

# Empathy and Horror Genre Villains

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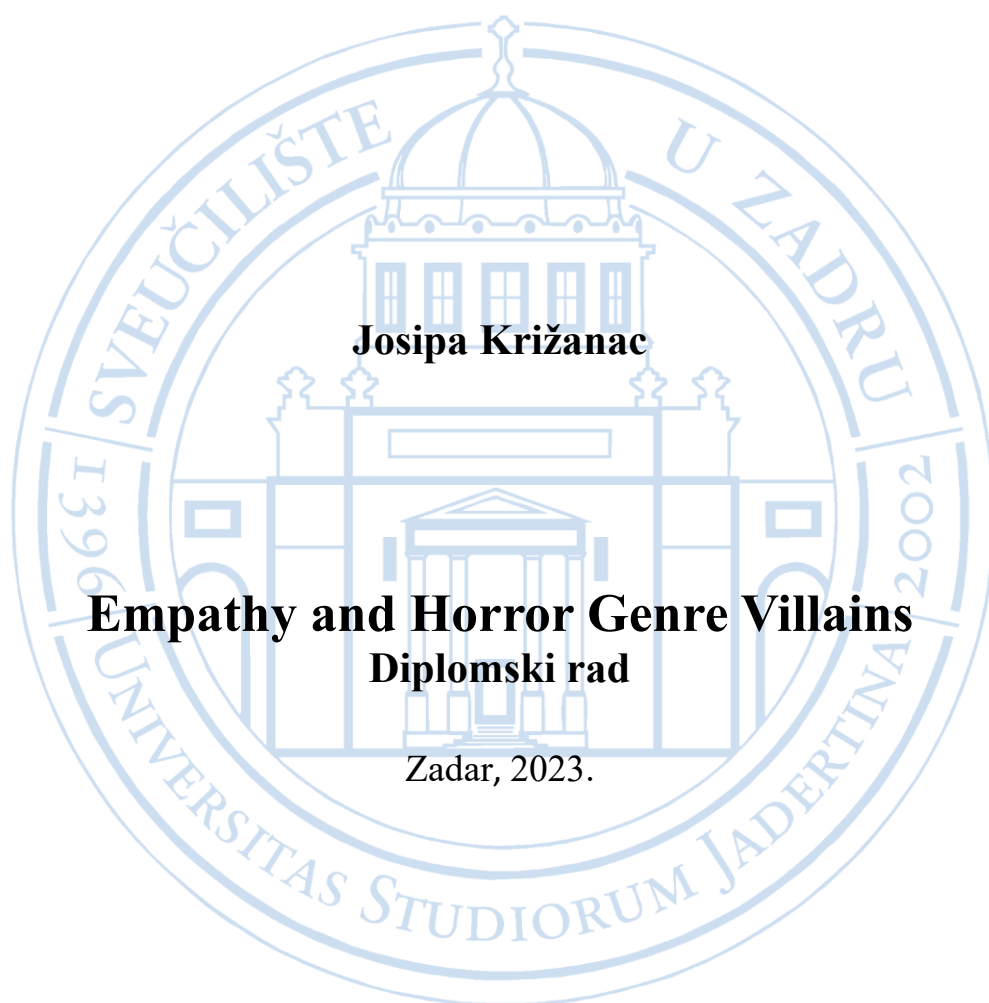
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Sveučilišni diplomski studij Anglistike; smjer: znanstveni



**Josipa Križanac**

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Diplomski sveučilišni studij anglistike; znanstveni smjer (dvopredmetni)

Empathy and Horror Genre Villains

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## 1. Introduction

Certain villains have captivated audiences in ways that transcend the traditional narrative arc of hero and antagonist. The main reasons why people find villains interesting is due to complexity of their characters – unlike traditional heroes who are usually portrayed as always virtuous, villains have many flaws, contradictions, and inner conflicts. The audience is naturally inclined to delve into the psyche of a villain in order to uncover the motivations behind their actions, their troubled pasts, and the web of circumstances that shaped them. This complexity sparks curiosity and invites viewers to explore the depths of human nature, challenging their own understanding of morality and consequently, liking a villain more. Another factor that contributes to the appeal of villains is the ability for audiences to identify with certain aspects of their characters. Despite the terrible acts they commit, villains often embody traits or experiences that the audience can relate to. These can be feelings of powerlessness, injustice, a desire for revenge, or a need for control. When we identify with a villain, it creates a connection and allows us to temporarily imagine ourselves in the villain's shoes. This empathetic identification can be a way for us to explore our own suppressed emotions and desires in a safe and controlled way, but it can also make us prone to justifying their actions, which can be harmful. Since villains go against societal norms, challenge the established order and push boundaries, it can be appealing to those who feel restricted by society's expectations. Villains represent freedom from following conventional moral codes, so it makes sense that the audience is so easily captivated by them.

This work aims to explore why audiences often develop feelings of empathy or compassion towards specific villains in the horror genre despite them being cruel and harmful individuals. The work will focus on four villains. Hannibal Lecter, created by author Thomas

Harris, is a highly intelligent and cannibalistic serial killer. He is most famous for his portrayal in the movie adaptation *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) by Jonathan Demme, but has later appeared in other movie adaptations - *Hannibal* (2001), *Red Dragon* (2002) and *Hannibal Rising* (2007). Freddy Krueger, created by filmmaker Wes Craven, is an iconic antagonist in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* film series (1984-1991). He is a disfigured and burned serial killer who stalks and murders teenagers in their dreams. Norman Bates is a character created by writer Robert Bloch and popularized by director Alfred Hitchcock in the film *Psycho* (1960). Bates is the proprietor of the Bates Motel and suffers from dissociative identity disorder - his alter ego, "Mother," takes control and commits horrific acts, including murder. Kevin Wendell Crumb from movie *Split* (2016), is created by writer-director M. Night Shyamalan. Crumb suffers from dissociative identity disorder (DID) and possesses multiple distinct personalities, including The Beast, a menacing alter ego who desires to punish those he perceives as impure.

The first chapter will discuss some of the definitions of empathy. Empathy is complex and multifaceted human emotion and as such, it has been defined and interpreted in various ways throughout history and literature. From the works of philosophers to the studies of psychologists, the definition of empathy has evolved, encompassing cognitive, affective, and compassionate dimensions. By discussing some of the definitions, the paper will set a foundation on which it will begin the journey of understanding why and how these villains evoke emotional reactions from the audience.

The second chapter will then provide psychological backgrounds and life circumstances of respective villains. In order to understand the roots of empathy towards Hannibal Lecter, Norman Bates, Freddy Krueger, and Kevin Wendell Crumb, an in-depth analysis of their psychological backgrounds and life circumstances is essential. Each character possesses a unique

set of traits, histories, and experiences that shape their identities and motivations. By comparing their backgrounds, the paper aims to unravel how different circumstances contribute to the formation of our empathy towards them. This chapter will also discuss the mental illnesses of our characters, with some similarities between Lecter and Krueger, both defined as psychopaths and Bates and Crumb, both suffering from DID. Some psychological findings will be incorporated into this chapter to better understand the behavior of the characters, and consequently, our attitudes and emotional responses towards such behavior.

The third chapter will then discuss concept of evil, trying to find the answer to the question of whether these characters are evil and how does it affect our empathy towards them. Drawing from philosophical and ethical findings, this chapter will delve into the depths of evil and the moral complexities embedded within the characters' actions. This chapter proposes the question whether empathy diminishes when characters is labeled as evil and whether empathy can coexist with acts of cruelty and malice. By examining these questions, the paper seeks to explore the intricate relationship between evil and empathy and how it shapes our perceptions of these characters.

The fourth chapter will then discuss the reasons behind empathy towards cruel individuals in general. If previous chapter concludes the characters are evil, the question why we feel empathy either way still remains unanswered. The empathy towards people who engage in harmful acts is not limited to these specific cinematic villains; it is a phenomenon that has intrigued and perplexed humanity for centuries. With the help of some psychological research and theories, the paper will discuss underlying cognitive processes that contribute to this paradoxical emotional response. Through an exploration of identification and the human



tendency for empathy, the paper aims to uncover the complexities of our empathetic inclinations towards cruel individuals.

