in the media. Associating Ramirez with dark and taboo topics only drew media attention, which was probably Ramirez’s goal. Connecting a serial killer with Satanism can lead to numerous misunderstandings and stereotypes about both Satanism and true crime. Focusing precisely on one aspect can overshadow other complex factors that contribute to an individual becoming a serial killer. The inhabitants of San Francisco and Los Angeles were in fear because they never knew when he would attack and who would be his next victim. It took the police a long time to discover his identity, and when they did, they published his name and picture in all the newspapers and news so that all people could recognize him. Several days later, Ramirez stumbled upon his own picture in a newspaper. Realizing he was now a recognizable figure, he attempted to escape. However, his attempts were in vain as nearby residents intervened and informed the police, which led to his arrest. Throughout the trial, Ramirez typically wore dark clothing and sunglasses, aiming to create a mysterious and rebellious image throughout the trial. “Other than that appearance, Ramirez sat through most of his numerous hearings, slouching in his chair, drumming his fingers on the table, and bobbing his head as if listening to rock music. He seemed oblivious to the seriousness of the charges” (Pietras 435). He also inscribed a pentagram onto his hand and showed it to the photographers, simultaneously shouting Satan’s name. Ramirez’s rebellion during his trial can be seen as a desperate attempt to assert his identity and gain the attention he lacked earlier in life. After his conviction, Ramirez spent 23 years on death row and he died on June 7, 2013, at the age of 53 due to problems related to B-cell lymphoma (Pietras 454). Knowing that he could no longer cause damage creates an atmosphere where those affected may find some peace and begin rebuilding their lives. After researching the case of Richard Ramirez, it is obvious that his upbringing and experiences greatly

influenced his twisted path. Ramirez's random selection of victims and complete lack of concern for human life intensify the horrifying nature of his crimes. Although his death brought relief to many, it is still not pleasant to think about the things he did and the fear and anxiety he instilled in many people who are probably still dealing with the consequences of his actions.

### **2.3. Jeffrey Dahmer**

Jeffrey Dahmer was born on May 21, 1960, in the city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Estep 342). Dahmer's childhood was marked by his mother's struggles with anxiety and depression, as well as his father's focus on his studies, resulting in a dysfunctional family environment. The tension between his parents and their emotional unavailability played a significant role in promoting a sense of detachment in Dahmer. His father, Lionel, wrote in his memoirs that when he and his wife fought, Jeffrey would "walk out into the yard and slap at the trees with branches he'd gathered from the ground" (Dahmer 60). His introverted nature combined with attention-seeking behavior indicated a complex internal struggle that he was facing at a very young age. Dahmer would do many pranks at school "including feigning cerebral palsy, allergies, or seizures. At his school, pulling a prank became known as 'doing a Dahmer'" (Lyon and Tan 201). He started drinking heavily in high school because he could not come to terms with the fact that he was drawn to other boys sexually. At that time, it was difficult for a man to be homosexual because many people did not accept them. Dahmer was left to try to suppress his sexual desires and not to tell anyone about his sexual orientation, which made him feel extremely lonely. The separation of his parents adds another layer of unsteadiness to Dahmer's life. His isolation intensifies after his mother left him alone at their house. That summer of 1978, after being left alone, he attacked his first victim, eighteen-year-old Steven Hicks (Philbin and Philbin 135). Dahmer "was preoccupied with the idea of a relationship with a subservient partner, where his own wants and needs took precedence over those of his lover" (Lyon and Tan 200). He took Hicks to his house, and they smoked marijuana there. When Hicks was about to leave, Dahmer took a barbell and beat him to death. Steven Hicks' murder is evidence of Dahmer's inability to form a connection with other people on a healthy level. To establish a relationship with another person, it is important that this relationship is based on equality. Dahmer was unable to maintain relationships as he never allowed the other person to express their opinion. When his father returned home, he decided to redirect him to the right path. He suggested Jeffrey to join the army, but that did not last long because Jeffrey was discharged due to alcoholism. Eventually, he moved in with his grandmother. Moving in with his grandmother appeared to offer a chance at redemption, as they both attended church together and Jeffrey even

