

Helter skelter book report

Literature



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The year was 1969, and in early August seven people were brutally murdered; words like “ Pig,” “ Healter Skelter” and “ Rise” were found printed in blood at the crime scenes. Eventually it is discovered that the perpetrators of these horrific crimes are cult members living on the outskirts of society, led by a man named Charles Manson. But who is Charles Manson? Charles Manson is a monster, certainly, but as a monster he offers us a unique look into the human mind. This semester we have learned about the many different types of people who may engage in individual forms of interpersonal violence.

Charles Manson however, provides us the case study of a man whose life revolved around interpersonal violence in all its manifestations. There was nothing this man wouldn't do to reach his goals- he would rape, murder, manipulate, and lie - all in the name of his personal ambitions. In Vincent Bugliosi's book, *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders*, the reader is provided a thorough explanation of how Manson developed his criminal lifestyle though the focus is on the famous murders he helped to commit as the leader of The Family and the process used to convict him.

After a brief comment about the book as a whole and its writing style and content, Manson's connections to the subject of interpersonal violence will be examined. These connections include the subjects of child neglect, rape, domestic violence, and spiritual abuse. This book offers a huge amount of detail regarding how the Manson Family murders were committed, how the investigation proceeded and how the trial against Manson was won.

To bring this history to life, Bugliosi organized his book into chapters ranging from one month to five month increments which serve to place the reader back in the summer of '69 right after the Tate murders were committed, and take him or her all the way to the conclusion of the trial and its aftermath. While this level of detail and careful organization is very good at informing the reader of the details of Manson's crimes and how he got convicted, I believe that most important is the analysis of Manson's life in regards to interpersonal violence.

Therefore, I will focus only on the summary of Manson's life provided in the book, as well as his methods for building and controlling his Family. Since this book was written by a lawyer (Mr. Bugliosi was the prosecuting attorney in the Manson case), one might think that Helter Skelter might be rather boring i. e. totally fact driven and concerned with the technical aspects of the Manson trial as Mr. Bugliosi experienced them. This book is certainly very concerned with the facts, and Bugliosi even provides the time that many events took place. The police investigation is especially explicit in this regard.

For example, “ about 1: 30 that afternoon Lieutenant Burdick interviewed a girl who had been booked under the name Leslie Sankston,” (p. 121). This aspect of the book can be hard to get through at times, as there is a large cast of characters including suspects, law enforcement officials, witnesses and other ancillary characters whose actions and influences on the case are laid out in careful detail. It can be difficult to keep track of who provided what evidence or which Manson family member was or wasn't involved in

the group's actions (to make matters worse many of the Family have multiple aliases and nicknames).

However, despite some factual overload, Bugliosi does add some comments which add flavor and help the reader to understand what the murders meant for people living around Los Angeles at the time. For example, Bugliosi talks quite about how the general public and the media react to the murders, including details such as, “ one Beverly Hills sporting goods store sold 200 firearms; prior to the murders, they averaged three or four a day,” (p. 73).

This color commentary lifts the reader's head out of the world of the murder investigation to remind them that outside of all this tragedy people were living their ordinary lives, and were obviously scared and nervous about the violence they saw happening in their city. Another interesting aspect of the story is the fact that while this book is in a way a history book looking at the past, Bugliosi actually experienced this history and provides his own emotional reactions to what happened.

For example, when Bugliosi read Manson's file to understand who he was about to prosecute he commented, “ I was surprised, in studying Manson's record, to find no sustained history of violence,” (p. 203). While the reader might disagree with Bugliosi (it seems that instances of armed robbery, homosexual rape and wife beating could be considered a “ sustained history”), these personal reactions to what is going on show the reader that Bugliosi is not merely an author or a historian, but a character in this story who experienced all the madness revolving around Charles Manson first hand.

Therefore, while Helter Skelter might be considered very fact-driven it certainly has a heart, and Mr. Bugliosi does an excellent job describing not only exactly how the investigation went, but also how it felt for some of the people involved. Anyone interested in interpersonal violence, the 60s or Charles Manson will certainly have learnt a great deal after finishing this book. As I've said previously, the life of Charles Manson revolved around interpersonal violence. From an early age Manson was the victim of child neglect – his mother (Kathleen Maddox) would leave him with neighbors, “for an hour, then disappear for days or weeks,” (p. 91).

