

Beneath the Mask of Sanity

"Murderers do not come out in the dark with long teeth and saliva dripping off their chin. We want to say we can identify these dangerous people ... you can't identify them. People don't realize that there are potential killers among them." – Ted Bundy.

Ted Bundy, one of the most notorious serial killers in known history, is a testament to his own words. Behind his façade of a well-educated, confident young man with a promising future lay one of the most cold-blooded killers known to this day. Killers come in all forms: men or women, strangers or friends. Even age isn't a boundary; the youngest known serial killer to date was only eight years old when he committed his first murder. So, the question is, how can we tell? The simple truth is we can't.



Ted Bundy at perfect ease before his trial. [Source: Cosmopolitan]

Nevertheless, it can get quite challenging to accept the unknown for what it is. The prevalence of such grotesque crimes may have significantly decreased in recent times, but

the fascination with serial killers remains. While an interest in the macabre may seem unwarranted, it is exactly what has us delve into the dark. Understanding a killer's motivation helps sate fear of the unknown: it fosters a feeling of security. Serial killers neither commit crimes of passion nor crimes of opportunity. They plan their murders and carry them out with cold precision. This inhuman intention to harm makes them so much more terrifying.

Through the Ages

Dozens of killers can be found interwoven throughout history. The most elusive is undoubtedly the ruthless murderer known by the alias, 'Jack the Ripper'. His exploits: a series of killings carried out in the East End of Victorian London. While around a dozen murders are attributed to him, only five are known to be his victims. It soon became evident that the Ripper had predilections in both his victims and the modus operandi. All five killings involved women in their early to mid-forties (except for Mary John Kelly, who came to her untimely end at 25), and all were suspected prostitutes, found in varying states of mutilation. Wounds were accompanied by the removal of several organs, hinting at surgical experience. The Ripper's identity remains unknown to this day.



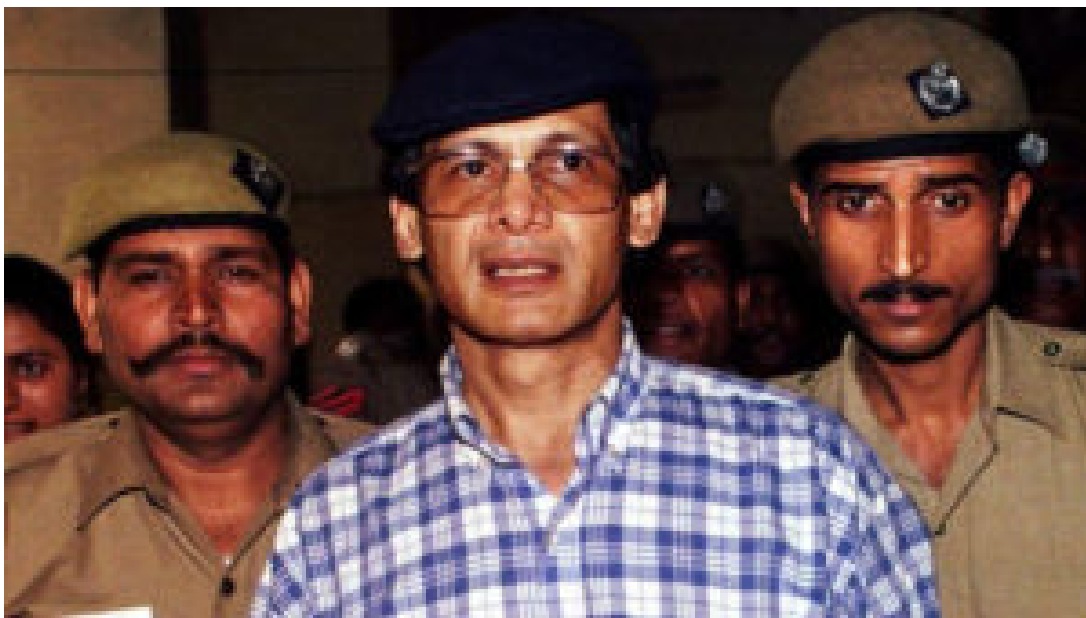
The Ripper's favourite haunt: The streets of Whitechapel

[Source: Penguin Books]

Ted Bundy was the epitome of a charming young gentleman. Born as an illegitimate child, Ted was raised as the adopted child of his grandparents. He was a bright boy, doing well in school. However, he showed a disturbing fascination with knives at a young age. He went on to study psychology and suffered a devastating breakup during his time at the University of Washington. Many later victims shared his college girlfriend's long, dark hair. Bundy too followed a pattern with his killings. His victims were often raped before being beaten to death and were all women. Although he confessed to 36 murders, it is believed that the actual number may lie closer to 100. Using his good looks and charming manner to his advantage, he regularly lured his victims into his car under the pretense of being injured. Unfortunately, his unquenchable thirst for murder caused him to lead the police right to him. Even with his infamous charm, Bundy was unable to talk his way out of a death sentence, he was executed in 1989.