made efforts to adopt a more positive outlook on life. However, an encounter in a library triggered a downward spiral for him. He started going out to gay bars and bathhouses where he drugged men and raped them. Jeffrey's behavior took a darker turn as he resumed his spree of killings. Dahmer can be classified as an organized serial killer because, with each murder, he shaped his modus operandi. "First, he would use his charm to ingratiate himself with a young man; next, he would lure them to a private place with promises of money, sex, and alcohol; and then murder them before having sex with the corpse" (Estep 353). In addition, he would dispose of the bodies using acid and preserve the skulls of his victims. His number of victims grew, and he began to develop cannibalistic tendencies in his murders. Dahmer "believed that by ingesting his lovers, he would never again be alone" (Lyon and Tan 199). As time went by, Dahmer wanted to have as much control over his victims as possible, and eventually, he realized that he did not want a dead victim but a "living, breathing slave, one whose mind and will were completely subservient to his own. In other words, he needed to create a zombie" (Estep 358). After drugging a person, he would take a drill and make a hole in their head and pour in hydrochloric acid so that the victim would be devoid of any emotions or desires. Many claim that Dahmer chose people from ethnic minority groups as victims because their absence would go unnoticed by the police, while others claim that his choice of victims was influenced by his residence in a neighborhood where most of the people were African American. However, Dahmer mostly sought victims who were attractive to him. He was most interested in the male body, as his father also states: "He had wanted bodies, muscular, male bodies. For me, it was simple as that. The color of their skin hadn't mattered to him in the least" (Dahmer 129). Being in prison was extremely difficult for Dahmer, and at one point he thought of committing suicide. But after some time, Dahmer decided to devote his life to religion and was also baptized in prison. He did not spend much time in prison because on November 28, 1994, his prison inmate Christopher Scarver had beaten him to death with a metal bar, and his life ended in the same way as the life of his first victim, Steven Hicks (Philbin and Philbin 139). Through his case, one can see that Dahmer was unhappy and lonely all his life. This loneliness made it impossible for him to form healthy relationships. Because of this impossibility, Dahmer often allowed his sexual urges to get the better of him, which led him to commit such heinous crimes. Dahmer's life can serve as a reminder of how important mental health is and how important it is to provide support to those who have struggles within themselves before such distress escalates into violence.

### 3. The Construction of Serial Killers as Monsters

Serial killers and their crimes have always frightened, but also fascinated people all over the world. The construction of their identities is due to various cultural and media factors. Sensationalized portrayals are most visible in the news and true crime documentaries. The goal of the media is to intimidate and shock people, because such “news content attracts a wide audience, and a large audience attracts advertising revenue” (Bonn 236). Serial killers are usually portrayed in the media as evil, reckless, dark, and psychotic people. News and documentaries often show graphic images explaining in detail the gruesome crimes committed by serial killers in order to elicit an emotional response from the viewer. Many media also exaggerate when describing serial killers and their crimes. Julie B. Wiest in *Casting Cultural Monsters: Representations of Serial Killers in U.S. and U.K. News Media* states that the media mostly uses words like “deranged,” “sadistic,” “evil,” “psycho,” “psychopathic,” “maniac” and “predator” (335). Some media also use numerous negative descriptions one after the other to capture the attention of the audience and emphasize the traits and actions of serial killers. In the film *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile*, starring Zac Efron, many negative adjectives were used in the title. Namely, the film focuses on the turbulent relationship between Ted Bundy and his girlfriend Elizabeth Kendall, as she discovers the truth that her boyfriend was responsible for the murders of numerous young women. Although the title suggests that the film is full of graphic images, this is not the case in the film. In the film, Bundy is portrayed as a charming and charismatic person, and by the end of the movie, many viewers were manipulated into believing that Bundy was innocent, even though they know the truth. Unlike the film about Ted Bundy, the series named *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* contains gruesome graphic images and is extremely difficult to watch. The series not only explores the heinous crimes committed by Dahmer but also places significant emphasis on the victims who tragically lost their lives and suffered mutilation at his hands. The title contains the word “monster” which is perhaps the word most often used to describe serial killers. The title serves as an invitation for viewers to watch the series, while the series is the one that creates shock and fear in the viewers. In recent years, true crime documentaries have become extremely popular. Although they provide an insight into the serial killer’s mindset and investigative procedures, the aim of such documentaries is to occupy and entertain the viewer. When producing films, series, and documentaries dealing with serial killers, attention is often put on the most notorious and horrific cases, which often leads to the creation of numerous stereotypes. Although the media incites fear in people and creates numerous stereotypes, it also has the potential to raise awareness and educate society.