In the final chapter, the paper will summarize the findings from the previous chapters and offer an explanation of the audience's empathy towards Hannibal Lecter, Norman Bates, Freddy Krueger, and Kevin Wendell Crumb. Through an examination of their psychological backgrounds, the concept of evil, and the broader phenomenon of empathy for cruel individuals, the paper will finally draw some conclusions on the enigmatic nature of empathy.

## **2. Defining the empathy**

The empathy has been defined and redefined for years. One of the most universally accepted definition describes empathy as “our ability to identify what someone else is thinking or feeling and to respond to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion” (Baron-Cohen 2011, pg.16). In his famous work *I and Thou*, Martin Buber contrasted the Ich-Es (I-it) mode of being, in which individuals treat others as objects to be analyzed or used for personal gain, with I-Thou (I-you) mode, in which individuals treat others as whole beings with their own intrinsic value (Buber 1966). Buber believed that empathy begins when we shift from a self-centered mindset, where our thoughts and perceptions are solely focused on ourselves, to a dual-focused mindset, where we simultaneously consider the thoughts and perspectives of others alongside our own.

Similarly, empathy is often compared to a spotlight (Baron-Cohen 2011, Bloom 2016, Zahavi 2014), suggesting our attention can “either be a single spotlight (shining through the darkness on our own interests) or it can be accompanied by a second spotlight (shining on

someone else's interests)" (Baron-Cohen 2011, p.14). Baron Cohen, a prominent psychologist and researcher, later on argues that the only way forward in this world is through empathy, saying that "each drop of empathy waters the flower of peace" (Baron-Cohen p.186). However, many authors suggest negative consequences of empathy as well.

While Zahavi, for example, recognizes positive effects of empathy, he also notes that empathy can have negative consequences if it is not accompanied by critical reflection and moral judgment. Empathy can lead to biased and partial responses if it is influenced by factors such as familiarity, similarity, or personal interest (Zahavi 2014). Bloom also focuses on negative consequences of empathy, presented in detail in his controversial work *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. In the book, Bloom presents the idea that empathy is leading motivator for inequality and irrationality. He believes we are better off without empathy and is trying to prove that empathy is vastly different from being kind and compassionate. Bloom (2016) explores the idea that problems we encounter, both as a society and as individuals, usually don't arise because we lack empathy but because we sometimes have an excessive amount of it. He also refers to spotlight comparison, but claims it is a harmful human tendency as that extra spotlight focuses "on certain people in the here and now (...) but leaves us insensitive to the long-term consequence of our acts and blind to the suffering of those we do not empathize with" (Bloom 2016, p.11). Empathy, Bloom believes, exhibits biases that incline us towards parochialism and racism. It lacks long-term vision, motivating actions that may bring immediate improvements but result in tragic consequences down the line. It is innumerate, prioritizing the needs of individuals over collective well-being and it can also incite violence as our empathy towards those we consider close can fuel acts of war and atrocities against others. Moreover,

feeling what others feel makes us prone to justify their behavior and excuse the actions which should not be excused.

It is important to note that although Bloom is against empathy, he is not against kindness nor compassion – even though empathy and compassion are often used interchangeably, Bloom and many other authors draw clear distinction between the two. For example, Tania Singer and Tania Singer and Olga Klimecki also argued that experiencing empathy for another individual is not the same as experiencing compassion. It differs not only in its effects, but in its brain basis as well (Singer and Klimecki 2014). “In contrast to empathy, compassion does not mean sharing the suffering of the other: rather, it is characterized by feelings of warmth, concern and care for the other, as well as a strong motivation to improve the other’s well-being” (Singer and Klimecki 2014). In short, Tania and her colleagues believe compassion is feeling for someone, and empathy is feeling with someone, and feeling *with* someone is what can lead to lack of justice and morality.

If we accept this as true, that does not mean that Baron-Cohen and others who claim that the progress of humankind lies in our ability to empathize is wrong. It is obvious in Baron-Cohen’s work that he too often uses empathy and compassion interchangeably. He does view empathy in a similar way to Bloom, in a sense of feeling what others are feeling, “suffering at the suffering of others” (Bloom 2016, p. 96), but he also sees it as a recognition of other people’s feelings and acting accordingly to it, which is precisely how Bloom describes compassion. Bloom and Tania view empathy as “the act of coming to experience the world as you think someone else does” (Bloom 2016, p.16) and they think that is unnecessary and harmful. However, they advocate for identifying and responding to other people’s emotions, which is how

many other authors define empathy, so they might not have as opposite stances as it may seem at first.

For this paper, the crucial stance on empathy is the one proposed by Adam Smith, a great philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment. He talked about the significance of empathy and the importance of appreciating that “we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it” (Smith 1982). Smith argued that we have a natural tendency to imagine ourselves in the situation of others and share their emotions. This natural tendency to empathize is what makes it possible for us to empathize with people who seemingly do not deserve it, which is of great significance when discussing why the audience feels empathy towards movie villains.

The empathy in which this paper is therefore interested is some middle ground between empathy and compassion, as Baron-Cohen approaches it and empathy as a natural, unavoidable human tendency, as Smith approaches it. However, when necessary, the paper will be drawing distinctions between empathy and compassion when discussing what the audience exactly feels when connecting to the villains. But first, the psychological backgrounds and personalities of the characters should be compared in order to see whether and how these circumstances influence our emotions towards them.

### **3. The backgrounds of characters**

Hannibal Lecter is most famous for his portrayal in the 1991 film *The Silence of the Lambs*, but is originally created by Thomas Harris, an author who wrote series of novels about Hannibal Lecter which were published over a span of a few decades.

In the series, Hannibal Lecter is a highly intelligent and sophisticated psychiatrist who is also a cannibalistic serial killer. He is manipulative and charismatic, seemingly well-adjusted and

easily trusted. The audience meets Lecter when he is already imprisoned, and we are introduced with his crimes before we are introduced to him. Once the audience does meet Lecter, we see him as eerily calm, collected and clever man who likes to intimidate people who he speaks to. We are immediately taken by his calmness and politeness which stand in contrast to wild, cannibalistic acts we know he had done. Lecter is a unique villain in this aspect, since his dark side is not revealed later on, but is instead the first thing we find out about him. However, we like him almost immediately. The likeness Lecter provokes is due to his admirable character, his love for music and art, his discernment and cleverness. We are also intrigued by Lecter because we want to insight into his mind and find some explanation for his doings, but we fail at such attempt. Lecter never justifies himself and has no issue in describing what he had done, in gruesome detail with a smile on his face, but never explains why. His complete acceptance and lack of remorse what he had done makes him disturbingly scary, but also fascinating. Especially since we are often witnessing Lecter's seemingly irreconcilable personality trait – his respect for Clarice Starling. She's a young FBI trainee who is assigned to interview him in order to gain insight into the mind of another killer who is still at large and although Lecter provokes her and is playing mind games on her, it is obvious he has a deep respect for her. Since we are following the story from Clarice's point of view, we are prone to judge Lecter by his relationship with Clarice only and we seem to forget his other relationships. Lecter respects Clarice and so we sort of feel like he might be respecting us too and we feel like we are safe from him as well. If the empathy is a spotlight, the spotlight here shines on Lecter and Clarice and rarely ever shines on Lecter's victims. We don't know much about them and we don't see them suffer, so it's not very likely for us to feel empathy. The criminal deeds of Lecter are spoken about, but not often seen, not in a way to provoke empathy anyways, since people we do see die are people we don't know

much about and don't like. However, it is wrong to suggest that we feel empathy towards Lecter in a way Bloom approaches the concept. We don't feel Lecter's suffering mainly because we don't see him suffer. We see him imprisoned, but he doesn't display his suffering, so we don't empathize with him. Lecter is a likeable character precisely because we don't feel his feelings, we cannot understand his mind and we cannot put ourselves in his shoes. However, since spotlight is shining on Lecter throughout the story, or our main focus on attention shines on him and if we were to see him in pain, we would probably suffer too. Or at least, feel the compassion. The reason why we are fascinated by Lecter, although we simply cannot understand him partly lies in Carl Jung's shadow theory. In Jung's analytical psychology, he theorizes that all people have shadow inside of them. Shadow, according to him, represents the unconscious and repressed parts of individuals - the darkest, scariest, most shameful parts of us which we are afraid to admit and accept (Jung 1933). Jung believes the road to self-fulfillment is acceptance of shadow, acceptance of our worst traits and living according to it.

