SERIAL KILLERS AS HEROES IN THE MEDIA'S STORYBOOK OF MURDER:

A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF *THE NEW YORK TIMES* COVERAGE OF THE "SON OF SAM," THE "BOSTON STRANGLER," AND THE "NIGHT STALKER"

by

JULIE B. WIEST

(Under the Direction of Maria Carolina Acosta-Alzuru)

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines *The New York Times* coverage of three infamous serial killers and how the newspaper constructed the stories about them to create meaning and a storybook of murder. Using textual analysis, it examines 190 articles to uncover the ways in which the newspaper constructs meanings about society and provides ways for people to understand their world by using myths that have always been present in news. Findings reveal much about society and the ways in which news is constructed using myth. This study was limited to analyzing coverage of just three serial killers in only one newspaper. Future research could be conducted that would analyze the coverage of other serial killers in *The New York Times* and in other publications.

INDEX WORDS: Myth in News Stories, Jack Lule, Textual Analysis, The New York Times

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The University of Georgia
August 2003

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all the victims of crime, especially those who are victims of murder and serial murder. There are no reliable data to determine the exact number of serial murder victims, but even one is too many. This thesis is especially dedicated to the victims of the three serial killers studied here, whose names are listed below.

Murder Victims of Albert DeSalvo:

Anna Slesers
Nina Nichols
Helen Blake
Ida Irga
Modeste Freeman
Sophie Clark
Patricia Bissette
Beverly Samans
Evelyn Corbin
Joann Graff
Mary Sullivan

Murder Victims of David Berkowitz:

Donna Lauria
Christine Freund
Virginia Voskerichian
Valentina Suriani
Alexander Esau
Stacy Moskowitz

Victims of Richard Ramirez:

Patty Higgins
Mary Louise Cannon
Diedre Palmer
Joyce Lucille Nelson
Linda Fortuna
Maxson Kneiding
Lela Kneiding
Chitat Assawahem
Sakima Assawahem
Christopher Petersen
Virginia Petersen
Ahmed Zia
Suu Kya Zia

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Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Tom and Barb, my brother, Dan, and my long-time friends, especially Krista, Susan and Dave, who put up with my complaining and rambling about this thesis and never doubted for a second that I would make it through graduate school successfully. And thanks to my friends who I met in Athens that made my time here more fun than I could have ever expected, especially Eunice and Katie.

PROLOGUE

It is important for any researcher to understand and divulge the subjectivities that are present before and during the research process and analysis. The idea for this topic sprung from my love of reading true crime books. I have a predilection for nonfiction reading, and the true crime genre has long been my favorite. After reading several of these kinds of books, I found the need for this study. I knew that the genre was a popular one among avid readers, but I did not know why I liked it so much. When I discussed the books I read with my friends, they seemed just as interested and excited as I was. But why?

Stories of serial killers seem to be the most fascinating of all, and after doing some research, I found that not only are these killers known, but they seem to be some kind of celebrities. I was surprised to learn that there are action figures and trading cards of serial killers, which are collectables I most commonly associate with other celebrities, like athletes and superheroes. I began this study with the notion that these killers somehow had achieved celebrity status, but I was then looking for the "why" and "how." Since I know the vast power and influence of the media, I thought it best to look at them first to see if they contribute to the glamorization of serial killers that helps make them famous.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"To reveal his secret will bring him fame,
But burden his family with unwanted shame."

Excerpted from a poem by Albert DeSalvo, allegedly "The Boston Strangler"[1]

Fame. Whether a killer seeks it or not, he or she surely receives it after committing serial murder, especially now that single murder is becoming so commonplace in our society. Most single murders do not even warrant news coverage, unless there is something unique about the murder, the murderer or the victim. But serial murder is something else. According to criminologists Hugh D. Barlow and David Kauzlarich in their book *Introduction to Criminology*, "Serial murder is an extremely rare but much publicized phenomenon."[2] Information and statistics about the actual number of victims of serial murder are difficult to come by, but most criminologists estimate that no more than 1 percent of all homicide victims each year are victims of serial murder. Yet, serial murder is consistently highly publicized in the media. Serial murder is a type of multiple murder and refers to murders that happen over weeks, months or years, often with an inactive period in between the killings. It should not be confused with mass murder or spree-killings, which are other kinds of multiple murder but differ mostly in

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[1] Courtroom Television Network LLC, "Crime Library," available from http://www.crimelibrary.com; Internet; accessed 7 April 2003.

[2] Hugh D. Barlow and David Kauzlarich, *Introduction to Criminology*, 8th ed. (Pearson Education, Inc., 2002), 49.

the timeframes in which the murders occur. Mass murder occurs within minutes or hours and usually in only one place, and spree-killings occur over one or two days.[3]

Serial murder receives extensive news coverage because it seems to fascinate society even more than single murder. In the case of single murder, people in society tend to identify and sympathize with the victim and his or her family and demand punishment for the crime, but serial murder shifts the focus and attention from the victims to the killer. We hear about the victims, but the killer and his or her motives are what really interest us. While there is usually a clear motive or reason for a single-murder killer's crime, there is no immediately obvious motive or reason for a serial killer's crimes. Oftentimes, the killings appear to be random, with no known association between the killer and his or her victims. It could happen to any one of us. And the serial killings are usually very well thought out and planned when compared to single murders, and this compulsive, ritualistic behavior is intriguing.

Societies can become quite involved in cases of serial murder. In the beginning of a case of serial murder, newspapers report about a couple or several murders that seem to be connected to each other and propose the possibility that the same killer may have committed them. From this instant, people in society become involved. Subsequent stories about further murders or possible suspects begin to piece together the final story, and people use these stories to come up with theories of their own. People feel important to the investigation because all of society is asked to be on the lookout for the killer. From the first murder to the capture of the killer, society is involved in the case of serial murder. Then, they become fascinated with the killer as his or her personal story, views and motives unfold in the news.

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[3] Ibid.

Media and Serial Killers

The media understand this societal fascination with violence and murder. They exploit this obsession through excessive coverage of murder and murderers. Through this coverage, people get to know these killers and become familiar with their lives and ways of thinking. Serial killers not only become stars, but to some people, they become kind of heroes. Most serial killers start their lives as unknowns, but through their crimes, they become superstars, known throughout the country. Newspapers, television programs, magazines and books retell their stories over and over again. We also see some of them on television, T-shirts, crime trading cards, comic books, calendars, action figures and Web sites. Many have fan clubs.

The media can help people in society understand their world and societal values. The newspaper is powerful, in that it has the ability to tell readers what is important, or what is news. Newspapers will have society believe that the story on the front page is the biggest and most important story and expect people to understand and accept this. Stuart Hall says, "The paper must be fresh every day, giving dramatic coverage to urgent events."[4] Serial murder certainly receives dramatic and immediate coverage, since it is urgent news. People are dying, there is a killer on the loose, and the media want to tell the public about this as soon as possible. "Yesterday's news is stale, unless a new development has taken its place, or a new angle can be found to give the item another lease of life," Hall adds.[5] Covering serial murder gives a newspaper news stories for a long time. Every time another person is killed, there is a news story. Every time a detective, police officer, criminologist, psychologist or family member is interviewed,

[4] Stuart Hall, "Introduction," In A.C.H. Smith (Ed.), *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change, 1935-1965* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975), 11.
[5] Ibid.

there is a new angle, and hence a news story. The serial-killer news story can take multiple angles, and there are constant new developments, like when each crime occurs, when a suspect is named, when an arrest is made, and when the killer is convicted and sentenced. But the coverage does not stop there. The media often continue their coverage even after the killer begins serving his or her sentence.

Through news, the media may try to reflect society, and the media can shape people's understanding of their world. Through extensive coverage of murder, people may begin to believe that crime is on the rise or that the number of serial killings or victims of serial murder is much greater than they are in actuality. Criminologist Philip Jenkins says, "Perhaps the most interesting aspect of serial murder from a sociological point of view is the way in which the phenomenon has been elevated in social consciousness from a rare, aberrant occurrence into a pressing social problem."[6] He attributes this mostly to the media. Barlow and Kauzlarich explain, "Philip Jenkins believes that the American public 'discovered' serial murder during the 1970s, thanks largely to aggressive media coverage of a few sensational cases."[7] Newspapers, through their coverage of particular news stories, send messages to the public that then create social realities for them. Hall says, "Newspapers, then, do not merely report the news: they 'make the news meaningful.'"[8]

If people use the media's messages to interpret and understand society, then we need to understand how and why these messages are constructed. We need to investigate what kind of stories newspapers consider to be big news and how the newspapers, then, cover the stories. If the media cover a story extensively, then it would appear to be an

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[6] Barlow, *Introduction to Criminology*, 50.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Hall, "Introduction," 21.

important and newsworthy story. Generally, the more important an issue, the more coverage it gets in the media. So if the media cover serial murder extensively, then we are led to believe that it is a very important issue. This is how the media aid in society's fascination with serial murder.

Objective

This thesis examines *The New York Times* coverage of three infamous serial killers and how the newspaper constructed the stories about them to create meaning and a storybook of murder. It is important to analyze how the newspaper constructs its stories to understand how messages are formed and sent to the public. I want to determine the media's responsibility (if any) in the creation of serial-killer superstars. As you will see from the literature reviewed, different people have said different things that relate to this topic. Media scholars note the influence of the media and their power to create notions of reality and society that are sent to the public through news stories. Criminologists note the media's over-coverage of serial murder and other violence, but only a few have made a connection between the two ideas. This thesis will do this by examining how the media create notions of reality and society that are sent to the public *through* their over-coverage of serial murder. What are the media trying to tell us through their extensive coverage of serial murder?

Background: Three Serial Killers and "Murderabilia"

Albert DeSalvo, though never tried for the 11 "Boston Strangler" murders that occurred between June 1962 and January 1964, was a molester and rapist who confessed

to the "Boston Strangler" crimes, in addition to two others, though not without recanting the confession before his death. Some people still wonder if DeSalvo was the "Boston Strangler," but he was able to tell police detailed accounts of each murder and knew things that the police thought only the killer would know. DeSalvo grew up with a physically abusive father until his parents divorced and his mother remarried, and he had many run-ins with the law beginning in early childhood. DeSalvo served in the army for approximately six years and was honorably discharged. Even though he continued to have brushes with the law, DeSalvo managed to always stay employed, marry and have children. His family was shocked when they heard of his confession to the murders and still do not believe that he was capable of committing them, even though his own lawyer consistently said that DeSalvo was the "Boston Strangler." Before becoming known by this nickname, DeSalvo was also known by two others (the "Measuring Man" and the "Green Man") for sexual crimes of which he was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. But first, he was sent to Bridgewater State Hospital for observation. After escaping from the hospital, he was caught and remanded to Walpole State Prison to serve the rest of his life sentence. In 1973, DeSalvo was stabbed to death by another inmate.

David Berkowitz, known as the "Son of Sam," killed six women in New York between 1976 and 1977. The tabloids originally named him the ".44-Caliber Killer" until the police found a note at one of the murder scenes written by Berkowitz that included the words, "I am the 'Son of Sam,'" thus creating his new nickname when the note was leaked to the media. Berkowitz grew up as an adopted child in a middle-class household, but he was a loner with a violent streak even as a child. He joined the army and stayed for three years before becoming a drifter. Before the murders occurred, he had allegedly set

approximately 1,488 fires in New York City and recorded each one in a diary. Around this time (or maybe for a while before), Berkowitz claimed to have started hearing voices of demons that told him to kill women. Berkowitz's demons lived within neighborhood dogs, whose howling indicated to Berkowitz that he should kill. The demon, according to Berkowitz, that most haunted him was named Sam and lived inside his neighbor, Sam Carr, who communicated to Berkowitz through Carr's black Labrador retriever. Once arrested, Berkowtiz was found fit to stand trial, pled guilty, and was sentenced to 365 years in Attica Prison. Around 1979, Berkowitz admitted that he fabricated the demon-dog story so that he could try to convince authorities when he was caught that he was insane and unable to stand trial. He said the real reason for his crimes was because he resented his own mother and the fact that he could not establish good relationships with women throughout his life; in fact, stalking and shooting women sexually aroused him. He has since shown remorse for his crimes, was denied parole in 2002, and is scheduled for another parole hearing in June 2004, though he seems to feel that prison is where he belongs.