Veering away from classic Caucasian serial killers, Charles Sobhraj was a French killer of Vietnamese and Indian origin. Unlike most, his killing spree spans over several countries. India, Malaysia, France, Germany, and Switzerland were all subjected to his sadistic whims. Sobhraj, shockingly, managed to gain a cult-like following, their loyalty to him causing them to turn a blind eye to his crimes. His cunning and skill at deception earned him the title 'The Serpent'. He committed his first known murders in 1975 with the help of his second in command, Ajay Chowdhury, and his girlfriend, Marie Le Clerc. His methods of killing included drowning, burning, and strangulation, all designed to be dismissed as accidental deaths during police investigations. He was caught in July 1976 and sent to jail in New Delhi, with a 12-year prison sentence. Sobhraj was living a comfortable life in prison. Having smuggled precious gems into the jail and bribed his

captors, he was afforded several luxuries such as a television and gourmet food. The infamous killer evaded execution once more in 1986. His sentence was approaching its end, condemning him to almost certain death if extradited to Thailand. He escaped prison, having drugged the guards with sleeping pills, and was caught only a month later in Goa. The authorities played right into his plan, extending his sentence by ten years. Released in 1997, with little to no evidence of his earlier crimes remaining, he walked as a free man. Sobhraj tripped up eventually: his overconfidence damned him to a double life sentence in a Nepalese prison in 2003. His charm, however, didn't take a hit, and he married his interpreter Nihita Biswas in 2010 while in prison. She described his eyes and gaze as mesmerising and even gave him blood in 2017 for open-heart surgery. Now a 77-year-old man, he is imprisoned to this day, though it remains to be seen if his renowned cunning will allow him to walk free once more or if Charles' Serpent' Sobhraj has taken his final bow.



The Bikini Killer, Charles Sobhraj, led away in cuffs after a failed murder attempt. [Source: India Today]

Myths: Fact or Fiction

With a steady increase in true crime connoisseurs, many movies

are based on various serial killers and their crimes. However, in the spirit of captivating the audience, many characteristics are twisted out of proportion to create a more thrilling plot. Killers are commonly portrayed as evil geniuses who are isolated from society. Several other stereotypes have come into play, giving off a false impression.

Myth 1: All serial killers are reclusive and antisocial

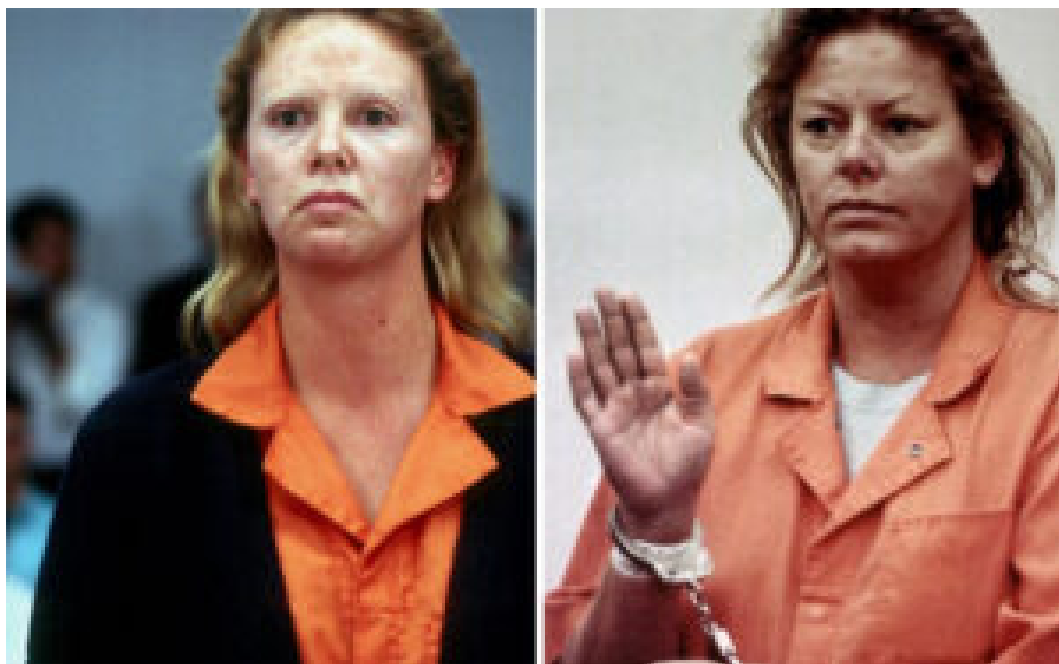
Most movies depict their killer as socially inept. But in real life, they blend in with society just as well as everyone else. They can often be friendly, non-threatening members of the community. Many have been known to have loving families. Ted Bundy was married twice and even had a child. Serial killers' ability to hide in plain sight is what makes them so frightening and fascinating at the same time.

