

# The case of susan smith



## The Case of Susan Smith

It made the headlines for weeks and riveted an entire nation as the drama of a mother who killed her two sons unfold before our very eyes. It was a tragedy made all the more tragic by the media that magnified every single detail of the death of two children, practically babies, at the hands of their very own mother.

On July 22, 1995, Susan Smith, then 24 years old, was found guilty of the murder of her two children, and was sentenced to life imprisonment, with no possibility of parole until after serving thirty years of incarceration. She was convicted of killing three-year old Michael Daniel and 14-month old Alexander Tyler Smith. Susan Smith drowned her babies by letting her car roll into the waters of John D. Long Lake in Union, South Carolina, while her two babies are inside the vehicle. So compelling are the evidences and Susan's confession that the jury only took two hours to deliberate their decision to convict.

What made the case even more bizarre was that it was Susan who initially made contact with the authorities. Susan Smith went to the police to on October 25, 1994, imploring their help. She reported that she had been carjacked and that her babies had been taken away by the alleged perpetrator. The case caught the attention of the media, and Susan Smith was seen on television left and right, making pleas for people to help her and for the suspect to return her babies unharmed. There was a nationwide manhunt and investigation, which the entire country watched.

Finally, after nine days of non-stop search, Susan Smith suddenly confessed to killing her own children. Needless to say, the entire country was stunned.

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The outpouring of grief and support changed into righteous, indignant anger. The entire American public felt betrayed and called for justice for the two innocent, helpless babies who never stood a chance.

As if the case were not strange enough, it also took on racial issues because initially, Susan was pointing to an unknown black man as the one responsible for stealing her car and taking her babies. So for nine days, the police were on the manhunt for an African-American man, not knowing that they were in for a wild goose chase. Turns out, not only did the black man did not exist, but it was the woman filing the complaint who was the real criminal.

After the confession of Susan Smith, many black people were complaining about Smith's fictional black criminal. The question is why did Smith particularly put the blame on an African-American man? Was Susan unconsciously acting because of role stereotypes of criminals? (Pollock, 2004, 273) It is a valid question that deserves to be raised and looked at. Why do people automatically assume that black men have more criminal tendencies? Indeed, the stereotyping exists, and can be grounds for problems later on.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the issues of race, the main crime of Susan Smith is the murder of her own babies. And it is a horrible crime all by itself. As Sally Simpson once wrote, " In a fit of depression over a recent break-up with a boyfriend, Smith placed her boys in the backseat of her car, released the emergency break, and watched the car plunge into the lake." (2000, 53)

Clearly, Susan Smith is exhibiting signs of deviant or abnormal behavior. No mother can ever think of harming her children, much them kill them with their own hands. It goes against the very nature of motherhood. And for <https://assignbuster.com/the-case-of-susan-smith/>

Susan to have killed her babies and even watched while they slowly drowned is a testament to her damaged psyche. No mother in her right mind would ever kill her own child. While Smith may not have been insane, she is for all intents and purposes, a broken soul.

Some people believe that Susan should have gotten the death penalty for what she has done. She showed no remorse for what she did. What was even more shocking is Smith's own justification for the killing. She said that she killed her sons because they stood in the way of her having a relationship with a wealthy local man. Her lover did not want her "excess baggage", and thus, she disposed of them.

However, in spite of her own confessions, Smith plead not guilty for the murder. As the case progressed, Smith's tragic life came to fore, and thus became grounds for the lowering of the sentence from the expected death penalty to life imprisonment. Apparently, Smith has been molested for many years by her step-father, after her mother married him when Susan's biological father committed suicide.

The defense team was bent on showing Smith as a victim. According to Smith's mother, who wrote a book about Susan, that she was never a violent person, she was always kind and gentle to her babies, and she showed no signs that she was capable of the crime that she did. (2000, 7)

Most people believe that the turning point of the Susan Smith case was the presentation of the defense team of Rev. Thomas Currie, the pastor of Union's First Presbyterian Church, with whom Susan once went to for counseling about her experiences as a molested child. His testimony was the single biggest factor that helped the defense avoid the death sentence for <https://assignbuster.com/the-case-of-susan-smith/>

