

What can  
representations of  
criminal women tell  
us about our  
anxieties regarding ...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The representations of women in crime have long been known to be different to those of men. Women who commit murder or adultery, are presented as more evil or guilty than their male counterparts. Through the media and films such as, bad girls, monster, etc, we see how the public's view on female criminals is "manipulated". Our anxieties regarding the "other" here are shown not just through the judgements put upon these criminal women, but in how they are portrayed in the popular media and films.

Case Study One: Myra Hindley. This is possibly the most famous British murder case in Britain. The infamous mug shot was taken when she was arrested and still haunts the public today. Myra Hindley in her mug shot is emotionless and stern looking; evoking hate and anger from the public after the media published the picture. This power has still not been lost over time; in fact it has become iconic in its ability to represent cold hearted evil and the likeness to "Medusa". "The Moors Murders, and the contest over Hindley's status as a criminal and a woman, took place in a blaze of publicity.

" (3. Page 42) The media response to this case was frenzied and the public response to this was angry. Myra was portrayed as pure evil and her guilt in the eyes of the public seemed to surpass that of her husband's obvious actions. This is an odd scenario, his name is rarely recognised, even though he was clearly the murderer. However Myra was seen to not just be a murderer but more than that, her brother even said: "He maybe a demon, but he is sleeping with the devil." Why have her actions been recognised more by the media and public than most other serial killers? It is because of

our anxieties around the female behaviour and our compelling nature to want to control its boundaries (4).

If one woman is seen to move outside of these boundaries she is seen as a deviant or worse. " Drunkenness and promiscuity is classified as deviant when found in women. " (2. Page 47) In Myra Hindley's book; *The Mind of a Murderess* (1988), Jean Ritchie (writer) stated how cool, emotionless, and unfeminine Myra was. She remarked at how showing a shred of emotion and feminine weakness might have served her case well.

This hardness and lack of femininity was plain to see in her mug shot. " The case of the moors murders became a kind of gothic soap opera. " 3. Page 33 Our anxiety becomes even more obvious in the case of a woman killing a child. Not only is this a murder, but a complete contradiction of nature itself. Myra Hindley found herself in a barrage of hate as she was implicated in assisting the murders of the moors children.

The public's thirst for retribution was completely insatiable because of their own discourses about the behaviour of a domestic woman and a loving wife. " Murder by a woman was so unthinkable in the patriarchal ideology of Victorian England that it had to be explained away as the action of a whore, witch, monster, or madwoman. (4. Page 230) Though the justice system believes itself as egalitarian, when the media becomes entwined with the public view it pressurises the system. This pressure from the media and anxiety inside oneself about the female deviant creates an Androcentric view. This view belays rational scientific truth, were there is no class or privileged group (egalitarian).

This signifies the discourse of woman's morale decay but it also subverts the course of justice which in itself is the morale decay of the justice system.

Simply put, the criminal justice system now seems more willing to incarcerate women. (1. Page 145) Case study Two: Rosemary West.

West's case becomes quite interesting when compared to Myra Hindley's case. The media took a completely different view on West as a figure of evil and hate. Her face is rarely shown and recognised even less. On top of this, her conviction was more controversial and therefore less guilt and hate was put upon Rosemary through the media and public. " Despite her crimes, the popular media does not use this face to personify feminine evil or deviance in the public imagination.

The media's response to this case was much more about the acts than the individual. This could also be due to the fact that Rosemary was not initially meant to be convicted by the police. Unfortunately her husband, who had been convicted, committed suicide in his cell, this put the justice system under pressure from the media and public. The thirst for retribution, pushed the court into tying circumstantial evidence from the murders to West, incriminating her in front of a jury feeling pressured to find justice.

The media also character analysed West, showing her deficiencies as a mother and a domestic wife which damaged her case and her respectability in the eyes of the jury. " The ideologies around motherhood, domesticity, respectability and conduct discussed above in relation to all women, play a powerful role in the way criminal women are treated. " (2. Page 51) We know that when a woman breaks the common discourse of female behaviour, it is

met with disgust and hostility. However we see a very interesting and diverse reaction to the way woman criminals are represented in films and TV. There was very little shown about Rosemary West, however the serial killer Aileen Wuornos had a lot of media attention.

Nick Broomfield brought out his second documentary on Aileen Wuornos “The Life and Death of a Serial Killer” in November 2003. Just before this, Patty Jenkins released in April 2003 “Monster”; a film based on the true life events and tragedies of Aileen Wuornos. A brilliant casting and performance from Charlize Theron, brought together Patty Jenkins’s powerful writing. This challenged the pre-conceived discourses about female behaviour and how the public reacts to crimes by women that would normally breed hate and anxiety. “Monster” did not try and make Aileen Wuornos normal or someone the audience could instantly love.

