

Constructing the monstrous criminal in a crime fiction novel and a newspaper report: A comparison

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1. Introduction

I noticed when reading crime fiction novels and newspaper articles reporting on criminals that often the linguistic construction of a fictional criminal character in the former shows many parallels with that of a supposed real perpetrator in the latter. This impression accords with Gregoriou (2011:164) who states in relation to serial killers that she has not found much linguistic variation in their construction across the genres she analysed including newspapers and novels. This article contributes towards validating this observation for other criminals through textual analysis.

The reason for the resemblance in their construction appears to be that the text worlds (Gavins 2007) of some crime fiction novels and all newspaper articles reporting on real crime overlap with our discourse world so that the same rules, norms and underlying ideologies apply in both. Both the fictional criminal character in a novel and the factual one in a newspaper article are enactors in a text world with the latter having a counterpart in the discourse world. I am interested to see which linguistic tools are used to construct both and whether these tools differ between a novel and a newspaper article. Thus the research presented in this paper validates Gregoriou's findings and expands them onto other crimes than serial killings.

2. The material for analysis

The crime fiction novel I chose for analysis is Simon Beckett's (2010) *The calling of the grave* because of its rather unusual plot where the supposed monstrous serial killer turns out to be an 'ordinary' criminal in the end. This detective story of the whodunit-kind is the fourth book centred around a fictional character David Hunter, a British anthropologist and medical doctor, who is occasionally consulted by the police in homicide cases. Hunter is the first person narrator and the two extracts from the novel I will have a closer look at in this paper are both narrated by Hunter.

In the book, we are introduced to Jerome Monk, a character who has exceptional physical strength, a distinctive physiognomy and who had confessed to murdering four young women. He is referred to as a 'monster' (Beckett 2010:25) in the beginning of the novel. As the narrative progresses, the reader discovers that Monk suffers from occasional blackouts and cannot remember any of the killings. It is eventually revealed that Monk due to his illness caused the death of one woman, his girlfriend, but not of the other three. He also beat a fellow prison inmate to death after the man revealed he knew who the real killer of the other three victims was but kept quiet about it.

I will compare Monk's construction to that of Josef Fritzl in a newspaper article from the Daily Mail, a right-wing tabloid (Bell 1991:109; Khosravini 2009:482), from 19th March 2009 (Hall 19.03.2009). Fritzl imprisoned, physically abused and repeatedly raped his daughter Elisabeth in a dungeon underneath their family home in Amstetten, Austria, for 24 years. He fathered seven children with her, one baby died days after being born because Fritzl refused to call for help (Hall 19.03.2009). The

Fritzl case because of its extreme deviance can be called a 'point of reference' (Soothill et al 2002:420) for comparable offences and contributes to our general knowledge about crimes (Soothill et al 2002:404). As Monk, Fritzl was referred to as a 'monster' in some newspaper reports, e.g. in an article from The Sun (Thomas 2009). The article under scrutiny was published during Fritzl's court trial and gives a detailed overview of Elisabeth's videotaped witness testimonial recalling the events during her years of imprisonment and Fritzl's subsequent confession to all the charges against him. The article is 2,556 words long and thus offers more material for analysis than the aforementioned one from The Sun (701 words).

Both texts were chosen because the perpetrators Monk and Fritzl are not serial killers like the ones Gregoriou (2011) was interested in but have nevertheless committed serious felonies against other persons and are both referred to as monsters which is indicative for their perception and that of their crimes through others. I acknowledge that a crime fiction novel and a newspaper report on crime do not lend themselves to direct comparison at first glance due to the different purposes they are written for. Whereas a crime fiction novel mainly serves entertainment purposes, a newspaper article on crime not only entertains but foremost informs the public about events in the discourse world (Busà 2014:37). In a novel, the focus is foremost on tellability [features that make a story worth telling (Baroni 2013)] and the quality of the story. Stories for newspaper reports, however, are chosen according to criteria of newsworthiness (Bednarek et al 2014; Jewkes 2009; Mayr et al 2012) and the language in those narratives is used to meet these criteria (Bednarek et al 2012).