Richard Ramirez, known as the "Night Stalker," is a Satanist and rapist who killed 13 people in the Los Angeles area during the spring and summer of 1985. He received his nickname from the media, after several others (including the "Valley Intruder" and the "Walk-in Killer") did not stick as well. Ramirez grew up in a poverty-stricken Hispanic neighborhood in El Paso, Texas, and had a troubled childhood, in which he had quite a few run-ins with the law. He became a burglar at a young age and, as early as junior high, showed interest in martial arts, marijuana, heavy metal music, Satanism, black magic, demons and dragons. He became a drifter who hung out in the

bars of southern California, often drunk and high. He then began breaking into homes in the Los Angeles area and killed many of the people inside, raping some of the women and occasionally burglarizing the homes. When Ramirez was in the East Side barrio of Los Angeles, citizens who had seen his picture in the local newspapers recognized him, chased him through the neighborhood, and captured him. He was then arrested, convicted and sentenced to death. Now, an inmate sitting in San Quentin's Death Row, he is also a suspect in several other murders in the San Francisco and Orange County areas that occurred around the same time as the Los Angeles murderers.

These three, as well as other serial killers, are viewed as stars by many people in society. The three described above are the subjects of biographies and have been featured on crime television shows. In addition, there are major motion pictures based on two of them and their crimes, *Summer of Sam* (1999) and *The Boston Strangler* (1968). And all three have been the inspirations for made-for-television movies. The celebrity status of serial killers (these three and others) is also evident in the sale of serial-killer memorabilia, or what is called "murderabilia." Besides books and T-shirts that feature serial killers, the more surprising murderabilia may be serial killer trading cards, calendars, action figures and comic books. Eclipse Enterprises started selling serial-killer trading cards in the early 1990s, but the company went out of business not long thereafter. The cards featured portraits of "America's most infamous serial killers," with a brief biography on the back. Two other companies, Shel-Tone Publications and Mother Productions, continue to make the killer cards. Shel-Tone has three series of them now: Bloody Visions I, II and III; Mother has two: 52 Famous Murderers and Cold-blooded

Killer Cards.[9] Several serial killer magazines and zines have sprung up, including the zine "Murder Can Be Fun." This zine's publisher, John Marr, has also created a yearly calendar/datebook that includes reminders of dates like David Berkowitz's second "Son of Sam" killing and Gary Gilmore's execution.[10] Spectre Studios sells serial killer actions figures for $34.99 - $39.99, and there are currently seven to choose from, though the designer is developing the eighth.[11] Comic books about almost all of the most well-known serial killers have been produced that retell the stories of their crimes. There is a Web site that sells serial killer fonts for word processing computer programs for $19.95 each that are supposed to resemble the respective killer's handwriting.[12] There was even a board game called "Serial Killer," which was packaged in a plastic body bag and came with four serial killer playing pieces, "crime cards," "outcome cards," and approximately 24 plastic "victims."[13] Other murderabilia sells for hundreds and thousands of dollars, including artwork, pictures, letters, postcards and poems, which are all more valuable if the killer signs them. One Web site is selling a lock of Charles Manson's hair for $995, and the seller notes, "Manson hair is the most sought after of any criminal hair."[14]

Much of this murderabilia are the perverse versions of other kinds of collectables that children and adults have collected for generations. Baseball cards and action figures of athletes, musicians and other societal heroes have always been popular, and it is certainly valuable to obtain the autograph of a famous athlete or musician. So now a

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[9] Harold Schechter and David Everitt, *The A to Z Encyclopedia of Serial Killers* (Pocket Books: New York, 1997), 42-43.
[10] Ibid. 37, 40.
[11] Spectre Studios, available from http://www.store.yahoo.com/spectrestudios; Internet; accessed May 2003.
[12] Killer Fonts, available from http://www.killerfonts.com; Internet; accessed May 2003.
[13] Schechter, *The A to Z Encyclopedia of Serial Killers*, 31-32.
[14] Supernaught.com, available from http://www.supernaught.com; Internet; accessed May 2003.

serial killer is not much different from the movie action hero, homerun hitter or pop star. But are the media responsible?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

"We don't know what to do with all this violence. We don't know how to process it. We don't know how to cover it. We sensationalize it, glamorize it, eroticize it."[1]

This quote appeared in *The New York Times* in an article entitled "Saturated With Violence," by Bob Herbert. Herbert was writing about American society in general, but he could surely also be referring to journalists and even *The New York Times* specifically. It is not surprising that the media cover crime, especially murder, as much as they do. Stories of murder, after all, fulfill all of the basic requirements of a news story, and they are simply what the public wants. In the case of serial murder, though, the public fascination is with the killer instead of with the crime or even the victims. We can see Americans' fascination with violence in all aspects of society and media.

The literature about serial killers is a varied body that includes work by criminologists, media scholars, sociologists, true-crime writers and journalists. These authors focus their analyses on society's obsession with murder and violence, the celebrity status of serial killers, and how the media glorify these killers or even encouraged their crimes.

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[1] Bob Herbert, "Saturated With Violence," *The New York Times*, 28 October 2003, sec. A, p. 25.

Society's Obsession with Murder

"The phenomenon of serial murder can be found throughout history and around the world, the most famous case being Jack the Ripper in England during the 1800s. But the 1980s brought a new and intensified spotlight on serial murder, inspired by the media, popular culture, and the political agenda of law enforcement agencies and certain advocate groups," says Philip Jenkins, Pennsylvania State University criminologist and author of *Using Murder: The Social Construction of Serial Homicide*. [2] People in society now are surrounded by stories of murder, and we have taken quite an interest in these stories, especially those of serial murder.

According to Sara Knox, lecturer in gender and cultural studies at the University of Western Sidney and author of *Murder: A Tale of Modern American Life*,

> Americans consume murder as a daily fare, sometimes – during the trial Of O.J. Simpson, for instance – to the point of biliousness. Most states have legislation allowing trials to be televised whole or in part, and an adept channel surfer can always find a murder covered in detail: on the news; in 'true crime' ministries; in the urban folklore of programs like *Unexplained Mysteries*; in the tabloid format of disaster and police work series; and, of course, on twenty-four hours a day of *Court T.V.* Television talk-show hosts regularly address the topic, programming fatal violence along with more banal, folksy wisdom on the control of weight, excess or insufficient body hair, and relations with one's in-laws.[3]

We consume violence everyday, and it becomes familiar and normal to us. It is oftentimes even a form of entertainment, blurring the lines between real and fictional violence. "Officially, the act of taking another person's life, either as crime or punishment, can be represented only as an artistic fiction or simulation. In this guise, murder is no longer a social reality; it has been neutralized and tamed as a supposedly

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[2] "Serial Killers Grip Americans' Imagination," *USA Today*, v.123, n.2591, August 1994, p. 7.
[3] Sara L. Knox, *Murder: A Tale of Modern American Life* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1998), 17-18.

harmless form of popular entertainment."[4] Murder then becomes less real and more fictionalized because of the extensive media coverage. Murder is all around us every day, and while we are fascinated by it, we are also desensitized of it. Murder in the news becomes just another tale of societal life; it becomes a storybook with various characters that interest and entertain us. As Knox says, "Murder fascinates, and its ambiguity – the mystery at the heart of murder – is not merely an effect of the factual unreliability of individual accounts of murder. Like all tales of death, the narrative of murder is freighted with a kind of awed bafflement at something visceral, yet inscrutable."[5]

It is clear that murder fascinates us, the American public, but journalists have a responsibility to report the news without sensationalizing these murders. Nonetheless, the media are exactly the conduits through which serial killers receive their fame and notoriety. Many people even think that the extensive media coverage of a serial killer encourages him or her to continue killing. David Berkowitz is a prime example of a serial killer who was aware of the media coverage of his crimes and felt encouraged by it. Elliott Leyton, an expert on serial killers and modern criminal psychology, says of Berkowitz in his book, *Compulsive Killers: The Story of Modern Multiple Murder*:

> Most disturbingly, his growing confidence was bolstered by the extraordinary coverage the media were giving his activities – a coverage which, not without insight, he interpreted as a form of encouragement. [Berkowitz says,] 'At this point I imagine I didn't care much anymore, for I finally had convinced myself that it was good to do it, necessary to do it, and that the public wanted me to do it. The latter part I believe to this day. I believe many were rooting for me.'[6]

Amy Alexander, a staff writer for *The Greater Baton Rouge Business Report*, discusses how the public's fascination with serial killer stories increases newspaper

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[4] Ibid., 25. from Black, *Aesthetics of Murder*, 21.
[5] Ibid., 202.
[6] Elliott Leyton, *Compulsive Killers: The Story of Modern Multiple Murder* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 167.

readership in an article about the "South Louisiana serial killer case" entitled "Behind the News." She says, "In studios and newsrooms around Baton Rouge, editors, producers and reporters are feeling intense pressure to feed the public something about the serial killer case every day…People are like sponges when it comes to the serial killer story…"[7]

Many killers even seek the media by sending letters to editors proclaiming their crimes and elusion of capture or sell their stories to the media after their arrests and convictions. Under the constant pressure of getting the best story and the highest readership or ratings, the media sometimes make deals with serial killers for their stories and pay them well. Knox says,

> There are so many potential angles to the story that media entrepreneurs determine their plot line on the basis of which 'characters' in the real-life drama will sell the rights to their story. And there is a peculiar tension between the idea of detailed general coverage and the concept of the 'exclusive' – which is about who gets into print first, rather than who attempts responsibly to sketch the 'whole' story (i.e., the 'facts' that say depressingly little).[8]

People may then criticize the media for glorifying murder in this way, but members of the media argue that they are only giving the public what they want. We, as society, refuse to acknowledge our obsession with violence and murder, but we continue to buy the newspapers that exploit our obsession. Mark Seltzer, a professor of English at Cornell, says, "We are not responsible for the sentence, nor for the journalists who report its execution, nor for the papers which print them,"[9] just as we are not responsible for the storylines in the novels we read, nor for the authors who write them, nor for the publishers who print them. People in society are not responsible, but we are enthralled.

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[7] Amy Alexander, "Behind the News," *The Greater Baton Rouge Business Report*, 29 April 2003, v.21, i.17: 28.
[8] Knox, *Murder: A Tale of Modern American Life*, 201-202.
[9] Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 183.

This is obvious in the popularity of true-crime books and movies, television shows about crime, and the popularity of murderabilia. Rick Staton, a collector and dealer of murderabilia, says that many people are disgusted by his collection and job, but he says that they also cannot help but be fascinated by it. He says, "The minute they step into this room, they are glued to everything in here and they are asking questions, and they are genuinely intrigued by it. So it makes me wonder: Am I the one who is so abnormal, or am I pretty normal?"[10]

Nicknames for Serial Killers

Harold Schechter, a professor of American literature and culture and a true-crime author, and David Everitt, a true-crime author, say in their book, *The A to Z Encyclopedia of Serial Killers*, "With the advent of tabloid newspapers in the 1800s, crime reporters began wracking their brains to come up with catchy nicknames for sensational killers – a tradition that continues to this day."[11]

Lawrence D. Klausner, a true-crime author, says of nicknames for serial killers in his book, *Son of Sam*, "How do we package the product? We need a label. How do we get exposure? We make certain that the label pleases the writers of headlines."[12] Here, Klausner is describing why the media use nicknames for serial killers: to effectively package a product (the killer) to gain exposure (selling more newspapers).

