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The Serial killer, Policing and Medical Discourses in Jim Thompson's Crime Fiction

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Anstract:

This paper aims to examine the psychological profile of the serial killer in Jim Thompson's crime fiction in relation to policing and criminological approaches to crime in Cold War America, on the one hand, and the medical discourses on serial murder, on the other. By examining the representation of the serial killer in Thompson's 1964 novel, *Pop. 1280,* this paper explores the interplay between the sociocultural critique of criminality and policing that Thompson's crime narrative delivers and the portrayal of the pathology of the serial killer. It is argued here that Thompson's novel, via the dramatization of a small-town policeman serial killer, showcases the shift in criminological discourses on crime and serial murder and the sociocultural anxieties during the Cold war in America, and at the same time subverts and challenges the genre conventions, hence carving a new lane for the serial killer narrative in the crime fiction genre. This paper will thus highlight how Thompson presents a case study of serial murder as a new subgenre of hardboiled crime fiction, and how the multilayered and complicated discourses on crime and policing in American culture at that time are connected to the serial killer narrative and the pathology of the criminal as key ingredients of American crime fiction of the Cold War era.

Keywords: Jim Thompson, the serial killer, hardboiled crime fiction, policing, the Cold War

1. Introduction

Jim Thompson portrays darker and grittier hardboiled narratives than those of his predecessors such as Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. His fiction announces a new era of hardboiled writing characterized by extremes, unreliable narration and the introduction of the serial killer. Thompson destabilizes and indeed reinvents the hardboiled genre perhaps more than any crime writer of that time. By breaking the unity and totality of the crime narrative and presenting texts that constantly challenge the status quo and explore the pathology of criminals and its correlation to law enforcement and policing, Thompson's work subverts the traditional understanding of crime fiction. Thompson develops the serial killer subgenre by shifting focus from the detective to the criminal, from the investigation to the pathology of the criminal. Thompson's work, which can be regarded "as social criticism, as sinister postmodern documentary" (Lee, 2003, 44), also succeeds in capturing a compelling parallelism between legal, medical and literary discourses in America. Shedding light on the criminals' mental state and their narrative voice, Thompson brings to the forefront the complexities and intricacies of the anxieties and unease of Cold War America.

Thompson, who created "first-person narrators, baleful descendants of the hardboiled

Heroes" shifted the "autonomous status and maverick ethics of the principal character into a source of pure menace" (Lee, 2003, 43). His fiction exemplifies the hardboiled world depicted in the genre but in an extreme form. Thompson excels in portraying the corruption, violence and paranoia that characterize the postwar American milieu. He creates flawed heroes— violent criminals who at the same time serve as small-town policemen, hence muddying the lines between law enforcement and crime. By so doing, Thompson's fiction establishes a link between "masculine heroism and the criminal underworld" (Malin, 2010, p.376)— his fictional world is so violent and chaotic that it challenges the boundaries of the genre and its main tenants of control and containment. Thompson demystifies the very premise on which detective fiction relies, namely, the resolution of crime by writing stories that do not provide a sense of contentment or relief for his readers, nor do these stories offer any closure. Instead, Thompson's fiction destabilizes any sense of containment and instead provokes anxieties. By creating villains, especially ruthless serial murderers, Thompson outlines alternative powerful crime stories, ones that disregard detection and make room for the psychology of crime and policing, stipulating more questions than answers.

Thompson is one of the most well-known crime writers in mid-twentieth century whose works left a mark on the genre as a whole. Thompson started as a proletarian writer and turned to crime fiction towards the end of the 1940s. His first novel, *Nothing More than Murder* came out in 1949, while the period from 1952 to 1954 was a time of intense writing that produced eleven crime novels. He wrote

mostly paperback originals with Lion Books (Cassuto 2009, p.126). However, Thompson's career saw fluctuations that probably reflect the shifts in the social milieu especially around the publishing industry. Thompson was not well-accredited during his life, yet his crime stories crystallize the transformations in crime narratives in the postwar period. His novels, *The Killer Inside Me* (1952), *Savage Night* (1953), *A Hell of a Woman* (1954) *and Pop. 1280* (1964), establish a dystopian worldview that renders a sense of hopelessness. It is also a world governed by power relations where characters struggle with impulses and desires and often transgress legal, social, and moral boundaries.