Nevertheless, a comparison of a crime fiction novel and a newspaper report is possible on the grounds that both texts present a text world with rules and norms based on ideologies (Jeffries forthcoming 2015:2). This is achieved through linguistic devices which can be analysed and compared because texts, whether fictional or non-fictional, 'make meaning in fundamentally the same way' (Jeffries 2014:408).

3. The analysis

I argue that the construction of the fictional character Jerome Monk shows many parallels with that of Josef Fritzl in the newspaper article under scrutiny. Both show characteristics of a flat character following Forster's (1927, 1987:73) definition in that they are constructed around 'a single idea or quality', namely their criminal predisposition. Forster's distinction between 'flat' and 'round' characters as an either/or-relationship has been further developed by Culpeper (2001:56) who conceives this distinction as a scale with some characters being rounder than others. Thus, factors like 'simplicity, stasis, immunity from conflict, and external life' allow the reader only limited insight into the character's inner life (*idem: ibidem*). As a result, Fritzl in the article is rather to be seen as a fictional, not particularly round character with only occasional ties to reality. As I have stated elsewhere (Tabbert 2013), there is linguistic evidence that the construction of offenders in news reports is based on prevalent ideological concepts of offenders in society as outlined by some criminological frameworks. According to a structural approach, an offender cannot be separated from his/her crimes. On the contrary, a person develops into a criminal because of his or her criminal predisposition (for example, in the genes, brain size or structure) (Loader et al 2011; Lombroso et al 1895; Natarajan 2011). The circumstances of that person's upbringing only play a subordinate role.

Following the first conviction, the offender is labelled (Becker 1966) as criminal by society (which shifts the focus from the criminal act to the offender) and thus pushed outside the law-abiding community which is the first level of labelling (note

that *label* is used here as a sociological term). On the second level, the offender internalises his/her label and accommodates his/her behaviour which leads to reoffending, reconviction and repeated labelling and internalisation (Lemert 1951). Gregoriou (2011:174) states that serial killer narratives reflect societal values, beliefs, morals, ethics, political opinions and perceptions on matters of class. Additionally, I argue that there is a bi-directional relationship in that the texts also influence societal discourse surrounding crime issues and contribute to the development or manifestation of those values, beliefs etc. The ideologies the crime fiction novel under scrutiny is based on are similar to those underlying newspaper reports on crime and thus also accord with predominant societal discourse surrounding this issue.

In order to detect those ideologies in Monk's and Fritzl's construction I apply Jeffries' analytical framework of Critical Stylistics (2010) because it delivers the tools 'to investigate the construction of ideological meaning in all texts' (Jeffries forthcoming:4). Ideology is delivered through the attachment of values to a text world. A text world is a mental representation which enables 'us to conceptualise and understand every piece of language we encounter' (Gavins 2007:2). The textual-conceptual functions listed by Critical Stylistics 'represent the different dimensions of the world as constructed by the text' (Jeffries forthcoming 2015:4). Thus both the construction of a text world (ideation) and the assignment of values to it (ideology) are 'delivered by the same set of textual features' (Jeffries forthcoming:9) which this paper sets out to identify.

3.1 Naming choices for Monk and Fritzl

I start with how Monk and Fritzl are named respectively. 'Naming and Describing' is a category that describes the functions that arise from naming and describing entities in texts. An analysis of the noun phrases naming both perpetrators will already provide a partial picture of how they are constructed and the underlying ideologies. Although an analysis of only one of the 10 textual-conceptual functions or the different dimensions of the text world on its own does not provide a holistic picture yet, it serves to illustrate the grid of Critical Stylistics.

Monk is introduced in a lengthier extract in the beginning of the book narrated by the main character Hunter. The information provided here are supposed to stem from Hunter's internet search on Mook before he even meets him.

