

Contemporary Demonology: The Criminological Theories of Hannibal Lecter, Part Two

By

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Although the public demonstrates an insatiable appetite for crime, one serial killer eclipses all other criminals in terms of popularity: Dr. Hannibal “The Cannibal” Lecter. It has been suggested that the character of Hannibal Lecter, drawn from real-life serial killers, may be popular because he emerges from paradox, fitting some criminological models of serial murder while defying others. However, two other possible explanations exist. First, Lecter may be a compelling character because he is a criminal genius, a “high IQ killer.” Second, the character of Lecter may fascinate the public because he is not a man at all, but a non-human monster of some kind (either a vampire or a devil).

Keywords: Hannibal Lecter; serial killer; cannibal

INTRODUCTION

“We love Lecter. He is the paragon of serial killers. There is something about this character that resonates in the popular imagination, and that lures audiences back to the novels and the films in order to spend their time with Lecter.”

Oleson, 2005b, p. 198

The public exhibits a seemingly insatiable appetite for true crime, and has exalted many serial killers into its pantheon of infamy (Oleson, 2003; Schmid, 2005), but one serial killer commands the popular imagination unlike any other: Dr. Hannibal “The Cannibal” Lecter. This fictional character, drawn from the profiles of real-life serial killers, has appeared in three novels (Harris, 1981, 1988, 1999) and four films (Demme, 1991; Mann, 1986; Ratner, 2002; Scott, 2001). Thomas Harris’s trilogy of Lecter novels has been published in more than 20 different languages and has sold tens of millions of copies (Random House, 2005). The quartet of Lecter films has earned a score of awards, including a sweep of the major 1992 Oscars: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress, and Best Adapted Screenplay (Harris & Dunkley, 2001). The American Film Institute has selected Hannibal as the greatest screen villain of all time (American Film Institute, 2005a), and has included his line, “A census taker once tried to test me. I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti” in its rankings of the 100 best film quotes of all time (American Film Institute, 2005b).

Why, though, has Hannibal Lecter – a cannibalistic serial murderer – been transformed into the kind of celebrity that at one time “was, arguably, the most publicized and recognizable personality (real or not) in America” (Skal, 1993, p. 383)? Why do we laud a villain? Suraiya (1999) poses the question another way, asking, “How can one make a murderous psychopath who not only kills his victims but eats them, sometimes alive, into a cult hero?” This is an

excellent question. Both hero (Dunant, 1999) and antihero (Dery, 1999), an inhabitant of a gothic universe in which good and evil are often indistinguishable (Braun, 2000), the character of Hannibal Lecter may fascinate the public because he is enigmatic (Oleson, 2005b).

Because the character of Lecter was derived from real killers, he conforms to several models of serial homicide (Oleson, 2005b). Lecter *seems* real. Indeed, he seems real enough to prompt social scientists and law enforcement officials to describe him as if he were a real person (Egger, 1998; Jenkins, 1994). At the same time, however, Lecter defies other criminological models. He seamlessly commingles reality and unreality.

Similarly, Lecter bridges the visceral revulsion associated with cannibalism (Rawson, 1999) with the admiration reserved for refined elites with perfect manners and cultured tastes. In the character of Hannibal Lecter, we find an implosion of definitions, and a conflation and collapse of binary categories (Messent, 2000). As has been suggested previously, by combining evil and good, the real and the unreal, the enigmatic character of Hannibal Lecter may present the reader and the viewer with a puzzle, a riddle, and thereby etch himself deep into the popular imagination (Oleson, 2005b).

There are, however, other reasons why Lecter may loom as the paragon of serial killers. Two of these explanations are explored in this article. First, it is suggested that the public might revere the character of Hannibal Lecter because he is a shining example of the high-IQ killer, the genius criminal who exists above the law. Lecter's paradoxical status as a psychiatrist-killer, as well as his extraordinary intellectual gifts, makes him an inherently interesting figure, and might help explain his crimes. Secondly, it is suggested that Hannibal Lecter may be such an attractive character because he is something more than human (or something less): a vampire, a devil, or some infernal combination of the two. Springing from the literary tradition of Milton's Satan, Goethe's Mephistopheles, and Stoker's Count Dracula, the character of Hannibal Lecter may be so successful because he plays upon the public's primal fascination with monsters.

