

# What is a Serial Killer? What is a Mass Murderer? How do they Differ?

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**Abstract:** Serial murder and mass murder are two most violent crimes. However, while many serial killers continue to evade police, mass murderers stop killing and, in many cases, kill themselves or are killed by police after they commit their crimes. Why do they differ in this way, and what are the similarities between these two types of crime? This paper will directly answer the most basic questions about serial and mass murderers.

**Key words:** serial killer, mass murder, difference, similarity, psychological mechanism.

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## 1. Typologies of serial killers based on motivation

Holmes and DeBurger have created a typology of serial killers based five categories that are related to the killer's motivation [1]. *The visionary killer* suffers from a break with reality and sees visions or hears voices from demons, angels, the devil, or God telling him to kill certain people. *The mission killer* is compelled to murder in order to rid of a group of people he has judged to be unworthy or undesirable. For *the lust killer*, sex is the focal point of murder, even after he has killed the victim. This type of murderer often conducts acts, such as cannibalism, necrophilia, and dismemberment. *The thrill killer* derives pleasure and excitement from killing, which often involves extended acts of torture. Once the victim is dead, he loses interest. These two types are classified as *hedonistic killers*. *The power and control killer* enjoys having control over his victim and being a master at what he does. His motive is the need for power and dominance over other human beings.

Fox and Levin have distinguished another five types of serial killers based on motivation [2]. *The power killer* sadistically tortures and kills to satisfy his need for control and dominance. *The revenge killer* slays women who remind him of his mother who mistreated him as a child. *The loyalty killer* is part of a team of killers who kill as a ritual to prove their commitment to one another. *The profit killer* poisons husbands to death in order to collect their life insurance. *The terror killer* is profoundly paranoid and plants bombs to warn the world of coming doom.

## 2. Theories on how the personalities of serial murderers develop

Hickey [3] developed the *trauma-control model* where he hypothesizes that a subject experiences certain destabilizing event(s) during their formative years that are suppressed on an unconscious level. This memory splits off of the subject's regular personality, but re-surfaces eventually.

These destabilizing event(s) include unstable home life, the death of a parent, divorce, corporal punishment, sexual abuse, and other negative events.

Holmes et al. [4] aimed to further specify this developmental process with their *fractured identity syndrome*. They supported Hickey's idea that a traumatic incident during the adolescent years could cause a small fissure in the subject's personality, and speculated that the following incidents would cause that fissure to explode and fracture the personality. Yet, they emphasized that there was nothing in the early years that would have prepared them for their later serial murders. They also claim that these subjects could recall their painful social event which led them to their later murders. Examples of such traumatic incidents include unreasonable punishment for something the subject did not do or discovery of the subject's illegitimacy or adoption. They also place importance on the timing of the initial fracture and the sequence of the events that followed.

### 3. Typologies of mass murderers

Mass murderers have received relatively little scholarly interest compared with serial murderers [5]; however, Dietz (1986) proposes three types of mass murderers [6]. The head of the family who murders his entire family out of jealousy, revenge, or loyalty is a *family annihilator*. A *pseudocommando* is one who takes anger out on society to draw attention to himself or to teach society a lesson. A *set-and-run killer* bombs buildings or vehicles, sets fires, or tampers with food or products, escaping before the murder actually takes place. Holmes and Holmes later added the *disgruntled employee* who takes revenge on his former workplace to right a perceived injustice [7], and Levin and Madfis added *school shooters* [8].

### 4. Theories on how the personalities of mass murders develop

Levin and Madfis hypothesized a five-stage model for the personality development of mass murderers based on their analysis of school shooters [8]. First, the subject experiences long-term negative experiences at home, school,

work, or neighborhood early in life or adolescence (*chronic strain*). This leads to the subject's inability to form bonds with his family and society, as well as fewer restrictions on conventional standards of behavior (uncontrolled strain). Then, a particularly devastating short-term event occurs that triggers the desire to carry out a murderous act (acute strain). Next, the subject starts planning his actions and acts out his school massacre. Levin and Madfis call this developmental process *cumulative strain* and emphasize that each stage builds on the previous one. Although their model was originally designed to describe relatively young school shooters, they hint at the possibility to extend this process to mass murderers in general. They also report that almost half of the school shooter sample in their study came from homes that were wrought with conflict, suggesting that the family environments of these killers were likely to be abusive.