While there is no evidence provided that Manson was actually abused during these days away from his mother, the lack of any strong parental figures to care for him must have been traumatizing for Manson. Kathleen was sixteen when Charles was born, and was known to drink and party, often bringing home men with the same proclivities. She was also a very poor model for her son when it came to following the law. Along with her brother Luther, Kathleen was sentenced to five years in prison for armed robbery when Charles was between four and five years old.

Manson never met his father who is said to have died in 1954. Considering his upbringing, it is not surprising that the boy had trouble adjusting properly, and that his struggle to be noticed and gain attention would be at the core of his being. When Manson was twelve his mother sent him away to the Gibault School for Boys, described as a “ caretaking institution,” (p. 191) because she could no longer to care for him. From this point on Charles Manson would be in and out of institutions (including prison).

When the investigations for the Tate-LaBianca murders were taking place Manson was thirty-two years old and had spent over seventeen of those years in some form of institution. During the time Manson was incarcerated personality examinations were conducted and various descriptions warn of the possibility of violence. Manson was described as being, “ aggressively antisocial,” (p. 193) having, “ a tendency toward moodiness,” (p. 192) and as, “ hiding his loneliness, resentment, and hostility behind a facade of superficial ingratiation,” (p. 00).

These examinations and their conclusions will be very important when considering what could have been done to stop Manson and what we as a society can do to ensure no one like him is ever allowed to terrorize others again. The acts of interpersonal violence Manson committed during his time in and out of institutions are numerous. When Manson was seventeen he attended Natural Bridge Camp and a month before his release hearing he, “ took a razor blade and held it against another boy’s throat while he sodomized him,” (p. 194).

However, this did not stop Manson from being released and he promptly married a waitress and got her pregnant (he was 19). A year later however, he was in trouble with the law for stealing cars (and driving them across state lines – a federal offense) and admitted to the judge-requested psychiatrist that he beat his wife, “ at times,” (p. 196). After three years in jail, Manson was released with five years parole (the year was 1958). In 1959, Manson’s parole officer was informed by a parent that Manson had conned his daughter (Jo Anne) and one of her friends (Beth), telling them he was in the night club, radio and television business.

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Manson convinced Jo Anne to invest her savings in his bogus company, got her pregnant (there was no mention if the sex was consensual), and drugged and raped Beth as well (p. 199). For violating his probation as well as these new sexual crimes he was accused of committing Manson was sentenced to 10 years in prison (although he was paroled on March 21, 1967). It was after this stint in prison that Manson began to bring his “Family” together and it was with them that he truly began to explore his appetite for violence through the use of spiritual abuse.

The Manson Family at first glance may not seem different from many of the communes that had come together in the 60s, representing a desire for sexual liberation and a more natural way of living. However, the Family was not simply a commune, but a cult whose idea of a more natural way of life included violence, submission and eventually control over the world as the, “pure, white master race,” (p. 330). To members of the family Charles Manson was Jesus Christ or God, and these were the aliases that Charlie Manson provided the police when he was charged for the car theft ring (p. 80).

Manson always had a desire for attention and to feel noticed and important, and it was through his creation of his own religion that he could finally get what he always wanted. Unfortunately for his acolytes, Manson’s appetite for violence and abuse only escalated once he had a multitude of willing victims under his control. It may seem odd that people would want to join such an abusive group, but Manson had various means to attract people to his Family. To convince men to join him Manson would use the sexual favors of the girls already under his control.

For example, when trying to attract a biker from the Straight Satans gang to join him, Manson is quoted as saying, “ Move up here, you can have all the girls you want, all the girls,” (p. 131). To get girls to join Manson would ask for the help of some of the more attractive men in the Family to, “ go down to the Sunset Strip, where the teenyboppers hung out,” or “ drive the highways watching for girls who were hitchhiking,” (p. 317) in the hope that they would be able to lure some of the girls back to the ranch the Family was living on.

Once these new recruits were introduced to the Family, Manson had a variety of techniques he would use to control them. Manson was said to have possessed an ability to capitalize on, “ a person’s hang-ups and/or desires,” (p. 316). He told plain girls they were beautiful, told girls with daddy issues to imagine that he was their father, and girls looking for a leader that he was Jesus Christ. To ensure that the girls were completely submissive Manson would convince them that, “ women are only as good as their men,” and that they were “ a reflection of their men,” (p. 02).