HANNIBAL LECTER: EVIL MASTERMIND

“Our construction of the ‘high-IQ killer’ is a sign of our desire to figure the serial killer as being above and beyond society, as someone who attempts to assert his freedom. It makes him Byronic or, more exactly, makes him related to the hero of every Bildungsroman taught to every child, from Huck Finn to Holden Caulfield”

Tithecott, 1997, p. 148

Hannibal Lecter is a particularly chilling villain because he is both a psychiatrist – a healer – and a serial murderer. He is free to either cure or kill, according to his whims. The Hippocratic Oath and the governing principle of *primum non nocere* (“first, do no harm”) do not appear to bind him. When the character of Hannibal Lecter discounts the murder of his patient, Benjamin Raspail, by quipping, “Frankly, I got sick and tired of his whining. Best thing for him, really. Therapy wasn’t going anywhere” (Harris, 1988, p. 57), it implies that Lecter is either altogether amoral or interpreting the mandate of the Hippocratic Oath through a very distorted framework.

Of course, Hannibal Lecter is not the only physician to become a murderer. Even doctors with rather pedestrian IQ scores sometimes disentangle themselves from the prohibitions of the Hippocratic Oath, and intentionally take human lives (Iserson, 2002). Sometimes – as in cases of euthanasia – the motives of these doctors are benevolent (Kevorkian, 1991; Smith, 1998); other times, their motives are far less honorable (Larson, 2003; Stewart, 1999). But the specialized training that physicians receive – in anatomy, pathology, pharmacology, and related disciplines – makes them potentially very dangerous. Indeed, trained in medicine, doctors are potentially more dangerous than many serial killers (Jenkins, 2001). As Sherlock Holmes noted, “When a doctor does go wrong, he is the first of criminals. He has the nerve and he has the knowledge...” (in Iserson, 2002, p. 9). In a similar vein, Iserson quotes Robert Furneaux:

With his knowledge, power, access to poisons, and accepted position, for his is the “trusted hand,” the doctor kills, or who having killed needs to dispose of the body, should be almost unbeatable. He may sign the death certificate, he knows the nature of poisons, the lethal dose, how to time its administration, disguise its effects and stimulate the symptoms of natural disease. He knows how to dismember and what identifiable features to remove. In the sick room his word is law and his opinions are accepted. Who is there to question them? It is remarkable, really, that the murdering doctor should ever fail (as cited in Iserson, 2002, p. 10).

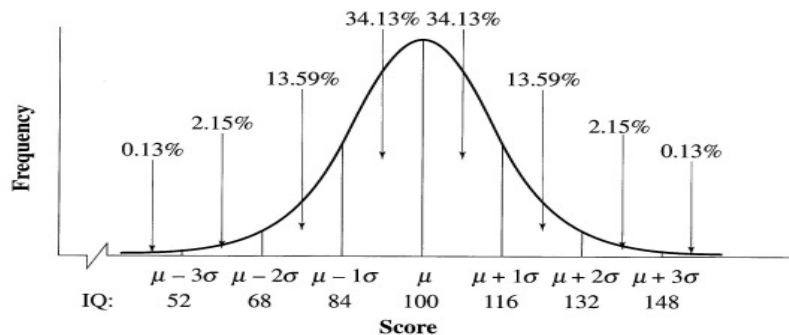
It makes sense. People are traditionally taught to trust physicians, and doctors are often among the last people suspected of murder (Iserson, 2002). Like a child-molesting priest or a corrupt politician, Lecter violates the special trust afforded to doctors when he kills. Thus, his training in medicine makes him appear even more culpable, even more wicked. But Lecter’s status as a doctor also makes him more compelling as a literary figure, for although Lecter is a notorious serial murderer, he retains the mind and manner of a physician. In *The Silence of the Lambs* (Harris, 1988), Lecter’s prying request, “Tell me about the lambs, Clarice,” is nothing more than an attempt to conduct therapy from the confines of his dungeon-like cell (Greenberg, 1992). Lecter is a terrifying figure because, having shrugged off the Hippocratic Oath, he stands in the same moral light as a Nazi doctor (Lifton, 1986). He possesses a formidable medical acumen, but is equally free to use his talent to cure or to kill.