Many criminologists say that creating nicknames for serial killers glamorizes them, encourages more violence, and deifies them. They become famous in the public

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[10] "Killer Collectibles: Inside the World of 'Murderabilia,'" *ABCNEWS Internet Ventures*, 7 November 2001, available from http://www.abcnews.com; Internet; accessed May 2003.
[11] Harold Schechter and David Everitt, *The A to Z Encyclopedia of Serial Killers* (New York: Pocket Books, 1997), 197.
[12] Lawrence D. Klausner, *Son of Sam* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1981), 4.

eye for the time of their crimes, arrests and convictions, and the nicknames help them to live on forever in the public's memories. Jack Levin, a criminologist and professor of sociology at Northeastern University, and James Alan Fox, a criminologist and professor of criminal justice at Northeastern University, say, "To give him a mysterious moniker is to send a message to the killer and to those who identify with the killer that the path to fame and glory is littered with the bodies of innocent people."[13]

Criminologists also think that it is possible that giving a serial killer a nickname gives the killer further motivation to continue his or her crime spree. Levin and Fox say,

> Certainly the instinct to label the killer in some colorful way is natural enough. But as criminologists who have studied serial killers for more than 20 years, we know that naming a dangerous criminal like this can do more than sear him in the public's collective memory. It may also encourage him to fulfill our expectations… Becoming a popular-culture celebrity is an important part of the motivation that inspires serial killers to continue committing murder. Once they are identified with a superstar moniker, their frequency of murder increases. No longer satisfied with obscurity, they seek to prove that they deserve the superstar status to which they have been assigned.[14]

Robert Ressler, a former FBI agent and pioneer of criminal profiling, uses the recent Washington, D.C., "sniper" serial killer case as an example to illustrate why the media's creation of nicknames for serial killers is a bad idea:

> To give him a handle is counterproductive. He's desperate for that. These people are so inadequate, they're going for the notoriety, any notoriety they can get…Journalists have a huge weakness for punchy labels, and as soon as I heard about the tarot card, I knew that some media outlets were going to use that as shorthand for the sniper. Headline writers love monikers like 'Son of Sam' and the 'Boston Strangler,' and people in the press don't think very much about whether that might spur a madman to more killings.[15]

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[13] Jack Levin and James Alan Fox, "Making celebrities of serial killers elevates threat," *USA Today*, 23 October 2002, sec. A, p. 13.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Laura Parker, "Elusive Sniper Makes a Few Names for Self," *USA Today*, 16 October 2002, sec. A, p. 3.

Serial Killers as Celebrities

Oftentimes, it is the guaranteed media coverage that fuels serial killers to continue killing. "The desire for glory or fame is not the core concept of the complex: it is the desire to become a story." [16] They want their stories known, they want to be understood, and serial killers know that the mass media is the best outlet to use to achieve these goals. This is why some killers send letters to the media or leave letters at the scenes of their crimes. In the case of Jack the Ripper, Seltzer says, "There was a series of more than 300 letters (none authenticated) mailed to the London press, signed Jack the Ripper. In such cases, the boundaries come down between private desire and public life, along with the boundaries between private bodies and the public media. Letters and bodies, word counts and body counts, go together from the inception of serial murder."[17]

David Berkowitz (the "Son of Sam") sent letters to the media and to police, many of which were published in the newspapers. Leyton says of Berkowitz, "His clever manipulation of the press made him a great celebrity long before he was captured."[18] He adds, "In February of 1979, less than a year after he had been sentenced to several hundred years in prison, Berkowitz confirmed his celebrity status by calling a press conference."[19] Actually Berkowitz was not only aware of the vast media coverage of his crimes (which he used to his advantage), but he seemed to greatly enjoy it because it made him famous. Ressler, who interviewed Berkowitz in prison, says,

> He told me the most rewarding thing in his life was when he saw his letters printed in the New York papers. When Berkowitz was captured, he was handcuffed and taken to police headquarters in a squad car. On the way, he asked the officers if they wanted him to cooperate. When

[16] Knox, *Murder: A Tale of Modern American Life*, 65.
[17] Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*, 9.
[18] Leyton, *Compulsive Killers: The Story of Modern Multiple Murder*, 150.
[19] Leyton, *Compulsive Killers: The Story of Modern Multiple Murder*, 165.

> they said yes, he asked them to get a comb out of his pocket. 'Comb my hair, please,' Berkowitz said to the officer. 'The press is going to be there.'[20]

Levin and Fox also note serial killers' awareness of the media's coverage of their crimes and the public's following of the coverage. "Richard Ramirez reportedly said to one of his victims as he assaulted her, 'You know who I am, don't you? I'm the one they're writing about in the newspapers and on TV.'"[21]

Many people think that the media turning serial killers into celebrities is irresponsible and does not serve the public interest. Andy Kahan, who works for the Houston Crime Victims Assistance Division, says, "The gruesome acts that make these killers infamous turns them into mythical, god-like figures. The more infamous the killer, the more they're in demand. The media coverage these guys get turns them into celebrities."[22] And Jennifer Elizabeth Frank, a public policy analyst for the Colorado Organization for Victim Assistance, uses serial killer action figures as an example when she says, "…these were some of the most disgusting serial killers around. When you glorify the actions of these guys, you send the wrong message out to society."[23]

Clearly, many criminologists, media scholars, sociologists, true-crime writers and journalists realize society's thirst for violence and the media's habit of over-quenching the thirst, and almost all believe that it is irresponsible and wrong. But almost no one has studied how the media use their coverage of serial killers to continue the hero myth that has been present in news stories for many years, which is the goal of this thesis. It is

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[20] Parker, "Elusive Sniper Makes a Few Names for Self," A3.
[21] Levin, "Making celebrities of serial killers elevates threat," A13.
[22] Bryan Robinson, "Murder Incorporated: Denver Sculptor's Serial Killer Action Figures Bringing in Profits and Raising Ire," *ABCNEWS Internet Ventures*, 25 March 2002, available from http://www.abcnews.com; Internet; accessed May 2003.
[23] Ibid.

important to understand how news stories are constructed to continue this myth and how and why the media portray serial killers as society's heroes.

Research Questions

This thesis is guided by the following research questions:

1. What kind of coverage does each of the three serial killers receive in *The New York Times* from the date of his first crime to present day? How much coverage does each receive?
2. How are serial killers, their crimes and their personal stories glamorized by the kind and amount of coverage they receive from *The New York Times*?
3. How does *The New York Times* news coverage of the three serial killers create stories in which killers are cast as heroes for society?

CHAPTER 3

THEORY AND METHOD

Theoretical Framework

Myths

myth *(mith) n. 1. A traditional story dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serves as a primordial type in the worldview of a people.*[1]

As shown in the definition above, myths are important to people in constructing their worldviews and use characters that may be considered role models for society. This thesis draws from scholars such as Lévi-Strauss,[2] Jung,[3] Eliade[4] and Lule,[5] "who see mythical stories not merely as fables, or fantastic and unrealistic stories, but as deeply connected to societies"[6] In his book *Daily News, Eternal Stories*, Jack Lule says, "Myth is essential and always alive. The stories of myth are necessary to human lives and the societies they construct."[7] People use myths to make sense of their world, which is why myths are told, retold and passed on to each generation. People hear the same stories over and over again and can then understand societal, cultural and political values and

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[1] *American Heritage Dictionary, The*, 3rd ed., New York: Dell Publishing, 1994.
[2] C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural anthropology / Claude Lévi-Strauss* (New York: Basic Books, 1963).
[3] C. G. Jung and K. Kerényi. *Essays on a science of mythology; the myth of the Divine Child and the mysteries of Eleusi* (New York: Pantheon, 1969).
[4] M. Eliade, "Myth and Mythical Thoughts," In A. Eliot (Ed.), *The Universal Myths: Heroes, Gods, Tricksters and Others* (New York: New American Library, 1990), 15-40. and M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1991.
[5] Jack Lule, *Daily News, Eternal Stories* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2001).
[6] F.P. Feldstein and C. Acosta-Alzuru, "Argentinean Jews as scapegoat: A textual analysis of the bombing of AMIA," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 27, i. 2 (2003): 157.
[7] Lule, *Daily News, Eternal Stories*, 17.

standards. Lule says, "*Storytelling* seems fundamental to human life… Humans make sense of the world and their time in it through story. Even more intriguing, *some stories* appear fundamental to human life. Startlingly similar folktales, legends, and myths can be found in different cultures and eras."[1] Storytelling and myths are important to, not only human life, but also social life. Lule argues, "Humans need stories – and their societies need stories. Through stories, a group of people define themselves… These societal stories attain sacred status. They become accepted and their value becomes assumed. They narrate and illustrate shared beliefs, values and ideals. They are myths."[2] And these myths can be found in stories that people tell each other, especially in news stories.

Lule "sees myth – and news – as telling the great stories of humankind for humankind."[3] There are many similarities between news and myth. People use news to understand their world and discover and accept societal values. Consumers of news can identify with and learn from the characters in news stories, just as they can with those in myths. News stories of today, like myths, retell stories that offer societal values and beliefs, with lessons and themes, and journalists are some of the greatest storytellers of myth today.[4] In fact, myths and news stories are important – if not the prevalent – ways in which societies can express their ideals, ideologies, values and beliefs.[5] To establish these ideals and make certain that people in society not only understand, but also accept them, the stories must be repeated over and over again. Lule argues, "When these fundamental stories become public, when these stories are told to a people, when these

[1] Ibid., 29.
[2] Ibid., 33.
[3] Ibid., 15.
[4] Ibid., 18-19.
[5] Ibid., 15.

stories are narrated on a societal level to render exemplary models and represent shared societal values and beliefs, news becomes myth."[6]

Lule says, "Only news regularly and daily shows its allegiance to myth."[7] The daily news is perhaps the primary vehicle for myth in our modern time, and there are four main similarities between news and myth that show this. First, news stories, like myths, are repeated over and over again and contain many of the same elements in each story. Therefore, like myths, news stories are not new. "Like myth, news tells us not only what happened yesterday – but what has always happened. Flood and fire, disaster and triumph, crime and punishment, storm and drought, death and birth, victory and loss – daily, the news has always recounted and always will recount these stories."[8] Second, both news and myths emphasize reality; both focus on "the real." News stories are supposed to be true accounts of real events, just as myths are supposed to promote social order and represent social beliefs and values, which are very real and important to society.[9] Third, the stories of both news and myth are public and meant, not just for individuals necessarily, but for society as a whole. They both address an audience to teach them societal values and ideals through the stories they tell. "Myth and news are, after all, stories of public interest."[10] Lastly, both myths and news stories use basic stories to inform and teach people in society. "News and myth speak to a public and offer stories that shape and maintain and exclude and deny important societal ideas and beliefs."[11]

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[6] Ibid., 33-34.
[7] Ibid., 21.
[8] Ibid., 20.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 21.
[11] Ibid.

Lule describes seven myths commonly found in news media: the Victim, the Scapegoat, the Good Mother, the Trickster, the Other World, the Flood, and the Hero.[12] The Victim in myth and news stories shows sacrifice. The victim can show people in society how mortal they are and how suffering and death should be seen as a sacrifice. Myths and news stories help elevate and transform death, tell a life story, mark a passing, and aid in mourning. The Scapegoat myth shows societies what happens when established social values and ideals are challenged. Scapegoats are demeaned and degraded because they embody social evils and social defiance. Myths and news stories about the scapegoat reiterate to society that it is important to understand and accept social norms and values or face ridicule. The Good Mother myth helps establish the ideals of motherhood and even womanhood. "Good" mothers and "good" women are portrayed in myths and news stories as being nurturing, caring and loving at all times. This myth tells women in society what is expected of them and how they should behave. The Trickster myth provides another character for society to dislike and degrade. The trickster is often portrayed as crude, stupid and senseless, who acts with animal instincts. It is implied that tricksters bring suffering upon themselves and deserve the ridicule they receive. Some common tricksters include "stupid criminals, dumb and dangerous athletes, hapless hit men, and classless and crude rich people."[13] The Other World myth provides stories about lands that are far from and different than our own. These stories can be either good or bad; they sometimes describe the other world as a "garden of delight" or an "exotic land of foreign charm," or other times describe the other world as a "threat" or a

[12] Ibid., 22-25.
[13] Ibid., 24.

