

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165



# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

**16** YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

**VOL. 16 ISSUE-2, APRIL 2025**

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ISSN 2278-9529

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**

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## **Formation of Psychopathic Cannibalistic Serial Killer: The Effect of Trauma on Hannibal Lecter's Transformation into a Monster**

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15317677>

**Article History:** Submitted-30/03/2025, Revised-12/04/2025, Accepted-17/04/2025, Published-30/04/2025.

### **Abstract:**

The earth one lives on is a dystopia. It is said that the demons have all the best tunes. Man's infatuation with devilry devil enchants a man and stimulates them in a world of wonder that morality never can. One of the most well-rounded characters in the psychological thriller genre is Hannibal Lecter, and Thomas Harris is credited for the character's revolution in the genre. The study aims to demonstrate the impact of childhood trauma on the main character and its overall effect on personality formation into a serial killer and man-eating monster. Traumatic memories could lead to mental disorientation and trigger psychopathic traits. The study is carried out by using psychological research based on the Freudian Psychoanalysis Theory. Though the study observed the impact that trauma left on Hannibal, the study also highlighted other mental illnesses such as Wendigo Psychosis and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which shows symptoms such as sweating, nightmare stress-triggered flashbacks inside the character, which was the

consequence of his sister's death. His actions in taking retribution on the barbarians are part of his traumatized memory. Through the lens of Psychoanalysis theory, further study examines the journey of a psyche, which can be seen as a 'victim turn to a perpetrator' where the character's mind crosses through a complex traumatized event, which is the driving force in Hannibal's turning into a monster.

**Keywords: Cannibalism, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Serial Killing, Trauma, Wendigo Psychosis.**

## **Introduction**

Everything in this world has two handles. Murder, for instance, may be laid hold of by its moral handle (as it generally is in the pulpit and at the Old Bailey), and that, I confess, is its weak side; or it may also be treated aesthetically, as the Germans call it that is, in relation to good taste. (7)

— Thomas De Quincey

Following the aforementioned death paradox, which is based on Michel Foucault's *Language to Infinity* (1996), articulates that the incapacity of language to comprehend death leads to an overt productivity of texts that either capture or consume imaginations of death upon stagnation. If this theory is accepted, then the hunger metaphor that guides this study reveals the character's soul as being profoundly rife with murderous desires. Essentially, the exterior British eye of author D.H. Lawrence, who, in his essay by James Fenimore Cooper, asserts that there is a killer at the core of the character, claims that everything else, including democracy, love, and sliding into desire, is a kind of by-play. The basic American soul is harsh, solitary, stoic, and a murderer. It hasn't melted yet. The world has been persistently afflicted by the emergence of serial killers over numerous decades, creating a pervasive atmosphere of fear and intrigue within society. In the pursuit of

psychological insight, the lives of these serial killers are often dissected down to the most minuscule and intricate details, with the hope that such an examination may yield a deeper understanding of the multifaceted factors that contribute to the transformation of an ordinary individual into a monstrous entity. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of their motivations and behaviours, it is essential to recognize that a serial killer is often perceived by society as a seemingly benign individual, possibly a friend or an acquaintance with whom they share some form of interpersonal relationship; however, their true nature, characterized by a latent killer instinct, remains obscured from public knowledge until the heinous crimes they commit are thrust into the harsh light of societal scrutiny. By the time the public becomes aware of the psychological disorders and the murderous instincts that underpin such individuals, it is regrettably too late for many, as these entities have a rich and often disturbing history that extends beyond their atrocious acts to encompass the extremes of psychological affliction that they embody. Given that these individuals inhabit the same social spaces as other members of society, it becomes increasingly challenging to identify them as the serial killers they are, as their true nature is virtually undetectable until they commence their brutal acts of violence against innocent lives, driven by motives rooted in their own psychological and emotional satisfaction.