'(1) Monk had been a journalist's dream. (2) A misfit and loner who supplemented his precarious living as a casual labourer with poaching and theft, he was an orphan whose mother had died during his birth, leading some of the more lurid tabloids to claim that she'd been his first victim. (3) He was often described as a gypsy, but that wasn't true. (4) While he'd lived most of his life around Dartmoor in a caravan, he'd been shunned by the local traveller population as well as the rest of society. (5) Unpredictable and prone to outbursts of terrifying violence, his personality matched his exterior.

(6) If anyone looked the part of a murderer, it was Monk.

(7) Freakishly strong, he was a physical grotesque, a sport of nature. (8) The photographs and footage from his trial showed a hulk of a man, whose bald cannonball of a skull housed deep-set, sullen features. (9) His black, button eyes glinted with all the expression of a doll's above a mouth that seemed curved in a permanent sneer. (10) Even more unsettling was the indentation on one side of his

forehead, as though a giant thumb had been pressed into a ball of clay. (11) It was disturbing to see, the sort of disfigurement that looked as if it should have been fatal.' (Beckett 2010:23, 24)

The noun phrases that name Monk were extracted from the text and grouped into different naming categories as shown in the following Table 1:

| Naming category | Naming choice |
|------------------------|---|
| proper noun | Monk (2) |
| family relations | an orphan |
| social relations | a misfit and loner a gypsy |
| crime | the part of a murderer |
| physical appearance | a physical grotesque a sport of nature a hulk of a man |
| profession | a casual labourer |
| body parts | his personality his exterior his black, button eyes a mouth the indentation on one side of his forehead |
| other | a journalist's dream |

Table 1: Naming choices for Monk

Names for Monk relate to his social or family relations, his crime(s), his physical appearance and parts of his body as well as his profession. Particularly Monk's physiognomy, the relation between his physical appearance and his criminal predisposition, is conducive to his construction as a serial killer like in sentence 6: *If anyone looked the part of a murderer, it was Monk*. Sentence 2 constructs the newborn baby Monk as having killed his mother in childbirth. Notice that this abstruse idea of Monk, the baby, being already a killer is used to establish the notion of his criminal predisposition and initiates labelling so that every following crime is not only a logical consequence of Monk's criminal predisposition and internalisation of being labelled a criminal but accommodated behaviour on the second level of labelling.

Josef Fritzl's construction through noun phrases matches Monk's by focusing on almost the same topics. I extracted all noun phrases (leaving out pronouns) naming Fritzl in the newspaper article and the result is presented in Table 2:

| Naming category | Naming choice |
|------------------------|--|
| proper noun | Fritzl (35) Josef Fritzl |
| family relations | her father (5) my father her twisted father her own flesh and blood |
| crime | her tormentor their gaoler a convicted rapist |
| mental state | an emotional volcano |

| | |
|----------------|--|
| profession | a building engineer the sexually obsessed building engineer |
| criminal trial | my client |
| gender | the man broken old man a demoniac man |
| body part | Fitzl's hands |

Table 2: Naming choices for Fritzl

Fritzl's naming choices refer to his family relation to the victim Elisabeth, the crimes, his mental state, his profession, his role in the criminal trial, his gender and his body parts. Although Fritzl doesn't look as deviant as Monk, the focus is instead on his deviant mental state which is indicated by premodifiers in noun phrases like *her twisted father* or *the sexually obsessed building engineer*. Premodifiers are more often used here in comparison to the Monk-text. Again, the second level of labelling applies because it is established that Fritzl had been convicted previously of the same type of offence (*a convicted rapist*) and has therefore internalised the label. Following from this internalisation of the label *criminal* is that the offender is destined to continue committing crimes. What further adds to establishing the notion of Fritzl's criminal predisposition is a direct quote from the forensic psychiatrist on this case who said that Fritzl was 'born to rape' (Hall 19.03.2009).

3.2 Monk's and Fritzl's construction through their crimes

As we have seen in the previous section, the naming choices for both offenders on their own already construct them as if it were in their nature to commit crimes. This notion will be underpinned by the analysis presented in this section. Here, I focus on the presentation of the crimes and the construction of the offenders through their crimes. Again, the framework of Critical Stylistics is applied but this section will be a condensation of the results when analysing all ten textual-conceptual categories instead of focusing on one of them in isolation as in Section 3.1 before.