Although Jung believed that the shadow is not necessarily negative or evil, he also emphasizes it can become so if it is ignored or repressed for too long. He believed that the shadow can manifest in various ways, such as anger, jealousy and envy. If we repress our shadow for too long, it can start to possess us, and if we fail to claim it, it can claim us. Often villains are possessed by their shadow and their dark side is leading them since they failed to tame it on time. Those people who accept their shadow, however, live in harmony with their unconscious and their darkness, they are self-actualized and something we should actually strive to be ourselves. What's interesting about Hannibal Lecter is that he is neither dismissive of his shadow as most of us are, nor is a self-actualized, well-intending person we should strive to be. His uniqueness lies in the fact that he accepts and integrates his shadow into his persona, but still chooses to be a

cannibalistic murderer who murders not out of passion or impulse, but because he believes it must happen.

Hannibal, and maybe it is not a coincidence that he is psychiatrist, tamed its shadow and knows what to do with it. He is a serial killer but is nonchalant about it, he is not possessed by his murderous nature but is willingly and rationally making his decision to kill. Hannibal is introduced with shadows of his patients daily and is known for prying into the minds of everyone he encounters. He is interested specifically in patients' shadows, in their repressed memories, their traumas, their unconscious, darkness and shame. The first question Hannibal asks Clarice is what is her worst childhood memory. He likes to know the dark side of people and he has no problem in letting his dark side taking over when he deems it necessary. He is not ashamed of what he is done and he never tries to explain it. We are captivated by Hannibal because he accepted his shadow and he refuses to explain it to anyone. This is also the reason why are we at the same time creeped up by his behavior, because it is very peculiar and unusual to us. Hannibal does not provoke empathy like Norman Bates or Kevin Wendell Crumb doe. He provokes confusion, fascination and perhaps respect, but not empathy - we wish to know him better, to understand his logic, to dig into his mind, but we don't have access to it. His interest in other people also interests us, because he analyses everyone he comes into contact with, but fails to openly analyze himself or to offer that analysis to anyone else. Unlike many other villains, Lecter is not in war with himself or his dark side, on the other hand, he is peaceful, seemingly unbothered by his solitude and boredom in prison. Norman and Kevin are both visibly bothered by their past and their dark side, and Krueger's dark side prevailed so much it made him a monstrous supernatural creature—Krueger has no humanity left in him. Hannibal does, and the humanity he does have is admirable to the audience. The fact that Hannibal wants others to

accept their shadow too is best depicted in the scene where he asks Clarice to be honest about her traumas, he wants her to share her darkness, and once she does, he respects her more. Once Clarice shared the story about the lamb, Hannibal seems touched and thanks her. The only people Lecter respects are honest people, people who are not in war with themselves. However, our natural tendency for compassion is so powerful that after the movie, Thomas Harris wrote another two novels and another two movies were made, the last one describing the backstory of Hannibal. As if, we needed a justification for feeling any sort of sympathy towards Hannibal, that the author and later on the director, needed to make up the tragic backstory, so we don't feel guilty for liking Hannibal. The novel and the movie *Hannibal Rising* (2006) provide the detailed account of Hannibal Lecter's early life. He was born in Lithuania in 1933 to a wealthy aristocratic family and shared a close bond with his younger sister Mischa. When Hannibal was just a young boy, World War II reached Lithuania, and his family's estate was invaded by German soldiers. During the chaos, Hannibal and Mischa were left alone and starving and eventually, a group of Nazi collaborators took them captive. Trapped in a forest lodge during the harsh winter, Hannibal and Mischa endured extreme hunger. The captors resorted to cannibalism, killing Mischa and feeding her remains to Hannibal. This traumatic experience deeply affected him, played a significant role in shaping his character and also offered the audience the opportunity to feel more compassion towards him and better understand his behavior.

The same thing happened with Freddy Krueger. In the first movie, Krueger is considered simply born evil and he shows no humanity whatsoever. We meet him as a sort of a ghost who haunts and kills teenagers of Elm Street in their nightmares. When Krueger was alive, he was a child-murderer and was burned alive by angry parents as a punishment, so now he is targeting the children of the parents that killed them. People like Krueger because of his unique



appearance - burned face, disfigured features and a glove with razor-sharp blades make him visually distinct and easily recognizable. He is also weirdly colorful for an antagonist of slasher movies, has a twisted sense of humor, likes to taunt his victims and often delivers his comically scary one-liners. Krueger, however, doesn't resonate strongly with the audience in terms of eliciting empathy, respect, or understanding. He serves more as an inspiration for Halloween costumes than someone people genuinely connect with. He does not have depth as Hannibal Lector, Norman Bates and Kevin Wendell Crumb have, so it's easier to feel disconnection from his character and not feel much compassion. However, after six movies, Krueger is finally defeated - but not before we are taken on the road to his childhood. Once we are introduced to his childhood, we see that Krueger himself was abused as a child. His mother was raped by one hundred insane criminals, which inspired Krueger's nickname of a "son of a one hundred maniacs". Presumably, this is the reason why Krueger was strange from the very beginning. He was also bullied by the kids from his class and abused by his alcoholic stepfather, so that too plays a huge, if not the main part of who Krueger became later on. Once he grew up, he took a revenge on his bullies by murdering their children and that is when the story of the first movie originally begins. The ending of franchise is interesting, because it seems as if the creators of Krueger had to motivate some kind of empathy from the audience before getting rid of him for good. Krueger's death is therefore, although celebrated, still a bit sour and more emotionally charged than it would have been if the audience hadn't just met him as an abused child.

Introduction of Hannibal and Krueger's childhoods also makes their characters more believable. Before the last novel and the last movie, it was assumed that both Krueger and Hannibal Lector were unexplainably, purely evil and were considered creatures different from the rest of us. Roy Baumeister begins his book *Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty*, by saying

that he will not be talking about characters like Hannibal Lecter, Freddie Kruger, Satan or Keyser Söze since their portrayal assume “the myth of pure evil” (Baumeister 1999). According to Baumeister, myth of evil is a belief that evil is a vicious “alien force” (Baumeister 1999, p.10) which makes certain people intentionally cruel, wanting suffering for the sake of suffering only. Such view of people who commit evil acts makes us differentiate ourselves from them in such extent that we see them as less human. People who commit cruel acts dehumanize people, and in return we dehumanize them; for example – “Nazis dehumanize Jews, we dehumanize Nazis” (Bloom 2016,p.125). One of the reasons why myth of pure evil exists in the first place is so called “the moralization gap”—the people’s tendency to “consider the harms they inflict to be justified and forgettable, and the harms they suffer to be unprovoked and grievous” (Pinker 2011, p.415). This phenomenon can be seen in accounts of violent offenders who are perplexed by the attention their crimes receive, as they simply don’t believe it’s a big deal. The moralization gap can also be observed in less serious cases.

Baumeister and his colleagues, for example, in one study requested people to remember either a situation where they provoked someone's anger or one in which they themselves were provoked by someone else. When people recalled instances in which they were the ones causing harm, they downplayed the severity of their actions, attributing them to good intentions. When they recalled being the victims, they were more inclined to perceive the incidents as significant, having enduring impacts, and driven by a mix of irrationality and sadism (Baumeister, Stillwell and Wotman 1990). We tend to view our own upsetting actions towards others as innocent, while perceiving the actions of others that upset us as irrational or cruel.