### 5. Confusions in the understanding of childhood environment and developmental process

Today, it is understood that the interaction between genetic, biological, and environmental influences is the key to the etiology of antisocial behavior [9] [10]. Nevertheless, there seem to be certain disagreements in the understanding of environmental factors and the developmental processes that produce both types of murderers. Many researchers seem to believe that both neglect and abuse are involved in producing serial and mass murderers [3] [4] [11]-[15]. Therefore, this paper re-examines the literature on serial and mass murderers to find possible distinctions in the childhood environmental factors and developmental processes that create serial murders versus mass murderers.

In *Extreme Killing*, Fox and Levin mention the following examples of environmental factors that create serial murderers [5]:

- Maternal brutality
- Maternal indulgence with her son in terms of her own needs

- Maternal sexual seduction from incest to excessive conversation about sexual matters
- The subject's shyness, disfigurement, speech impediments, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, and athletic inadequacies
- Adoption
- Death of a parent
- A profound sense of neglect and low self-esteem
- Deprivation of warmth and affection during the first few months of life
- Childhood abuse, neglect, or abandonment

In terms of the environmental factors affecting mass murderers, Levin and Madfis claim that almost half of the school shooter samples in their study came from homes wrought with conflict [8]. Harper and Voigt, and Fox and Levin also agree that parental abuse is a common part of the family backgrounds of homicide-suicide subjects [11], [5]. On the contrary, Kimmel and Mahler claim that almost all of the adolescent shooters in their study came from intact and relatively stable families with no history of child abuse [12]. Others point out that experiences of social isolation and bullying are key factors in the development of the mass murderer personality [7], [13]–[15].

Here, the researchers seem to include both abuse and neglect in the environmental backgrounds of serial and mass murderers. Regarding the backgrounds of serial murderers, Fox and Levin clearly include neglectful aspects (see the underlined environmental factors in the list above. Here adoption was interpreted as neglectful due to the biological parents' abandonment of the subject), in addition to what are considered abusive aspects [5]. Regarding the backgrounds of mass murderers, multiple researchers have pointed out experiences of social isolation and bullying, while others, such as Levin, claim abuse is part of their childhoods [8]. Therefore, while the main aspects of a serial killer's childhood may be abusive, certain neglectful aspects are also involved. However, the main aspects of mass murderers' childhoods are neglect plus bullying, which supports the presence of abusive aspects as well.

## **6. Serial murder versus mass murder: two distinct types of murder**

Serial murder and mass murder are two distinct phenomena. According to Fox and Levin, serial murder involves a string of four or more homicides committed by one or a few perpetrators that spans a period of days, weeks, months, or years. Mass murder, on the other hand, consists of the slaughter of four or more victims by one or a few assailants within a single event, lasting only a few minutes or as long as several hours [16]. While the perpetrator of mass murder frequently welcomes his arrest or suicide, serial killers are often difficult to identify and apprehend [17]. It is difficult to think that practically identical childhood backgrounds can produce such different results with such a high probability.

## **7. Neglect, physical abuse, and psychological abuse cause distinct damage**

Neglect, physical abuse, and psychological abuse are each proven to have distinct psychological effects on a child's development. Although physical abuse produces aggression toward others, psychological attacks and criticism from parents appear to be specifically associated with low self-esteem [18]. Compared with physical abuse, neglect is associated with even more severe cognitive and academic deficits, such as social withdrawal, limited peer acceptance, and internalizing problems [19].

## **8. Abusive environments produce serial murderers**

Abe [20],[21] conducted research on the childhood environments of serial and mass murderers based on the information available on the Internet and found that abusive environments generally tended to produce serial murderers, while neglectful environments produced mass murderers.

Abe pointed out that neglect was always accompanied by some kind of trauma or abuse [20]. That is, pure neglect did not produce serial murderers unless it occurred alongside abusive behavior that implanted aggression in the subject.

