

Why Did He Kill? – A Criminal Psychological Study of *Zombie*

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Abstract

The novel *Zombie* by American author Joyce Carol Oates describes the entire self-destructive process of the main character Quentin, who turns from a college student into a ruthless serial killer. This article attempts to interpret the serial killer Quentin in *Zombie* from the perspective of criminal psychology, mainly the factors influencing the formation of crime, to analyse how Quentin descended into the abyss of crime step by step, which is critical for us to better understand the formation of crime and to take relevant preventive measures.

Keywords: *Zombie*, Joyce Carol Oates, criminal psychology, serial killer

1. Introduction

Zombie (1995), written by American writer Joyce Carol Oates, is based on the real story of Milwaukee cannibal and serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer. Between 1978 and 1991, he killed 17 young men, sexually abusing their corpses and sometimes eating their internal organs. The case shocked the world and Jeffrey's upbringing and psychological journey attracted Oates, as a result, she adapted it into a novella, *Zombie*. Oates is acclaimed as the master of psychological realism and her fictions have always focused, among other things, on human lives, souls and minds. *Zombie* is no exception, in which the psychological journey of the protagonist and serial killer, Quentin, is

meticulously documented in the form of a diary.

2. Literature Review

This novella employs symbols, capital letters, and graffiti to dramatize the serial killer's insanity and the terrifying consciousness of serial killers. It is a bold and original attempt in Oates' writing style, which has attracted the attention of a wide range of scholars. Miho Morii (2009) and Fiorenzo Iuliano (2013) analyze the significance of the novel's association with reality; Payel Pal (2019) reveals the American's obsession with masculinity and heroism and highlights Oates's interrogation of capitalism. In terms of ethnicity, Xu Lingling (2020) examined the marginalized position of

American minorities through the lens of post-colonialism. Some scholars analyse this novel from psychology. Li Wei (2013) uses literary sociology and psychology to expose the purpose of Oates's writing—to reveal the dark side of society and to call for realistic changes. Similarly, Liu Yuhong (2016) uses bodily cognitive poetics to examine the connection between the violent desire for power and psychological reality in the text. However, the cause of the protagonist's crime was neglected in the previous study. Studying the causes and psychological journey of offenders can help prevent the recurrence of such cases. In light of this, this article examines this novel through an interdisciplinary path, combining criminal psychology and literature, to answer the following questions: 1) What are the imaginative representations of crime and justice in *Zombie*? 2) How can criminal psychology help us understand what happens in *Zombie*? 3) What does literature reveal about crime that criminal psychology misses?

3. Methodology

To achieve the above-mentioned aims, this article uses a qualitative approach by referring to the interpretation of text with a data source selected from *Zombie*. Focus is placed upon the protagonist's psychological changes, criminal behavior, and possible causes of his crimes. It involves the following stages: (1) introduce criminology and crime psychology, (2) identify and classify the data related to criminal behavior in literature, (3) analyze these data under the guidelines of crime psychology, and (4) evaluate and conclude the research result by conducting intersubjectivity techniques, which are supposed to minimize the researcher's subjectivity in processing and analyzing data.

4. Criminal Psychology

Before stepping into the internal world of the criminals, it's necessary to know the definition of criminology. It is the multidisciplinary study of crime, involving sociology, psychology, and psychiatry, anthropology, biology, neurology, political science, economics etc.

Literary works have been approached quite differently in recent years, focusing particularly on their interdisciplinary aspects, among them criminology have provided a new perspective to

comprehend the criminals' behavior in the fictional world. Despite the fact that criminology and literature only emerged as a distinct academic field in the 21st century, Wilson (2021) believes the study can be traced back to the first half of the 20th century when literary critics compared Shakespeare to criminologists (Stoll, 1912). Under the umbrella term "criminology and literature", criminal psychology and literature attract most attention.

Criminal psychology is the study of psychological phenomena and factors associated with crimes. According to Bartol, it is the science of the behavior and mental processes of the person who commits crime. (30) Specifically, it is the application of the basic principles and methods of psychology to explore in what mental state and under what psychological factors the perpetrators are influenced to commit crimes that seriously endanger society. Some cold-blooded, ruthless and murderous criminals often suffer from a lack of affection or emotional care during their early formative years, especially a lack of communication with their parents, such that they reject or resent sincere communication with their families. It is true that young people who have not been loved from an early age will find it difficult to love others on their own initiative as adults, a problem caused by a person's innate socialisation deficit—a lack of love. The complete process of Quentin's psychological evolution can be clearly seen in his criminal psychology, from the preparation, execution, and completion of the crime, as well as the actions he took after the crime to avoid social responsibility. It is not difficult to determine the factors influencing his criminal psychology.

5. Family's Indulgence

Environment plays a vital role in the formation of an individual's character. In a given environment, the influence of people on each other cannot be ignored, and there is a profusion of ways of influencing each other, including the comments and actions of others, and even changes in attitude and behaviour caused by the mere presence of others. Family, social and economic environments have a significant influence on the protagonist's criminal behavior in the novel.