Thompson's crime fiction is full of contradictions and opposites. It presents blurry lines between sanity and madness, good and evil, justice and injustice, innocence and guilt. In one novel after another, he presents the puzzle and challenge of dualism; how one concept or idea stands against another. Thompson's work often shows tantalizing relations between opposite forces on the two ends of a continuum, and it also displays dualities within (*inside*) his characters**.** There is a moral ambiguity in how his characters navigate these dualisms. In the words of Michael McCauley, "rich and poor, appearance and reality, right and wrong, good and evil seemed to Thompson not so much polar opposites as a matter of power and perspective, on both a societal and a personal scale" (1991, p. 31).

The conflict between good and evil is front and center in Thompson's work especially in his serial killer novels. His work begs questions about human nature, crime and what constitutes evil, but it is not a simple case of categorizing and labelling criminals. As Dorothy Clark explains, Thompson in *The Killer Inside Me,* which presents his first serial killer policeman, reveals a "powerful early postmodern representation of evil – one that reflects the moral catastrophe of WWII and is proleptic of current philosophical discussions" (2005, p. 17). Similarly, in *Pop128*0, the tension between reality and appearance is a key concern in a story told by a serial killer protagonist. This showcases a "a world morally devastated" – one that masks corruption, and renders Thompson's narratives as proposing and at the same time ironically rejecting all "Grand Narratives about evil in the human character" (Clark, 2005, p.18). Thompson uses 'evil' characters against the postwar culture to expose how "woefully coherent, and uninformative, our modern narratives about evil really are" (Clark, 2005, p. 27).

Focusing on the discourses on crime, evil and insanity, this paper investigates the correlation between the representations of the serial killer and policing as a dominant force that manifests itself in various avenues narratively and technically in Thompson's work. This paper argues that Thompson's crime fiction destabilizes the correlation between the serial killer, law enforcement and policing, on the one hand, and the medical discourses on insanity and serial murder, on the other. By creating the persona of a serial killer policeman in small-town America, Thompson exposes the sociocultural anxieties and at the same time subverts the law and order and policing discourses of postwar America.

His fiction does not reinforce the binaries in a way that conforms to a patriarchal hegemonic society; rather it leaves more room to question and shake the fixity of any perceived realities and forces in play in his fictional world. Examining the serial killer *in Pop1280*, this paper explores how Thompson presents a case study of serial murder, policing, and the pathology of the criminal, and how these complex (and contradictory) connections dictate serial murder and the pathology of the serial killer as key elements of crime fiction of that period more generally. Through the disturbing presence of the serial killer, Thompson depicts the horrors of living in small towns, hence problematizing the ordinariness of everyday reality. It is also argued here that through his unique treatment of dualism both within the boundaries of the fictional narratives and extending to the sociocultural and political contexts, Thompson's work subverts and reimagines the conventions of the crime narrative in how it launches a new trend in crime fiction that is "filled with monsters, real and imaginary" (Haut 1995, p.46). This culture of monstrosity (which is associated with the Cold War period) comprises complex layers of paradoxes and contradictions shown in the way Thompson's work addresses the discourses on legality, policing and justice, as well as how it presents the convoluted psychology of the characters, especially that of the serial killer.

2. Thompson's Cold War fictional world and the question of evil

Described as a "dimestore Dostoevsky" (O'Brien, 1997, p.150), Thompson delves into the human psyche and the conflict both within the self and with others. His work offers a vision that exposes "the big lie of capitalism as manifested in its most deadly form—the split souls of psychotic, doomed pursuers of the American Dream" (McCauley 1991: 31). Thompson explores the American postwar context addressing and indeed deconstructing the pieces that constituted a multilayered reality of the 1950s and 1960s America. What Dorthy Clark describes as "postmodern uncertainty" of evil was brought about by the calamities of the post-World War reality. Thompson "captures this condition and unveils a world in which making meaning becomes both imperative and impossible" (Clark 2005, p.17). The crime fiction formula also facilitates the paradoxes that dictate the way Thompson's narratives represent "both the desire and impossibility of making sense" (Clark, 2005, p.18). Additionally, Thompson's use of the subgenre of the serial killer allows for an investigation into the questions of what constitutes evil and the pathology of the murderer against a multitude of psychological, sociocultural and legal factors.

This paper will thus engage Phillip Cole's *The Myth of Evil* (2006) which addresses the paradox of evil and the question of "whether there can be a secular conception of evil, whether that idea can tell us anything about the human condition" (2006, p. 1). Cole argues that monsters do not exist in reality, only in fiction. To Cole, there is no purely evil person— only a "fictional villain" is depicted as evil,

and the "more deeply the fictional villain is explored, in genuinely revealing and moving works of literature, the less easy it becomes to regard them as agents of pure evil – they become, like Faust himself, ambivalent, impure figures" (Cole, 2006, p.55). However, Cole acknowledges that evil is a human capacity proposing that people are able to inflict pain and suffering on others, and adds that the

> fundamental question is one of explanation, and whether the concept of evil can play any constructive or useful role in explaining human action. Is 'because she was evil' ever an explanation, even a partial one? (Cole 2006, 18).