3.2.1. Monk's crime

I will start with the second extract from the crime fiction novel which is the part where Hunter narrates what Monk told him about the moment his girlfriend Angela Carson died and stems from the last pages of the book. The extract reads:

(1) It wasn't long before she asked him to stay the night. (2) The blackouts had been less frequent since they'd met. (3) He'd been calmer, less agitated. (4) He'd allowed himself to believe they were over. (5) Even so, he hadn't meant to fall asleep. (6) But he had. (7) He claimed to have no recollection of what happened, only that he found himself standing by the bed. (8) There was a pounding on the door as the police tried to break in. (9) All was noise and confusion. (10) His hands were covered in blood, but none of it was his. (11) He looked down and saw Angela Carson.(Beckett 2010:373)

Mental and relational processes (Simpson 1993) give the impression that the reader gets insight into Monk's inner life. However, Hunter instead of Monk narrates these sentences so that insight into Monk's thoughts can only be provided to the extent to which Monk had verbally revealed them to Hunter before and Monk's

thought presentation is in fact speech presentation. This establishes a distance between Monk and the reader. What further adds to this distance is the use of Indirect Speech (Leech et al 2007) in sentence 7 as a less faithful way of presenting Monk's original verbiage which not only allows Hunter to summarise and reword Monk's speech but also to assess it. The use of the verb *claimed* plants doubts whether Monk truthfully has no recollection of the actions leading to Carson's death or hides behind his memory gaps in order to mitigate guilt which constructs him as a potential liar.

Monk's guilt in causing his girlfriend's death is constructed by using epistemic modality (*believe*) in relation to Monk's degree of certainty about his recovery from his blackouts. This together with the deontic modal verb *allowed* and the adverb *Even* so establish that Monk is not sure whether his blackouts have disappeared for good but wishes them to be over in order to stay the night with his girlfriend. The contrastive conjunction *But* in sentence 6 opposes Monk's intention not to fall asleep as a reaction to his blackouts with what actually happened and thereby a mental process of reaction (sentence 5) with a material process of supervention (sentence 6) and reveals Monk's tragedy.

Doubts whether Monk really cared for his girlfriend are raised in sentence 11 through the naming choice for Monk's girlfriend. By naming the victim with her full name instead of other naming choices (like *his girlfriend*), a distance is established between her and Monk which constructs Monk's detachment from her through Hunter's words.

It is not explicitly stated in the text that Monk killed Carson. However, it is implied that there was nobody else in the room and that Carson died from unnatural causes which leads to the deduction that Monk must have caused her death. This lack of explicitness allows space for sympathy with Monk and is one of the distinctions between Monk's and Fritzl's construction where there is no understanding for the crimes of the latter as we will see shortly.

Despite the potential for sympathy with Monk and the consequential critique of the monster-scheme, Monk is constructed as a potential liar unable to act responsibly as well as torn between his will to change and his criminally predisposed nature.

3.2.2 Fritzl's crimes

Finally, I will look at an extract from the newspaper article constructing Fritzl through his crimes. I have chosen a part picturing Fritzl's early crimes against his daughter before her imprisonment which are undoubtedly serious already but not as extreme as those committed later and perceived as monstrous. This enables a better comparison with Monk's construction through his crime against his girlfriend which was not monstrous either. The extract reads:

(1) *Fritzl claims Elisabeth was sliding into a life of drink and debauchery and that he was 'saving her from herself' when he incarcerated her.*

(2) *But she spoke of being a normal teenager with normal passions and dreams.*

(3) *'Somehow, I don't know why, my father seemed to choose me for himself,' she said.*

(4) *He began abusing her when she was 11, fondling her and leaving pornographic magazines under her pillow.*

(5) *In October 1983, she ran away with a friend to Vienna because she could no longer handle the abuse. (6) She was found by police and returned to her father for her last months of freedom.*

(7) *She said that she wanted to move away from home and enjoy all the normal things teenage girls wanted.*