It is clear that we are all capable of doing evil and justify our own behaviors, even though we would harshly judge them if they were committed by someone else. Although it is true that

our wrongdoings are not comparable to those of murderers, the motivation behind them is usually similar. We think we are doing something which makes sense, offending someone who offended us, defending our stances, punishing people because we believe they deserved it and so on. All of these motivate the serious offenders too, and an extremely small percentage of them are hurting people for the sake of hurt itself - they are doing it because they are led by the strong inner force of self-justice, something we all possess. As many authors argue, cruel actions are commonly committed by people “fueled by a strong moral sense” (Bloom 2016,p. 127), people who think they are doing what they must. In Pinker’s words: “The world has far too much morality. If you added up all the homicides committed in pursuit of self-help justice, the casualties of religious and revolutionary wars, the people executed for victimless crimes and misdemeanors, and the targets of ideological genocides, they would surely outnumber the fatalities from amoral predation and conquest” (Pinker 2011, pg. 622)

If Lecter and Krueger were deprived of their backstory, they perhaps could have been considered purely evil, committing crimes out of sadism only. However, once we are introduced with their childhoods, we can see that the childhood trauma created or unlocked their deranged moral codes, in which name they are acting. They are not committing senseless, meaningless crimes, however unreasonable those crimes appear to us.

Krueger believes he deserves his revenge and is killing out of anger and vengeance. He does kill out of passion and he does wish to cause pain to parents of children he targets, but he wishes to harm those who wronged him, so he does think his acts are justified. Hannibal has stronger moral system as he murders those he sees as impolite, intellectually damaging to society, useless or someone who is threat to himself or people he cares about – he truly believes he is doing a world a favor by getting rid of people undeserving of being in it.

Even if we do conclude their evildoings are completely immoral, their lack of morality or their need to hurt other people is again explained through their childhood trauma. In his work, Baron-Cohen is trying to find origins of cruelty in the world and concludes that cruel people lack empathy and tries to find the reasons behind someone's lack of empathy. What many people call evil, Baron-Cohen calls "empathy erosion" and believes that's the scientific approach everyone should take (Baron-Cohen 2011). He studies numerous cases of what he calls zero empathy types and finds that main reason for people's lack of empathy lies in their childhood. If a child lacks parental love and protection, the regions in brain in charge of empathy, so called empathy circuit, fail to develop properly. This is something easily seen in real life cases of serial killers. Majority of them were abused in childhood and suffered numerous traumas, and most murderers, especially serial killers, were victims themselves before they found their own victims. Another reason why someone may lack empathy even if they did have normal childhood is their genetic predisposition or a head trauma. Some people are born with dysfunctional empathy circuit, or their empathy circuit was somehow damaged in an accident, but in most cases, the cause lies in childhood years.

One of these zero empathy types are psychopaths. It is obvious both Lecter and Krueger are psychopaths, which is often considered a synonym for "born evil", furtherly building on the myth of pure evil. However, despite popular belief that psychopaths are born and not created, the truth is far more complicated. Baron-Cohen (2011) discovers that, just like in other zero empathy types, the diagnosis of psychopathy is linked to their early childhood experiences, and not their genetics. While there may be some genetic predisposition such as dysfunctional empathy circuits, if these individuals had a positive upbringing, most of them would develop into functioning members of society. In the worst scenarios, they might exhibit traits like being

difficult, manipulative partners or colleagues, but they would not become murderers. The involvement of a troubled childhood is almost always necessary for psychopaths to become homicidal.

A psychopath is, therefore, an individual who exhibits a set of specific personality traits and behaviors characterized by a lack of empathy and remorse, as well as manipulative and antisocial tendencies. They often have a superficial charm and can mimic emotions to manipulate others for personal gain. Psychopathy is considered a personality disorder and falls within the broader category of antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) (Baron-Cohen 2011). While not all individuals with ASPD are psychopaths, psychopathy represents a more severe and distinct subset within this group.

When it comes to Norman Bates and Kevin Wendell Crumb, the psychological background is completely different. Both were abused in their childhood, but the abuse had different consequences on their psyches - it led them to develop a mental illness called DID - Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). We learn about Kevin and Norman's diagnosis from their psychiatrists – in Kevin's case, we are being made aware of his diagnosis relatively early on, and in Norman's case, we find out about it at the very end of the movie. People diagnosed with Dissociative Identity Disorder frequently mention having endured physical or sexual abuse in their childhood (Spiegel 2019), something both psychiatrists touch on. Extreme sexual, physical, or psychological trauma in childhood has been suggested as an explanation for the development of DID. In some cases of severe trauma, patients' awareness, memories and emotions related to the traumatic events are dissociated from consciousness, leading to the formation of alternate personalities with distinct memories, emotions, and behaviors. (Varcarolis et al. 266). The role of psychiatrist in the movies, except to explain what DID is to a viewer is to also provide an

objective insight into what is going on, rather than the subjective point of view of the character. Both characters were abused during their childhood, which triggered Kevin's need to hide away among other personalities, and Norman to lash out and then hide from guilt by creating a split personality. Interestingly, both characters were abused by their mother, while their father was absent. This deeply influenced their relationship with women in general, which is seen in the movies in various ways. Kevin's personality Dennis abuses and eventually kidnaps underage girls, Norman's personality of his mother Norma controls him, shames him and berates him whenever he feels desire for a woman. Both characters end up killing women, that is, their hateful personalities do. The most problematic relationship with a mother and women in general is found in Norman Bates's case. He is the only character who is not aware of the trauma he endured and the abuse he suffered. This makes his relationship with mother based both on love and hate, admiration, fear, jealousy and guilt. Norman does not know he is a victim and he keeps on defending his mother. Norman's mother, according to the information we know, was very controlling and verbally abusing, shielding Norman from the world and preaching against sexual desires and romantic love. Norman and his mother had a codependent relationship that bordered on incestuous. So, when Norma began a relationship with a man, Norman felt betrayed and abandoned by his mother, but also weirdly jealous. He ended up killing his mother over his jealousy and possessiveness, but was so disturbed by what he has done, that his mind created the persona of his mother and they continued to coexist. That was the way Norman dealt with what he has done, while Kevin created his personality to deal with what has been done to him. Although Norman was a victim first, before he ever victimized someone else, when speaking of his personality disorder, it was triggered by his crime - not by his mother's abuse. Or more precisely, it was triggered by the guilt he felt over killing his mother, which made him invent the

scenario of not actually killing her at all. This makes his relationship with his mother extremely complex, obviously so because his other personality is no one else but her and she remained as controlling as she was before she died. While Kevin created his identities to hide from abuse, Norman created his identity to hide from the guilt of killing his abuser. Kevin is the character who is most aware of the abuse he endured or rather his personalities are, as Kevin was just shortly present in the movie. Unlike with Norman, Kevin's identities are aware of each other, they know each other, they know Kevin and they know they were abused. Although Kevin has 23 personalities, we are introduced only with a few of them. Berry is the rational, moral, benign personality, someone who we hope Kevin is deep inside. Barry, knowing they were abused and knowing they had DID as well as other mental health problems, consciously goes to therapy and regularly discusses his issues with his therapist. Kevin knows he suffers from DID and he is the only one actively seeking help for his issues. The whole plot actually revolves around the potential appearance of “The Beast”, Kevin’s 24th personality who aims to rid the world of the “impure”, i.e. those who were never abused. Therefore, it is clear that the abuse has more prominent and evident role in Kevin's life, in comparison with Norman who he is in a complete denial.

Kevin’s personality was split in the childhood, when he was left by his father and abused by his mother. Some of his identities seek revenge while others are calmer, kind personalities who want to lead a normal, healthy life. Kevin's identities Dennis and Patricia are displaying their need for revenge by harassing girls and eventually kidnapping three to prepare them for The Beast. Kevin's benign personalities are opposed to this idea, and this is the rational part of Kevin's mind, mind that is aware it needs help and recovery. Unfortunately, positive identities fail to prevail over the evil ones, but it seems like Norman had slimmer chances, as he was not

aware of what is happening and therefore, he would have never tried to heal himself. The characters' different backgrounds, but also attitudes and reactions to the trauma they endured shaped who they are in different ways. It also influenced our feelings towards them.