Families can be divided into families of origin and

post-group families, which are fundamentally different from each other. The family of origin is the group that a person first comes into contact with, and it has the most profound influence on the formation of a person's personality, ideas and morals. The post-group family is the family formed actively or passively after a person enters society, and is second only to the family of origin in terms of personality formation. Although it is not as influential as the family of origin, it is one of the groups in which a person needs to stay for a long time, and it plays an important role in the development of a person. Parents are the first teachers of their children, and their every word and deed has a subtle influence on the development of their children. If a child lives in a harmonious and stable family, he or she may collect good traits such as kindness, tolerance and cooperation, while on the other hand, he or she may be influenced by a negative family atmosphere and pick up undesirable habits.

Parental monitoring "refers to parents' awareness of their child's peer associates, free-time activities, and physical whereabouts when outside the home" (Snyder & Patterson, pp. 225–226). As identified by Diana Baumrind (1991), parental styles can be classified into four categories: 1) authoritarian, 2) permissive, 3) authoritative, and 4) neglectful. In Quentin's case, he has a father vacillate between being authoritarian and neglectful. Quentin was born into a well-off family. His father is a distinguished professor with many graduate students wishing to study with him. He has probably two Ph.D. coming from Harvard University. Besides, he is befriended by the research scientist Dr. M__ K__ who won a Nobel Prize in 1958. Being busy with his academic career, he demonstrates detached feeling and very little involvement in his children's life or activities, nor being responsive to his son's mental needs.

It is natural for Quentin's father harbor high expectation for Quentin. In the father's envisage, Quentin will be a scientist or a doctor. However, he was so disappointed by his son again and again that he tried to avoid confronting with his son.

Quentin started lying to his father when he was seven. He purposefully hurt Bruce, tangled his neck and head in the swing chains, hid Bruce's glasses. However, when Bruce's parents sought justice for their son, Quentin pretended to be

innocent.

(Bruce) scared me saying he would strangle me in the swing chains because I wouldn't touch his thing, but I got away, I got away & ran home & I was crying hard, my elbows & knees were scraped & my clothes soiled. (22)

Dad believed his lies and excuse him easily, which led to some bigger troubles.

When first discovering that Quentin was a gay and read *Body Builder* secretly, his father was shocked and disgusted, yet did not provide any help for his son but reprimanded his son, saying "This is sick Quentin", "this is disgusting I never never want to see anything like this again in my life. We won't tell your mother" (12). As a result, they burned the evidence at the back of the garage where Mom would not see. The father's indulgence resulted in Quentin's later crimes.

Quentin's father had many opportunities to discover that his son was a sexual deviant and a homicidal maniac, yet he chose to ignore them all. There was a time he came closest to the truth when he smelled his son's stored body, his eyes fixing on locker and asking, "That locker, that's new isn't it?" "What's in that that requires a lock, son?" (11) His questions were eluded by Quentin with lame explanations: "A lock came with it, Dad. From the Salvation Army. It was a real bargain at \$12. It's a part of it. It's a way of getting the full use of the locker, I suppose." (11)

Despite his suspicion, he chose to ignore all these obvious anomalies, or he did not want to know. It was this connivance and silence that slowly fuelled Quentin's sexual perversions, and the low cost of crime allowed him to become increasingly reckless. Instead of growing into a healthy teenager, the indulgent family relationship allowed Quentin to become increasingly self-centred and an increasingly inhuman sexual pervert. Not only does he use the living room to create zombies, but he even tried to kill his father who almost discovered the truth.

The father's shielding and protection of his son became one of the reasons for Quentin's sliding into the abyss of sin. Being a distinguished professor, Quentin's father considered it's a humiliation to have a criminal son and was reluctant to have a heart-to-heart talk with his son. He tried to ignore the fact that his son was a

criminal by saying “So sad & squalid Quentin. But now we are going to turn over a new leaf aren’t we son (6).”

In addition to his father’s patronage, his grandmother also spoiled him. Often, she paid him a considerable amount of money to do odd jobs such as weeding and driving. The car he was driving when he caught his prey was the one his grandmother had bought for him. To conclude, absence of family discipline contributed to Quentin becoming a ruthless psychopathic killer. Having come from a new middle-class family, he had a father who was a university professor, and this privileged background gave rise to a sense of white supremacy and discrimination against marginalized people such as black people. The affection from his grandmother, combined with the lack of attention and care from his parents, and his indifferent family relationships could easily lead to egocentrism, autism, split personalities, and eventually psychological disorders.

6. Rapid Changes in Social Environment

According to criminal psychology, the psychological formation of the criminal is inseparable from the social environment in which he lives. Similarly, the formation of Quentin’s criminal psychology also has its deep social and class roots. As Jens-Jacob Sander points out in *Exploring the Criminal Mind*, criminals are likely to resist becoming responsible individuals because they are subject to certain mental procedures and underlying brain mechanisms that oppose change.