Cole's theorization about the possibilities of evil is interesting, especially his dualistic position on evil, which this paper suggests is personified in the figure of serial killer. The play between the "fictional villain" and the real one is also of interest to this paper as it proposes that the serial killer navigates these connections and tensions, hence the positioning of the serial killer becomes essential to read reality in America at the time. It is also noteworthy to mention the traditional approach to studying evil entails that evil is a force that generates monstrous acts, while the "enlightened" approach dismisses evil to some people with mental illness and other factors that diminishes agency. Dismissing both traditional and the so-called enlightened approach to evil, Cole proposes that evil is a "myth"—a construction that people created and asserts that evil is "something to be feared, and historically […] it is the enemy within who has been seen as representing the most intense evil of all – the enemy who looks just like us, talks like us, and is just like us" (2006, p.2). This paper interrogates some of the key notions that Cole addresses such as the "enemy within" which is crucial to examine the serial killer and the culture of monstrosity that Thompson establishes in his work. The argument that evil introduces a moral dualism, a binary opposition, which represents the divide between good and evil, is also relevant to the examination of crime and policing during the turbulent sociocultural and political context of the Cold War. This context of McCarthyism, paranoia along with draconian policing is the background against which Thompson's text can be read, as the next section will illustrate.

3. McCarthyism, policing and the serial killer narrative

The Cold War, which began in the aftermath of the Second World War, changed the fabric of American society. The tension between capitalism and communism fostered a cultural, social and political divide that tore through America at the time. Fear, suspicion and paranoia dominated people's lives with a growing security challenge and a concern for subversion. The rhetoric of the "Red Scare" dictated an updated, if not draconian criminal justice system and policing that ruled American cities with an iron fist. The fear of communism launched what is known as the "McCarthy era" which brought about a number of sociocultural and political anxieties and was characterized by an unsubstantiated suspicion of disloyalty and a constant suppression of freedoms and rights with a

growing counter movement that called for subversion. The "conflicts and quarrels of that era" produced "profoundly new, and often unsettling, perspectives and values that shaped the content and tone of public discourse" (Latzer, 2016, p.103). This entailed a pursuit of perceived threats, which was often followed by incarcerations and arrests. Additionally, rates of crime increased, especially in urban areas and with new policing strategies, there were drastic changes to policing and criminal justice agencies. As Barry Latzer questions:

> Did Americans suffer through the most protracted and disturbing violent crime rise in over 100 years because they had become embittered and hostile toward one another, had their faith in authority figures shattered, or had lost all "hope of winning respect by legitimate means"? (Latzer, 2016, pp.103-4).

The strive for safety and the elimination of threats imposed a pressure to rethink the concept of policing, hence changes impacted police departments and the legal system more widely. For example, Harlan Haun and Judson Jeffries (2003) draw attention to the tension between the police and the public, which police reform in the postwar period ignored. William Westley also points to the violence committed at the hands of police officers which was more prevalent in the postwar period, stressing the normalization of a culture of police violence. He argues that "the depoliticization of the police, represented in professionalization and in civil service, may not be the panacea it is often thought to be" (1970, pp. xiii).

While Cold War era is associated with an economic growth and prosperity, it also came with a rise in organized crime rates and mafia violence. Big cities in America witnessed gang activities and a rise of drug, blackmail and racketeering. The expansion of mafia and organized crime impacted policing at the time in a way that it intensified the iron fist rule with which the police controlled urban areas, and at the same time reinforced the role of government agencies. As such, the power of the FBI and its role in law enforcement and combating crime also expanded (See Archbold 2012). With crime perceived through the lens of threats to national security, policing became more extensive and centralized.

This expanded power that the police and the FBI exercised in American towns allowed for surveillance to become a tool for control and anyone who was deemed subversive was targeted. Thomas Heise points out that hardboiled crime fiction was born amid a "profound shift in the study and prosecution of urban crime" (2005, p. 487). The "unprecedented federal and state intervention into the roots of criminality" which began in the 1920s and 1930s in the US, was also associated by the trend of the "scientific examination" of crime, which in turn "brought the spatiality and sociality of working-class life in the city under intensive scrutiny" (Heise 2005, p. 487).