(8) *But, she said, her life was stolen by her own flesh and blood and she was to become the personal breeding machine of her twisted father.* (Hall 19.03.2009)

Fritzl's actions are mainly Material Actions Intentions (Simpson 1993) in active verb voice, like *saving, incarcerated, choose, abusing, fondling* and *leaving* with Fritzl being the actor and Elisabeth the goal being acted upon. In the last sentence 8, Elisabeth remains the recipient of Fritzl's actions but is foregrounded by being mentioned first and a passive verb voice (*was stolen*). The many occasions of Fritzl being the actor of material actions provides a contrast to him being the sayer in only one verbalisation process in sentence 1. The use of a less faithful way of speech presentation (Indirect Speech) in combination with a short phrase in Direct Speech establish a distance between the reader and Fritzl. The verb *claims* raises the question whether Fritzl's motive was genuine which the reader is lead to negate because Fritzl's self-construction as his daughter's saviour is belied. The provided facts, namely Fritzl started abusing his daughter when she was 11-years-old and thus long before she ran off at the age of 17 and her incarceration at the age of 18, imply that Elisabeth's behaviour could not have been the reason for her incarceration. Although Fritzl had admitted his guilt to all charges and thereby broken his silence at the time the article was written, it is noticeable that in this extract, as in the rest of the article, Elisabeth's percentage of speech far outweighs Fritzl's. Thus she is the one who provides insight into Fritzl's inner life, although only through hypothesising about Fritzl's motive as in sentence 3 using the epistemic modal verb *seemed* which maintains the distance between the reader and Fritzl, as it was also the case with Monk. In this extract it becomes once again clear that the construction of the victim contributes to the construction of the offender by placing the two at opposing ends of a morality scale (Christie 1986). Particularly the last sentence 8 and the conceptual metaphors used here, namely referring to Fritzl as *her own flesh and blood* and to Elisabeth as *the personal breeding machine of her twisted father*, manifest the notion of Elisabeth, the ideal since innocent victim and Fritzl, the monstrous criminal who doesn't even have scruple abusing his own daughter who he depersonalises through his crimes.

4. Conclusion

This paper provides additional evidence that the linguistic construction of offenders in texts from different genres, here a crime fiction novel and a newspaper article, does not vary significantly. Both offenders, Monk and Fritzl, are constructed as rather flat characters centred around a single idea, namely their criminally predisposed nature as the reason for their crimes. Thus they are reduced to their criminal offending role which backgrounds all other social roles (like being a boyfriend or father or a labourer or engineer). The text worlds presented in both texts overlap with our discourse world in that the same rules and norms and their underlying ideologies apply in all three. The ideological view on offenders underlying Monk's and Fritzl's construction respectively sees them as invariably evil and incapable of reforming, although we saw that the potential for sympathy with Monk questions the monster-scheme but nevertheless Monk cannot overcome his criminally predisposed nature. Therefore it is only down to the right opportunity that they commit crimes and the only solution is control and incarceration. Critical Stylistics offers the tools to systematically expose underlying ideologies in texts by finding out 'what kind of world is being presented by

the text' and what is acceptable or unacceptable in this world (Jeffries forthcoming 2015:2).

The reductionist view on offenders as discovered in both texts under scrutiny accords with predominant societal discourse on offenders. Ways of seeing and thinking about offenders and punishment in society have already been firmly established (Birkett 2014:116). A dramatisation of evil (Tannenbaum 1938), as this reduction can also be called and which we have witnessed in both texts, might appear harmless at first glance because, one might assume, it only serves entertainment purposes. However, it does have a serious impact on societal discourse on offenders because of the bi-directional influences between text worlds and our discourse world. Particularly the naturalisation (Fairclough 1992:87) of the underlying ideologies and their perception as 'common sense' (*idem: ibidem*) bear the danger that we forget that our predominant way of seeing offenders is just one possibility out of many.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Lisa Nahajec who provided the initial idea for this paper and her valuable comments on an earlier draft of it. And I am hugely indebted to Dan McIntyre for his altruistic support and his much appreciated feedback on the previous version of this paper.

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