This is obviously ideal for a cult leader because Manson portrayed himself as the father of the Family and their savior. Since “ their man” was so good, these girls felt that they were good, and that Manson would lead them to salvation and love. This mixture of brainwashing and domination produced in the girls, “ a little girl quality” as if they had been, “ retarded at a certain stage in their childhood,” (p. 184-185). Even when considering murder and death the girls would maintain a positive, contented mood, as if nothing could faze them.

Manson did not just use words to bring about total obedience however. One thirteen-year-old girl was not considered “submissive enough” for Manson so he, “punched her in the mouth; kicked her across a room; hit her over the head with a chair leg,” (p. 277). This was not entirely typical of Manson though as his favorite weapons of control consisted of using or withholding sex (especially with the male Family members), as well as drug-aided manipulation. LSD is a hallucinogenic drug which can make the one taking it more susceptible to outside influence.

Manson used this property to, “instill his philosophies, exploit weaknesses and fears, and extract promises and agreements from his followers,” (p. 318) while they were “tripping” on LSD (which he provided of course). Manson’s “religion” that he would convince his followers into believing was based on a mixture of Scientology, passages from the Bible, Buddhism and records by the Beatles. While it is difficult to decipher exactly how this philosophy all fit together, one important element that aided in the control of the Family was fear.

According to Manson, “fear was the same thing as awareness,” (p. 319) and the goal (as in many religions or philosophies) is to gain more awareness, or to come into the “Now,” which is a term taken from Scientologists and basically means to truly live “in the moment.” Manson told Family members that they should always be afraid, and he would search out his followers’ greatest fears so that he could use these fears, “like a magic button...he could push at will to control that person,” (p. 319).

This aspect of the Manson cult is so important to understand because it explains why Manson had such a strong following. Even though many of his Family members were afraid of him, Manson told them that they wanted to be afraid so they took it as a good thing. Another important aspect of Manson's beliefs that is very important for understanding the murders he would later commit was his interpretation of a chapter in the Bible from Revelations. Revelations tells of the four horsemen of the apocalypse who were foretold to arrive on earth to bring about a war where a third of mankind would perish.

Manson believed that these four horsemen were the Beatles rock group, and therefore the apocalypse was happening soon if not immediately. Manson believed there was going to be a race war (blacks vs. whites) in which the whites would be wiped out (the third of mankind that will perish) and the only way to escape it was to hide out in the desert where he could later return with his Family where they would rule over the remaining blacks as the master race. The murders that Manson and his followers committed were meant to spark this race war, and move Manson's plan into action.

Although this sounds quite unbelievable, the combination of LCD, naivete (some of the Family members were fed these theories since they were thirteen), and the time period allowed Manson to assemble quite a sizable group. While it is estimated that there may have been over a hundred Family members at various times, the inner circle remained at around 20-30 people (p. 186). The Family was Manson's "greatest" creation. While previously Manson could only abuse one or two people at a time, he found a way to

simultaneously abuse dozens of people - all without the knowledge of society as a whole.

A lot of research has been done in the field of interpersonal violence since the time of the Manson murders. There are more accepted theories explaining why people commit acts of interpersonal violence and there are more tested methods of how to recognize people or situations that may become abusive. It is clear just how far things have progressed when the ease of which Charles Manson is labeled as the monster he is and the multiple warning signs that appear when looking at his life and personality.

Many of Manson's personality traits match with those suggested by Rosenbaum, Pagelow and/or Anderson, including " violence in family of origin," (although there is no explicit information about physical abuse, Manson was neglected and rejected by his mother) " low self esteem," (Manson had a drive to be recognized by others) " traditionalist, authoritarian personalities, need for power or control" (the way Manson ran his Family is clear evidence of this) as well as " moody," (mentioned in institutional personality checks of Manson) and " psychopathology," (Wallace, Roberson, p. 22 Table 9. 1).

Although there is no single accepted checklist for traits of an abuser, Manson would be identified as an abuser using three different (though overlapping) scales. If these types of measurements had been available in Manson's early years, he may have been discovered and possibly could have been treated when he was 19 (when he abused his first wife) instead of being released

from prison after a few short years with no rehabilitation and allowed to continue his patterns of abuse.

The tactics Manson used to control the Family are also very well documented in today's research of intimate partner abuse. For example, three main elements in any abuse situation are fear, isolation and lack of resources (Wallace, Roberson, p. 225). Manson's " religion" was based on making his followers as afraid as possible, and having an intimate knowledge of each member's fears so that they could be used against them when needed.