The phenomenon of cannibalistic serial killers has carved out a distinct and unsettling niche within the broader landscape of serial homicide, further complicating our understanding of this disturbing trend. Philippa Gates and her colleague Stacy Gillis, in their *The Devil Himself Villainy in Detective Fiction and Film* (2008), illustrate that “The mass, multiple or serial killer has, moreover, been creatively deployed for some two hundred years as a means of articulating a sense of social dislocation and, specifically, as a means of examining the relation of the lone and often alienated individual to the purportedly democratic society that he or she inhabits.” (197)

The world in which an individual resides frequently reflects a nightmarish and dystopian environment where the forces of darkness and moral integrity engage in a tumultuous and unending struggle. Within this multifaceted and intricate context, enduring fascination with the nature of the devil, and its convoluted psychological underpinnings, has emerged as a prominent and persistent theme that has captured the attention of both film and literature throughout the ages. Within the psychological thriller genre, one can find some of the most enigmatic psychologically intricate characters, among whom the notorious figure of Hannibal Lecter, also called 'Hannibal the Cannibal,' an infamous creation crafted by the literary prowess of Thomas Harris. The character Lecter has not only transformed but also substantially revolutionized the genre by seamlessly amalgamating attributes of exceptional character as one of the most compelling and enthralling antagonists in the realm of modern fiction. This scholarly investigation aims to meticulously analyze the profound impact of childhood trauma on the trajectory of Hannibal Lecter's psychopathic personality development while simultaneously examining its pivotal role in his transformation into a serial killer and cannibalistic monstrosity. By employing Freudian Psychoanalysis as the central theoretical framework, this study will delve into the intricate ways in which traumatic memories can precipitate mental disorientation and contribute to the emergence of various psychopathic traits. Moreover, the research will also investigate the interconnection between other psychological disorders, such as Wendigo Psychosis and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as they pertain to Lecter's complex psychological evolution.

The environmental and genetic elements that influenced Hannibal's development into a psychopath are covered in this research. Based on the causes, this will examine the incidents—basically retaliation and painful childhood memories—that contribute to his psychological issues and turn him into a psychopath. In short, after Hannibal's parents were slain in a Nazi onslaught,

a group of five Hiwi (foreigners who volunteered to help Germany during WWII) subsequently found the lodge where he and his sister escaped. The two kids were taken prisoner by Nazi forces. Grutas, one of the barbarians, who has “held a thin chain that froze against the children’s skin as he looped it around their throats” (Harris 57). The troops began to starve as there were no animals to hunt due to the severe weather. After arguing about who Hannibal and Mischa should pick, they decided on Mischa, who was now ill with pneumonia. One of them remarked, ‘We have to eat or die’ Hannibal Lecter was staring at the kids while his mouth was full of blood, which was the only thing he could remember about the incident.

Eren Samancioglu, in “A Likable Cannibal: Why the Audience Likes Such a Villainous Character as Hannibal in Bryan Fuller's TV Show” (2021), articulates a compelling thesis regarding the existence of two distinct categories of cannibalism that merit thorough examination and analysis. The initial category pertains to what is classified as survival cannibalism, which manifests under dire circumstances when an individual finds themselves devoid of any alternative food sources and is thus compelled to resort to the consumption of human flesh as a means of ensuring their continued existence. Conversely, the second category of cannibalism is indicative of an underlying psychological disorder, wherein the individual engages in the act of consuming another human being with volition and awareness, driven by an intrinsic desire to partake in such acts. The infamous character Hannibal Lecter exemplifies this latter type of cannibalism. Enduring relentless torment and anguish due to distressing recollections from his traumatic past, Hannibal perpetuates the horrific cycle of cannibalism by exclusively feasting upon the internal organs of his unfortunate victims, a behaviour that is thoroughly examined by Bettina Gregory in “Hannibal Lecter: The Honey in the Lion’s Mouth” (2018). Notably, he deliberately refrains from consuming

the extraneous flesh of his victims and instead opts for vital body components, including but not limited to thymus glands, pancreases, and cerebral matter.

