A Psychoanalytical Reading of Norman Bates in Robert Bloch’s Psycho

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to analyse the psychic/abnormal behaviour of one of the greatest villains of the serial killer genre – Norman Bates in American fiction writer Robert Bloch’s novel Psycho (1959) using Sigmund Freud’s and Jacques Lacan’s theory of psychoanalysis.

A serial killer is generally a mentally disturbed person who murders their victims (usually three or more) within a short span of one month with brief intervals in between. The motive behind the murder is sadism and psychological gratification. The victims usually have something in common, maybe in terms of their appearance, sex, a specific age group etc. The murder is perpetrated in a similar style, which may also involve sexual contact (known as necrophilia) with the victims. Serial killers also involve in fetishism and partialism.

According to Austrian neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud, an individual’s personality is mainly composed of three components namely the Id, which consists of the individual’s basic drives and instincts, the Ego - which helps in maintaining a balance and helps the individual in taking rational decisions and finally the Superego - which is the moral centre of an individual. A person’s consciousness is greatly determined by the unconsciousness experienced by that individual during their childhood. Freud theorised that a child’s psychosexual development consisted of five stages namely the oral stage, anal stage, phallic stage, latency stage and finally the genital stage. These stages play a crucial role in the overall healthy development of an individual’s personality. Any kind of distortion in this development during one’s childhood can produce psychopathic tendencies later in their adulthood. Unpleasant and traumatic experiences during childhood where one is severely abused verbally, physically (even sexually) influences the behaviour of such individuals. A child’s environment also plays a crucial role in contributing to its homicidal activity. They usually experience the loss of an important family member either by way of death or separation, with whom they were closely connected (mostly a parent). This makes them feel that their needs are neglected which in turn lowers their self-esteem. As a result, they alienate themselves from the society and their overly introverted personality directly contributes to their homicidal activity.

Right from an early age, such individuals are fascinated by cannibalism, voyeurism, pornography, sadomasochism and possibly even homosexuality. There are one kind of serial killers who believe that they are following the orders of a different persona (within themselves). They are called Visionary killers. The other kind are called Hedonistic killers, who simply derive pleasure from causing extreme physical pain to their victims.

Robert Bloch is one of America’s finest and renowned horror, suspense and science fiction writer and also a script writer best known for this most famous work Psycho. He was born in 1917 in Chicago in the United States. His interest in fiction writing was kindled by the works of H. P. Lovecraft, who mentored him during his early career. He started writing suspense and horror stories for magazines and published his first story in 1934. He has written more than 220 stories. In 1947, he published his first novel The Scarf and from then on became a famous writer of horror stories. He has received the Nebula award, two Hugo awards for outstanding achievement in science fiction, three World Fantasy awards and five Bram Stoker awards for his literary contributions. Some of his best novels include The Kidnapper, Night World, Strange Eons and The Star Stalker. Most of them were adapted into movies and television series.

Bloch’s Psycho, tells the story of Norman Bates, his strange relationship with his mother and the motel business they run in Fairvale, California. Norman is a middle aged bachelor, around forty years old dominated by his mother, a mean tempered and puritanical old woman who forbids him to have a life of his own. Thus, he never learns to socialize with the outside world. Mary Crane is one of the customers who visits the Bates Motel by chance after having impulsively stolen $40,000 from a client of a real estate company in order to pay off the debts of her lover, Sam Loomis. In the motel, Norman awkwardly asks her to join him for dinner. When he talks about his ‘sick mother’,
Mary suggests him the idea of admitting her in an institution but this outrages Norman. Soon after she returns to her room, Mary is brutally decapitated in the shower by a figure which looks like an old woman. Detective Arbogast, hired by Mary’s old boss, traces her to the Bates Motel in order to retrieve the money. But he too is murdered by this mysterious figure who slits his throat. After getting to know the information from the local Sheriff that Norman’s mother had been dead for the past twenty years, Sam and Mary’s sister Lila arrive at the motel. While exploring Norman’s house, Lila is shocked to find the corpse of Norman’s mother preserved all these years. She is suddenly attacked by Norman who is dressed in his mother’s clothes but manages to escape with the help of Sam. It is later revealed that Norman had murdered both his mother and her lover many years ago. To escape from the feelings of guilt of having murdered her, Norman develops a split personality in which his mother becomes his alternate self. It is only when he takes on the personality of his mother that he commits the murders. The obsession overpowers him so much that he is finally institutionalized for insanity.