But the character of Lecter is far more than a murdering physician – he is also a criminal genius. His intelligence, more than his status as a serial killer, cannibal, or murdering physician, makes him an unusual – and memorable – literary figure. It elevates him into our pantheon of elite villains. While the public condemns the offender who kills for profit, or who kills in a fit of rage, it understands him. But the killer who deliberately and coolly commits his crime, not because he must, but because he *can* – because he *likes it* – is both mysterious and terrifying. The high-IQ killer who uses his extraordinary gifts to carry out his crimes seems positively beyond the pale. The fascination with the high-IQ killer explains why the 1924 murder of Bobby Franks by millionaire geniuses Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb – the “crime of the century” (Higdon, 1999) – is still a powerful meme that influences filmmaking to this day (Fleischer, 1959; Hitchcock, 1948; Kalin, 1992; Schroeder, 2002). The monstrous nature of the high-IQ killer also explains why Unabomber Theodore John Kaczynski, the serial killer responsible for the largest manhunt in American history (Douglas & Olshaker, 1996), was described in the press as “diabolical” (Survivors condemn, 1998). We are both attracted to and repulsed by the criminal

genius. Indeed, while little is known about the phenomenon of high IQ offenders (Blackburn, 1993; Oleson, 2002), there is no question that people are fascinated by the idea of a “mastermind.”

The character of Hannibal Lecter clearly fits the bill. Horn (2001) describes Lecter as possessing a “brilliant mind,” Suraiya (1999) describes him as “fiendishly brilliant” and as “an evil genius par excellence,” and O’Hagan (2001, p. 26) describes him as a “very brilliant and very evil man.” It is not only journalists who describe the character in such lofty terms. Author Harris also takes great pains to emphasize Lecter’s genius. In *The Silence of the Lambs*, he goes so far as to tell us that Lecter’s IQ score is “not measurable by any means known to man” (Harris, 1988, p. 190). In this sense, Lecter closely resembles prodigy William James Sidis, who was perhaps the most intelligent person to ever live. Like Lecter, Sidis’s IQ was too high to be measured by conventional intelligence tests, but was estimated by an expert psychometrician as being “easily” between 250 and 300 (Wallace, 1986, p. 283). As a point of comparison, Napoleon Bonaparte had an estimated IQ of 145, Thomas Jefferson had an estimated IQ of 160, and Leonardo da Vinci had an estimated IQ of 180 (Cox, 1926). Figure 1 depicts the bell curve distribution of IQ across the population.

Figure one: Distribution of IQ across population.



By definition, the mean IQ score is 100, and only about 2.5% of the population has an IQ score of 132 or more (Jensen, 1980). Only 1 person in 30,000 has an IQ score 4 standard deviations above the mean, only 1 in a billion has an IQ score 6 standard deviations above the mean, and only 1 in 1.5 trillion has an IQ score 8 standard deviations above the mean (Norlinger,

2005). An IQ score of 300 is 12.5 standard deviations above the mean. Tables of normal distribution do not extend this far, and treat such a score as *infinitely* rare (Norlinger, 2005).

Possessing an infinitely rare IQ score, William James Sidis was able to do the things that other intelligent people do, but to these things more efficiently. Records show that, in spite of a bout of typhoid fever, Sidis raced through his entire elementary education (grades 1-7) in less than 9 months (Wallace, 1986) and was supposedly able to master a whole language in one day (Wallace, 1986).

Like Sidis, Lecter is a polymath and has mastered many subjects outside of medicine. He is a gourmand, with an encyclopedic knowledge of food and wine. The reader is also told that he is an exceptional musician, capable of playing Bach's *Goldberg Variations* "not perfectly, but exceedingly well, with an engaging understanding of the music" (Harris, 1999, p. 134), and playing it without need of sheet music. But Lecter is not limited to cuisine and the arts. Like Sidis, Lecter also excels at advanced physics:

[H]e sits in his armchair with a big pad of butcher paper doing calculations. The pages are filled with the symbols both of astrophysics and particle physics. There are repeated efforts with the symbols of string theory. The few mathematicians who could follow him might say that his equations begin brilliantly... (Harris, 1999, p. 436).