Hannibal, as a character, epitomizes an individual who possesses a profound understanding of his own value and self-worth, as he perceives himself to be an esteemed member of the upper echelons of society or the aristocracy. His actions are characterized by an unwavering commitment to excellence in all endeavours, a principle that extends to the highly intricate and deliberate act of cannibalism itself. In a bid to substantiate his own superiority and cultivated refinement, which are deeply rooted in his distinguished lineage, Hannibal exhibits meticulous concern regarding the manner in which he engages in the consumption of his victims. He exercises considerable discretion in selecting which specific anatomical components he intends to consume, and he devotes an extraordinary amount of attention to the elaborate preparation of his culinary offerings. This sophisticated and extravagant gourmet approach to the culinary preparation of the internal organs of his victims serves as a powerful testament to his belief that he occupies a far superior moral and intellectual position compared to those captors who obliterated his childhood, savagely devoured his sister as though she was mere prey, and inflicted upon him profound psychological trauma that would haunt him throughout the entirety of his life.

Throughout the entirety of the tetralogy, one will find a conspicuous absence of any definitive moment or passage wherein Hannibal is apprehended in the very act of his gruesome deeds. The audience is only privy to a narrative that recounts his historical cannibalistic transgressions, yet direct evidence of such acts remains predominantly obscured. In Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1989) "The doctors managed to save one of her eyes. Lecter was hooked up to the monitors the entire time. He broke her jaw to get at her tongue. His pulse never got over eighty-five, even when he swallowed it" (14). Carlo Cenciarelli, in "Dr. Lecter's

Taste for ‘Goldberg’, or: The Horror of Bach in the Hannibal Franchise” (2012), intriguingly observes that within the text *The Silence of the Lambs*, there exists merely a plethora of rumors surrounding his heinous crimes, such as allegations that he incited a fellow inmate to ingest his tongue, alongside the unsettling depiction of a disfigured nurse; however, there is a conspicuous lack of tangible evidence to substantiate his culpability. This absence of concrete proof underscores his remarkable cunning and strategic acumen. In a masterstroke of deception, Lecter orchestrates his escape from incarceration by committing the act of murder against a guard, subsequently removing the guard’s facial skin and applying it over his visage. Consequently, the ambulance personnel, under the impression that they are transporting the victim from the prison facility, are blissfully unaware that Lecter, the actual subject of their search, is in plain sight, cleverly camouflaged right before their very eyes.

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It is obvious that Hannibal, who was raised with a strong sense of duty by his parents, must feel guilty about unexpectedly losing his sister. Before being adopted by his uncle, Robert Lecter, and his wife, Lady Murasaki, Hannibal seemed to be a recluse. He accompanied the couple to France. Evidently, Hannibal Lecter had PTSD, which manifested as symptoms like sweating, nightmares, stress-triggered flashbacks, and flashbacks prior to developing major mental issues, in addition to early stages of psychopathic tendency. As depicted in the novel, "Hannibal screaming in his sleep, Mischa Mischa" (Harris 71). It is made clear that Hannibal Lecter already had a mental illness and was severely injured from the inside. He was emotionless and distant. Additionally, he had no regret for hurting other people. He hardly ever had friends as a teenager and hardly spoke to them. These were the initial manifestations of his psychopathic conduct, which grew worse once he was able to identify the murderer of his sister, which affected his psyche in a distorted manner.

The psychoanalytic theory formulated by Sigmund Freud in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1949) offers invaluable insights and profound understanding into the intricate development of human behaviour as well as the emergence of various mental disorders. Kartini Kartono in *Pengantar Metodologi Riset Sosial* (1980) claimed that situations in which the initial impulses and forces are constantly activated. Also, she asserts that as the conscious psychic life is understood and has a stronger connection to the unconscious psychic life, psychoanalysis is also known as 'verstehen' (understanding) psychology. According to Freud's theoretical propositions, childhood trauma is identified as a critical factor that significantly influences the formation of personality, often leaving an indelible mark on the individual's unconscious mind that persists throughout their life. Freud's structural model of the psyche, which is composed of the id, ego and superego, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the psychological state of Hannibal

Lecter. Within this model, the id, which is driven by primal instincts and urges, exerts a dominating influence over Lecter's compulsions, while his ego and superego, despite being highly developed, become increasingly overshadowed by the weight of his unresolved trauma and the repression of profound emotions also this can be understood in a different way that Lecter's id is overpowered on ego. Freud's Notions of Repression, along with the concept of the return of the repressed, are particularly salient when one attempts to analyze Lecter's actions, which can be interpreted as outward manifestations of deeply buried childhood traumas that he has yet to confront.