The central character Norman Bates’ case of split personality can be grouped into three - the little boy dominated by his mother, Norma - the mother whom he does not allow to die and the adult ‘normal’ Norman who conceals the existence of the other two personalities in his day to day existence. Norman suffers from Dissociated Identity Disorder where both his personalities – Bates as himself and as his mother are very distinct from one another. Norman basically is a very caring and conscientious person and also an ‘obedient’ son. For instance, he is the reason why Mary eventually decides to return the money after she talks to him. However, the alternate personality, his deceased mother Mrs. Bates, is so dominating that it controls Norman’s actions throughout his life. Having been deserted by her husband in the past, Mrs. Bates develops a hatred towards men in general. This is one of the reasons for her to have an abusive relationship with her son. Being a victim of infidelity, she tries to protect Norman from sensual influences. She brings him up saying that excluding her, all other women are “bitches” [23]. Because of this, he is unable to have a proper relationship with any woman he desires and ends up murdering the women who attract him. When ‘possessed’ by his mother’s personality, he fulfills things which his mother would desire. He murders Mary, accusing her of being a provocative “bitch”, the way his mother had taught him. He puts the blame on the victim for provoking an attack. It is very disturbing to know that even long after his mother’s death Norman still applies the lessons he learnt from her in his life.

Norman Bates is not born a psycho but becomes one because of the environment he was exposed to as a child. His mother was all he had after his father deserted them. He is deeply affected when he learns that his mother, around whom his whole life was centred and whom he thought to be the only ‘moral’ woman he knew, has an extra marital affair with a man called Joe Cosidine. His first murder (of his mother and her lover) starts after he interrupts them in a ‘primal scene’. According to Freudian theory, this is the first time a child witnesses a sexual act between its parents and this may distort the psychosexual development of the child. Fearing that he will lose his mother’s love and affection and considering her relationship with her lover as a threat, he poisons them both to death with strychnine and watches them die. Norman forges a suicide note after the murder to make it seem as though his mother had intended to kill her partner and then herself as she had conceived. In order to relieve himself of the guilt, he internalises his mother’s personality as a way of repressing the memory of killing her. His intense love for his mother together combined with his guilt of killing her contributes to his Dissociated Identity Disorder. In the case of Bates, his superego or his moral centre operates the most. The more one listens to the superego, the more one feels guilty. And this guilt is what initiates Norman’s split personality.

An important thing to be noted is the absence of a father figure during Norman’s childhood. According to French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s mirror image theory, when a child is born into the world, it believes that it is in a state of oneness with the mother. This is known as the Imaginary order. Eventually as the child grows, it needs to successfully enter into the Symbolic order i.e., the outer world of linguistic communication and societal rules and conventions. It is the stage where the child recognises the ‘Name of the Father’ or in other words, the child learns to abide by the rules and dictates of the society which control one’s desires and rules of communication. While the Imaginary order represents the realm of the mother, the Symbolic order represents the realm of the father. Only through the recognition of the ‘Name of the Father’ can an individual make a successful entry into an outside community. In the case of Norman, he continues to live in the state of imaginary order even in his adulthood and fails to enter into the Symbolic order because of the absence of a father figure. Having left this Symbolic realm behind further contributes to his psychotic nature.
Norman punishes his mother for having a sex life outside marriage and then punishes himself for having punished her. But his self-inflicted punishment is more complex than the murder itself. He becomes the inhabitant of his mother, not as she was but as she is in the body and soul of his matricidal son, who saw in his mother not the woman who gave him life, but a woman who committed an act so unspeakable that she deserved to die. His obsession for her is so strong that he brings back her corpse from the cemetery and preserves it for years in the cellars using his knowledge of taxidermy. It is later revealed in the novel, that even before Joe Cosidine comes into his mother’s life, Norman had been a closet transvestite as a child (a person who likes to dress like the opposite sex). Norman never had the chance to shape his sexual identity since he had always been alienated from the outside world. This led to the confusion of his own sexual identity. This is the main reason why he appears to be very ‘feminine’ in behaviour, considering his traits of being soft spoken, calm and caring. He dresses like his mother and even begins to converse with himself by modulating his voice and shifting from one personality to the other. This not paid attention to, further develops into his adulthood. He mentally brings her back to life and addresses himself as ‘Norma’. Mrs Bates’ failure to observe the moral standards and the right upbringing of her child affects both her life and her son’s.