Myth 2: All Serial Killers are Caucasian

While only white male serial killers have come to light as cultural icons, serial killers span all racial and ethnic groups. Anthony Edward Sowell, an African-American man known as 'the Cleveland Strangler', was responsible for 12 murders in Ohio. Another example is Rory Conde, a Colombian native who carried out six homicides in Florida.

Myth 3: All Serial Killers are male

Although the most notorious killers are all male, female serial killers have proven to be just as deadly. The majority of all homicides committed by women in America are serial killings. Aptly named 'The Black Widow', Judy Buenoano poisoned her husband in 1971 and drowned their son nine years later. She also attempted to murder her boyfriend in 1983 and was executed by an electric chair in 1998. Aileen Wuornos killed seven men, shooting them at point-blank range.



Actor Charlize Theron (left) playing Aileen Wuornos (right) in the movie 'Monster.' [Source: Pinterest]

Myth 4: All Serial Killers have an extremely high IQ

Serial Killers are often shown to be incredibly intelligent. A premise that is used to explain how they can escape the law frequently. Yet most serial killers show an IQ that aligns with the general population. A serial killer's success does not lie in their intelligence but their obsession and cold-bloodedness.

The psyche of a killer

When faced with the atrocities that killers commit, it's inevitable to wonder why they feel the need to take lives. Based on motivation alone, serial killers are classed under four rudimentary categories.

1. Mission-oriented killers target specific groups in retaliation for what they see as a violation of particular values.
2. Visionary killers claim to hear voices encouraging them to kill.
3. Power-control killers derive sexual pleasure from the

power they exert over their victim

4. Hedonistic killers kill for personal gain, gratification, or thrill.

However, a killer's motivations are never clear-cut, and it is believed that the urge to kill is born out of a mix of various psychological factors. Fictional portrayals of killers often pin the blame on dissociative identity disorder (DID). The belief that two individuals can co-exist in a killer can explain how someone who displays socially acceptable behaviour can also commit cold-blooded murder. 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde' is a classic example of this. However, very little evidence points to this being found in serial killers in real life. DID *has* been found to manifest in victims, who use it as a coping mechanism.



The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde [Source: Bibliotheca Alexandrina]

Born Or Made?

J.M Macdonald suggested a link between specific childhood behaviour and an inclination towards violence as an adult. His theory is also called 'The Macdonald Triad'. The three characteristics he picked out are animal cruelty, fire

setting, and bedwetting. He connects the first to a child's need to vent their anger on something over which they have power. This may be due to a need to feel in control, which is lost when abused by an adult in their life. Similarly, fire setting may be a mechanism to satisfy feelings of aggression. He believes that bedwetting may worsen the child's feelings of humiliation and anxiety. While his theory has not been conclusively proven, it does match what many killers have confessed regarding their childhoods.

Familiar Faces

Killers also tend to look for specific characteristics in their victims, usually from past negative experiences, a la Ted Bundy. This ties into how negative experiences as a child or even later in life can trigger psychopathic behaviour. However, convenience also plays a factor. Vulnerable victims who are easy to access are preferred, as they are more susceptible to an attack. Due to this, victims are frequently young females of the same race as the perpetrator. Moreover, although in homicides, the victim is usually known to the killer, serial murders are twice as likely to involve a stranger.

A Neurological Dichotomy

Many killers showcase signs of psychopathy or sociopathy. Their characteristics also match people with antisocial personality disorder, which is suspected of having genetic roots. The condition causes an inability to distinguish between right and wrong and a lack of regard for others. However, few serial killers are classed as mentally insane. They are primarily found to be entirely conscious of their actions, and most of them display a lack of empathy and remorse even after being caught. Criminal psychopaths tend to showcase two disturbing neurological anomalies. Their lack of empathy seems to be caused by a decreased connectivity between the amygdala and prefrontal cortex of the brain. This can

prevent the translation of negative stimuli, in the amygdala, to negative emotion. Thus, they feel little to no regret. However, serial killers also tend to have an enhanced emotional drive that causes an inexplicable urge to hurt and kill other humans. These contradicting phenomena are yet to be explained on a neurological level.

But despite all this, sometimes there is no real explanation for or motivation behind a killer's actions. It's a lot easier to stomach their crimes as having occurred for a reason as opposed to the harsh truth: sometimes, people kill for no reason. To them, it's just another thrill. We watch movies and scoff at how easily the killer can be identified, but the signs aren't as blatant in real life. Killers rarely stand out in a crowd. Usually, they're the people no one pays attention to—the people who would never cross anyone's mind as being capable of cold-blooded murder. The truth is, anyone can be a murderer. So, the next time you're walking in a crowded street and catch the eye of a stranger across the road, stop and wonder whether you just locked gazes with a killer. And hope that if you did, they didn't look into your eyes and see their next victim.

[Featured Image Credit: Pinterest]