To understand why the audience feels the empathy towards Norman and Kevin, it is necessary to understand this notion of DID. Their dark side, unlike Hannibal or Krueger's coexist with Norman and Kevin in a different way- they do not accept their dark side, but are instead fighting against it, and we are therefore more likely to empathize with them or with their good side. To understand this juxtaposition between good and bad side, we must delve into the notion of uncanny. It was first introduced by Ernst Jentsch, a German psychiatrist and subsequently expanded upon by Sigmund Freud in his 1919 essay *The Uncanny*. In his essay, Freud discusses the German terms "heimlich" and "unheimlich" and initially, he delineates the differences in their meanings. As the essay unfolds, however, he blends the two words to convey the essence of what the uncanny truly represents. He defines "heimlich" as denoting familiarity and "unheimlich" as signifying something concealed or hidden (Freud 1919, p. 3). It is this interplay between the familiar and the concealed that ultimately gives rise to the concept of the uncanny, where something unfamiliar is added to something familiar. Empty museums at night or an empty motel at night should naturally be filled with people, but put in a strange, unordinary situation, they become uncanny. The uncanny is always present in the horror genre and better the uncanniness is translated from the movie to the audience, scarier the horror is and stronger the feeling of uneasiness. Simply put, it is that feeling that something is not as it is supposed to be, however subtle, silent or hidden it is. Freud claimed that the source of the uncanny is the double or doppelgänger uncanny. The uncanny double or the uncanny doppelgänger is someone or something that bears a strong resemblance to oneself, while simultaneously existing as distinct



from one's own identity. Uncanny doubles are a recurring motif in the horror genre, taking form of the shadows, mirrors, dolls, ghosts, zombies etc. Freud believes these things are uncanny because they are like the self, but at the same time different in a threatening, menacing way (Freud 1919, p.10). Taking this into account, portrayal of DID is an obvious choice made by a director who wants to use the creepiness of the uncanny doppelganger in his horror. Person suffering from DID is exactly what Freud talks about- self, but at the same time, the other. It has a great advantage over the ghosts and haunted dolls too, and it is a fact that DID is indubitably real. Further, Freud suggests that the concept of the "double" corresponds to a particular stage of development. This developmental stage is connected to his theory of the "narcissism of the child," a natural and normal stage of development in early childhood, in which child is focused solely on their own needs and desires. In this phase, a child forms multiple self-projections, reflecting an intense self love. Eventually, the child overcomes this stage and develops their ego. The connection to the "double" arises when, in adulthood, a person encounters experiences that evoke a return to this primitive state of self-absorption, resulting in the disruption of the self, creating the uncanny (Freud 1919, p. 10). Since DID is usually triggered in childhood, as it is in Kevin's case, we can conclude that he never recovered from this stage and that his multiple projections of himself became more concrete and individual over time, instead of disappearing or merging into one. Therefore, he is constantly faced with his uncanny doubles.

In *Psycho*, however, we never encounter Norman's shock when he finds out he suffers from DID, because he never did find out. The uncanny double effect is best depicted in a memorable scene in which Norman is dressed like his mother and screams "I am Norma Bates!". However, this doppelganger effect is present only at that brief instance, since in the very next moment, we find out that the personality of the mother has prevailed and there is nothing of

Norman Bates left. We never see Norman becoming conscious of this ordeal nor do we see Norman being his other personality for too long, as the shift happened at the end of the movie. In *Split*, on the other hand, the approach to a doppelganger is entirely different. Kevin appears only briefly in one scene and upon finding out he has had no control over his body for the last two years, he asks one of the kidnapped girls to kill him. Kevin is not oblivious as Norman is, he is instead a disappointed and defeated man who tried to help himself and just realized he had failed. The empathy we feel for him in that moment is of different sort- we see a man who has failed despite his efforts to conquer his illness and we cannot help but to feel his suffering. Although identity of Kevin was there more to evoke empathy than it was to evoke uncanniness, Shyamalan did play around with the uncanny doubles through other means. Here we are put into the objective reality and we see things as they are, i.e. from the perspective of kidnapped girls. As we see things as they are and not as Kevin imagined them, the uncanny double perhaps has a stronger effect in this movie, mostly due to the simple fact that all of Kevin's identities wear the same face. This is best displayed in the scenes where personalities shift from one another, especially at the beginning, while the girls and the audience are still unaware that Kevin is ill. We are firstly introduced with Dennis, who kidnapped girls, but very soon with are introduced with Patricia. Patricia is another destructive Kevin's identity, but from the girls' and audience's perspective, we see Dennis suddenly dressed as a woman and behaving completely different. And again, something familiar became unfamiliar and Patricia becomes the uncanny doppelganger of someone we already met. Another shift is to a young boy Hedwig, which is a complete opposite of already introduced identities, as Hedwig is innocent, kind-hearted and cheerful. However, since we are not in a Kevin's mind, but in an objective reality, we see a grown man acting and speaking like a child. We do learn that Hedwig is a separate identity and

we eventually perceive him as such, but upon first encountering Hedwig, he was too the uncanny doppelganger. It is no wonder that Shyamalan chose a woman and a kid to be amongst the most present Kevin's identities, since shift from identities is then not only clearer, but also more uncanny.

In a case of Hannibal Lector, the uncanny double is not as present, at least not in the same way. Hannibal doesn't try to overcome his dark side and his two sides live in harmony with one another, not in a war. However, when we see Hannibal enjoying art and music, speaking highly of Clarice and showing understanding for her, we are in disbelief that such a person is capable of monstrous crimes. His uncanniness is present simply in such moments when we see him as a human, although we know him as a monster. Lector's cannibalistic tendencies could also be seen as an uncanny double of his own refined and cultured personality, as well as a distorted reflection of the viewer's own primal and instinctual drives. His obsession with manners, etiquette, and fine dining could be seen as creating an uncanny double of conventional societal norms and values, subverting expectations and blurring the line between acceptable and taboo behavior. The character's combination of sophistication, intellect, and monstrous behavior have made him uncanny, although not as obvious as in Norman or Kevin's case.

In the context of Krueger, the concept of the uncanny double could also be applied. For example, Krueger's burned and scarred face could be seen as an uncanny double of his own pre-burned self, just as his razor-fingered glove could be seen as an uncanny double of the human hand, both familiar and yet unnervingly different. Also, Krueger's ability to enter and manipulate his victims' dreams could be seen as creating an uncanny double of their waking reality, diluting the contrast between what is real and what is imagined. But when it comes to Krueger's psyche,

it is neither split nor conflicted, so his uncanniness lies exclusively in his appearance and approach to victims, not in the juxtaposition of his mind.

It is easy to empathize with characters like Norman and Kevin, obvious victims of their circumstances and their childhoods, humans which we share more with, people which seem like us, speak like us, look like us, but are having their dark side manipulating them. We can see ourselves becoming them in some alternative reality, and we can imagine we would try and fight the darkness in the same way that they try. It is harder to empathize with psychopaths like Lecter and Krueger, which is why it's interesting we are offered their tragic backstory too, so it can enhance any possibility for compassion, as an attempt to put them together with the rest of a troubled victims of their circumstances. This is perhaps what Bloom is thinking of when he argues that empathy leads to justifying the unjustifiable, as people are desperate to understand what is going on inside someone's head. And yes, we do understand Hannibal's cannibalism better once we see him as a boy forced to consume his sister and we do understand Krueger's actions a bit more once we see him as an abused and bullied child willing to take revenge on parents who bullied him as a kid. However, to understand and to justify is not the same. We may not justify the villain's deeds and we may still judge them harshly, but if we understand their backgrounds better, we are more prone to empathize or feel compassion. Perhaps this truly is wrong as Bloom and Zahavi claim and it can certainly lead to extremes, like people worshipping real-life serial killers and popular media being obsessed in portraying them in more humane way. In most cases, however, empathy and rational morality can coexist in one's mind and we can empathize with a villain and still want them to be punished for their crimes. Lovers of true crime stories are always perplexed when watching or reading the backstory of some murderer, suddenly realizing a murderer was an abused child and then they tend to feel a compassion

towards such child. The conflict of feeling empathy, fascination, judgement, anger or even hatred towards the same person may be one of the reasons people become obsessed with these individuals. If the feelings of compassion towards the villains is not as frowned upon and deemed morbid, people would realize it is completely natural to feel such conflicted emotions and would not in turn develop an unhealthy fascination due to that perplexity and confusion. It shouldn't neither bother us, nor occupy us, nor fascinate that we feel empathy towards the monster - as long as it doesn't affect our rationality and we don't fail to punish them.