Like for most serial killers, it is evident that Norman’s childhood was a great influence on his growth as a man. Norman’s mother would constantly criticize and abuse him and make him feel guilty. His mother never having given the chance to socialise, often accused him for lacking “gumption”. “Never had the guumption to leave home. Never had the guumption to go out and get yourself a job, or join the army, or even find yourself a girl.” [14] As a result, being unable to give vent to his sexual desires, he turned towards his mother. His world consisted only of his mother which turned into an obsession. He could not stand sharing her with anybody. This incestuous relationship can be viewed as an Oedipus complex (the name originally derived from Sophocles’ tragedy Oedipus the King), a term developed by Freud which occurs during the phallic stage in a male child, wherein it unconsciously experiences a carnal desire for the parent of the opposite sex and wishes to eliminate the parent of the same sex from this relationship. This is the root of the conflict within Norman which never gets resolved. His mother says, “I’ll never forget that time you talked so dirty to me, never. To think that a son could come to his own mother and say such things!” [17]. He begins to think that his mother would be jealous of him if he found another woman attractive. On that account, whenever he is aroused by an attractive woman he takes on the personality of his mother and murders them. Thus, the many women who stay at the Bates motel and go missing in the novel, are actually murdered by Norman.

As far as Norman’s state is concerned, his mother can be seen as the cause since he suffered great emotional abuse at her hands. His split personality mainly develops after his brief hospitalisation after having poisoned his mother and her lover. After every murder that he commits impersonating his mother, he wishes to surrender to the police but is not able to, because he thinks his ‘mother will be taken away’ from him by them. He never wants to ‘lose’ her. He feels that they both need each other. Finally, when he is seized and hospitalised at the end of the novel, his mother’s persona takes over him completely. He shuns his own personality and ‘becomes’ his mother.

Though a threat to others, Norman is a tormented soul on the inside. He is tormented by the inability to act. For instance, when he is confronted by detective Arbogast at the motel for the first time and is suspected, he panics. He does the same when Sam and Lila arrive at the motel to find the truth about Mary.

In order to cope with his lack of courage, Norman retreats into books. Mrs Bates considers this interest as misanthropic, then as perverse: “I know the sort of thing you read. Trash! And worse than trash.” (16) She accuses him of reading for titillation and not education. She knows the “nasty bits” [5] he looks for. The novel shows how Norman is fantasised by books on theosophy, occultism, abnormal psychology, cannibalism and sadomasochism. He has a whole shelf of books devoted to pornography which gives us clues of his psychological state. For instance, in the beginning of the novel Norman is seen reading a book on the Incas tribe culture of skinning their victims and stretching their stomach to form a drum.

The most dangerous thing about Norman is that he appears very normal. Bloch is best known for his use of puns and very appropriately names this character Norman (which is only a letter away from the word ‘normal’). Even those who know him well ever since his mother’s death, like the local Sheriff of the town never suspect him. When Sam and Lila approach the Sheriff for help, he has no explanation because from his association with Norman he has always appeared to be a quiet and nice person.

The character of Norman Bates is loosely based on the real Wisconsin serial killer Ed Gein, who remained unsuspected and undetected for many
years. He was a middle aged farmer who suffered a traumatic childhood. His father was an alcoholic and his mother was a fanatical Lutheran who taught him that most women were prostitutes. As a child, Gein had been fascinated by stories of head hunters, pirates and Nazis. He butchered his victims, carved off their flesh and sewn suits of human skin. He is reported to have even exhumed the corpse of his mother.

It should however be noted that Norman is portrayed as one who feels a lot of shame and guilt. He is torn by compulsion and shame especially before the famous shower scene in the novel, where he secretly watches Mary undress in the bathroom through a hole. He feels ashamed of being aroused and the repression of his aroused feelings contribute to his psychological tension. Feelings of shame triggers in him his mother’s anger and the only way he can appease ‘the mother’ in him is by killing the object of desire (in this case, Mary). He thinks that if he destroys his object of desire, he will thereby kill the desire itself and the feeling of shame. And if he feels no shame then maybe his mother will cease to torment him. Norman understands that there is some truth in his mother’s verbal abuse. She blames him for his circumstances by telling “No boy, I don’t make you sick. You make yourself sick.” [14] Stephen King in his book *Danse Macabre* comments “Psycho is effective because he brings the Werewolf home. It is not outside evil, predestination: the fault lies not in our stars but in our selves. We know that Norman is only outwardly the Werewolf when he is wearing Mom’s duds and speaking in Mom’s voice; but we have the uneasy suspicion that inside he is Werewolf all the time.” [77]

*Psycho* was adapted into a movie in the year 1960 by Sir Alfred Hitchcock using the same title and starring Anthony Perkins in the lead role. It became such a phenomenal success that it was nominated for four Oscars. The story was also adapted into a psychological horror drama series titled *Bates Motel* in the year 2013. Interestingly, it traces the events in the lives of Norman Bates and his mother prior to the happenings in the original story and it still continues to be aired on television.

References