This applied even in the case of deprivation of maternal care right after birth. Dong et al. emphasized that childhood abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction often happened together rather than independently [22]. Clemmons et al. also pointed out that more forms of abuse make it more difficult to adjust to a normal life later [23]. Armsworth et al. argued that abuse before two years of age caused a child sadness and anger by six years old, while abuse between four and six years old caused anxiety, nervousness, compulsiveness, and withdrawal [24]. Considering serial killers' aggression, this could indicate that they were abused before two years old, even if neglect seems to be prevalent. In *Female Serial Killer*, Vronsky describes the childhoods of multiple female serial killers, which gives the impression that neglectful backgrounds were more prevalent among this group [25]. Yet, it must be mentioned that factor(s) that could be considered abusive were also present. Thus, it is possible that the childhood backgrounds of serial killers always involve abusive factors, especially in very early stages of life, even when they appear to be cases of neglect.

### **9. Neglectful environments produce mass murderers**

Abe suggested that even when abuse happens in mass murderer's childhood, it happens after neglect and usually not as severe as in the case of serial murderers [20] [21]. As mentioned previously, neglect is associated with severe cognitive deficits, social withdrawal, limited peer acceptance, and internalizing problems to a greater degree than physical abuse [18] [19]. This could be because mass murderers have severe cognitive deficits with negative expectations and a tendency to withdraw from society, which could lead to actual unacceptance and bullying by peers [21]. Even in such a cases, the bullying may be less severe than in the cases of serial killers.

Having established mentality, which gets confused with negative relation dynamics [19][26], mass murderers could easily take subtle reactions from others as negative feedback, rejection, or bullying, which could develop into pathological envy, revenge fantasies, and unexplained anger

[13]–[14], [27]–[28]. These chronic strains accumulate and are finally ignited by acute strains, resulting in acts of mass murder [8]. Thus, the childhood environments of serial murderers involve abuse or abuse and neglect, which make the subject predisposed to externalization. Meanwhile, the childhood environments of mass murderers involve neglect or neglect followed by abuse, which make the subject predisposed to internalization. Moreover, the additional factor of abuse is usually not as strong as the primary factor of neglect in terms of its impact. As such, it only functions to boost the effect of the primary factor. In other words, abusive environments produce serial murderers, and neglectful environments produce mass murderers [20] [21]. This supports Lyons-Ruth's findings that disorganized or controlling patterns of attachment behavior, caused by fear, opposing behaviors, and frequent separation, rather than avoidant or ambivalent patterns, are related to aggressive and coercive behavior in children [29].

### **10. Two types of post-traumatic stress disorder which cannot process stresses**

Next, it is necessary to determine how serial and mass murder personalities develop under abusive and neglectful childhood environments. Schurman-Kauflin claims that both serial and mass murderers appear to suffer from emotional dysfunctions and live with high levels of anxiety because they cannot effectively handle the stresses of life [30]. Emotional dysfunction is caused by the subject's negative interpretation of life, which results from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [31]. This indicates that serial killers and mass murderers suffer from two different types of PTSD: one caused by abuse and the other caused by neglect. Schurman-Kauflin describes that mass murderer's world as one of social deprivation and depression due to an overwhelming lack of coping mechanisms. The act of mass murder, therefore, is actually their dismal way of coping with stress, which they have accumulated throughout their lives. Serial killers, on the other hand, are those who cannot process insults and must act defiantly to restore their grandiose image by lying, cheating, or killing [30], although not all psychopaths

become serial killers.

This is to say that serial murderer keeps externalizing their stress, while mass murderer cannot release their stress. The latter simply keeps accumulating stress until they become exhausted and it explodes.

It is still necessary to decipher how these different types of PTSD develop into two different behaviors. This can be explained in terms of the different psychological dynamics of each type of murderer. As mentioned, serial murderers usually experience abuse where unnatural or unnecessary force is placed on the subject. The subject tries to *react* against this *action*; however, since the abuse happens in their early childhood, they cannot react directly against the perpetrator. Thus, they react indirectly on less dangerous subjects, such as animals and younger children. They may also break things or set things on fire. Whatever the target, such *displacement*, which does not solve the original problem [47], must happen each time they face a situation that reminds them of their initial childhood trauma.

Mass murderers, on the other hand, are exposed to neglect, where there is neither offensive positive input nor actions that could cause reactions. Therefore, the subject remains still and isolated in their environment. However, humans are social animals and desire acceptance. When humans lack basic relationships and communication, they do not know how to enter into human relationships and lack the energy to keep making such attempts. Originally negative and envious, these individuals take subtle exchanges from others as offensive and obsess over every each slight or negative encounter in their isolated lives. All these angers build up and when confronted by a trigger, they explode. This is why murders by this type of person are called “autogenic massacres.” They are psychologically destined to explode without an understandable external cause [46].