However, now the question arises of whether the psychological backgrounds and life circumstances of these characters affect our judgement of their evilness. When we get to know their stories better, do we still hold them responsible for their actions? And if we do think of them as evil, why is it that we feel empathy either way?

#### **4. Evil and responsibility**

In cases of Norman Bates and Kevin Wendell Crumb, good and evil coexist in the same person, which means we do like the character, but we dislike the evil inside of them. In cases of Hannibal Lecter and Freddy Krueger, however, their evil side is prevailing over good one in such extent that we rarely recognize any good in them, so it is easier to label them as evil. When examining evil, the question of responsibility often arises. It is widely debated whether individuals who commit evil acts bear complete moral responsibility for their actions. Some argue that individuals possess agency and should be held accountable for their choices, regardless of external factors. Others suggest that external influences, such as societal, cultural, or psychological factors, may mitigate individual responsibility. This complex relationship between evil and responsibility underscores the ongoing discourse on the nature of evil and the

extent to which individuals can be held morally accountable for their actions. Many studies on evil commonly hold the belief that to perform an evil action, an evildoer must be a moral agent, i.e. morally responsible for committing an evil act. While certain wild animals or natural catastrophes can inflict significant harm, their action cannot be considered evil since they lack moral agency (Levy 2007). Kekes believe that the combination of three components make some action evil: “the malevolent motivation of evildoers; the serious, inexcusable harm caused by their actions; and the lack of morally acceptable excuse for the actions. Each of these components is necessary, and they are jointly sufficient for condemning an action as evil.” (Kekes 1990, p. 2)

Now, we need find out if Hannibal, Norman, Freddy and Kevin meet these criteria for being an evil person. As already discussed, one of the main things that connects these characters is some sort of childhood trauma. The connection between bad upbringings and criminal behavior has already been discussed in previous chapter, however not in relation to the concept of evil. There are two key arguments supporting the idea that individuals should not be morally accountable for actions resulting from a disadvantaged upbringing. The first argument posits that since we cannot choose our childhood, it is unfair to hold us responsible for crimes that are the outcome of such childhood (Cole 2006). The second argument supporting the idea that people should not be morally accountable for crimes arising from challenging upbringings starts with the premise that we are morally responsible for our actions only when we are suitable objects of “reactive attitudes”, like resentment or anger (Strawson 1963). In line with this argument, people who have had troubled upbringings and commit crimes are not suitable objects of reactive attitude since that would be pointless. Another reason why some evildoers may not in fact be evil is if they are ignorant of the evil they are doing. Nonetheless, numerous theorists acknowledge

that ignorance can serve as a valid justification for causing unjust harm only when we are not responsible for our lack of knowledge, that is, when the ignorance is not a result of our own actions (Calder 2009). So now the question arises whether our characters were ignorant or not.

Kevin and Norman represent all of their personalities, not just the one we sympathize with because they are troubled and kind. These nice personalities perhaps have been ignorant of the evil their body was doing, but something in Kevin and Norman did commit those murders and that something was consciously and deliberately doing evil. Especially so in Norman's case because he murdered his mother before his personality was even split, even if Norman we meet has suppressed that memory. Hannibal and Krueger were evidently not ignorant about what they were doing – both are portrayed as having a clear understanding of the evil they commit. However, they are perhaps only aware that what they are doing is evil in the eyes of society, but they don't necessarily think they are evil. Krueger is killing out of revenge, so he fights for his own justice, not merely to cause pain, but to establish balance to what was done to him. Lecter commits evil not only out of sadistic tendencies, but because he believes that people he kills deserve it – because they are fragile and easily manipulated, because they represent a particular archetype or societal issue that he wishes to address or comment on through his actions or because they wronged him and caused him harm. He is, therefore, not ignorant of the evil he is doing, but according to his deranged moral system, his acts are not so evil after all.

Nevertheless, let's assume Lecter and Krueger were completely morally responsible for their actions and Norman and Kevin partly responsible due to their split persona. It is still unclear whether such conclusion would affect the extent of our empathy.

The audience probably did not study the concept of evil after the movie to determine whether a character was evil or morally responsible for their acts, rather they intuitively knew

they deserve compassion, regardless of what they did. This is supported by the fact that Norman Bates is often recognized as a symbol of a likeable criminal and he generally evokes much greater sympathy in people than let's say, Kevin and yet, unlike Kevin, Norman Bates is knowingly and consciously doing evil even before the split in his personality. One of the reasons why Norman is loved by the audience is probably the fact that screenwriter Joseph Stefano tried his best to make this happen. In the original novel by Robert Bloch, Norman is depicted as an unattractive man in his 40s prone to heavy drinking. When Norman gets drunk and blacks out, he then transforms into Norma. Stefano was not a fan of the original Norman and he purposely made him more likeable for the audience: "I thought he was incredibly unsympathetic. I didn't like him. So when Marion gets killed, I am then expected to switch my empathy toward this man? I couldn't do it with the character as he was written. I perceived a young man, vulnerable, good looking, kind of sad, makes you feel sorry for him" (Rebello 1990, pg. 60). However, we cannot forget that Norman did kill his mother and even if he did not kill Marion, he hid his mother's crime and got rid of her body. Therefore, if we approach the concept of evil in the way already discussed, Norman actually is morally responsible because he knowingly committed the crime, so, not one of his personalities, neither Norman Bates nor Norma Bates is innocent. Kevin is both consciously or unconsciously fight his destructive personalities using the strength and rationality of this good personalities. Norman Bates does not have a "good personality", and yet we sympathize with him more, so evil may have nothing to do with it after all. Another reason for the fact that Norman Bates is so likeable may be that the audience gets know him the best. Until the very end of the film, Norman is the only personality which we encounter, so naturally, we become more attached to him than to Kevin's identities are numerous. Norman is also charismatic, childlike, seemingly kind and innocent character, so it is not surprising that he won



sympathy of the audience, regardless of his crimes. Also, the background of his mother's abuse has found its way to the audience in perhaps the most intimate way, since his mother is not some absent character whose existence we are briefly introduced to. Norma Bates is present throughout the story and from the beginning, we feel how controlling and verbally abusive she is towards Norman and we sympathize, especially since he does not seem to understand her terror and continue to loyally and innocently defend her. In Kevin's case, we are not as invested in his life as we are in Norman's. Some even criticized the overall Shyamalan's characterization of Kevin, with one movie critic saying that "Shyamalan loses sight of Kevin's fundamental humanity, and in doing so, misunderstands what can really make mental illness a terrifying ordeal" (Bramesco 2017). Kevin is, however, the only character who is actively looking for help, who is trying to better himself and who is trying his hardest to eliminate his destructive identities, but somehow we fail to sympathize with him as much as we do with Norman. This may be because, although aware of his struggles, we hardly ever see Kevin struggling. Kevin himself appeared on the screen briefly and we had no chance of getting to know him. We also do not see the suffering of his positive identities, identities which we like. The conflict that we see in the movie is placed on kidnapped girls versus Dennis and Patricia, and not on Kevin's vile versus nice personalities. And since we do not see Kevin's struggles, we are less eager to forgive him for his deeds. We do feel empathy, because we are introduced with his situation, but that empathy is more of a rational choice, rather than something deep inside us compelling us to like him. In a more poetic definition, compassion is, according to Czech author Milan Kundera, "a heavy burden, for there is nothing heavier than compassion. Not even one's own pain weighs so heavy as the pain one feels with someone, for someone, a pain intensified by the imagination and prolonged by a hundred echoes" (Kundera 1987, pg.18). This may explain why the audience

feels the empathy for Norman Bates, because we know that he, the person we are seeing, has suffered his mother's abuse since he was a child. We see an abused person, we can imagine his pain and that pain is, in our heads, „intensified by the imagination“, because it is, after all, left to our imagination- we never see Norman being abused by his mother nor do we see his childhood traumas unfolding before us. Truth to be told, this is the case with Kevin too, but the problem is, again, the fact that we do not know Kevin as well. We know his identities, but they were not abused- they were the answer to an abuse, a reaction to an abuse, but they themselves were not abused. We don't see their sufferings, because all the sufferings belong to Kevin and we see almost nothing of him.