"primitive" nation with strange beliefs.[14] These myths and stories provide our society with ways to view other lands, cultures and societies. The Flood myth tells stories of natural disasters that are humbling to people in society because they show them how powerful and destructive nature can be. This myth is often associated with the wrongdoings of people who were affected by the disaster. The final myth is the Hero myth, which is described in detail below.

The Hero Myth

hero *(hîr'o) n. 1. In mythology and legend, a man celebrated for his bold exploits. 2. A person noted for special achievement in a particular field. 3. The principal male character in a literary work.*[15]

A hero is someone who accomplishes extraordinary feats and performs a task or quest better than others, and a hero is the main character in myths and other stories. People look up to the hero for his or her ability to achieve greatness and recognition. Lule says, "As myth, news stories too regularly celebrate the exploits of heroes."[16] The values and ideals of a society can be dramatized and personified through stories of heroes, as the hero of any story typically embodies societal values and sets a good example for everyone else. The news regularly tells and retells the stories of heroes, and they tend to tell these stories in a similar format, with a similar pattern: "the humble birth, the early mark of greatness, the quest, the triumph, and the return."[17]

The hero is born into humble circumstances and starts out as nobody special. Because of this humble beginning, it becomes more remarkable that he or she is able to

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[14] Ibid, 24-25.
[15] *American Heritage Dictionary*.
[16] Lule, *Daily News, Eternal Stories*, 23.
[17] Ibid., 23.

achieve greatness, since he or she had no special opportunities from birth. Sometime early in the hero's life, he or she realizes his or her quest, which is the way in which he or she will become great. Throughout the realization of the quest and achieving it, the hero will struggle and face obstacles, which he or she will overcome through determination and dedication to the quest. The hero always triumphs in the quest in the end, after proving that he or she is great and deserves recognition for exceptional accomplishments. After his or her triumph, the hero will return again and again, whether mentioned as a role model for society, compared to other heroes, or referenced as an example of greatness.

The modern hero, however, is often more of a celebrity than a role model, which is more of a non-hero, and the media play a crucial role in this definition process: "The decline of the modern hero most often is attributed to mass media. The massive coverage of social life given by newspapers, magazines, television, cable, talk radio, and now the Internet has helped transform and degrade the hero."[18] A new element of the hero myth is now standard: the degradation of the hero. Often, modern heroes are criticized and scrutinized in news stories. Perhaps this is because negative news seems to be more interesting to the public, or maybe modern media scrutinize celebrities more closely and critically because the public wants to know everything about society's celebrities and seems to love it when they falter. "Mass media, publishing online or on-air 24 hours a day, have an insatiable need for well-known figures capable of attracting and holding audiences," Lule says. "People *know* celebrities not at all and can come to resent the figure and the process."[19]

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[18] Ibid., 84.
[19] Ibid., 84-85.

Studying the Hero myth in news stories helps us understand much about society and societal values. Since the hero normally exemplifies societal values, we can identify these values in news stories by observing what ideals the hero embodies. And we can also see society's uneasiness with admiring celebrities and heroes, which is usually why many heroes are degraded at some point during their quests and triumphs. By analyzing news stories for elements of myths, we can also see how the news consistently and constantly repeats "real" stories to the public to instruct and inform.

Methodology: Textual Analysis

"Newspapers are not simply noisy channels which connect one end of an information exchange with another," says Stuart Hall. "They employ verbal, visual and typographical means for 'making events and people in the news signify' for their readers. Every newspaper is a structure of meanings in linguistic and visual form."[20] It is important to not only look at *what* is said in a newspaper (the literal words and information contained in articles), but also "*how* what is said is presented, coded, shaped, within a set of signifying meaning-structures."[21] Newspapers, through the ways in which information is presented, help people understand their world and construct meanings about it. They "do not merely report the news: they 'make the news meaningful.'"[22] There are many ways that newspapers make news meaningful for its consumers. Hall says, "A newspaper can also emphasize or depress individual items on a scale of significance by their positioning on a page, or by employing the whole repertoire of

[20] Stuart Hall, "Introduction," In A.C.H. Smith (Ed.), *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change, 1935-1965* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975), 17-18.
[21] Ibid., 21.
[22] Ibid.

typographical distinctions: headlining, underling, bold use of types, strapline elaborations, attention-getting captions, with or without illustrations, and so on."[23] In this study, I looked at these elements, as well as others. In the articles' headlines, I was interested in the wording and analyzed how each could be interpreted. I looked to see who/what was the subject of the headline because this can reveal who/what was the most important element to the story. The most important and newsworthy element of the news story tends to be written in the headline and/or the first paragraph, so these were both important places of the article to analyze and interpret. I also looked for any photographs that were included with the news stories and, if so, who or what is the focus of the photographs. Size and type of font are important because they can be analyzed to uncover meaning as well. For example, a size 24, bold font tells us that the information is very important, while a size 10, regular-style font does not stand out as significant.

It is important to study these distinctions and others to understand how newspapers use them to emphasize what is considered to be significant news, de-emphasize what is considered insignificant news, and make society understand the difference. "It is only when we penetrate to the deep structures of the newspaper that we really understand *how* a paper stands in relations to the society which it 'mirrors' day by day."[24] Textual analysis will help us discover these deep structures of the newspaper and understand how they help create meaning in the news.

Textual analysis is a qualitative method of analysis that seeks to delve beneath surface meanings to uncover deeper social meanings that may be hidden beneath the text's façade. Another common method of analysis is content analysis. But Hall states,

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[23] Ibid., 19.
[24] Ibid., 24.

"Both methods are based on a long preliminary soak, a submission by the analyst to the mass of his material: where they differ is that content analysis uses this process of soaking oneself to define the categories and build a code, whereas [textual] analysis uses the preliminary reading to select representative examples which can be more intensively analyzed."[25] In sum, textual analysis is "more useful in penetrating the latent meanings of a text."[26] As a method of analysis, it can dig beneath the literal meanings of texts to uncover underlying meanings that are present within the texts. These underlying meanings can provide information about society, societal values, and ways in which texts create meaning and social understanding. "Briefly, the method views the news story as a dramatic act, a text whose language unavoidably gives meaning to the world it reports, meaning that can be understood through interpretation."[27]

Procedure

Through this method, I analyzed a total of 190 *New York Times* articles to examine and interpret the news stories and how they are constructed to create meanings about society and societal values. I analyzed every *New York Times* article that was written about David Berkowitz (the "Son of Sam"), Albert DeSalvo (the "Boston Strangler"), and Richard Ramirez (the "Night Stalker") from the first article written about each to any articles written up to 1999. To obtain these articles, I used the New York Times Historical Newspapers database, powered by ProQuest, and searched for articles using each killer's real name and nickname. Though identical articles were recovered by

[25] Ibid., 15.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Jack Lule, "Victimage in *Times* Coverage of the KAL Flight 007 Shooting," *Journalism Quarterly*, v.66, i.3 (1989): 616.

using both names as search terms some of the time, I found a rather large discrepancy in the numbers of articles recovered using the nickname as opposed to using the real name. This was true even after weeding through recovered articles that were unrelated to the killer. For example, the search term "Son of Sam" recovered 171 articles, but some of these were obituaries or other articles about a man whose father's name is Sam. After examining all legitimate, related articles for each killer using both search terms, I found: 25 articles using the search term "David Berkowitz," 139 articles using the term "Son of Sam," 6 articles using the term "Albert DeSalvo," 27 articles using the term "Boston Strangler," 7 articles using the term "Richard Ramirez," and 10 articles using the term "Night Stalker." Though this adds up to 214 articles, 24 of these were duplicates and, therefore, not counted in the total of 190 articles. (Please see the appendix for a complete list of analyzed articles.)

For this study, I read each article twice, once reading all the way through, and the second time reading more closely to try to understand what the article was really saying and what latent meanings could be uncovered. Analyzing all 190 articles in this way provided an opportunity for an intense and long "soak" in the material. Every word was considered important because any word or group of words could have significance in the construction of meaning. I paid particular attention to headlines, photographs, and the positioning and font style of headlines, photographs, captions, pull quotes, and the article itself. I also specifically looked for elements of the Hero myth.

Rationale

I chose to analyze these three serial killers for a few reasons. Perhaps the best reason is because of their enormous fame; their names appear over and over again in serial killer literature and Web sites. Court TV's Crime Library includes a section about the "most notorious" serial killers, which includes all three men. Each of the three has his own section in *The A to Z Encyclopedia of Serial Killers*, and there are countless articles, books and Web sites devoted to each of them. In addition, each of the three serial killers for this analysis committed his crime in a different decade and in a different area of the country. Albert DeSalvo (the "Boston Strangler") committed his crimes in Boston, Massachusetts, in the 1960s; David Berkowitz (the "Son of Sam") committed his crimes in New York City, New York, in the 1970s; and Richard Ramirez (the "Night Stalker") committed his crimes in Los Angeles, California, in the 1980s.

I chose to analyze *The New York Times* coverage of these three killers for two reasons. First, the New York Times Historical Newspapers database is exhaustive and contains articles from the 1960s. Other databases do not go as far back. Second, *The New York Times* is one of the most important and influential newspapers in the world. As an agenda-setting newspaper, *The New York Times* helps tell and retell stories and create and recreate myths in news stories today. Lule says:

> Understanding the *Times* has become a necessary part of understanding the times. Though not the biggest, it may well be the most significant newspaper in the world…People in the news media also acknowledge the importance of the *Times*. The newspaper has been awarded dozens of Pulitzer Prizes, far more than any other news organization. Rival newspaper editors and broadcast news directors make the *Times* required reading for their staffs so that the *Times* helps set an agenda for other news media.[28]

[28] Lule, *Daily News, Eternal Stories*, 6.

John C. Merrill and Harold A. Fisher, in their book *The World's Great Dailies: Profiles of Fifty Newspapers*, profile *The New York Times* as one of best daily newspapers in the United States that is, not just read throughout the nation, but also throughout the world. "One measure of a paper's greatness is the degree of recognition given it by fellow professionals," they say. "That measure, in the case of the *New York Times*, would place it above all other newspapers, certainly in the Unites States."[29] The authors make it clear that the newspaper's recognition and prestige are undeniable. They sum the newspaper up in saying, "The *Times* as a newspaper defies classification; it forms a kind of composite of the best in all journalism."[30] And the New York Times Company, itself, says:

> In 2003 the Company was ranked No. 1 in the publishing industry in Fortune's list of America's Most Admired Companies, for the third consecutive year. Over the years, The Times Company's properties have been awarded many journalism awards, including a total of 110 Pulitzer Prizes, more than any other news organization. The Company's core purpose is to enhance society by creating, collecting and distributing high-quality news, information and entertainment.[31]

It is clear that *The New York Times* is a prestigious, respected and highly recognized newspaper. It is read all over the country and even the world. The newspaper is very influential and can help continue and support myths in news stories. For these reasons, *The New York Times* was the best choice for my analysis.

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[29] John C. Merrill and Harold A. Fisher, *The World's Great Dailies: Profiles of Fifty Newspapers* (New York: Hastings House, 1980), 229.
[30] Merrill, *The World's Great Dailies: Profiles of Fifty Newspapers*, 230.
[31] The New York Times Company, available from http://www.nytco.com/company.html; Internet; accessed April 2003.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS[1]

Through textual analysis, many themes and patterns emerged in the articles. Even though articles were analyzed for each of the three serial killers, many of the same themes and patterns showed up for all three. Therefore, all of the findings here are grouped together and not divided by serial killer.