### **11. Psychological mechanisms of mass murder: three major groups**

Let us look at each type of murderer separately in more

detail. According to Abe [21], mass murderers can be categorized into three types. The first experiences neglect, either intentionally or unintentionally from his or her parents. This type of murderer does not know how to enter into human relationships, nor do they have the courage or energy to learn how due to the lack of positive human interactions starting early in life. The second type of murderer experiences psychological control by their parent(s). This type of murderer is accepted by their parents under very strict conditions. Therefore, this type of murderer cannot express his self or feelings because he is afraid of losing his parents’ love. This attitude extends into other relationships outside of the family; therefore, this type of murderer cannot be himself, even when he appears to be mingling with others. Instead, he watches other peoples’ reactions out of fear of being hated. The third type of murderer is one who was overprotected as a child. This type is allowed to act as he wants at home, but this self-centered attitude is not accepted among his peers. This individual is often bullied and stops showing his true personality. Since his parents support him unconditionally, he cannot confirm his identity in relationships with real people. This is psychologically the same as being alone. This causes severe inner loneliness, even if the individual appears to have friends. Not having genuine points of contact with the real world causes pathological despair about the human world. In the end, this individual is likely to commit homicide or suicide when he feels there is nothing left to live for. Therefore, it is unsurprising that school shooters often attack when they hit puberty and are expected to become more independent, both physically and psychologically.

### **12. Psychological mechanisms of serial murderers: two major groups**

Serial murderers, on the other hand, can be divided into two major groups. One involves murders committed with sexual undertones, and the other is meant to control victims without sexual undertones. In general, most sexually motivated serial killers are men, as women’s need for power does not usually involve sexual sadism [5] [30], although there are some exceptions.

As described above, serial murder is usually the result of abuse where unnatural or unnecessary force is placed on the subject. That force could be physical abuse or sexual abuse by the mother, father, or both [20]. It could be the result of bullying at school or an orphanage, as well as disabilities, such as shyness, disfigurement, speech impediments, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, and athletic inadequacies, which could lead to fear [5]. This fear creates aggressiveness as the subject attempts to fight against it [32]. In the case of maternal deprivation right after birth, it could result in a serial murderer personality only with frequent parental arguments or witnessing domestic violence due to its extra vulnerability [20]. Parental arguments and witnessing domestic violence lead to frustration, and frustration is known to cause aggression [33] [34]. Outstanding and shocking incidents, such as severe illness and injury and the sudden death of a loved one, could also result in a serial murderer personality when it is combined with neglect [35]. Adoption could be another cause of a serial murderer personality if it is combined with abuse, including favoritism among siblings [20] [36]. Adoption, illegitimacy, sexual abuse, and psychological abuse can all lead to the development of a negative self-image that the serial murderer is unclean or abominable and does not deserve love. This could lead to the desire to destroy all happy, beautiful, and positive people who receive love. Furthermore, maternal domination and sexual seduction could distort a subject's normal sexual development. Both excessive sexual fondling and permissiveness and proscription could lead to an addiction to sexual abnormalities [37].

Women are especially vulnerable to unnatural and unnecessary force that tends to lead to a desire to play God with other peoples' fate (except for a small number of cases in which the subject prefers sexual sadism). Women seem to experience more serious neglect paired with hostile environments. Vronsky cites examples in which psychologically rejected women (e.g., resulting from favoritism) killed those who were dependent on them and craved attention (*munchausen* syndrome by proxy) [48]. In such cases, the nurse or mother of sick children is often

eager to outwit or humiliate doctors. Severely neglected women under hostile environments also tend to murder those who are dependent on them (often in exchange for insurance money) because they are exhausted from taking care of others [25].