This became even more pronounced in the postwar period with concerns of increasing state intervention and austere policing which further intensified the air of paranoia associated with the McCarthy era.

Mirroring these ideological and sociopolitical anxieties, Thompson's fiction vividly depicted the violence that ravished American towns along with the urge to challenge and subvert the legal and social dominant structures. Thompson's work included themes of surveillance and control, and the concerns for security and the expanded role of the police are also part and parcel of his stories. With all this playing out, the fascination with the serial killer has grown and this figure became a staple in postwar American crime fiction, particularly in Thompson's writing. In this regard, Fredrick Whiting argues that in postwar crime fiction, with the rise in sex crimes and the popularity of psychoanalysis, "a new species of monster, the sexual psychopath" emerges in the scene (2005, pp.156-7). By examining Spillane and Thompson's texts, Whiting outlines what he calls the "new monster" and suggests that writers like Thompson and Spillane show "the internal contradictions of the popular psychoanalytic reformulation of human boundaries in U.S. detective fiction during this period" and behind the interest in male pathology lies an anxiety over female sexuality (2005, p.151). In Thompson's fiction, the "new monster" is represented by "the twisted intelligence of the psychotic killer or the coldblooded amorality of the professional gunman" – the serial killer (Payne, 1996, p.68).

The serial killer is a fascinating figure that gained the attention of writers and filmmakers as well as the police, psychologists and scholars in a variety of disciplines. The serial killer narrative sets itself apart from other crime or mystery narratives. By portraying a "social landscape of pervasive and endemic crime, violence and evil in a postmodern context of apathy, indifference and institutional incompetence", the serial killer subgenre relies on a formula that centers on investigating a series of murders committed by the serial killer wherein the detective relies on evidence and clues to read the crime scene and the victims to reveal the identity of the killer (Santaulària, 2007, p.56). The serial killer narrative evokes horror and intrigue as it demonstrates the dark and brutal side of criminal behavior. It is worthy to mention that the term "serial killer" is relatively new as it has been in use since the 1960s; it refers to "unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offender(s), in separate events," (Bentham, 2016, p. 204). Gaining popularity in the 1980s, the serial killer epitomizes the American fascination with violence, and the presence of this figure became "potent and ubiquitous" (Bentham, 2016, p. 203). Bentham suggests that the case and/or narrative of the serial killer:

> lays bare the interplay between fact and fiction, myth-making and media, which secures the legacies of celebrated criminals and feeds the public appetite for thrilling stories of transgression (2016, p.205)

The allure of and fascination with the serial killer considering all the devastation and carnage associated with serial murder is thus part of a cultural project of violence. Criminals such as Ted Bundy, Jeffery Dahmer, Ed Gein, to name only a few are figures who shaped a public image of the serial killer with notoriety— "murder by numbers (as serial murder has been called) is the form of violence proper to statistical persons" (Seltzer, 1995, p.124). Indeed, there is a mythology that surrounds the serial killer, a mystique built on an expression of brutality and violence so extreme that it leaves an impact on society and collective consciousness. In the same vein, Mark Selzer in *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture,* analyzes the public facination with serial killers in what he calls "wound culture." According to Selzer, this fascination with trauma, vioelnce and crime is rooted in the divide and the breakdown between the private and the public in a culture where individuals are "torn" (1998, p. 1).

The study of the serial killer is an investigation of the dynamics of violence, but it also brings other elements into play, for example detection, the psychology and sociology of crime, gender, race and other factors that are often explored in serial killer narratives. The question of whether real serial killers are similar to/different from fictional ones is also an interesting one. It interrogates the issue of representation and the contestation of the serial killer as a construction and the ramifications of using this discursive classification in literary, legal and medical discourses. The discourses that attempt to explain the serial killer – the compulsion to repeat murder and the motives and desires that stand behind it – offer an intricate net of frameworks that assign meaning to a narrative that is otherwise hard to explain. As Simpson argues, the serial killer "achieves legendary status, largely through clever textual strategies that relocate the monstrous face behind the human one" (2000, p.3). There is a precariousness to the cultural positioning of the serial killer as he often "occupies the position of the Other within the structural opposition that generates the fantastic" (Hantke, 1998, p.181). This emphasis on 'otherness' has been the subject of many investigations into the serial killer (for example, Jenkins 1994; Picart and Greek 2003). The mythological, even fantastical element that surrounds the image of the serial killer allows him to occupy "the spaces outside the limiting frame of the 'human' and 'real,' outside the control of the 'word' and the 'look'" (Hantke, 1998, p.179). By so doing, the serial killer becomes an embodiment of subversion and transgression.