The psychological evolution of Hannibal Lecter is profoundly entrenched in the traumatic experiences of his early life, which play a crucial role in shaping his complex psyche. His formative years were characterized by extreme horror and violence when he tragically witnessed the horrific murder and subsequent cannibalization of his beloved sister by six deserters, Mischa, during the tumultuous period of World War II. Earlier, as described in the novel *Hannibal Rising* (2006) by Thomas Harris, the protagonist, Hannibal Lecter, is initially simply a decent young boy who adores his family, particularly his sister, Mischa Lecter. At the age of eight, Lecter was spotted playing in the kitchen garden with his cherished sister. In addition to laughing and rubbing dirt on each other's noses, they played with a goose with joy. The following passages from each paragraph provide proof that Lecter did so: "Five hundred years later Hannibal Lecter, eight years old and eighth of the name, stood in the kitchen garden with his little sister Mischa and threw bread to the black swans on the black water of the moat. Mischa held on to Hannibal's hand to steady herself and missed the most entirely on several throws. Big carp stirred the lily pads and sent the dragonflies soaring" (Harris 2). This intensely traumatic experience not only served as a foundational catalyst for his psychological transformation but also created a lasting scar that would shape his future actions. Freud asserts that traumatic events, if not adequately processed and

resolved, frequently give rise to the development of neurotic or psychotic tendencies within individuals. In Lecter's case, the trauma stemming from the brutal and inhumane loss of his sister led to an obsessive fixation with avenging her untimely death, culminating in the emergence of a predatory instinct that would come to define his adult existence, which is the neurotic effect. The complexities of his repressed grief, coupled with an all-consuming desire for vengeance, significantly influenced his worldview and precipitated his subsequent actions.

The inability to effectively process this traumatic experience in a manner that aligns with socially acceptable norms resulted in Lecter's gradual descent into the realm of psychopathy. As Freud suggests through his theoretical lens, unresolved trauma has the propensity to manifest in violent and destructive behaviours, often resulting in the victim's transformation into a perpetrator of violence. Hannibal Lecter's psychological state exhibits characteristics that align with a 'victim-turned-perpetrator' archetype, wherein his psyche undergoes a multifaceted and intricate metamorphosis that is fundamentally driven by an urgent need to reclaim a sense of control over the profound suffering he endured in his past.

While the foundational underpinnings of Freud's psychoanalytic theory serve as a pivotal framework for comprehending the multifaceted psychological development of Hannibal Lecter, it is imperative to acknowledge that additional psychiatric conditions, notably Wendigo Psychosis and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), provide further elucidation of his complex behavioural patterns. Wendigo Psychosis, a rare and culturally-bound syndrome, is characterized by an insatiable and overwhelming craving for human flesh, which presents a profound intersection with the psychological implications of Lecter's cannibalistic inclinations, primarily rooted in indigenous folklore. The conceptualization of consuming human flesh as a potent symbolic act of power and dominance resonates deeply with Lecter's intrinsic desire to exert

control over the vestiges of his tumultuous past, thereby enriching our understanding of his psychological profile.