Amount of Coverage and Significant Dates

The sheer volume of articles published about the three serial killers could be proof enough of their fame and celebrity status. *The New York Times* published 148 articles that mention David Berkowitz or the "Son of Sam," 28 that mention Albert DeSalvo or the "Boston Strangler," and 14 that mention Richard Ramirez or the "Night Stalker." This is a large volume of articles to be published about someone in such a prestigious newspaper. In addition, on many "significant dates," more than one article was published about a killer. It is interesting to consider these significant dates when analyzing the articles to see if the amount of coverage of each of the killers corresponds to these dates.

[1] A complete list of all the articles analyzed for this study can be found in the appendix.

Albert DeSalvo

First murder: June 14, 1962

Arrest: November 1964

Confession: March 1965

Since DeSalvo was never tried for the "Boston Strangler" crimes, most of the articles about him follow his trial and conviction for the other crimes that landed him in prison for life. It is interesting to note, however, that he did not receive coverage in *The New York Times* for the other crimes until he had confessed to the "Boston Strangler" murders. DeSalvo was arrested for assault, burglary and robbery in November 1964, but there were no articles about him until October 21, 1966, which was after he confessed to the murders. Throughout the coverage of his conviction, the articles always mentioned his confession to the stranglings. It seems unlikely that the newspaper would cover his trial, conviction, sentencing and the remainder of his life afterwards if he had not confessed to the murders because the public would not be as interested in him if they did not know he was a serial killer.

David Berkowitz

First murder: July 29, 1976

Arrest: August 10, 1977

Trial: May 8, 1978

Conviction: May 8, 1978

Sentencing: June 12, 1978

Berkowitz committed his first murder on July 29, 1976, but the first article about him was not published until April 29, 1977, nearly a year later. This is interesting because after the first article written about him, more began to be published with growing frequency. This shows society's relative disinterest in single murder but fascination with serial murder. By the time the first article was published (nearly a year after the first murder), the police had decided that they were looking for a *serial* killer, which is interesting to the public and, therefore, newsworthy. Two articles were published on the anniversary of the first murder, and one article was published on the date of Berkowitz's arrest, but it was not about the arrest because Berkowitz was arrested in the evening, which was after the newspaper came out for the day. However, the following day, four articles were published about him, and the day after that (two days after his arrest), eight articles were published covering every possible aspect of the story. Subsequent articles followed the case closely, and when nothing new was happening with the case, then an article was published that summarized the past events. This helped to keep the story fresh in people's minds and reminded them of its (and Berkowitz's) importance.

Richard Ramirez

First murder: June 28, 1984

Arrest: August 31, 1985

Trial: January 29, 1989

Conviction: September 20, 1989

Sentencing: November 7, 1989

The New York Times coverage of Ramirez differed from the other two killers, mostly in the amount of articles published but also in the number of years it followed the killer. Ramirez was only covered in the newspaper beginning eight days before his arrest and lasting until the day after he was sentenced. He was covered throughout his arrest, trial, conviction and sentencing, with articles often corresponding to significant dates. There was one article about him after his arrest, one article eight days after his conviction, and one article after sentencing. Since there were almost three and a half years between the time of Ramirez's arrest and the beginning of his trial, *The New York Times* published articles during that time to keep the story fresh in people's minds and remind them of its (and Ramirez's) importance, just like they did in their coverage of Berkowitz.

One common element in the coverage of all three serial killers was that each began to be covered in *The New York Times* only after it became evident that he was a *serial* killer, not just a single-murder killer. This suggests that serial murder is more interesting and newsworthy than single murder, which seems to be a more ordinary, everyday occurrence and, therefore, only infrequently covered in the newspaper.

Elements of the Storybook

Articles that follow serial killers are very similar to mystery stories. The first few articles outline the crimes and begin to make connections between multiple crimes, implying that there is only one killer. Then theories begin to emerge as people try to establish patterns in the crimes. The crime scenes are described, the profile of the killer is constructed, and many of the characters are introduced, such as police officers,

detectives, victims and family members of victims. Public interest grows from here, as people try to figure out "whodunit," just as they would while reading the latest best-selling mystery.

When a suspect is arrested, it is like the actor has finally been found to fill the role in the story. Just as any actor or celebrity, when we first meet the killer we want to know everything about him. Where did he come from? Why did he commit the crimes? What does he look like? The articles analyzed in this study follow the pattern of a storybook exactly. And the hero of the story (the killer) receives massive attention as we learn everything we can about him. As soon as the killer was arrested, his picture appeared in the newspaper, accompanied by a long feature story, which summarized past relevant events and provided biographical information about the killer. We finally knew "whodunit" and then wanted to know about his background, his family, his motives, and what will happen next. So the coverage continued.

Elements of the storybook are found in the coverage of all three serial killers. The first article about David Berkowitz (the "Son of Sam") introduces the serial killer to the public by using both of his nicknames (the "Son of Sam" and the ".44-Caliber Killer") and describing the connected murders. Subsequent articles describe the on-going investigation, inform the public about efforts to catch the killer, and introduce theories about possible patterns in the crimes. Little by little, articles begin to reveal the latest clues about the mystery story. The second article shows a picture of a gun that is similar to the one that the killer used, and fewer than three months later, sketches of a suspect began to appear along with the stories. At this point, the crimes and the weapon were known and familiar to the public, and the sketches were the latest clues in the mystery

story. Every time another clue emerged, an article was published to inform the public about it, and the pieces of the story began to come together. For example, new sketches of the killer were published whenever another witness came forward. Finally, when Berkowitz was arrested, the articles immediately began to provide biographical information about him and published his picture. Post-arrest articles delved more deeply into his background and began to speculate about his motives. Once reporters were able to obtain interviews with Berkowitz, they began to quote him in articles and explain his side of the story.

Once the first article was published about Albert DeSalvo (the "Boston Strangler"), he had already been arrested for other crimes, though there was no coverage in *The New York Times* about him until he had confessed to the "Boston Strangler" murders. But the first article, which introduces a book about the "Boston Strangler," never mentions DeSalvo by name. This is noteworthy because, by the time the article was published, he had confessed to the stranglings, but, like coverage of the other serial killers, the first article always announces the crimes and presence of a serial killer; it never mentions any real names of suspects. DeSalvo is mentioned by name in the third article published about him, which also includes biographical information. Subsequent articles delve more deeply into his background and follow the rest of his life.

Once again, the first article published about Richard Ramirez (the "Night Stalker") announces the existence of a serial killer. The next article tells of his arrest and begins to describe his background. Subsequent articles, like those about the other two killers, delve more deeply into his background and follow his life for years.

The elements of the storybook are present in the coverage of all three serial killers in similar ways. Specifically, the first article (and many after for Berkowitz) announces the existence of a serial killer. Pre-arrest articles follow the progression of the case (with all the clues to the mystery story), and post-arrest articles provide personal information about the killer.

Some of the articles actually make references to fiction when telling the tales of the serial killers. One article states, "The notion of a psychopath stalking victims at random and eluding detection – like the killer who calls himself 'Son of Sam' – has long terrified and fascinated the public, although, it seems, more often in fiction than in fact."[2] And another says, "The psychopathic killer, a staple of Hollywood melodramas, is equally fascinating – and frightening – in real life."[3] What is perhaps most interesting is that both of these quotes are leads in their respective articles, establishing the mood for these stories. Even though these two quotes mention real life, simply referencing fiction in the lead of the article desensitizes the public to the information that follows. In this way, the gruesome story is made less real and more of a fictional account of real events.

Of course the main character in the storybook is the hero, in this case, the serial killer. But, as in any story, the character is not real but is played by an actor. In these cases, David Berkowitz played the "Son of Sam," Albert DeSalvo played the "Boston Strangler," and Richard Ramirez played the "Night Stalker." So the killers become more like movie stars who *play* the *roles* of killers. They become celebrities, which are some of society's biggest heroes. The nicknames help make the killers heroes just like movie roles in Hollywood help make actors celebrities.

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[2] Eleanor Blau, "The Stalking of Random Victims Has Terrified Public Over Years," *The New York Times*, 9 June 1977, p. 85.

[3] "A Year Later 'Son of Sam' Still on Loose," *The New York Times*, 3 July 1977, p. 98.

The newspaper tends to separate the killer (e.g., the "Son of Sam") from the suspect (e.g., David Berkowitz), and the end effect is that the stories depict crimes that were not committed by a real person. One headline reads, "'Son of Sam' Suspect is Facing Trial Soon,"[4] which sounds more like a story than if it read, "*David Berkowitz* is Facing Trial Soon." If the newspaper were to use the real name in this headline, then it would make the crimes and the killer seem more real. Instead, the use of the nickname in the headline diminishes the reality of the crimes and the killer. One article reads, "…he said he belonged to a satanic cult when he was the Son of Sam."[5] Saying he *was* the "Son of Sam" seems to again separate Berkowitz from his nickname, implying that Berkowitz was an actor who merely *played* the "Son of Sam" in the story. This is similar to an article about Richard Ramirez that says, "…Mr. Ramirez, 29 years old, was the "Night Stalker" who committed 13 gruesome murders and 30 felonies…"[6] Once again, it separates Ramirez from his nickname, saying he *was* the Night Stalker. There are other references that the stories of the serial killers are just that – stories. An article about the Boston Strangler calls the story a "creepy tale,"[7] and another discusses a movie about the crimes, in which Tony Curtis "stars" as Albert DeSalvo. The article's sub-headline states, "Curtis in Title Role of Film at 3 Theaters," and the body of the article reads, "Tony Curtis 'stars' – the program credits word – as what the movie takes to be the Boston

[4] Max H. Seigel, "'Son of Sam' Suspect is Facing Trial Soon; Judge to Start the Murder Case if Hearing Next Wednesday Finds Berkowitz Fit," *The New York Times*, 7 April 1978, sec. A, p. 15.
[5] "Reaching Out from Prison," *The New York Times*, 20 June 1999, p. 36.
[6] "Jury is Urged to Order Death for Night Stalker Murders," *The New York Times*, 28 September 1989, sec. A, p. 25.
[7] Eliot Fremont-Smith, "Books of The Times: A Maniac on the Loose," *The New York Times*, 21 October 1966, p. 39.

strangler."[8] These quotes show that Albert DeSalvo was simply the lead character – or hero – in the "Boston Strangler" story.

The use of nicknames in headlines is also noteworthy. If the reporters were simply using the nicknames to refer to the killers before their real names are known, then it would make sense to stop using the nicknames once the suspects are arrested. But this is not done in these articles. Instead, the nickname is continually used in the articles' headlines throughout the coverage of the killers, even after they were convicted. There is a total of 148 articles written about David Berkowitz (the "Son of Sam"), and of these, 121 were published after Berkowitz's arrest. Of the 121 articles, 76 contained a nickname (either "Son of Sam," ".44-Caliber Killer," or some variation of the two names) in the headline, and only 31 contained his real name, even though the real name was used in the body of almost all of the articles published after his arrest. For articles about the "Boston Strangler," all 28 articles were published after Albert DeSalvo's confession, and 15 of those contained his nickname in the headline, while only 5 contained his real name. For articles about the "Night Stalker," 13 of the 14 articles were published after Richard Ramirez's arrest, and 5 of those contained his nickname in the headline, while none of the articles used his real name. The continued use of the serial killers' nicknames in the headlines and bodies of the articles supports the storybook and makes the real violence seem less real. Placing the nickname in the headline or beginning of the articles sets the stage for the storybook; it becomes the title of the story, in which other characters play supporting roles.

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[8] Renata Adler, "Screen: 'The Boston Strangler' Opens," *The New York Times*, 17 October 1968, p. 52.