One reason that Lecter, trained as a psychiatrist, not a physicist, might be able to rival the world's top experts is that he possesses unusual mental faculties. For example, the character of Hannibal Lecter is able to manipulate textures and smells in his mind (Harris, 1981). He can also paint colors within his mind (Harris, 1999). Like the figure of Satan in *Paradise Lost* (Milton, 1667/1981), Lecter has realized that "[t]he mind is its own place, and in itself [c]an make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of a Heaven" (p. 44). In this way, while incarcerated, Lecter escaped his austere cell, taking refuge in his "inner world" (Harris, 1988, p. 164).

The construction of mental rooms is an ancient mnemonic device (Spence, 1994), but Lecter has transcended the limits of the human mind. Even by medieval standards, his mental construction is vast: in his imagination, he has constructed a palace of 1,000 rooms, a grand castle of miles of hallways (Harris, 1999). Lecter is able to maintain such an elaborate construct only because his intellect is so boundless. But this fact presents the reader with a difficult criminological puzzle: why would such a brilliant individual commit such ugly crimes? Why would a doctor of such infinite faculty – a man who can literally create his own reality – choose to savagely kill, and then consume, innocent victims? Perhaps Lecter kills because he is so brilliant – after all, "infinitely rare" IQ scores don't only lead to quantitative increases in ability – they also lead to *qualitative* changes. Weschler (1955, p.134) writes:

General intelligence, for example, is undoubtedly quantitative in the sense that it consists of varying amounts of the same basic stuff (e.g., mental energy) which can be expressed by continuous numerical measures like Intelligence Quotients or Mental-Age scores, and these are as real as any physical measurements are. But it is equally certain that our description of the difference between a genius and an average person by a statement to the effect that he has an IQ greater by this or that amount, does not describe the

difference between them as completely or in the same way as when we say that a mile is much longer than an inch. The genius (as regards intellectual ability) not only has an IQ of say 50 points more than the average person, but in virtue of this difference acquires seemingly new aspects (potentialities) or characteristics. These seemingly new aspects or characteristics, in their totality, are what go to make up the "qualitative" difference between them.

What kind of qualitative differences might emerge from an IQ score in the 250 to 300 range? What kind of qualitative differences might the character of Hannibal Lecter exhibit? Aldous Huxley has suggested that men of real genius are so different from the rest of humanity, they are like another species:

Perhaps men of genius are the only true men. In all the history of the race there have been only a few thousand real men. And the rest of us—what are we? Teachable animals. Without the help of the real man, we should have found out almost nothing at all. Almost all the ideas with which we are familiar could never have occurred to minds like ours. Plant the seeds there and they will grow; but our minds could never spontaneously have generated them (Huxley, 1956, p. 2242).

Huxley's provocative claim finds some support in Lawrence Kohlberg's research on moral reasoning. Kohlberg (1984) has suggested that some people make moral decisions at a pre-conventional level, following social norms either because they wish to obey authority and avoid punishment or because this is in their own self-interest. Most people, Kohlberg has claimed, make decisions at a conventional level, following social norms either because they seek the approval of others or because they believe in maintaining the social order. A few people, however, Kohlberg has suggested, make decisions at a post-conventional level, following social norms either because they see the world in terms of social contract or because they believe in universal principles. But those rare individuals who reason about moral decisions within a framework of universal principles may be required to disobey unjust laws. Jesus was executed as a criminal. Galileo, Thoreau, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King were all incarcerated. Believing in universal principles may mean following them, even when the law forbids it.

If, as research suggests, high IQ scores are associated with superior moral reasoning (Gross, 1993), then individuals with "infinitely rare" IQ scores may perceive the world through radically different moral lenses. Unabomber Theodore John Kaczynski – whose 167 IQ score eclipses that of Charles Darwin – was sentenced to life in prison after engaging in a 17-year letter-bombing campaign in an attempt to save society from the corrupting effects of technology (Oleson, 2005a). Kaczynski's crimes may seem monstrous and unintelligible to the general public, but this genius with a 1-in-70,000 IQ score believed they were necessary – even moral – under the circumstances (Mello, 1999).