Furthermore, the symptoms associated with PTSD, including a thirst for blood, are palpably reflected in Lecter's behavioural manifestations, which are characterized by recurring nightmares, stress-induced flashbacks, and obsessive-compulsive tendencies that permeate his daily existence. His lived experiences are congruent with the classic manifestations of PTSD, wherein unresolved trauma precipitates aggressive, detached, and often erratic behaviours that are indicative of a deeply troubled psyche. According to R. Glenn Schiraldi's *The Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Sourcebook* (2009), "flashback is an especially distressing form of reliving the traumatic event. In a flashback, someone goes back in time and relives the trauma" (8). Individuals suffering from PTSD frequently exhibit heightened levels of anxiety, a state of hypervigilance, and a profound emotional detachment— symptoms that can be distinctly identified in Lecter's meticulously calculated yet emotionally aloof interactions with others, thereby providing a rich avenue for psychological exploration. Hannibal still experiences nightmares about the horrific incidents even after moving in with his uncle. This is demonstrated by the following quotation: "Mischa, Mischa!' The cries rang down the stone corridors and Count Lecter and Lady Murasaki burst into Hannibal's room. He has ripped the pillow with his teeth and feathers are flying, Hannibal growls and screams, thrashing, fighting, and gritting his teeth" (Harris 84). Schiraldi claimed that "irritability or outbursts of anger may be combined with shame, frustration, betrayal, or other unpleasant emotions that lead to moodiness and explosions of pent-up anger" (9). Post-traumatic stress disorder has certain causes; Lecter's parent's death and Mischa's murder are among the wartime events seen in the novel. Also, he examined that "Individuals in a war zone can be subjected to a variety of traumatic events. Individuals may have been attacked, witnessed

the deaths of others, lost friends and comrades, been physically or sexually assaulted, witnessed mass death or suffering, or been otherwise a victim or observer of terrifying events during the war” (39)

When examined through the intricate lens of Freudian psychoanalysis, Hannibal Lecter's psychological odyssey can be interpreted as a complex interplay between his id-driven impulses and the deeply entrenched trauma that has shaped his existence. His metamorphosis from a profoundly traumatized child into a coldly calculated killer serves as a quintessential illustration of Freud's concept of repetition compulsion, which posits that individuals subconsciously reenact traumatic events in various forms throughout their lives. In Lecter's particular case, his heinous killings and cannibalistic predilections can be construed as a means of reliving and ultimately reclaiming agency over the traumatic experiences that have defined his past, thus encapsulating the tragic essence of his character.

Moreover, Lecter's remarkable ability to seamlessly integrate into the fabric of society, despite his underlying violent inclinations, poignantly reflects the inherent duality of human nature. Freud's theoretical construct of the uncanny, which articulates the phenomenon whereby something familiar transforms into a disturbingly strange entity, aptly elucidates the paradox embodied in Lecter's character. The dissonance between his outward charm and sophisticated demeanour, juxtaposed with his monstrous inclinations, engenders a disquieting contradiction that renders him an enigmatic and profoundly terrifying figure within the realm of psychological fiction, challenging our preconceived notions of morality and monstrosity.

The study confronting this complex subject matter encounters a multitude of challenges, chief among them being the inherent difficulty associated with diagnosing fictional characters through the lens of real-life psychological disorders. Although Freudian Psychoanalysis provides

a robust theoretical framework for analysis, the subjective and interpretative nature of literary criticism complicates efforts to establish definitive conclusions regarding Lecter's psychological state. Moreover, the significant overlap between various psychological conditions serves to further complicate the analytical process, as Lecter's character simultaneously embodied traits of psychopathy, PTSD, and culturally-bound syndromes such as Wendigo Psychosis. Wendigo psychosis is among the most severe mental diseases. The compelling and often overwhelming compulsion that drives specific individuals to seek out and consume human flesh is fundamentally what serves to differentiate this particular psychological condition, which is academically identified as the phenomenon known as the drive to eat human flesh. Alternatively, one might postulate that this entire concept could be nothing more than an elaborate fabrication, lacking any substantive basis in reality, notwithstanding the fact that the symptoms associated with wendigo psychosis are largely non-specific in nature, trained psychologists are nonetheless able to identify and recognize a variety of distinct traits that may be exhibited by individuals who are potential candidates for this diagnosis. Furthermore, it has been observed that some individuals may present with two distinct stages of this complex disorder: the initial stage is characterized by a state of passivity and a seemingly non-dangerous indifference towards the surrounding environment, while the subsequent stage is alarmingly marked by overt acts of cannibalism accompanied by violent behaviour. Wendigo psychosis, which can be considered a particular type of psychosis, is characterized by a constellation of symptoms that includes an intense and unwavering desire for human flesh, as well as an acute and profound fear of succumbing to the status of a cannibal, and this phenomenon is intricately linked to the cultural figure of the wendigo within the context of contemporary psychiatric discourse. It is important to note that this condition is classified as a