### 3.1. Stereotypes about Serial Killers

By presenting carefully selected cases of serial killers in the media, society begins to create certain stereotypes related to them. The first of the stereotypes associated with serial killers is their appearance. Serial killers are portrayed in the media as “creatures with blood dripping from their fangs or crazed psychopaths babbling satanic rituals. While a few are exactly like that, many appear at first glance to be healthy, normal, and even attractive people” (Vronsky 25). This is the case with Ted Bundy. Bundy was a charming and attractive law student who shocked the world when it was discovered that he had committed many heinous crimes. With his charm and looks, Bundy was able to fool many people years after his arrest and execution. It is also important to note that the media’s focus on certain cases creates stereotypes that only men can be serial killers. This belief is not correct because there are many female serial killers, including Aileen Wuornos, Amelia Dyer, Karla Homolka, and many others (Inglés). The cases of Aileen Wuornos and other women prove that aggressive and problematic behavior is not solely a male trait, as the stereotype states. It is evident from the examples above that problematic behavior is not determined by gender and that anyone can commit numerous heinous crimes. There is also a belief that serial killers only target female victims. There are many serial killers who targeted men, such as Jeffrey Dahmer and John Wayne Gacy. Many people believe that serial killers often come from dysfunctional families and experience feelings of loneliness and isolation. There are many serial killers like Jeffrey Dahmer who were lonely and many like John Wayne Gacy who were abused in their family, but there are many who did not come from dysfunctional families and did not experience loneliness or isolation. For example, Ted Bundy, who, despite his shock at discovering that his sister is his mother, never experienced physical or mental abuse as a child. He also never felt particularly lonely since, as he got older, he had a girlfriend, numerous friends at university, and was an active member of politics. Another stereotype related to serial killers is their intelligence. Many believe that serial killers are highly intelligent individuals, but Joni Johnson states that “serial killers are not particularly bright, having an average IQ of 93-94” (Johnston 100). Very few people, approximately 2 percent, have an IQ above 132, and among that two percent is a serial killer named Ted Kaczynski, who had an IQ of 167 (Johnston 100). His high IQ is clearly an indicator of the complexities and potential dangers associated with individuals who possess remarkable intellectual capabilities. Stereotyping of serial killers has a great influence on human perception, shaping society’s understanding and reaction to these crimes. It is important to understand that these stereotypes are not an accurate representation of the psychological and physical characteristics associated with them, and in reality, serial killers have various characteristics,

motivations and behaviors that encourage them to commit crimes, and therefore each case should be looked at separately because each serial killer is different from the previous one. Stereotypes only worsen our ability to analyze a certain topic properly to get a better understanding and form our opinion. Therefore, society should avoid forming stereotypes and be open-minded in approaching such topics to understand the circumstances and motivations that led to the creation of serial killers.