Except for cases of distortion of normal sexual development, the personalities of serial murderers are assumed to develop when the subject's adverse conditions are considered to have as severe impacts as physical abuse does [18]. The fear and frustration that are caused by constant parental arguments and fights could lead to a desire to control and destroy others. Negative self-image leads to a desire to destroy those who appear happy and loved. Humiliation leads to a desire for revenge, and being ignored leads to a desire for recognition. Repressed anger in childhood is unconsciously displaced onto others later in life [38]. Abnormal sexual desire leads to ignoring the humanity of others and a desire to indulge one's selfish sexual fantasies. All of these personality distortions are considered engines for acts of serial murder. Each time the subject faces a stressful situation, such as an insult, the above-mentioned urge deriving from unsolved past trauma is expressed, either in sexual sadism or extreme control of others, depending on the subject's sex, personality, and social position. Moreover, the subject becomes addicted to the pleasure and sensation they get from these acts, similar to how others become addicted to drugs.

### 13. Defining serial killers and mass murderers

The psychological base for a mass murderer is pathological interpersonal fear, which hampers the subject's ability to enter into human relationships and show their true self. This results in pathological envy and despair, which ultimately leads to revenge-suicide. On the other hand, the psychological base for serial murderers is flash backs related to an untreated psychological scar or the repressed self or a sexual desire that return every time the subject faces a situation that reminds him or her of the initial trauma. Therefore, in a sense, both mass murderers and

serial murderers experience different qualities of PTSD, one through abuse, and the other through neglect. Because of these differences, mass murderers belong to the over-controlled repressor group, which falls into Cluster C of Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders V (DSM-V), and the serial killer belongs to the psychopath group, which falls into Cluster B of the DSM-V [30][39]. Cluster C shows fearful and anxious traits, including avoidant, dependent, and obsessive-compulsive personality disorders, while Cluster B shows highly dramatic, narcissistic, and antisocial tendencies.

#### **14. Common characteristics of serial and mass murderers**

Outside of these basic differences, serial murderers and mass murderers have multiple common characteristics that can even be considered contrastive. Knowing other people do not understand dark desires, serial killers usually hide what they are thinking. Psychologically, they often compartmentalize their abnormal desires, especially when they feel guilty [40] [41]. Interpersonally, they only show a perfect outward image (visual social identity), always hiding their true self (actual social identity) [42]. As a result, these people often choose isolation in order to maintain their abnormal fantasies and acts. On the other hand, the social isolation of mass murderers is not a result of their choice, but is due to their inability to enter into human relationship. Therefore, they cannot help being socially isolated. However, in both cases, these individuals usually share obsessions with certain things, owing to their isolated lifestyle, which start in early childhood. It is a coping mechanism to absorb oneself in something other than human interactions.

The FBI's *Crime Classification Manual* separates serial murderers into three categories: organized, disorganized, and mixed [43]. Disorganized serial killers are typically represented by a small number of visionary killers who try to kill as many people as possible without specifications, or those who are highly obsessed with the act of killing itself, no matter the type of victim. The counterpart to this in mass

murder is a small number of pseudocommando who conduct random massacre in psychotic state, not elaborately preparing in advance and going off without major external event [5]. Extremely severe abuse/neglect in early childhood could affect the symptoms of schizophrenia, either in the case of serial murder or mass murder [44] [45].

In both serial and mass murder, victims can be either specific or random. However, both serial and mass murderers more often kill specific targets than do random killings. And some random killers are very well organized. In case of mass murder, when the perpetrator felt frictions/conflicts everywhere in his life with unspecified people, disrespected on the internet, or developed severe schizophrenia which leads to animosity to everybody, he could harbor hostility toward society, human beings, or human civilization as a whole, and lash out at the public at random. In serial murder the case of purely random targets is again limited to a group of the visionary and those obsessed with the act of killing itself. Serial killers kill specific type. They are either the group they have developed grudge against, the type who reminds him of his abusive mother, the type whom they wanted to associate with but could not, those who happen to be available close by for their gratification /money scam, the type who is the social weak whom they can safely project their anger on, and those who are dependent/burden on them.

When they kill specific targets, they very often shift their very personal revenge act to a higher principle to justify it and be accepted by public. This justification manipulation happens both in serial and mass murder. Thus they not only have tendency to obsess with guns, but also to devote themselves into certain dark/radical/fundamental ideology/religion in order to fortify their insecure desire by something larger than themselves. Loyalty, in which the cult leader has a certain revenge target of his own and the members follow his direction, is considered to play the similar function as higher principle to justify his/her acting out. Both serial and mass murderers initially have hesitation to cross the final line. Belonging to a group of the same

mentality, radical/fundamental ideology/religion, and playing copycats all function to encourage their acting out.