Characters in the Storybook

The characters in the storybook of murder are, as mentioned before, police officers, detectives, victims, and family members of victims. But the stars of the story are the killers, and this is obvious when analyzing the articles about them. The victims of the crimes are never the focus of the articles, even though their names are sometimes mentioned. Only two articles[9] actually showed pictures of victims, and that was one of David Berkowitz's victims, though many more pictures of Berkowitz were published. There is always more information about the killer than the victims, and the reader learns little about the victims' backgrounds, though we learn almost everything about the killers. Sometimes the victims' families and friends are quoted, but so are the killers' families and neighbors. Even when the article is not about the killer, he and his crimes are mentioned. Among the articles for David Berkowitz, there is an obituary[10] (for the son of the man inside whom Berkowitz claimed a demon lived that told him to kill through the man's dog), and there is more information in the obituary about Berkowitz than the deceased. Albert DeSalvo or his nickname were mentioned in two obituaries.[11] These killers are clearly the main characters in the story, and anyone associated with them or their crimes became supporting characters that were not as important as the killers.

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[9] Emanuel Perlmutter, "'.44-Caliber Killer' Wounds Two in Car Parked on Queens Street," *The New York Times*, 27 June 1977, p. 39. and McFadden, Robert D. ".44 Killer Wounds 12th and 13th Victims." *The New York Times*, 1 August 1977, p. 1.

[10] "Real 'Son of Sam' Dies in a Crash on Highway," *The New York Times*, 6 October1979. p. 27.

[11] "Phillip J. DiNatale, 67, Dies; Led Boston Strangler Inquiry," *The New York Times*, 31 January 1987, p. 16. and "Peter Hurkos, 77, a Psychic Used by Police," *The New York Times*, 2 June 1988, sec. D, p. 26.

Serial Killers as Heroes

The main elements of the Hero myth, as theorized by Jack Lule, are the "humble beginning," the "quest," and the "triumph." Other elements of the myth include the degradation of the hero, the hero's obstacles, and the return of the hero. All elements of the Hero myth were found in the articles about David Berkowitz (the "Son of Sam"), Albert DeSalvo (the "Boston Strangler"), and Richard Ramirez (the "Night Stalker").

Humble Beginning

After a killer is caught, people want to learn all that they can about him, and most articles after an arrest mention biographical information about the killer. David Berkowitz is repeatedly described as a loner who was adopted as a baby, grew up in the Bronx, and was an "unexceptional" student.[12] Articles also mention that he "had little money,"[13] as well as a poor family who could not afford his legal defense. He had served in the Army and worked as an auxiliary police officer, a security guard and a postal clerk, all unassuming occupations. Albert DeSalvo is described in several articles as having a "horrifying background"[14] and a bad home life when he was a child. He had also worked as a construction worker and military policeman, both humble occupations. Richard Ramirez is described as a "drifter," with a troubled childhood and little money. Thus, it is apparent that all three serial killers were men of humble beginnings. None of them had a good childhood, and none was financially well off. Berkowitz and DeSalvo seemed to be good citizens, as they were usually employed and mostly stayed out of serious legal

[12] Robert McFadden, "'Sam' Suspect, Heavily Guarded, Arraigned and Held for Testing," *The New York Times*, 12 August 1977, sec. A, p. 10.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Fremont-Smith, "Books of The Times: A Maniac on the Loose," 39.

trouble. Ramirez, on the other hand, had been in legal trouble and was rarely employed, but it is reiterated often that he came from a poor, Hispanic neighborhood and had few opportunities to make something of himself. All killers had humble backgrounds, and the articles make this clear by repeating the background information over and over again. It becomes all the more remarkable, then, that these three, coming from poor, humble beginnings, became as famous as they now are.

Preliminary Quest and Triumph

After analyzing the articles, it became apparent that the newspaper portrayed each of the killers as having two quests in which each triumphed. First, news stories set these men apart from others by presenting them as exceptional killers. In this sense, *The New York Times* depicted their actions as a quest, not of notoriety, but one of recognition. The newspaper chronicled their accomplishment of this quest through murder. The media made these three serial killers some of the best known in the history of murder in the United States. Media coverage, through elements of the Hero myth, showed that the killers deserved the attention because they did something exceptional to stand out from other murderers, that their crimes were more brutal and more shocking than other killers' crimes.

One article published a statement from David Berkowitz about his "determination to murder 'to make people notice me'"[15] and another describes his crimes as his "handiwork,"[16] both statements establishing the hero's quest of recognition and the

[15] Howard Blum, "Re-examination of Berkowitz Files Offers New Insights," *The New York Times*, 17 May 1978, sec. B, p. 1.
[16] "'Son of Sam' Adds Four Names in New Letter, Police Disclose," *The New York Times*, 6 June 1977, p. 55.

realization of it. Other articles depict a triumph in this quest; they describe Berkowitz as "a major killer"[17] and a "sophisticated criminal,"[18] and it is noted over and over again that his crimes were "among the longest by a single assailant in New York history,"[19] "the largest manhunt in the city's history,"[20] "a special case that required special treatment,"[21] and "the most publicized murder in New York history."[22] It is also reported in the articles that more than 100 police officers and detectives worked on the case, and it cost more than $1 million. One article calls Berkowitz the "elusive 'Son of Sam.'"[23] Since the literal meaning of "elusive" is to be evasive or to escape by being daring or skillful, calling him "elusive" suggests that he was skillful, which implies that he was especially good as what he did. These descriptions of Berkowitz and his crimes in the newspaper establish the preliminary quest (recognition) of this "hero" and suggest a triumph (achieving recognition) in it.

Articles describe Albert DeSalvo's crimes as "monstrous"[24] and "one of the most extraordinary and exhaustive manhunts in modern criminal history."[25] One article even quotes him as saying about his crimes, "It's bigger than the Brink robbery."[26] Using

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[17] Molly Ivins, "Stalking a Man Called 'Son of Sam,' the .44-Caliber Killer," *The New York Times*, 21 May 1977, p. 25.
[18] Lawrence Van Gelder, "Interview: The Corrupt are Still His Target," *The New York Times*, 17 July 1977, p. 2.
[19] Perlmutter, "'.44-Caliber Killer' Wounds Two in Car Parked on Queens Street," 1.
[20] Carey Winfrey, "'Son of Sam' Case Poses thorny Issues for Press," *The New York Times*, 22 August 1977, p. 1.
[21] Leonard Buder, "25 Win Promotions in 'Son of Sam' Case; All are Cited for Role on the Arrest of Berkowitz – Yonkers Policeman and Civilian are Given Citations," *The New York Times*, 20 August 1977, p. 1.
[22] Blaine Harden, "'Son of Sam' Weeps, as Others Rage, at Movie," *The New York Times*, 20 June 1999, p. 1.
[23] "Where the 'Son of Sam' Struck, Young Women Walk in Fear," *The New York Times*, 30 June 1977, p. 21.
[24] Homer Bigart, "'Boston Strangler' Guilty in 4 Attacks," *The New York Times*, 19 January 1967, p. 21.
[25] Fremont-Smith, "Books of The Times: A Maniac on the Loose," 39.
[26] Homer Bigart, "Plea by DeSalvo is Called a Ruse: State Witness Says Suspect Outlined Insanity Strategy," *The New York Times*, 14 January 1967, p. 13.

words like "monstrous" in articles about the killer suggests that he stood out and excelled in his performance of something (murder). The articles about DeSalvo establish the hero's quest of recognition and performing better than others and indicate his triumph in the quest.

An article about Richard Ramirez says, "'These were horrible crimes,' Mr. Reiner said. 'Many investigators who have gone to the scene say they saw some of the most grotesque things they have seen in their experience.'"[27] Thus, the article sets Ramirez apart from other murderers by portraying him as going above and beyond what had been done before. A triumph in the quest of recognition is evident here. Another article notes, "The attacks Mr. Ramirez is charged with … earned the attacker the name 'night stalker.'"[28] The word "earn" is usually positively associated with diligent hard work and effort, both societal values. Using the word here implies that Ramirez received the nickname because of his hard work and effort and that he did something extraordinary to be labeled with this name. This is more evidence of the newspaper depicting a triumph in the killer's quest.

Secondary Quest and Triumph

Later articles in *The New York Times* about the killers (mostly those published after the killers' arrests) suggest a change in the heroes' quest, or the beginning of a second quest. The newspaper began to depict the killers' actions as a quest of fame and infamy, and they are shown to be triumphant in this quest (achieving fame and infamy) in many instances.

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[27] Robert Lindsey, "Suspect in Coast Deaths Charged in One Murder," *The New York Times*, 4 September 1985, sec. A, p. 14.
[28] Ibid.

The articles show a triumph in the second quest in similar ways for all three serial killers. Many articles about each killer note the "widespread publicity" of the cases and the immense media and public interest in the cases. Other articles indicate that the killers would have the opportunities to profit from their crimes by selling their stories to the media. Reports mention that people would be willing to pay to read (and/or watch movie or television versions of) the killers' stories. For David Berkowitz and Albert DeSalvo, there are articles that detail books, films and television movies about them, which implies their celebrity status. The articles also note the media's determination to cover every aspect of the cases, building the superstar status of these killers and, thus, showing a triumph in the quest of fame.

Some articles about Berkowitz describe and quote from letters he sent to the media, evidencing his fame, since the newspaper knew that the public would be interested in what the killer had to say. One article notes that Berkowitz called a press conference,[29] which again shows media and public interest and reinforces his fame, or triumph in his quest. Many other articles describe the national and even worldwide interest in Berkowitz. One reads, "[Detectives] have answered thousands of phone calls that come in from around the world on five lines,"[30] confirming the huge public interest in Berkowitz. Articles were also published about members of the media who got into legal trouble because of their determination to cover the story about the killer. Several articles report about a journalist who bribed a corrections officer to take pictures of Berkowitz in prison and three other journalists and one photographer who were found

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[29] David Abrahamsen, "Unmasking 'Son of Sam's' Demons," *The New York Times*, 1 July 1979, sec. SM, p. 5.

[30] Howard Blum, "Psychopaths are Harder to Find than Other Criminals: From Door to Door and from Hypnotists to Numerologists," *The New York Times*, 7 August 1977, sec. E, p. 6.

inside Berkowitz's apartment after his arrest. The articles portrayed the media as acting just like the paparazzi that follow celebrities around, take pictures of them, and find out everything they can about them. In this sense, the killers are shown to be as famous as celebrities, as they are in the media spotlight in the same way. One article says, "Indeed, there are few areas of the country where the media have not carried numerous detailed accounts of the matter."[31] In fact, the media – including *The New York Times* – so extensively covered Berkowitz that the street number of his apartment building was changed after his arrest, and those who lived in the building were asked to use the new address immediately to avoid association with Berkowitz. Another article[32] reports about a letter Berkowitz wrote to a woman that sold for $400 at an auction that also sold a letter written by former president Richard Nixon, further indicating his celebrity status, or the hero's triumph of the quest of fame. Several articles refer to a law named after Berkowitz (the so-called Son of Sam law) when reporting about stories that are unrelated to the killer, though the use of the nickname and the short description of his crimes that always accompanies such stories evidences the killer's fame and now even infamy. One of these articles notes, "It was the biggest arrest in a New York City case since the apprehension of the 'Son of Sam' killer in 1977."[33] Other articles showed that Berkowitz was famous when they described his apartment and possessions. One article even published excerpts from his journal and other writings.