### **3.2. Nicknames**

Serial killers and their heinous crimes receive more media attention and are often the subject of various discussions and debates. They are often nicknamed by the media so they could differentiate them from other serial killers. Serial killers are often assigned with memorable nicknames, which are taken from specific characteristics or patterns associated with their crimes, such as methods of killing, geographic locations, or victim profiles. For example, Richard Ramirez was nicknamed the “Night Stalker” for the way he operated (Estep 192). At night, he would sneak into people’s houses to torture, rape and kill them. Jeffrey Dahmer was nicknamed the “Milwaukee Cannibal” because he had developed cannibalistic tendencies and because of the location of his murders, which was Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Estep 367). John Wayne Gacy was nicknamed the “Killer Clown” because he used to dress up as a clown and put on shows for the whole neighborhood (Schechter and Everitt 141). Some serial killers did not have a nickname, such as Ted Bundy and Charles Manson. Their names became synonymous with all the crimes they committed. Giving serial killers nicknames might sensationalize their actions and lessen the seriousness of their crimes. It is crucial to understand that the reality is completely different and that serial killers as individuals are far more complex than their nicknames suggest. Although nicknames are used to identify a serial killer and capture the attention of society, it is important to note that there are many factors that influence the origin and actions of a serial killer, and that is why it is important to thoroughly investigate the entire case, and not just follow the media portrayal, which often leads to the creation of numerous stereotypes and misunderstandings related to serial killers.



## 4. Fascination with Serial Killers

Serial killers have always fascinated the public and increased their desire to find out as much information as possible about them. Factors that contribute to their development, the motivations that drive them to kill and the reasons for the selection of certain victims are some of the questions that interest the public. One of the reasons why people are fascinated with serial killers is because they fit very well in the society and do not draw too much attention to themselves. Ted Bundy is a good example. His looks and charm are the main characteristics that enabled him to blend into the society. People are also drawn to serial killers because they stimulate basic emotions like fear. Some people's fear arouses curiosity for serial killers and their reasons for killing. Crime books, films, series, and documentaries are extremely popular in society because they allow the audience to take on the role of detectives and, while following certain facts, they develop solutions about the killer's motives and identity. The fascination with serial killers is a complex part of human psychology, and by acknowledging and researching this fascination, people can gain insight into themselves as individuals as well as society in general.

### 4.1. Serial Killers as Celebrities

The mass portrayal of serial killers in the media contributed to their development as celebrities. There is an increasing number of films and documentaries that focus on the lives and crimes of serial killers. Many films, such as *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* tend to romanticize serial killers, which makes viewers develop a fascination for them and they begin to justify serial killers because they believe in their innocence (Lowry). There are many people who fall in love and become obsessed with serial killers, believing that they are misunderstood. Ted Bundy was supported by many women during the trial, and he received numerous letters from his admirers every day. One woman supported him the most, and that was Carole Ann Boone (Estep 146). She was Bundy's acquaintance who reconnected with him when he ended up in prison. She believed he was innocent and decided to marry him during one of his trials. Another serial killer who married his admirer was Richard Ramirez. Ramirez would often read "newspaper articles talking about him as the devil and understood that he was a celebrity now. The more he flashed the pentagram or talked about serving Satan, the more he was quoted in the papers" (Pietras 453). During the trial, Ramirez would most of the time wear sunglasses, "cultivating a look that was as much wannabe rock star as it was serial killer" (Estep 194). Ramirez enjoyed the attention he

received from his fans and often turned to them during the trial, trying to impress them in different ways. Unlike the previous two serial killers, Jeffrey Dahmer was not visited so much by his admirers, but many people wrote him letters, while he was in prison. Many wrote to him that they had similar urges as him, while others wrote to him that he seemed like an intelligent person and that they were sorry that he ended up in such a state. Many even sent him money. There were also people who would send him love letters, as his father Lionel states: “One woman wrote to tell Jeff that she’d bleached her jeans and emblazoned his initials on them. ‘We are destined to be together,’ another woman wrote” (Dahmer 160).