Repetition is also essential to the understanding of the serial killer. As the name itself suggests, seriality by definition relies on multiplicity and repetition of the criminal action. Therefore, chronology (time) is the link that connects the action and determines the identity of the criminal. In other words, the actions of the serial killer belong to the past, the present as well as the future (Hantke, 1998, p.179). There is a determinism that surrounds the serial killer; the serial killer committed crime in the past, but

it is expected that he will commit more crimes in the future. This adds to the stress on serial murder as a cultural project that impacts society on many levels. As Steven Egger argues:

> The United States has long made legends out of outlaws. American history is full of the folklore of killers, many of the so-called heroes of yesteryear, including the lawmen and gunslingers of the old West, would fit the modern definition of serial killer […] One of the key elements of the personality of the serial killer appears to be that he kills for an intrinsic motive, simply, he enjoys killing [...] All forms of the media have contributed to this portrayal of serial killers as clever, daring, sexy, and elusive (Egger, 2002, p.103)

The serial killer is capable of demonstrating extreme levels and demonstrations of violence, but he also relies on "banal and self-effacing profile." This violence is the result of "both visceral and at times intellectual – drive to kill, an uncontrollable pleasure that like any uncontrollable pleasure, thrives on repetition" (Conrath 1994, pp.144-5). Serial killers "do not look like killers, nor does their appearance reflect an ultimate evil. Unfortunately, serial killers do not stand out […] as anything other than the average person" (Egger, 2002, p. 47*).* The invisibility of the serial killer is part of the criminal persona and the mask that hides his identity. The serial killer can hide among us, which invokes more terror and adds to the mythology that surrounds him.

This masking behind an ordinary persona is especially evident in Thompson's crime narratives as the serial killer, who not only ironically represents the law but also enjoys breaking legal, social and cultural limits and boundaries of society. Thompson's serial killer does not fit the stereotypical image of the evil monster; Corey is a man in a small town who has an active role in the community, but behind this mask he is a ruthless murderer. *Pop. 1280* embodies many features of the serial killer narrative and makes the case for the connections between policing, medical discourses and the turbulent sociocultural anxieties of the Cold War as the next section will explain.

4. The policeman serial killer in *Pop. 1280*

Pop. 1280 is a prime example of Thompson's depiction of the interplay between violence, policing and insanity in a small town in the 1960s. The book features Nick Corey, an unassuming sheriff in a town called Pottsville that has only 1280 inhabitants, and who turns out to be a ruthless serial killer. Corey uses the persona of a harmless and slow-witted policeman but masks behind it a dangerous and violent killer. Thompson's creation of Corey introduces the subgenre of the serial killer. Indeed, the book is a masterpiece by Thompson, which reveals his dark vision and investigates the question of evil by using sarcasm, irony and the unique persona of Corey to showcase the malaise and corruption of the Cold War in small-town America.

The novel, at first glance, appears to be as another crime fiction book exploring a mystery, a story of crime and detection. However, with a close reading of the novel, it is evident that Thompson both transcends and transgresses the crime conventions of the hardboiled genre. In a story that is full of violence and murder, Thompson twists the formula of a detective solving a mystery by featuring a policeman who himself is the aggressor. Moreover, Thompson displays the meaninglessness of violence and the ease with which Corey is willing to commit crimes. The narrative encapsulates the author's ability to achieve an unflinching portrayal of a serial killer, and presents a moral dilemma that might force the reader to face an uncomfortable reality about human nature, justice, crime, evil and morality. Through taut prose and the deliberate use of dry comedy and sarcasm, Thompson creates a text that is both challenging and intriguing.

Pottsville, a fictional town in the South is a microcosm of America in the 1960s. It serves as an example of the "emptiness" and decay of the milieu at that time. Nick describes this emptiness as the "absence of things" (1990, p. 197) – it is both a physical and spiritual emptiness that best describes the town: "Not homes, not places for people to live in, not nothin'. Just pine-board walls locking in the emptiness. No pictures, no books—nothing to look at or think about. Just the emptiness that was soakin' in on me here" (1990, p.197). Through exposing hypocrisy and corruption in the town with a failing system and crooked people, Thompson outlines the perverse moral and social parameters of life under McCarthyism. As a political book more than Thompson's other works, *Pop.1280* offers a critique of power dynamics in relation to violence and the law. The novel navigates the complex links between morality, crime, evil and insanity in a narrative that invites questions and provokes reactions. Corey is a representation of the paradoxes that define life in Pottsville. Describing the world of Thompson and his characters, Payne opines "Heredity and social circumstances usually play a large role, but the more insightful of these characters […] find ways to vent their disgust with what they see as the hypocrisy and the cynicism that infect the American world around them and in which they find themselves trapped" (1994, p.51).