specific illness that is unique to certain cultural contexts, underscoring the interplay between psychological phenomena and cultural beliefs.

Another notable limitation inherent in this study is the potential tendency to romanticize or glorify serial killers within popular media narratives, which risks overshadowing the critical psychological analysis of trauma and its far-reaching consequences on individual behaviour and societal perceptions. The findings of this comprehensive study illuminate the critical role that childhood trauma plays in shaping the psychological evolution of Hannibal Lecter, thereby lending substantial support to Freud's assertion that repressed trauma can catalyze destructive behaviours. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that Lecter's actions are driven by a complex interplay of psychopathy, PTSD, and a symbolic representation of Wendigo's Psychosis, collectively contributing to his multifaceted character. His narrative exemplifies the troubling trajectory from victim to perpetrator, illustrating how unresolved trauma can transfigure an individual into a predatory figure within society. Additionally, the study underscores the exploration of the duality of human nature as it is articulated through Lecter's character, rendering him a compelling subject for in-depth psychological analysis and discourse.

To encapsulate the intricate and multifaceted effects of trauma on the character of Hannibal Lecter, one must delve into the profound implications that such experiences have had on his psychological and emotional development. The ramifications of this trauma can be delineated as follows. Firstly, one must consider the harrowing memories from his tragic childhood that haunt him persistently. Hannibal Lecter possessed an incredibly profound and abiding love for his sister, Mischa, and when he was confronted with the horrifying reality of her being brutally killed and subsequently cannibalized by Nazi soldiers, it was this traumatic event that catalyzed the onset of his disturbing transformation. The pervasive nature of this trauma rendered him so engulfed in

silence and despondency that he ultimately became withdrawn and reticent, refusing to articulate his thoughts or feelings to anyone. The haunting recollections of his sister's fate relentlessly plagued his mind, invading both his waking hours and his dreams, leading to an overwhelming sense of despair. Consequently, the aftermath of this trauma culminated in a complete absence of fear and sadness, instead fostering a burgeoning sense of aggression within him. Secondly, one must examine the emergence of a vengeful disposition that evolved as a direct consequence of his post-traumatic stress disorder, which manifested in an intense and abiding animosity towards the soldiers responsible for Mischa's tragic demise. Hannibal bore an unrelenting grudge against these malevolent figures, their faces indelibly etched in his memory, leading him to harbour a fervent desire for vengeance against them; indeed, he wished for their untimely deaths with a fervour that was almost palpable. However, this animosity was not confined solely to the soldiers; it extended to anyone who dared to provoke or challenge him, including his fellow orphans residing in the same orphanage and his mentors who were meant to guide him. In a particularly telling incident, he violently stabbed his mentor in the hand with a fork, driven by a mere moment of anger, demonstrating how deeply his rage had taken root. Following this pivotal moment, Hannibal became increasingly dominated by a thirst for vengeance, ultimately culminating in him committing the egregious act of murdering all the deserters who were complicit in the brutal killing of his beloved sister, Mischa. From that juncture onward, the manifestations of trauma became starkly apparent in Hannibal's behaviour and psychological state. He ultimately developed a Psychopathic Personality, wherein he began to perceive himself through an inflated lens akin to that of a deity, which significantly distorted his self-image and worldview. Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge that Wendigo's Psychosis emerged as yet another direct and alarming consequence of the trauma he endured in his formative years.



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