While many of the Family members appeared to radiate inner contentment, there were several former members of the Family that testified in the Manson case that would talk about how afraid they were of what Manson would do to them if they disobeyed his commands. Isolation was obviously an important part of Manson's philosophy as he was very against the " establishment" and saw the apocalypse fast approaching therefore he took his family to the desert and for most of the time the Family was together they lived on Spahn's ranch, which was an old western movie set that had fallen into disrepair.

Once in this isolated location Manson had free reign to manipulate and abuse his followers with no one to stop him. Lack of resources could be said to apply to all the members of the Family as they were living the hippie lifestyle with no real employment prospects. However, this is important when considering that very few of the Family members left Manson, especially his " inner circle. " Although Manson might have been abusive and demanding

in many ways, he appeared to have a plan and an answer for life's tough questions.

With no better prospects and no real way to successfully fend for themselves, it is no surprise that many of the women especially did not leave (they were taught they were only good as their man after all – what would they do with no man?). With more knowledge about what can cause abusive situations as well as increased awareness among the general population I am hopeful that a situation like the one that developed in the California desert will not happen again, and if it does hopefully it will be quickly identified and shut down.

Sexual assault is a common factor in many of the different topics in interpersonal violence including rape, intimate partner abuse and child abuse. There is evidence that Manson participated in all of these facets of sexual assault. Although I've already mentioned how he has raped (Beth in 1959) and used sex as a means of control (with the female Family members), he also engaged in child sexual abuse.

One thirteen year old girl was sodomized by Manson as other Family members looked on as part of her initiation (p. 18). Manson's motives for sexual assault are easy to match up with the category of " power rape" given in Wallace and Roberson's text book on family violence. Power rapes (specifically power-assertive rapists) consider rape as, " an expression of his virility, mastery and dominance," (p. 342). Clearly Manson desired attention, obedience and wanted control over his victims, that being the same way he

ran his Family. By controlling what others did sexually Manson was able to feel in control of them.

Clearly Manson was not interested in his followers as people, but merely puppets from which he could get what he wanted. When considering the scope of the spiritual abuse that Manson perpetrated on his followers, it is important to consider his authoritarian personality and his need for attention and control. Manson's philosophy was all there was for the Family – there was no adding elements to it or putting a personal spin on the information. As one Family member put it, “ everything was done at Charlie's direction,” (p. 317).

Therefore, when examining some of the questions Wallace and Roberson's book offer as means of determining if a religious group is abusive, the answers to them are uniformly “ no. ” For example, “ Does the group allow for development in theological beliefs? ” “ Does the group foster relationships and connections with the larger society that are more than self-serving? or the question most indicative of the abusive situation happening at Spahn ranch, “ Does the group encourage independent thinking and the development of discernment skills? (Wallace and Roberson, p. 327).

While Manson did not demand any of his followers kill themselves as is the pattern in many cults, his motives were just as sinister. Manson's goal was to survive the apocalypse to be the leader of the master white race. With the help of his Family Manson wanted to go from the leader of 30-40 hippies to the leader of the whole world. Luckily his means of obtaining this goal were

not as grand as the goal itself and eventually landed him in jail, far away from impressionable minds to warp and twist.

Charles Manson is an interesting man in that he offers us the opportunity to see how a human being can transform himself into an animalistic monster if society turns a blind eye. Even though Manson proved from an early age that he was violent and had no respect for authority or law, he was repeatedly let out to wreak havoc on society. Charles Manson's masterpiece was a sadistic, brainwashing cult which twisted the minds of dozens of young people, made them experience the horror of abuse, physical, emotional and sexual, and finally ended in the deaths of at least nine people.

What Manson really gives us is a reason to continue the fight against interpersonal violence. As a society we must never again allow such a person to freely exist among us. People with these types of violent tendencies must be identified, understood and if at all possible, rehabilitated. If rehabilitation is not possible then the proper steps must be taken to ensure that such an abusive person is never allowed access to another victim.

While people often think that interpersonal violence isn't their problem because they haven't personally experienced it, Charles Manson shows just how ignorant this opinion is. While Manson may have been "someone else's problem" before he started the family, it was still one man that shocked and frightened an entire state, and made the entire country take notice. With our increased understanding we now have the ability to fight to insure that nothing like the Manson Family will be allowed to exist unchecked again.