However, it showed a confused woman that could not fit into the social brackets and discourses laid out for a woman’s behaviour. We sympathize and relate to her problems through her eyes, creating a view for the public which allows for a more intelligent response for Dovey’s argument. Above left: Aileen Wuornos taken before her execution in 2002. Above right: Charlize Theron playing as Aileen Wuornos in “Monster”.

Jon Dovey looks at “confession” (5) and uses Foucault’s theories to argue our fascination with the deviant confessor. What has made Nick Broomfield’s documentary so popular is that the sets of discourses and set of “social norms” (5) of which we can measure deviance against is challenged. This not only disturbs the audience’s views upon their own discourses, but it intrigues

<https://assignbuster.com/what-can-representations-of-criminal-women-tell-us-about-our-anxieties-regarding-the-other-essay/>

them in how a woman who committed such atrocities is confessing to them personally. Throughout both Nick Broomfield's documentaries it is completely obvious that she is insane, but our association with her becomes very personal because she pours herself out to the camera. We get a sense of power from this as it makes us feel as though she is just confessing to us, even though we know many others will see this (5).

Nick Broomfield's "The Life and Death of a Serial Killer" (2003) was a very moving documentary and again like "Monster" humanises the character of Aileen Wuornos. Though both productions lean towards Aileen Wuornos being innocent, they don't portray her as normal or that she didn't kill the men. Both productions suggest she may have been temporarily insane or even completely insane. This is an important aspect and the one defence she had for the murders. The viewer also can start to question over who is right or wrong. At the end of the Documentary "The Life and Death of a Serial Killer" Nick Broomfield shows Aileen completely confessing to us, that she had premeditated all of the murders.

Nick Broomfield then tells her the camera is off and asks her one last question. Nick Broomfield "Was it really premeditated?" Aileen Wuornos "No" For many this doesn't absolve Aileen of what she did, however it does change their perspective of her and raises questions about the judicial process and their competence under media pressure. The media through Aileen's case was frenzied and portrayed her much like the cases I have spoken about previously. Aileen's image to the public was that of an evil woman who killed 7 men and buried them in the forest behind the road she grew up in. This was made out to be premeditated and that there was little

<https://assignbuster.com/what-can-representations-of-criminal-women-tell-us-about-our-anxieties-regarding-the-other-essay/>

or no reason for her behaviour. This made Aileen in the eyes of the public a deviant and broke their discourses about female behavior.

However what has made this case worse for Aileen is that she killed men (2). Although this is not viewed as heinous as killing children; due to her chosen work and previous history she was socially lower than a man in the eyes of the public (androcentric view). So killing someone above oneself socially was viewed as not only tragic but worse than just murder (3). The popular TV series "Bad Girls" (Maureen Chadwick 1999-2006) depicts criminal women inside the penal system in Britain. This present day drama creates a whole new set of discourses for deviant women.

This series also shows a development in the public's acceptance and equality of women who commit crime. However there are still characters in the show that are hated and others that we associate with. This is more to do with the fundamental rules of writing and creating tension amongst the storyline than creating an equal and unbiased depiction of criminal women. Our anxieties about criminal women have changed, but the media still resorts to sensationalism which evokes irrational prejudice. We should however look at bad girls as Jon Dovey's theories (5) come to light again in the self realization/confession of the women about their crimes and the internal torment and grief this causes.

This challenges the discourses we have about women and humanizes the characters enough for us to find ourselves associating with the women. This TV series does well what people should have already understood, that women deviant or not are human and should be treated equally to men.

Conclusion Our anxieties have made a vast impression upon the justice system, and have also resulted in the horrific treatment of accused female murderers. In the case of Aileen Wuornos, her treatment over her entire life by her own family and friends prevented her from learning and accepting the behavioral discourses that we accept.

Criminal women tell us a lot about our anxieties about the other, theorists and the media pick up upon these discourses and anxieties. The media use our anxieties of the deviant to sell papers but as we have seen. this has adverse effects on an impartial justice system. Overall I believe that women are treated extremely different to men when convicted of crimes. If a man commits murder it is less frowned upon than a woman committing murder.

This is because of many reasons I have discussed but the fact remains because of our inability to treat men and women equally, they will always have disproportionate punishments to each other. Recent popular media and films like the ones discussed above have marked a positive change in equality between men and woman when going through the justice system. As the rights of women become more and more equal so will hopefully the discourses on their behaviour.