Perhaps Lecter's crimes *are* the product of his superhuman intellect. There is, of course, a body of criminological research suggesting that low IQ scores are associated with criminal behavior (Hirschi & Hindelang, 1977; Lynam, Moffitt, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1993; West & Farrington, 1973), and that high IQ may serve as a *protective* factor (Shader, 2003). Hirschi (1969), for example, has suggested that high IQ scores reduce offending because bright students

do well in school and form social bonds with their classmates, schools, and communities. But while Hirschi's model may make sense if we are talking about the geniuses studied by Terman (1925) – robust, popular individuals with an IQ score somewhere above the 135 mark – a very different picture emerges if we are talking about the extreme geniuses studied by Hollingworth: children with IQ scores of 180 and higher. Hollingworth (1942) wrote:

Children with IQs up to 150 get along in the ordinary course of school life quite well, achieving excellent marks without serious effort. But children above this mental status become almost intolerably bored with school work if kept in lockstep with unselected pupils of their own age. Children who rise above 170 IQ are liable to regard school with indifference or with positive dislike, for they find nothing in the work to absorb their interest. This condition of affairs, coupled with the supervision of unseeing and unsympathetic teachers, has sometimes led even to truancy on the part of gifted children (p. 258).

According to Hollingworth (1942), children with IQ scores between 130 and 150 make friends easily, while children with IQ scores of 160 or higher tend to have problems with finding friends (Towers, 1990). Isolated from their classmates and forced into stultifying academic environments, children with very high IQ scores often view school with antipathy and contempt. Under Hirschi's model, then, these children would be *more* likely to turn to delinquency and crime, despite their high IQ scores. If individuals with IQ scores of 170 tend to bristle against the yoke of social rules, imagine how someone with an “infinitely rare” IQ score of 250 or 300 might respond. Someone with an IQ score so high he feels like he belongs to a separate species might reject social norms, embrace taboos, and willingly break laws. Georg Hegel (1837/1956) warned:

It is even possible that such men may treat other great, even sacred interests, inconsiderately; conduct which is indeed obnoxious to moral reprehension. But so mighty a form must trample down many an innocent flower—crush to pieces many an object in its path (p. 32).

Hegel's suggestion is not mere abstract speculation. At the age of 21, William James Sidis led a riot and assaulted a police officer; he avoided a sentence of 18 months at hard labor only because his father used his influence (Wallace, 1986). Perhaps, similarly, Lecter's crimes are the consequence of seeing too much, too far, and rejecting the laws of society. Perhaps he murders, and consumes, because “*quod licet Iovi non licet bovi*” (“What is allowed to Jupiter is forbidden to cattle”). Or perhaps Lecter, while brilliant, is insane. Perhaps his genius is tethered to a terrible madness (Becker, 1978; Jamison, 1993; Oleson, 1997).

Surely, it would be comforting to dismiss Lecter's crimes as the product of insanity. Certainly, given his cannibalistic proclivities, it would not be difficult to imagine that Lecter is mad. People are especially likely to invoke psychiatric labels when crimes are particularly heinous:

If a defendant just kills his victim for what appears to be a very ordinary motive such as greed or jealousy, diminished responsibility stands little chance of being established, but

if the defendant has a history of mental trouble, goes in for perverted sexual practices with the victim before and after death, mutilates the body, [or] cuts it up ... then the more horrible the killing, the more likely diminished responsibility will be established, because the further removed from normal behaviour the behaviour of the defendant, the more he appears to be mentally ill (Samuels, 1975, pp. 199-200).

Author Harris, however, indicates that the character of Lecter is not insane (although he *is* incarcerated in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane). Under the formulation of the influential M'Naughten test for insanity:

[I]t must be clearly proved that, at the time of committing the act, the party accused was laboring under such a defect of reason, from disease of the mind, as not to know the nature and quality of the act he was doing, or that [if] he did know it, that he did not know he was doing what was wrong (Finkel, 1988, p. 21).