Smith. Currie said that at seventeen, Susan's life was careening out of control. Reverend Currie also mentioned that what was chilling about Susan was her detachment about her sexual abuse. He said that Smith recounted her experiences without any emotion, as if she were talking about another person's tragedy. Currie made a statement that executing Smith would only cause Union more pain. He added that life sentence would satisfy our need for justice and that the death penalty was more for vengeance, which is not ours to give. (McDonough, 1995)

Beverly Russell, the man accused of molesting Susan also testified in her behalf. Russell admitted abusing Susan when she was only fifteen years old, and their sexual relations went on until she was twenty-three years old, just shortly before Smith killed her babies. His testimony also contributed to the commutation of Susan's sentence, from death to life. The jury also took two hours to decide on Smith's life sentence, the same length of time it took to decide whether Smith was guilty or not.

In all of these events, what seems to stand out from Smith's life story is the recurring disappointment of the men in her life. Her father, the one man who was supposed to protect and take care of her, killed himself. He did not have the courage to live for himself, much less for his own daughter. The man who she thought might take the place of her father ended up raping her. And the man who fathered her two boys left her as well. She wanted some father-figure in her life, an authority figure who would tell her what to do, but she did not get it. This is the root of Smith's abnormal behavior. Her life was a constant search for that person who would give her a sense of direction that she could not find for herself.

There is no denying that Susan had a turbulent life. She never found peace after the suicide of her biological father and the sexual abuse of her stepfather. From then on, it was a life going nowhere fast: alcoholism, substance abuse, and depression. Clearly, all of these abnormal behaviors were a sign Susan needed help, but she did not know where to find it. As Huysman once said, " Smith herself had a preoccupation with suicidal feelings from the time she was 13. As a young girl, she had attempted suicide twice - once at age 13 and again, at 18." (2003, 131)

In her fragile mental and emotional state, she could not carry the responsibilities of motherhood alone. But because she and the father of her children separated ways, Smith was left to take care of the children, when she was barely capable of taking care of herself.

Because Smith's act was so terrible, it goes against human logic. And society needs to justify the horror by assuming Smith was insane or under some form of chemical abuse to have done what she did. Even more horrifying was her actions during and after her confession; she was so calm and collected. And while Susan plead not guilty, she did not use insanity as excuse. She was sane enough to know that she was not insane when she drowned her babies.

In all cases of infanticide or mothers killing her babies, it is always an issue of " mad" or " bad". You have to be either very evil or badly insane to commit such a crime. According to Meyer, there are two types of mother killing their children. One is the accidental killer through neglect, and the other one is purposeful murder. (21, 2001) Smith's crime was purposeful, and she strapped her children to the car with full intent to kill them.

Whatever led her to do that, she was clearly lucid had knowledge of her actions. Susan was tested for competency as was found mentally sound to stand trial.

As Mayer said, there are three possible personality disorders that afflict mother who kill their children. And those three are dependent, antisocial, and borderline personality disorder. (72, 2001) In Smith's case, it might have been the borderline personality disorder, which is defined by a pattern of instability in relationships and concept of self-worth. There is also marked impulsivity and unpredictable behavior. As proof of her borderline mental state, Susan, in one statement that she made, said that she would rather kill her children than have someone hurting them. Her logic was so twisted, but she was convinced by it just the same.

Indeed, Smith has a mental illness, and that was a mitigating factor in Smith's favor. Her traumatic experiences damaged her psyche to such an extent that she was very unstable and suicidal. However, as a sexually abused child, Smith swung the pendulum and quickly shifted from victim to seductress. (Saleci, 2004, 161) In fact, there have been instances where she sought the approval of men through sexual favors. She used her sexuality to find the authority figure that she longed for, but she failed in her quest. In fact, on the first years of Smith's jail time, she had sexual relations with two of the prison guards assigned to her jail location.

Perhaps the greater tragedy of Susan Smith was that she did not realize that the love she was looking for was something she could have found in her two beautiful babies. She was looking everywhere for someone who would stand by her side and never leave her, never knowing that she had them all along.

Indeed, the tragedy of Susan is our collective tragedy. It is incumbent upon us to never let this avoidable tragedy happen again. And so I end with these words from Jensen,

... There are more people involved in this crime than Susan, her two beautiful sons, and her boyfriend. We're involved. And how do our psyches survive the trauma if we make no attempt to at understanding another human being in deep serious trouble with herself... If we think that punishing Susan is all that needs to be done, what kind of people are we. (2004, 101)

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