Krueger is not empathized with in a sense in which Norman is, but this does make sense. Although we get to see Krueger in six movies, that doesn't mean that we got to know him. We are following the story from the victims' point of views, and we rarely see Krueger in any contexts other than him murdering or taunting people. We don't see him being human, with the exception of the last movie in which get to see him before he become a murderer.

Lecter, however, is not very deserving of empathy, and yet he receives it. Not in a very obvious way, however, since we don't see him suffer, but we don't want him to - we like him and sympathize with him. Although we are not following the story from his point of view, his presence is felt differently than Krueger's. He is mysterious and everybody wants to know the reasons behind his actions, so he is often talked about and analyzed, so we naturally do that too. We also see him enjoying music and art, having beliefs and opinions and are introduced with his personality traits better. However, once again, in the context of moral responsibility, Lecter is definitely more morally responsible for his acts than Kevin is, but our empathy or our wish to see him unharmed is stronger in his case, since we get to know him and like him better. The reasons

behind our empathy, therefore, has not much to do with the whether the character is morally responsible for their actions and or not.

In *Psycho* and *Split*, evil identities won. It is an interesting, yet obvious choice. The constant internal battle of the characters made their story appealing, but we knew that battle was coming to an end. The audience cheered for good personalities, but was instead faced with evil identities becoming the dominant ones. However, this does make sense, because if nothing else, it strengthens our empathy even more. The good which we saw in these characters has been shattered, their nice identities have not won their fight and we are inclined to suffer their deaths, just like we would of any other likeable victim. When it comes to the notion of likeable criminal, it is a bit complex in cases like this. Liking villains usually implies liking some aspect of them, while still condemning other aspects. However, likeable criminals of these movies suffer from Dissociative Identity Disorder, so it is not as simple as liking some aspect of them. It is more like liking an entirely separate character, the good side manifested into its own, autonomous identity. We don't like Dennis or Patricia, but we do like Berry and Hedwig, we don't like Norma, but we do like Norman. All these good characters were dead by the end of the movie, so we mourn over them same as we would over some more conventional heroes. Therefore, the empathy or compassion we feel for Kevin or Norman is actually aimed at their good sides and it is intensified ones we realize they have not succeeded at becoming the dominant personality. If the good personalities somehow prevailed, these movies would not have the same effect, because then, we would be somehow forced into forgiving all that was done and cheer for their victory. However, although we do like these characters, we know they cannot have a happy, fulfilling life and we would not be satisfied if they walked free by the end of the movie, as if they have never committed those murders. We know they deserve the punishment, but we do not exactly want to

see them punished. They needed some other destiny and this alternative was the best one. We are not blinded and we do hold them accountable for what was done, the empathy cannot erase that. We understand these characters, we realize the reasons behind their mental illness and we realize why have they behaved in a way they did, but we do not justify their wrongdoings. And, if we concluded that positive, innocent personalities cannot be morally responsible for the murders if they were oblivious, but we also feel they cannot be freed, the elimination of them is the most satisfying, however tragic solution. Lecter is the one character who was never punished for his acts, so evil won in this story too. At the end of *Hannibal* (2006), Clarice is left with a choice: to arrest Lecter or to let him escape. In a surprising turn of events, Clarice decides not to capture Lecter. Instead, she watches as he vanishes into the crowds of a Florentine Carnival. This decision stems from her realization that Lecter, despite his heinous actions, possesses an unmatched intellect and an intriguing sense of justice. The movie ends with Lecter seen walking alone in a crowded marketplace, disappearing into the crowd, leaving his ultimate fate and future actions unknown. This ending is satisfying, as the audience doesn't want to see the character they came to love being defeated. This is the only character whose action we do forgive because we like him and our morality is clouded by such sympathy. What makes it easier to forgive him is the fact that he didn't escape or outsmarted Clarice, but she – a powerful, rational, moral character decided he was worth letting go, and we respect her decision. Was Lecter to be punished, we would be unhappy, was he to kill Clarice or escape, we would be sorry for her and our sense of justice would be wronged, but since Clarice has spared him, we are allowed to as well.

Krueger is the one who did die and therefore received his punishment. It makes sense that the only character which dies is the one which the audience empathizes with the least. He was

the inhuman character, so we fail to develop the connection needed for strong empathy and we don't mind seeing him kill as much.

However, even if we accept that all of these characters are evil, even if we still believe some of them are purely evil and we don't think their actions can ever be rationalized and discussed in a way which makes them less immoral or less evil, the empathy towards these villains still stand strong. All this discussed, it is obvious something else makes us like them and empathize with them- not merely their backgrounds, since Kevin would be much more liked, not their moral responsibility, since Lecter would be much less liked, but something else. People usually don't like them because they think they are not evil, but in spite of it. Therefore, something else entirely makes the audience focus more on the positive attributes of the villains and feel compassion towards them.

## **5. Unveiling empathy for those who cause pain**

Feeling empathy towards individuals who engage in harmful or evil actions can be a complex and controversial topic. Philosophical perspectives on empathy provide various explanations for this phenomenon. Roman Krznaric, a contemporary writer and philosopher, explores the concept of empathy in his work and offers a perspective known as radical empathy (Krznaric 2014). Central to radical empathy is the act of perspective-taking. By immersing ourselves in the experiences of others, we naturally develop a deeper understanding of their realities. While conventional empathy often relies on finding similarities or shared experiences to establish a connection, Krznaric's empathy encourages us to understand people whose lives may be vastly different from our own. Those include people engaging in harmful acts as well.

Immanuel Kant, a prominent philosopher of the Enlightenment era argued that empathy arises from recognizing the shared humanity in all individuals. Despite the evil actions they may commit, empathizing with them helps acknowledge their capacity for reason and moral agency (Kant 1993). Kant believed that empathy should be extended to all human beings, including the ones committing harmful actions, as a recognition of their inherent worth. Both of these views on empathy stand in contrast to what Bloom (2016) and Zahavi (2014) think as they argue that empathy should not be extended to all human beings as it leads us to justify the unjustifiable.

The philosophy which perhaps best encompasses the audience's empathy towards Hannibal Lecter, Norman Bates, Kevin Wendell Crumb and Freddy Krueger is the Buddhist philosophy of compassion response. Compassion (*karuna*) in Buddhism is the deep recognition and empathetic response to the suffering of others. It arises from the understanding of the fundamental truth of interconnectedness and the universal presence of suffering (*dukkha*) (Hanh 1999). Buddhist philosophy recognizes that all beings possess the potential for enlightenment and seeks to alleviate suffering through compassionate action. Evil, according to this philosophy, is not an inherent quality but rather as a manifestation of ignorance, delusion, and unwholesome mental states. Evil actions are seen as the result of a chain of causes and conditions, including personal conditioning and the influence of societal and environmental factors. The significant aspect of this philosophy emphasizes that the compassionate response is impartial and free from discrimination, extending to all beings, regardless of their background, status, or affiliation.

Most of the authors who speak on empathy do highlight that feeling empathy towards evil people does not imply condoning or excusing their actions. Empathy allows us to understand the underlying factors that contribute to their behavior, but it does not negate the need for accountability, justice, or protection of the well-being of others. All the researches on empathy -

philosophical, psychological, spiritual and neuroscientific ones, however conflicting they may be, offer a similar view on *why* we feel empathy. Empathy is an innate characteristic over which we have little control – we feel empathy towards someone because of who we are, not because of who they are.

Empathy is irrational as many authors pointed out, but it's unavoidable. On same basic level, we do all feel similar to each other and we recognize that whatever separates us is so often out of our hands. Our humanity recognizes others' humanity, even if it's subtle and hidden. And pain is something we recognize the most since it is something we ourselves feel and remember the most. We should not act on our empathy only, but we should accept it as an inevitable part of our personality, even if it's shameful and morbid at times. We shouldn't try to avoid or overcome empathy, since empathy itself is not to blame for injustice. If we don't feel bad for people suffering just because their suffer is deserved, we are the ones lacking the fundamental human trait too, not only evildoers. By dehumanizing cruel people, we are dehumanizing ourselves too, as we are suffocating the part of us which is the most humane at all. It is natural to like and despise Lecter, it's natural to feel bad when Krueger dies, even if we celebrate it as well.