Their target can be from very specific to more broad, depending on the level of the subject's contact/relation to the victims, although all the targets are placed in a weak position, in which they cannot prepare/resist or are socially stigmatized/marginalized to be cared by society, i.e., homeless, gay, handicapped, minority, Jew, elderly, etc.

All the above characteristics — isolation/obsession, disorganized, random killings, justification by a higher principle, dark/radical religion/ideology, intentional attack at social weak—can be seen both in serial and mass murder.

In addition, genes, head trauma, drug use, and the arrival of puberty also seem to result in both serial and mass murder. In both cases, the symptoms start after puberty, which accompanies hebetate energy. However, the average age for mass murderers is higher at 35 compared to serial murderers at 27.5 [48] [49]. Serial murders only happen by change after the subject has gone through practical trials while mass murder happens after the subject has had enough of the frustrations of life.

## **15. Conclusion**

In summary, what separates a serial murderer from a mass murderer is if their initial childhood conditioning was abusive or neglectful, as this establishes the subject's psychological foundation. As mentioned earlier, physical abuse leads to aggression, psychological attacks, and criticism, which leads to low self-esteem [18]. Meanwhile, neglect leads to severe cognitive, social withdrawal, and the internalization of problems [19]. Therefore, the initial childhood environment of a serial killer involves physical abuse or sexual abuse, or other similarly powerful incidents. This creates a psychological character that is fundamentally aggressive to others. Untreated physical trauma compels the subject to let out their frustrations and stress every time they experience a flashback. On the other hand, the initial childhood environments of mass murderers involve neglect

or psychological attacks and criticism. This creates a psychological character that is fundamentally negative, depressive, and prone to internalization. Therefore, although they face daily stress and frustration, serial killers cannot let it out. Instead, they keep accumulating stress until it explodes. Of course, such stress could only lead serial and mass murder when negative childhood conditions are consistent throughout early childhood, as opposed to ordinary cases where abuse happens sporadically and relatively later in life. Serial murder becomes an impulse that is difficult to stop by external factors, while mass murder is set to explode in early childhood, as if it were a time bomb.

Because of their different childhood backgrounds, serial killers and mass murderers develop decisively divergent characteristics. Serial killers feel pleasant and sometimes sadistic sensations from killing, while mass murderers kill for revenge, rather than pleasure. That is, the driver of serial murder is pleasure from destroying others while that of mass murder is romanticized revenge through death [13] [14].

The visionary, mission, terror, and loyalty serial killers do not necessarily enjoy the act of killing as much as the other types of serial killers, such as the power, control and hedonistic types. In this sense, they are considered to be closer to mass murderers. These intermediate categories are evidence that serial murderers and mass murderers exist on the same continuum and are not categorically difference. Fox and Levin support this continuum hypothesis, pointing out the cases of Ted Kaczynski, Richard Speck, and the Spree Killers, which are considered hybrid cases that cannot be described as either serial or mass killers [48]. However, these hybrid cases seem to always fall into either the serial killer or mass murderer type, depending on whether they had the intention to die after their attacks.

In summary, serial and mass murderers are on two opposite ends of the same spectrum of untreated PTSD, which lead individuals to deal the stress they cannot process in two

different manners.

**Table 1.** Differences between mass murderers and serial murderers.

- Both serial killers (SK) and mass murderers (MM) cannot cope with stress due to trauma starting in early childhood.

**MM**

Fear, depression, lack of confidence (X engine) ➡ Cannot process stress

- Cannot enter into human relationships due to neglect and depression

Image) ➡ ]] X

- Cannot show their true personality due to psychological abuse

Image) ➡ ] φ

**In-Between**—Serial killers who commit suicide

Image) ➡ ➡ ➡ ➡ ] X

**SK**

Anger (conscious and unconscious), distorted sexual desire (O engine)

➡ Can let out stress every once in a while

Image) ➡ ➡ ➡ ➡ .....

- Displace repressed childhood anger (unconscious anger implanted during early infancy)
- Self-denial (←anger) due to rejection
- Repressed sexual desire turns hideous and explosive

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## Author Profile

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