Although they were glorified by certain people during their lifetime, the fascination with serial killers continues to grow even decades after the crimes were committed. People have become increasingly preoccupied with the personal belongings owned by serial killers. The term used for this intensive collection is called murderabilia. Many people are willing to pay up to several thousand dollars to buy items such as clothing, photos, letters, and artwork that serial killers had. There are numerous websites such as *Cult Collectibles* and *Murder Auction* that sell numerous products of various serial killers. Many products can be found on these platforms, but everything depends on the buyer’s criteria and willingness to pay a certain amount of money for the product possessed by a serial killer. Apart from such sites, social networks are also popular in developing opinions about serial killers. Judith Fathallah states that there are two types of “Bad Fandom” that the media has encouraged, which are falling in love with serial killers and imitating serial killers (15). The first group is dominated by women, who are captivated by the physical appearance of a serial killer, and they often tend to forget the crimes that the serial killers committed and mistake them for the victims. Social networks such as *TikTok* and *Twitter* contain numerous groups and posts about serial killers. Many social media users support serial killers like Bundy, Ramirez, and Dahmer, oblivious to the pain they caused not only the victims, but also their friends and families. The second group mostly consists of men, who see the serial killer as strong and dangerous and thus idealize them and their acts. After the release of the series about Jeffrey Dahmer called *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*, many people started dressing up as Dahmer either for Halloween or during everyday activities such as going to work or school (Walsh). From the above, it can be clearly seen that the media portrayal of serial killers causes many problems, including glorification and romanticization. To reduce these problems, the media should stop putting profit in the foreground, manipulating society, and exaggerating their lives and actions, but should realistically portray serial killers to educate the entire society about the potential dangers that are present in the world today.

## Conclusion

Today, serial killers have captured people's interest and attention. It is important to recognize the difference between serial and mass murder. Serial murder refers to the killing of three or more persons within a certain period, while mass murder refers to the killing of multiple people at the same time. Each serial killer is different from the other, and that is why special attention must be given to the victims, motives, methods, and factors that influenced the person in becoming a serial killer. The concept of a serial killer is marked by numerous stereotypes. For example, one of the stereotypes is that serial killers attack mostly women, which is not the case with Dahmer, who killed young men. Another stereotype is that many serial killers come from dysfunctional families. This may be the case with Richard Ramirez, but for example Ted Bundy did not experience any domestic abuse as a child. The way people perceive serial killers is largely influenced by the media. The media tries to portray serial killers as monsters. Their goal is to attract the public's attention, by scaring and shocking them at the same time. They do this through sensational headlines of articles and news where they use numerous negative terms such as "monster," "devil," "psychopath," "evil," etc. The media also uses such expressions when creating nicknames for serial killers. These nicknames are intended to draw attention to the intense and heinous crimes committed by serial killers, but also to identify people to distinguish them from other serial killers. In addition, the media generally focuses on the most famous cases, and because of that, the previously mentioned stereotypes are created. Also, the media tries to horrify the public in articles, films, and documentaries through detailed descriptions of the crimes committed by serial killers. Moreover, people extremely like to read books and watch documentaries about serial killers because then they take on the role of detectives and through various facts try to discover their identity, as well as the various factors that influenced their actions. Various films and series lead to the romanticization of serial killers and the public begins to sympathize with them, often without fully understanding the seriousness of their crimes. Furthermore, the romanticization of serial killers through movies and series leads to glorification on social media. Social networks are a powerful weapon that shape the opinions of many people. There are two types of people on social networks, those who are attracted by the appearance of serial killers and fall in love with them, and those who find serial killers mysterious and fascinating, often trying to imitate them. Glorifying and romanticizing serial killers should be avoided, and attention should be paid to their victims and their families. In conclusion, the media should focus on realistic portrayal of serial killers to raise awareness and educate the public about the potential dangers prevailing in society.

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