Also, the important factor in our empathy towards these villains is simply the fact that we get to know them. We usually don't feel empathy towards serial killers in general, war criminals, rapists or anyone who we think is evil but are never offered their story. They are anonymous, faceless, embodiment of evil and in these cases, our empathy falls solely on their victims. Our spotlight of our attention doesn't shine on those we don't see, so we don't feel empathy towards cruel people in general. However, once we do see our respective villains, once we see them walk, talk and smile, we recognize humanity in them the humanity in us attaches itself to it. That's another reason Krueger is a character who receives the least empathy, because he is displaying

the common human traits the least. Others, however, are similar to us in some aspects, and our spotlight shines on it. In his work *Humanity*, Jonathan Glover recounts an anecdote involving George Orwell during his time serving in the Spanish Civil War. In this story, Orwell encountered a soldier who was holding up his pants with both hands. “I did not shoot partially because of that detail about the trousers. I had come here to shoot at ‘Fascists,’ but a man who is holding up his trousers isn’t a ‘fascist’; he is visibly a fellow creature, similar to yourself, and you don’t feel like shooting at him” (Glover 2012, pg.115)

This passage perfectly sums up our ability to empathize with villains portrayed in movies or literature. We are introduced with their human qualities and they become emphasized in contrast to their inhumanity. We see someone who murders people liking art, listening to music, smiling to a joke, being hungry or wearing trousers and in those moments, we forget about their monstrous deeds because we perceive them as being similar to ourselves. We lack such empathy towards people we dehumanize, but we usually don’t dehumanize people we get the opportunity to meet, even only through a story. As already discussed, this tendency can be detrimental in real life when it leads to an unhealthy obsession with serial killers. Nevertheless, most people are able to separate their empathy from morality and still desire punishment for the cruel acts committed, while simultaneously feeling compassion towards the perpetrators - if they recognize they possess some of the fundamental human qualities.

## **6. Conclusion**

Upon examining the phenomena of feeling empathy towards evil people, it becomes clear that empathy is an intrinsic aspect of human nature. Numerous authors have carried out their own researches into the nature of empathy, and while many of them disagree with each other, they all approach empathy as a natural human tendency.



On a fundamental level, there exists a shared humanity that binds us all together. Regardless of the differences that separate us, we can often recognize the universal aspects of human experience. Our recognition of the inherent humanity in others may be subtle or concealed, but it nonetheless exists. We instinctively empathize with other human beings because we intuitively understand that the circumstances that set us apart are very often beyond our control. Our capacity for empathy is a profound expression of our humanity, even if it can be unsettling or deemed morbid at times. It is essential to recognize that empathy alone should not guide our actions and it should be balanced with reason.

When it comes to Lecter, Krueger, Wendell Crumb and Bates and other villains of the horror genre, our empathy naturally expands to them as well. The paradox of feeling empathy towards evil people forces us to question the boundaries we often place between good and evil, and makes us realize those differences are not so clear-cut. Baron-Cohen argues that evil is treated as incomprehensible, something which is challenging to deal with because “the scale of horror is so great that nothing can capture its enormity” (Baron-Cohen 2011, pg.5). This often makes people use the concept of evil to explain the seemingly incomprehensible atrocities. „Why did the murderer kill an innocent child? Because he was evil. Why did this terrorist become a suicide bomber? Because she was evil” (Baron-Cohen 2011, pg.5). But when we ask why are they evil, the answer we get is “because they killed an innocent child” or “because they are a suicide bomber”. This type of circular reasoning does not explain evil at all and instead perpetuate the myth of pure evil which considers people committing horrible crimes as somehow less human. This is not only wrong, but it is counterintuitive as human beings are wired to feel empathy and then they feel confused or guilty when they realize they empathize with someone considered evil.

Compassion allows us to transcend the cycle of resentment, anger, and hatred that perpetuate suffering. It opens our hearts to understanding and the potential for healing, both for the perpetrator and the victim. As Baron-Cohen's puts it: "If we treat another person as essentially bad, we dehumanize him or her. If we take the view that every human being has some good in them, even if it is only 0.1 percent of their makeup, then by focusing on their good part, we humanize them. By acknowledging and attending to and rewarding their good part, we allow it to grow, like a small flower in a desert." (Baron-Cohen 2011, p.175).

Hannibal Lecter, Norman Bates, Freddy Krueger and Kevin Wendell Crumb are portrayed with intricate backstories and psychological complexities, so such depth of their characters evoke curiosity and lead to a certain level of empathy or understanding. Understanding the factors that shaped them, such as childhood trauma or mental illness, makes us less likely to dehumanize them and feel nothing towards their struggles. Of course, another factor which definitely adds to our empathy is simply the storytelling. It is easier to connect with the character when we get to know them through the story, when we see them sharing something with us and when we are drawn into their perspectives. We see them as persons with likeable qualities, such as intelligence, humor, appearance, and we intuitively focus on those positive traits. This tendency may lead to harmful justification or even glorification of crimes, as many authors pointed out, but it is not harmful in itself.

Ultimately, empathy arises naturally within us and cannot be easily dismissed. The recognition of our interconnectedness and the acknowledgement of the causes behind evil actions help bridge the gap between empathy and evil. By accepting and harnessing our capacity for empathy, we are not dismissing the evil acts, but are rather refusing to answer to dehumanization with dehumanization. When we display empathy towards perpetrator, we are refusing to turn the

perpetrator into an object and instead view them as humans, because that is who they are - no matter the circumstances.

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## 8. Empathy and Horror Genre Villains

The villains of the horror genre have always captivated the audience. Despite their actions the audience are often drawn to these villains, feeling compassion towards them. This paper aims to explore why.

While some authors believe the society can thrive only through empathy, others believe that empathy is the leading cause of inequality and rationalization of heinous acts. I would argue that empathy is inevitable and it is natural to empathize with bad people, especially those whose stories we hear or see in detail. The problem arises when we justify their behavior, but not when we feel compassion towards their struggles which led them to such behavior.

I am exploring the empathy towards the villains through four movies: Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), Jonathan Demme's *Silence of The Lambs* (1991) and M.Night Shyamalan's *Split* (2016). In an attempt to answer why we feel empathy towards these characters, I have concluded that we attach ourselves to their humanity the moment we recognize it and their inhumanity becomes secondary in the formation of our attitudes towards them.

**Key words:** villains, empathy, compassion, moral, concept of evil, mental illness, trauma

## 9. Empatija i zlikovci horor žanra

Negativci filmskog svijeta oduvijek fasciniraju gledatelje. Unatoč njihovim postupcima, negativci privlače gledatelje, koji prema njima često osjećaju sažaljenje. Ovim radom htjela sam istražiti zašto je to tako.

Dok neki autori vjeruju da društvo može napredovati samo kroz empatiju, drugi vjeruju da je empatija glavni uzrok nejednakosti i racionalizacije loših postupaka. Tvrdim da je empatija neizbježna i da je prirodno suosjećati s lošim ljudima, posebno s onima čije priče detaljno čujemo ili vidimo. Problem nastaje kada opravdavamo njihovo ponašanje, ali ne kada osjećamo empatiju zbog okolnosti koje su ih dovele do takvog ponašanja.

Istražujem empatiju prema negativcima kroz četiri filma: Alfred Hitchcock - *Psycho* (1960), Wes Craven - *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), Jonathan Demme - *Silence of The Lambs* (1991) i M. Night Shyamalan - *Split* (2016). U pokušaju da odgovorim na pitanje zašto osjećamo empatiju prema zlim likovima, zaključujem da se povezujemo s njihovom ljudskošću čim je prepoznamo, a njihova neljudskost tad postaje sekundarna u formiranju naših osjećaja prema njima.

**Ključne riječi:** negativni likovi, empatija, sažaljenje, moral, koncept zla, mentalna bolest, trauma