

Brief Commentary

Staying Under the Radar: Poison and the Female Serial Killer

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This brief commentary will explore the archetype of the female serial killer and her use of poison as a means to achieve her ends in the landscape of patriarchal, Western culture. A serial killer is a person who has killed two or more people (some definitions indicate that the person has killed *three* or more [1]) with cooling off periods between each murder and the murders generally taking place in different locations [2-4]. With origins in the Victorian era, poisoning has been predominantly perceived as a feminine means of murder, as women were believed to be instinctively passive creatures and belonged in the domestic sphere [5]. Thus, poison (e.g., arsenic) was a useful tool to rid the home of unwanted vermin, children, or husbands either for the sake of the woman's reputation or financial gain [1,4,6]. In the past, poisoning would have been a convenient means of murder, as the untimely deaths of loved ones could be attributed to heart failure or consumption. However, as [7] identified, as cultural expectations of gender change, so too does the gendered nature of murder.

Typically, serial killers are cast as masculine actors who are active agents in the world motivated by fear, anger, jealousy, or desire [8]. These cultural conceptions are reinforced through large-scale data on serial murders, which tend to be overwhelmingly committed by men, with only 5-8.6% of instances perpetrated by women [3]. In these cases, the women are often concealed within the archetypes of traditional womanhood, tethered to their relationship to men or children (e.g., mother, nurse, wife, daughter, prostitute). However, as these archetypes break down and women are liberated from patriarchal forms of control, so too will their reasons for and methods of murder change. Thus, there is a need to explore the role of poison as it pertains to feminine archetypes in the 21st century.

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