Quentin lived in a time when the social environment was radically changed. Competition is ubiquitous at that time, and to a certain extent it has become an unconscious state inherited by humans, a hidden instinct. The negative side of competition can increase frustration, create pressure and threat, induce hostility and revenge, and even lead to criminal behaviour.

The text has repeatedly highlighted the fact that he drove a Ford van with an American flag in the rear window, and it is clear that the American flag represents his fantasy of himself defending the identity of the white subject. The rapidly changing demographic and economic structure has stirred up xenophobia and growing anxiety among some whites. The white community, represented by

Quentin, attributes the economic downturn and the widening gap between the rich and the poor in society to people of a different colour, race and creed than themselves, believing that these people have robbed them of their opportunities, blaming social problems on innocent people on unfounded charges, and seeking revenge from them. For example, in describing the changing racial composition of her old neighbourhood during World War II, Grandma said, “After World War II ended, University Heights started to change. People of colour started to live in and white people started to move out” (4), illustrating white resistance to the social changes brought about by the war and intolerance towards people of colour. In criminal psychology, there is a latent period in the formation of a criminal mind, and when it reaches an ignition point numerous negative emotions will explode, exercising appalling power. Throughout the evolution of Quentin’s criminal mind, his experience of being humiliated in public should have been the catalyst for his crime.

This life-changing incidence happened on the muggy summer night seven or eight years ago. On that night Quentin was beat hard by a gang of black youngsters, no one coming to his rescue. He was traumatised by the ridicule of the people around him and the physical abuse he received from teenagers.

I’m sobbing & trying to say No! Don’t hurt! oh hey please! no, NO! like not even a child but a baby, an infant might, & I’m pissing my pants. (20)

As Bartol points out, the most prominent social risk factors that have been identified in the development of criminal behavior include peer rejection combined with association with antisocial peers. (60) The social and interpersonal skills of rejected youth are less developed, making it difficult for them to make friends and maintain positive relationships with peers. The fact that Quentin lived alone and had no friends illustrates his incompetence in communication. The rejection and humiliation he received from these youngsters brought indelible damage to him.

After this incidence, he suddenly realized that he could arouse pity, trust, sympathy wonderment and awe with a fake face. Quentin’s perception of these youngsters as violent predators allowed him to justify his actions. He easily convinced himself

that because his prey was already considered “inhuman” and savage, he needed to resort to violence in order to defend himself. Since then, he directed his paranoid delusions and violence towards the similar black youngsters, hoping to seek revenge on them.

7. Corruption in the Judicial System

Quentin’s first offense came when he was accused of molesting a mentally disabled 12-year-old boy and was given a suspended sentence due to some “friendly” intervention. This “friendly interference” refers to the way Quentin’s lawyers substituted his racial abuse of black people into improper sexual transactions through backroom deals. When it comes to the reasons for the crime, corruption has to be mentioned. Although the novel does not explicitly specify that the judge and the lawyer accepted favours from Quentin’s father, the reader can infer this fact from reading between the lines.

People were saying where money changes hands & it is the word of an inexperienced white man, unmarried, thirty years old, against the charge of a black boy from the projects, & this black boy, twelve years old, from a “single-mother welfare” family, there is not much mystery guessing what probably occurred. Nor what kind of “justice” would be extracted. (30)

The lawyers are more interested in playing the game of law, and in their eyes, the interests of their clients take precedence over the administration of justice. Criminals born into middle class are not afraid of being put into prison because the people in the court may be their friends. Through “friendly interference”, Quentin was released easily instead of getting his due punishment.

Quentin’s probation officer is supposed to “inspect” (42) his residence every few weeks. However, the man from Michigan Department of Corrections, Mr. T always complained he had overworked and had to postpone his visit to Quentin’s residence. In his visit to Quentin’s house, he only stayed 10 minutes while talking on his car phone for a while before he came up the steps. The negligent officer merely checked it out very casually and then wrote down “model” (42) as the result of assessment.

Out of bourgeois exclusivity, the incompetent

government officials, co-opting the interests of their own race, indirectly became accomplices of criminals like Quentin. The insidious and widespread racial discrimination and social unspoken rule in part encouraged the crimes, thus giving birth to countless violent perverts sheltered by incompetent court institutions and power families.

8. Conclusion

The work is a realistic guide to analyse the factors that are responsible for the criminal mind. Oates describes this criminal mentality in her literary works with her own imagination. It shows Oates’ criticism of some morbid family relationships. With the development of society and the advancement of technology, people are becoming more and more materially privileged and busy with their work. Family relationships becomes more like a bondage to contemporary people, with the personal pursuits of overriding moral pursuits and families altruism. Family relationships that are devoid of love, utilitarianism or indulgence can easily lead to deviation from the right path and even crime.

Through this study people can perceive the deficiency of society and human nature through the fictional characters and reflect on a number of social issues that deserve deeper consideration, such as whether the state regulatory agencies, such as the police officer, can effectively maintain social security? What are the effective forms and purposes of family education and school education? How to build close and sincere family relations and harmonious interpersonal relationships?

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