Thompson's novel, therefore, depicts the state of malaise of life as reflected in the inaction of his protagonist sheriff. Corey boasts about his passive role as a policeman for he "didn't arrest no one unless I just couldn't get out of it and they didn't amount to nothin" (1990, p. 3). This feigned laziness is his way to use the criminal justice system to his advatange exploiting his positon and power to comit crimes while facing no consquences. This passivity and inaction stand in contarst to his position as a serial killer who is revealed to plan and commit crimes repeatedly. Not only is Cory deliberately cynical about policing but he himself breaks the law and does not hesitate to revert to vioelnce.

Throughout the novel, Thompson showcases the failure of the criminal justice system and law enforcement. Both this novel and *The Killer Inside Me* are a critique of policing in Cold War America. Via Pottsville and the dynamics presented between Corey and the townsfolks, the novel exposes the legal and social structures that allow harm to occur to innocent people and for the guilty to walk away. By criticizing the institutions that are supposed to uphold justice and implement a fair system, Thompson points to the grim reality of the 1960s; corruption, immorality and fear are the key elements that defined the McCarthy era. As Woody Haut argues, Thompson outlines a world where anything is possible and where "sanity and insanity, right and wrong, good and evil, are indistinguishable; where external manifestations are used to explain the horrors of life ordinarily thought to be internal to those manifestations" (1995, p. 47). Thompson's book, however, can be read to provide a deeper and broader perspective on human behavior and crime. So, although *Pop. 1280* can be contextualized in the Cold War America providing a lens to examine the anxieties of that time, it can also be considered within a more universal farmwork in how it investigates the human condition, particularly criminal behavior in relation to evil, justice and insanity. In other words, the novel can be regarded as a case study of crime and criminal behavior especially that of the serial killer. In scene after scene, Thompson paints horrifying images of a policeman who is not only violent but one who has no conscience.

Through Nick Corey's characterization, the book dissects the psyche of the serial killer, how he acts and kills, and by so doing the narrative presents a chilling case study of the pathology of serial murder. For example, at the beginning of the novel when Corey talks with Lane Lacey, a sheriff of a county nearby, he complains about two pimps who constantly insult him. Lacey in turns mocks Corey emphasizing that if anyone dared to mock him, he would shoot them. Then Corey, who has been taking bribes from the pimps, shoots those men in cold blood and later implicates Lacey in the murders. Although his actions on the surface seem to be passive and unassuming, Corey is manipulative, cunning and eventually he is able to fulfil his hidden agenda. Nevertheless, there is an air of desperation that surrounds him in the way he processes and interacts with his environment. Corey appears trapped and plagued by a sense of impotence and a mundane reality of the town he lives in and polices. More significantly, his motives for the crimes he commits are not clearly stated. He seems motivated by a hunger for power while being mocked by those around him. His reaction to the townspeople mocking him is delayed and so violent that it can be read as a desperate attempt on Corey's part to reclaim control through murdering those who belittled him. For example, Corey devises a plan to get rid of his wife, Myra, her brother, Lannie, and Rosie, a woman he has an affair with. With an elaborate web of betrayal and manipulations, Corey succeeds to get Rose to kill both Myra and

Lannie. He reveals a cold brutality when he laughs at Rose's horror when she realizes that not only did Corey manipulate her into committing murder but he can find pleasure in her suffering. He taunts her asking: "What kind of a believable explanation are you going to put together for them two dead bodies you got in your house and the blood all over the floor", and when she asks him to help her and "cover this up some way" he refuses and states, "After all, you're guilty of murder an' fornicatin' and hypocrisy, an'-" (1990, p. 205)

Corey, however, is not a typical criminal, a gangster or mobster. There is a complexity that surrounds him as he navigates his role as a policeman and a serial killer. The psychological profile that Thompson paints of the serial killer in this novel is one of duality and ambiguity. Corey justifies his crimes as acts of survival and his veneer as a charming sheriff hides a dangerous man who shows no guilt or remorse. Towards the end of the book, Corey starts to exhibit a detachment from reality that manifests itself in delusions. In his inner monologue, Corey believes that he is an agent who is carrying out divine justice in Pottsville. He seems to be less in touch with reality as he believes that he is Jesus Christ sent to save people, "I'm the savior himself, Christ on the Cross come right here to Potts County, because God knows I was needed here, an' I'm goin' around doing kindly deeds-so that people will know they got nothing to fear and if they're worried about hell they don't have to dig for it" (1990, p.179). This shift in his mental state at the end of the book is telling of a breakdown in his mental faculties, which provides Corey with a twisted rationale to justify his crimes as he believed that he was ridding the town of those he considered sinners.