Several articles about Albert DeSalvo explain that he said he was the "Boston Strangler" only to become famous and make money from the sale of his story, which

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[31] "Berkowitz Trial Change of Venue Denied by 4-Judge Appeals Panel," *The New York Times*, 8 December 1977, p. 39.
[32] "Berkowitz Letter to Brooklyn Woman is Sold for $400," *The New York Times*, 4 December 1977, p. 81.
[33] Martin Gottlieb, "Animosities Surface Between Agencies," *The New York Times*, 7 March 1993, p. 39.

establishes the quest of fame. Another article[34] furthers the triumph in this quest when it reports that DeSalvo and two other inmates escaped a mental institution but only mentions DeSalvo by name. His crimes are also noted, as is the fact that they "attracted worldwide attention," but it is obvious that *The New York Times* considered DeSalvo to be the "star" of the story, since he is the famous one. The other two inmates are simply characters in the on-going "Boston Strangler" story. The same article also notes that DeSalvo called a press conference after his capture, which shows that he was an important person in the media's eyes. Another article quotes DeSalvo as saying he escaped "to 'force public officials to admit' he is the 'Boston Strangler,'"[35] which reiterates the quest of fame because he is portrayed as insistent that he is the serial killer. Once the public and media admit this, then there is a triumph in the quest. It seems as though *The New York Times* admitted this throughout their coverage of DeSalvo, as the articles always refer to him by nickname and mention the murders.

An article about Ramirez describes the killer's realization of a triumph (achieving fame) when it quotes the killer as saying, "'You guys got me, the Stalker.'"[36] The newspaper shows that even the killer understands that his quest is fame, which is important because heroes must realize their quests before they can triumph in them. The article shows that Ramirez started to see himself as the media-created superstar and accepted this role, which is evident by his referring to himself by the name the media gave him. Another article describes the killer as bragging about his crimes to a prison

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[34] "'Boston Strangler' Flees Mental Institution: 2 Others Who Also Escaped Surrender," *The New York Times*, 25 February 1967, p. 1, 11.
[35] "Letter by DeSalvo Reported to Insist he was Strangler," *The New York Times*, 26 February 1967, p. 37.
[36] "Statements in Killings in West," *The New York Times*, 8 May 1986, sec. B, p. 18.

guard and even calling himself a "super criminal."[37] Publishing this statement in the newspaper further validates Ramirez's claim for recognition and his status as a criminal who "excels;" after all, the media are surveying his actions in prison and report to the interested public his actions and statements. The newspaper's extensive coverage of Ramirez implies his superstar status, making him appear to be a kind of "super criminal."

All of the killers achieved fame through the articles in *The New York Times*, and the articles have helped them continue to triumph in their quests of fame and infamy ever since the end of their trials through on-going news coverage. Their constant triumph is also evident when considering the books, fan clubs, Web sites, T-shirts, trading cards, calendars, and other paraphernalia that depict them or tell their stories. And these products are even promoted in the media through articles that are continually published about these paraphernalia. An article was published in *The New York Times* that reported about serial-killer trading cards and their immense popularity.[38] It reported that one company sold 8 million of them in the first week since they were released, and the editor in chief of the company said, "They are the biggest selling cards we have ever had." The article also noted that some people call the cards "unworthy imitations of cards depicting sports heroes," but trading card companies say, "The crime cards date to the 19th century and are as American as the baseball card." Publishing an article like this almost promotes the trading cards and surely implies the fame of the killers, which is their triumph in the quest of fame.

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[37] Marcia Chambers, "Suspect Quoted: 'I Love to Watch People Die,'" *The New York Times*, 9 May 1986, sec. A, p. 19.

[38] Josh Barbanel, "Nassau County Limits Sale of Crime Trading Cards," *The New York Times*, 16 June 1992, sec. B, p. 5.

Societal Values

Jack Lule discusses societal values such as risk-taking, power, dominance, control, force, and masculinity[39] when he discusses the modern societal values that modern heroes possess and uses baseball player Mark McGwire as an example. *The New York Times* depicted all three serial killers as possessing these kinds of values, as well as the societal value of fame itself. Articles about each of them mention these traits frequently, describing David Berkowitz as intelligent (because he used a semicolon in one of his letters), sophisticated and possessing "tremendous discipline,"[40] all of which are considered valuable and honorable traits by society. Several articles about both Berkowitz and Albert DeSalvo mention that they were in the Army and Military, respectively, which is considered honorable. In addition, several other articles mention that DeSalvo was the middleweight boxing champion of the United States Army occupation forces in Germany after the war, which shows athletic ability, a valued trait in the United States. Another article describes him as "clever,"[41] which is usually associated with positive traits. One article describes Richard Ramirez as having a "husky voice,"[42] a masculine trait. In this way, *The New York Times*' depiction of these men includes many traits that are considered valuable in society.

Obstacles and Degradation

The New York Times described obstacles the serial killers encountered during their quests, the most obvious examples are being caught for their crimes, arrested,

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[39] Lule, *Daily News, Eternal Stories*, 99.
[40] Van Gelder, "Interview: The Corrupt are Still His Target," 2.
[41] Bigart, "'Boston Strangler' Guilty in 4 Attacks," 21.
[42] "Murder Trial Jury Told to Continue; Judge Says Slaying of Panel Member Should Not Halt 'Night Stalker' Case," *The New York Times*, 17 August 1989, sec. A, p. 20.

convicted and sentenced. The newspaper also describes a different obstacle that Berkowitz encountered while imprisoned: he was slashed in the neck by another inmate, and *The New York Times* made sure to cover the story on the day that it happened to inform the public about the incident and the prognosis of his expected recovery.[43] This shows that people obviously want to know everything that happens to this hero, including his obstacles and triumphs, and the media realize this and even reinforce this interest through constant coverage of the killers and everything that happens to them.

Another part of the Hero myth describes the degradation of the hero. *The New York Times* made it clear that not everyone looked up to or idolized the killers; many degraded them (though they were just as fascinated with them and followed the coverage of them just as much as those who idolized them). One article reported about what people in the affected neighborhoods thought about Berkowitx, and most agreed that he should be killed for his crimes. Another article describes Berkowitz as the "wretched defendant."[44] An article about Albert DeSalvo describes him as "an uncontrollable human vegetable,"[45] which was a quote from his lawyer, and another as "a dangerous and uncontrollable beast."[46] And an article about Richard Ramirez describes him as "a pathetic human being."[47] The newspaper published reports about the media and the public degrading all three killers, but it continued to reiterate (through continued and thorough coverage) the importance of the killers and, by keeping them in the public eye for many years, seemed to suggest that people should continue to follow them.

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[43] "'Son of Sam' Killer is Slashed in the Neck at Attica," *The New York Times*, 11 July 1979, sec. B, p. 1.
[44] "Judgment on Son of Sam," *The New York Times*, 11 May 1978, sec. A, p. 22.
[45] Homer Bigart, "Client Killed 13, Bailey Tells Jury," *The New York Times*, 13 January 1967, p. 81.
[46] Bigart, "'Boston Strangler' Guilty in 4 Attacks," 21.
[47] "Court in Los Angeles Gives 'Night Stalker' Death in 13 Killings," *The New York Times*, 8 November 1989, sec. A, p. 18.

Return

The last element of the Hero myth is the return of the hero. True heroes remain in the public eye for a long time, and, even though coverage of them may diminish over time, they continue to reappear many years after their prime time in the spotlight. This is true for serial killers, especially for those who are as famous as the three discussed here, and is obvious when books are written about them, films are made about them, and other murderabilia depicting them is sold. But, these killers reappear in the news, too. *The New York Times* shows David Berkowitz's return every time it mentions the "Son of Sam" laws because the articles typically include an explanation of how the law got its name. In 1990 (12 years after Berkowitz was convicted of the "Son of Sam" crimes), *The New York Times* published an article about the "Zodiac Killer," which referenced Berkowitz: "Four months after the gunman who calls himself the Zodiac shot his first victim, the largest police task force assembled in New York City since the Son of Sam murders is still baffled…"[48] In 1993 (15 years after his conviction), the newspaper published an article that promotes a series of three interviews with Berkowitz that were to be aired on *Inside Edition*.[49] In 1996, the newspaper again referenced him in an article about the "Zodiac Killer,"[50] and in 1998 (20 years after his conviction), an article was published that discussed a planned film about Berkowitz and his crimes entitled *Summer of Sam*.[51] All of these articles mark returns of David Berkowitz, the hero in the "Son of Sam" story, and he was covered in *The New York Times* for 22 years.

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[48] James C. McKinley, Jr., "In the Zodiac Case, Still More Riddles Than Clues," *The New York Times*, 9 July 1990, sec. B, p. 1.
[49] "'Son of Sam,' on TV, Denies 70's Shootings," *The New York Times*, 8 November 1993, sec. B, p. 2.
[50] Nick Ravo, "Case of 'Zodiac' Gunman Sparked Panic in 1990; Shooter Cited Victims' Birth Dates and Signs," *The New York Times*, 19 June 1996, sec. B, p. 3.
[51] Karen W. Arenson, "Parents of Son of Sam Victim are Angered by Planned Movie," *The New York Times*, 12 July 1998, p. 31.

In 1968 (3 years after his confession to the "Boston Strangler" crimes), *The New York Times* showed a return of Albert DeSalvo in an article that reported the killer's protest about the opening of a movie about him and his crimes.[52] In 1975 (10 years after his confession), an article was published that mentions DeSalvo's death and discusses the two inmates who were charged with conspiring to kill DeSalvo.[53] In 1976, the newspaper again showed a return of DeSalvo by making him the butt of a joke in an article that is not specifically about him: "Having as your lawyer in a capital case the writer who is wheeling and dealing your life story is about the same as hiring the Boston Strangler as a masseur."[54] In 1986, an article compared DeSalvo to other famous people who affected Boston, including George III and athlete Ralph Sampson.[55] All of these articles (as well as other) show his return and also imply his celebrity status. Other articles briefly mention him until 1996, as *The New York Times* covered Albert DeSalvo for 29 years.

The New York Times did not depict Richard Ramirez's return like Berkowitz and DeSalvo, as he was only covered in the newspaper for 4 years. This may be because he committed his crimes in California, which is far from home for *The New York Times*. His return was, instead, in other media. Recent examples include references to the killer in news media like *U.S. News & World Report*,[56] *USA Today*,[57] *The Wall Street Journal*,[58]

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[52] "DeSalvo Seeks $2-Million in 'Boston Strangler' Suit," *The New York Times*, 4 December 1968, p. 56.
[53] "2d Trial of 2 for Conspiring to Kill Strangler a Mistrial," *The New York Times*, 7 March 1975, p. 47.
[54] "Book Ends," *The New York Times*, 12 December 1976, sec. BR, p. 11.
[55] Ira Berkow, "Sampson's Long Day," *The New York Times*, 9 June 1986, sec. C, p. 6.
[56] Samantha Levine, "Famously Evil," *U.S. News & World Report*, vol. 133, i. 15 (21 October 2002): 24.
[57] Kevin Johnson, "Six Serial Killers: Their Crimes and Fates," *USA Today*, 1 July 1999, sec. A, p. 12.
[58] Jess Bravin, "Death Rate for Killers," *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 November 1998, sec. CA, p.1.

and *Time*[59] and in entertainment and celebrity-focused media like *Variety*,[60] *Hollywood Reporter*,[61] *Cosmopolitan*,[62] and *People Weekly*.[63]

Summary

The textual analysis of these articles suggests the presence of the Hero myth in the coverage of serial killers David Berkowitz, Alvert DeSalvo and Richard Ramirez. It is important to note, however, that the articles did not clearly show "the early mark of greatness" element of the myth. This is the only place where coverage of serial killers seems to stray from the Hero myth, though we have established that the coverage depicted the killers as a different kind of hero, a more perverse version. Straying from the myth at this early point may be the reason why the coverage strays the killers themselves from the traditional definition of the "great hero" to which society has become accustomed.

Analyzing these texts helps uncover societal meanings about the public's fascination with the hero, the media's exploitation of the hero, and the hero's journey from his humble birth to realizing his quest to triumphing in his quest. These killers started out as troubled children with few opportunities growing up, but they worked hard to become famous and even infamous. Even after death, they will live on in the public's memory.

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[59] "Dances with Werewolves," *Time*, vol. 143, i. 14 (4 April 1994): 64.
[60] Scott Foundas, "Nightstalker," *Variety*, vol. 390, i. 2 (24 February-2 March 2003): 55.
[61] Zorianna Kit, "Fisher Stalking New Killer for Follow-up Film," *Hollywood Reporter*, vol. 376 (23 December 2002): 3.
[62] Melba Newsome, "When a Woman Loves a Killer," *Cosmopolitan*, vol. 229, i. 4 (October 2000): 260.
[63] Mark Bautz, "The Night Stalker," *People Weekly*, vol. 46, i. 6 (5 August 1996): 33.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis examined the ways in which newspapers, specifically *The New York Times*, construct meanings about society and provide ways for people to understand their world. The coverage of three serial killers – David Berkowitz (the "Son of Sam"), Albert DeSalvo (the "Boston Strangler"), and Richard Ramirez (the "Night Stalker") – shows elements of the Hero myth and how the media continue to construct the myth in news stories as they have always done. In addition, this thesis explored the public fascination with serial murder and the media's understanding of this and exploitation of it through their coverage.

This study was limited to analyzing coverage of just three serial killers in only one newspaper. Future research could be conducted that would analyze the coverage of other serial killers in *The New York Times* and in other publications. Also, it would be interesting to analyze coverage of the three serial killers studied here in other newspapers and other media and compare the findings to those in this study.

What Can We Learn About Society?

Analyzing the articles about the serial killers uncovered many interesting insights into society. People use myths to make sense of their world, and myths can be used to teach people about societal ideals and values. Myths can be found in many different

stories that people tell each other, including news stories. Myths and news are both stories of public interest, and the news regularly uses these known molds to deliver new stories. Uncovering the myths present in news stories can teach us much about society and its values.

It is clear that serial murder is more fascinating and newsworthy than single murder, since the murders were not covered much until the police determined that they were connected. Single murder is so commonplace that it is not shocking or very interesting to people anymore, but serial murder is rare and shocking, so people want to learn all about it. Many single murderers have clear motives, but serial murderers usually do not, making them more mysterious and captivating. Serial killers are not just criminals, but they are "super criminals," as Ramirez called himself. They perform murder "better" than most other killers; they possess many traits that are considered valuable and impressive in society: determination, skill, dedication, masculinity, strength, force and control. There stories are told in the same ways that other celebrities' stories are in the media, and they, too, have action figures depicting them, trading cards, movies, books, and fan clubs and Web sites devoted to them. Serial killers, through extensive news coverage, become superstars as big as the movie action hero, homerun hitter and pop star.

It is clear that people in society are interested in violence, as evident in our love for crime television shows, action movies, true-crime books, and sports like boxing, hockey and wrestling. We enjoy seeing gruesome scenes, and we love the thrill of action and being scared, as manifest in our love for horror movies, ghost stories and roller coasters. It makes sense, then, that we would like news stories about serial killers, but at

the same time, we want to feel safe. The frequent use of nicknames for serial killers is a product of our ambivalence towards these characters. We are both fascinated and terrified. Rarely are nicknames assigned to the perpetrators of single murders. In these cases, we usually know the motive (passion, revenge, mental illness, etc.), and the victim is not random. A serial killer is far scarier, and the nickname works towards desensitizing the public to the real violence and the fright that surrounds cases of serial murder. In similar fashion to reading a book or watching a movie, we can enjoy the horror story without feeling as frightened. Using nicknames for serial killers makes them seem like characters in a story or play, and therefore less real, and their crimes, too, become less real.

The thrill of being scared (up to a point) is also fueled by the kinds of nicknames associated to the serial killers. Sometimes the nickname identifies the killer by his or her crime (like the "Boston Strangler" or any nickname that contains the words "killer" or "slayer"), and many identify the area where the murders took place (the "Boston Strangler," the "Sunset Strip Killer" – Douglas Clark, or the "Plainfield Ghoul" – Ed Gein). These kinds of nicknames are used to remind the public of what the hero of the story was known for and where he committed his crimes. Other nicknames use more emotion-provoking words in them, like "ripper" ("Jack the Ripper"), "stalker" (the "Night Stalker"), or "slasher" (the "Sunday Morning Slasher" – Coral Eugene Watts), which are more sensational nicknames that also produce emotion in the people who follow the stories and keep their interest high. Still, other nicknames support the storybook concept even better. They actually contain words taken directly from the pages of a storybook or horror movie, further fictionalizing the real crimes and desensitizing the

public; some of these nicknames include the "Milwaukee Monster" (Jeffrey Dahmer), the "Beast of the Black Forest" (Heinrich Pommerencke), the "Pied Piper of Tucson" (Charles Schmid), the "Killer Clown" (John Wayne Gacy), and the "Vampire of Sacramento" (Richard Trenton Chase). Monsters, beasts and vampires are fictional characters used in books and movies; clowns are used for entertainment; and we all know the fictional story of the pied piper. These nicknames, taken from literature, the arts and popular culture, further construct the serial killer and his/her crimes as a "storybook of murder."

Media and Society

The media are very aware of people's love of violence and being scared (though in a safe setting), and they take advantage of this through their coverage of serial killers, mainly through the creation and use of nicknames, as noted above. But the media exploit these loves in other ways too. Headlines in news stories are supposed to catch the reader's attention, but in serial killer stories, they do more than just that; they also produce fear, which makes the reader want to read the story. This was evident in the articles analyzed in this thesis. Some of these fear-provoking headlines include:

"Where the 'Son of Sam' Struck, Young Women Walk in Fear"[1]

"A Year Later 'Son of Sam' Still on Loose"[2]

"Apprehension Over 'Son of Sam' Is Leaving Lovers Lanes Vacant"[3]

"Suspect Quoted: 'I Love to Watch People Die'"[4]

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[1] "Where the 'Son of Sam' Struck, Young Women Walk in Fear," *The New York Times*, 30 June 1977, p. 21.
[2] "A Year Later 'Son of Sam' Still on Loose," *The New York Times*, 3 July 1977, p. 98.
[3] Robert Hanley, "Apprehension Over 'Son of Sam' is Leaving Lovers Lanes Vacant," *The New York Times*, 11 August 1977, sec. D, p. 23.

These kinds of headlines provoke emotion and fear in readers and appeal to their interest in horror and violence and their love of being scared. People are likely to read articles with headlines like these. At the same time, the use of nicknames moderates the fear. The end result is an appealing story that seems distant to the reader. According to Ellen Booth Church, an early childhood consultant for the New York State Department of Education and other programs across the country, "[P]eople need routines. You could say that routines and rituals are emotional and social 'fences' and templates. They provide people with behavior boundaries, procedures for solving problems, prompts for acting appropriately, patterns for celebrations, and ways for coping."[5] Most people in society feel most comfortable in non-chaotic situations. This may further explain our interest in serial murder because one common component of serial murder is that it is performed ritualistically.[6]

We can usually establish patterns in serial murder, making the crimes more predictable and enabling us to establish a criminal profile or theories that may predict his or her next move. It is evident in the articles analyzed that the newspapers strive to satisfy people's need for patterns to make sense of a stressful situation. For instance, one of the early articles about David Berkowitz stated that police officers are working to establish a pattern in the crimes: "Efforts so far to determine any pattern in the seven shootings that have left five persons dead and six wounded have been unsuccessful…One common factor has been the use of the same Charter Arms Bulldog .44 special revolver in each

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[4] Marcia Chambers, "Suspect Quoted: 'I Love to Watch People Die,'" *The New York Times*, 9 May 1986, sec. A, p. 19.

[5] Ellen Booth Church, "Why Children Need Rituals & Routines," *Scholastic Inc.*, available from http://www.scholastic.com/garanimals/article.htm; Internet; accessed June 2003.

[6] David Lester, *Serial Killers: The Insatiable Passion*, (Philadelphia: The Charles Press, Publishers, Inc., 1995), 94.

shooting."[7] It also notes that a previous theory about a pattern in the crimes (that the killer was only killing women who had long, dark hair) was unfounded. Many articles mentioned that women in New York City had begun to dye their hair blonde and wear it up, which shows that the people bought into the theory as a desperate attempt of establishing a pattern and predicting the killer's moves. A young girl could feel safe if she did not match the pattern of victims, and when this theory was found to be false, people felt very uneasy, which is noted several times in various articles. Subsequent articles continued to report about possible patterns in the crimes or mention already established patterns. This occurred in articles about all three killers. The articles about Albert DeSalvo note that all his victims were strangled, and for Richard Ramirez, there was a pattern of satanic symbols left in the homes of victims. Coverage of these killers and their crimes suggested patterns and routines that comforted us by providing some sense of stability and understanding of these horrific events.

Continuing the Hero Myth

The previous chapter explains the elements of the Hero myth that were found in the articles analyzed about each of the three serial killers. This myth is perpetuated over and over again in the news media and is used for all kinds of heroes, including athletes, musicians and movie stars. The headlines are similarly worded, the pictures show the same types of things (crime scenes, court rooms and portraits of the killers, police officers and occasionally the victims), and the articles are written in the same dramatic,

[7] Peter Kihss, ".44 Killer's Victims Did Not All Have Long, Dark Hair." *The New York Times*, 1 July 1977, p. 20.

storybook way. The myth creates sympathy and admiration for the hero, and we love to see the hero return in news stories for years.

The Hero myth also shows how victims of serial murder are always secondary characters in the story, behind the killer, who is the lead character. Victims are often mentioned by name, but we almost never learn anything else about them. Every once in a while, there is a picture of a victim in a news story, but it is very rare; this study analyzed 208 articles, and only two of which published a picture of a victim. Many of them, however, published pictures of the killers. We also learned about the killers' backgrounds, including job experience, childhoods, criminal history and current homelives.

Though the Hero myth commonly recounts stories of greatness, I argue that serial killers become heroes in news stories in a more perverse way. Stories about serial killers follow the same pattern as those about usual heroes. They do create celebrities out of the killers and make them into heroes in a different sort of way, as evidenced in the presence of serial killer fan clubs and Web sites. Even though serial killers exemplify an almost anti-hero to usual societal values and norms, they are heroes just the same to those in society who do not conform to societal values and norms. Serial killers are surely heroes, using the dictionary definition: they are celebrated for their bold exploits, noted for special achievement in a particular field (murder), and the principal characters in literary works. They are a different kind of hero for a different kind of people to honor. At the same time, though most people in society do not value serial killers in the same way they value great sports figures and pop stars, they are just as – if not more – fascinated by

them. This exposes society's fascination with violence and murder, which can then turn the serial killer into a perverse version of the hero.

"The nature of the Hero shapes – and is shaped by – society. The Hero can reveal much about society,"[8] says Lule. Just as we can be self-conscious about our admiration for all types of heroes, we are perhaps even ashamed of our admiration and fascination with serial killer heroes. Lule says, "Our mass-mediated society has transformed heroes into celebrities, human pseudoevents who can be created, packaged, marketed. Once created and consumed, these false heroes are degraded and discarded."[9] If this is true, then serial killers are not false heroes at all, but they are very much the real things. Though people in society often degrade serial killers during their crimes, trials and convictions, we never discard them. The news still covers them throughout their time in prison, their parole hearings, and the rest of their lives. We see this in the news and also in crime TV shows, serial killer biographies and autobiographies, true-crime books and movies detailing the killers' lives and crimes.

The creation of these heroes is, of course, the mass media's doing. "Mass media, publishing online or on-air 24 hours a day, have an insatiable need for well-known figures capable of attracting and holding audiences."[10] Serial killers, through society's fascination with them, surely attract and hold attention, which is just what they need to reach their hero status. "To achieve mythic heights, to become an exemplary social model, the Hero must achieve celebrity status."[11] Their stories sell newspapers, and people can't seem to get enough. The killers are celebrities – the new heroes, and, unlike

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[8] Jack Lule, *Daily News, Eternal Stories* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2001), 82.
[9] Ibid., 83.
[10] Ibid., 84.
[11] Ibid., 101.

pop stars and sports figures, their notoriety is not likely to be forgotten. They are, in essence, the ultimate, though perverse, heroes.

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APPENDIX

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