Thompson uses insanity as a tool for the depiction of malaise and melancholy of Pottsville. There is a sense of nihilism that is evident in the way Corey carries himself and the way he interacts with the townsfolks. Corey tries to "play Jesus Christ and to exact social retribution are futile gestures in the face of his overriding sense of the vacuum at the center of things" (Payne, 1994, p. 56). Insanity is also used narratively as a critique to criminological discourses during the Cold War, which emphasized control and suppression of freedoms. Serial murder in particular is linked to a variety of psychological, social and criminal influences; Thompson portrays his protagonist, Corey to have a pathology that makes him one of the most chilling protagonists in crime fiction. It is also noteworthy to mention that Thompson's text plays on the distinction between sanity and insanity. At the start of the novel Corey is intelligent and aware of his environment with an ability to manipulate others. But then he deteriorates into a state where he seems to lose insight and suffers from delusions and a dissociation from reality. To achieve this image of his protagonist serial killer, Thompson uses moral ambiguity and dualisms to demonstrate the complexity of criminal behavior. *Pop.1280* subverts the traditional portrayal of insanity as a condition that renders a person completely irrational, incoherent and cognitively impaired.

Instead, the "alienated protagonists" in Thompson's fiction, "exhibit varying degrees of insight into the complex causes of their psychosis and the extent to which it may be an expression of a deeper cultural neurosis" (Payne 1994, p.51).

As the narrator of his own story, we get a glimpse into Corey's mind and see the different facets of his behavior. The paradox of his character does not simply lie in having two contrasting sides, but it is how he uses one persona to mask another and carefully switches from one to the other to gain impunity. The novel starts with setting the persona of a "worried" sheriff but at the same time establishes a grotesque sense of irony:

> Well, sir, I should have been sitting pretty, just about as pretty as a man could sit. Here I was, the high sheriff of Potts County […] I had it made […] And yet I was worried. I had so many troubles that I was worried plumb sick. (1990, p. 3)

The beginning of the book is comic as Corey lists his anxieties about eating pork chops and sleeping eight hours at night: "I'd start worrying about those problems of mine, and the next thing you knew I was getting up from the table with food still left on my plate" (1990, p.3). There is a sense of detachment and disassociation that are later validated with the shift in his mantal state. Corey plays with words using language as a weapon to carry out his manipulations. Part of his disguise is the language he employs to project the persona of a simple-minded man. Corey's sarcasm and the dark comedy surrounding him create a framework that defines the violence in his story not just in relation to the murders he commits, but also as symptoms of the dysfunction and the "emptiness" that characterized life in Cold War America. Moreover, the novel brings forth the conflict between the public and the private. As a law enforcement officer, Corey's role is public service. Yet his criminal behavior is played out in a small domestic sphere and his own wife falls victim to his violence. The book extends an invitation to explore the family dynamics (for example, Cory with Myra and Rose), but there are broader legal, medical and sociopolitical contexts that delve into the domain of criminal behavior, morality and evil.

Unpacking and explaining "evil" is part of a bigger project that investigates the motives and actions of the serail killer. Dorthey Clark's analysis, which examines *The Killer Inside Me* but can be easily applied to *Pop. 1280*, focuses on how Thompson's serial killer narrative "holds up an evil person as a mirror to the culture, and reflects back on us how woefully coherent, and uninformative, our modern narratives about evil really are" (2005, p.27) At the essence of this narrative of evil is the "profound cultural project – the colonization and conquest of those darker regions of the human soul in which evil dwells" (Clark, 2005, p.27). The presentation of Corey as a serial killer is thus attached to a psychological pathology, but it is also corelated to a set of sociocultural issues at stake in society. The

outlook of the medical discourses in this novel is thus inseparable from the violence that defines the text, hence provoking questions about evil and crime. Corey's murderous actions are presented through a clinical lens showcasing mental illness at the heart of the discourse on the serial killer; however, it simultaneously challenges the standards of what society deems "evil.

The novel also presents the lines between truth and lies, between what society deems acceptable and what is considered taboo as thin and blurred. Thompson depicts "clichés as both a key feature of commodified social existence and emblematic of the way late capitalist society presents itself as stagnant, timeless, and beyond challenge" (Anshen, 2007, p.402). *Pop. 1280* establishes a complacency by the townspeople to the crimes and evil they witness and there is indifference, perhaps even apathy in the small town. When Corey orchestrates his elaborate murder plans, not only does he involve others (for example, Rose), but he also exposes the ease with which people in Pottsville accept the violence. Thompson's book can be seen as a scathing criticism to the social and moral norms in a society that does not fight back and allows for evil to keep happening. The moral ambiguity that Thompson's text paints is key to read his characters especially the serial killer. The text evokes the uncomfortable question of how those who seem ordinary and active members of a community, let alone a policeman can be the face of evil in that context.

Thompson's *Pop.1280*, therefore, invites difficult questions and goes into murky waters particularly in the treatment of moral justice, evil, law and policing. In his characterization of Nick Corey, Thompson creates a dilemma for his readers. We see Nick ridiculed, mocked and belittled, which produces an image contrary to the one of a calculating serial killer. Empathy is not easily available to Corey who seeks self-preservation in an apathetic community. However, the violence and ruthlessness of Corey as a serial killer are set against his role as a sheriff in a corrupt system that does not respect the law and the police force. Eventually Thompson succeeds in creating a complex serial killer narrative that alternates between comedy, cynicism and horror and creates a challenge to be read not only against the sociocultural and political milieu of Cold War America, but also against the legal discourse on crime, justice and policing.

5. Conclusion

What Kenneth Payne describes as the "American emptiness," in Thompson's fiction is the key to read *Pop. 1280* narratively and technically (1994, p. 51). Thompson presents a protagonist with a pathology that is emblematic of the American serial killer narrative. At the heart of this narrative is the conflict between the bucolic life in Pottsville and the violence and cruelty that it masks. The novel provides a scathing critique of Cold War America and extends an invitation to examine the criminological and medical discourses that address crime, justice and morality.

The novel also offers a commentary on the nature of evil and the sociocultural critique of the Cold War milieu. The violence that the book relates is not only brutal and extreme, but the way it is masked behind law enforcement and the criminal justice system points to a failing system at every juncture. The conflation between policing, violence, serial killing and mental illness is illustrated through nuanced and layered connections in Thompson's story in a manner that dissects the criminological and medical treatment of crime at the time. Thus, Thompson's fiction subverts the contemporary discourses on crime that focused on draconian policing associated with McCarthyism in America in the 1950s and 1960s. By portraying a precarious society ridden with crime where the police and law enforcement are corrupt and criminal, Thompson brings to the forefront the anxieties that ravished America at the time.

As such, subversion becomes the key to read Thompson's fiction. His narratives push the boundaries of the genre of hardboiled fiction redefining the generic conventions that rely on closure, containment and the fulfilment of a version of a hardboiled justice that exists in the stories of the founders of the genre such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. By creating his own parameters in a narrative that exists in "the moral no-man's land of society" (Payne 1996, p. 67), Thompson challenges the representations of the hardboiled hero and creates a recipe that shows the hardboiled formula in its extreme form. His world is defined by the violent tendencies of his protagonists and the interconnection between policing, insanity and crime. Not only does Thompson present the serial killer as the hardboiled protagonist, but he also reshapes this role by conflating policing with medical discourses. Destabilizing the conventions of a genre that relies on crime and detection, Thompson's serial killer is not the antagonist whom the police and the detective hunt and capture at the end of the story. Ultimately Thompson's leaves us with a feeling of going nowhere, a vicious cycle that cannot be escaped. Thompson presents this cycle narratively through a compelling story where violence is set against everyday life and where characters lead double lives. *Pop.1280* stresses the hardboiled formula of a "character poisoned or compromised by his surroundings" – the "the sense of the sinister world, or an inescapably problematic atmosphere" (Lee, 2003, p.44).

Conversly, medical discourses play a role in understanding the individual and societal strctures associated with the prevellance of vioelnce and serial murder in Thmposn's fictional world. As Robert Polito suggests, Thompson's *Pop. 1280* "wriggles past private madness, or American rot, to universal horror'' (1995, p.456).Via the complex profile of the serial killer, Thompson narrates a story in *Pop 1280* that uses intermingled criminal and medical discourses and permits a closer look into the intricacies and connections between them. But it is Corey who is the "author and producer of that horror" constructing "a particularly sinister

postmodern resonance" (Lee, 2003, p. 44). Thomposn's novel, thus, remains a profound commentary on crime, evil and the hidden and dark side of human nature.

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