The character of Hannibal Lecter flunks the M'Naughten test on all counts. He does not suffer from a defect of reason – if anything, as a genius with an infinitely rare IQ score, he may suffer from a superhuman *perfection* of the reason (Harris, 1999). Similarly, Lecter knows perfectly well the nature and quality of the crimes he commits, and he knows that they are denounced as wrong by society. He may disagree, and feel exempt from the laws of mere mortals, but he knows that his acts are viewed as crimes. The character of Hannibal Lecter would be deemed sane under more recently developed tests for insanity, as well. Lecter, in perfect command of his will, does not commit his crimes because he is compelled. Accordingly, he would not be insane under any formulation of the irresistible impulse test (Finkel, 1988). Nor would he be found insane under the American Law Institute test. “A person is not responsible for criminal conduct if at the time of such conduct as a result of mental disease or defect he lacks substantial capacity either to appreciate the criminality of his conduct or to conform his conduct to the requirements of law” (Finkel, 1988, p. 39). Lecter possesses both near-infallible cognitive ability and an iron will. He in no way fits the categories of insanity articulated under prevailing rules. Still, because it provides the reader with a convenient exculpatory mechanism to absolve the character of his wrongdoing, it may be tempting to label Lecter as insane. But Lecter is not insane under any traditional standards of insanity. The insightful character of FBI Investigator Will Graham explains, “He did it because he liked it. Still does. Dr. Lecter is not crazy, in any common way we think of being crazy. He did some hideous things because he enjoyed them. But he can function perfectly when he wants to” (Harris, 1981, pp. 46-7).

Lecter is repeatedly described as a sociopath, but sociopathy typically does not satisfy the legal criteria for insanity (Harris, Skilling, & Rice, 2001), and even if it did, Lecter does not fit the criteria for the diagnosis (Oleson, 2005b). Thus, while it would be comforting to explain away the crimes of Hannibal Lecter as an aberrational product of insanity, the character does not qualify as insane under any standard legal test (Bonnie, Jeffries, & Low, 2000; Finkel, 1988).

Another possibility is that Lecter's actions stem from a desire for fame. In Harris's literary universe, Lecter's letters are framed throughout psychology departments across the country. Perhaps his keeper, Dr. Chilton, is correct when he speculates that Lecter depends upon

the interest of the public, and perhaps FBI Section Chief Jack Crawford is correct when he claims that Lecter's only weakness is the need to look smart. Simpson (2000) thinks so:

Lecter's only weakness is that he must appear to be smarter than anyone else. Paradoxically, Lecter has achieved the ultimate in name recognition in his culture by becoming a serial killer. Though his murders physically isolate him from society, he continues to thrive on the hyperreal effect he has on others. Someone will always continue to seek him out, he smugly knows, but only if he continues to play the game of the Professor Moriarty of serial killers to its furthest possible extreme (p. 95).

But Crawford and Simpson may have underestimated Lecter. Maybe Hannibal Lecter is fully self-actualized (Maslow, 1943). In *Hannibal*, Author Harris explains that "Dr. Lecter does not require conventional reinforcement. His ego, like his intelligence quota, and the degree of his rationality, is not measurable by conventional means" (Harris, 1999, p. 136). Lecter, then, remains an enigma. His terrible crimes cannot be explained away by insanity or ego. Too brilliant to be explained by standard psychological instruments (Harris, 1981), Lecter seems almost inhuman. Indeed, one Hannibal Lecter website describes him as a god (Hannibal Library, 2005). Even the author of the Lecter novels, Thomas Harris, hints at the possibility that Lecter is something more than a man – or something less:

[T]here is no consensus in the psychiatric community that Dr. Lecter should be termed a man. He has long been regarded by his professional peers in psychiatry, many of whom fear his acid pen in the professional journals, as something entirely Other. For convenience, they term him "monster" (Harris, 1999, pp. 136-7).

Perhaps the character of Hannibal Lecter is enigmatic and difficult to understand because he is not completely human. Perhaps Lecter truly is a monster of some kind.

HANNIBAL LECTER: A MONSTROUS VAMPIRE-DEVIL

"Lecter is not a man who kills because he was a sick little boy. He kills because it is who he is. It's not his fault he tempts the weak and tortures the damned. It's his job, a position permitted him by Heaven itself, and it is a job no man or medicine or moviemaker can ever take away."

Stephen Whitty, 2002, p. 001

Numerous commentators have characterized the character of Hannibal Lecter as a monster (Messent, 2000; Palmer, 2001; Suraiya, 1999). Even within Harris's literary world, the media brands him a "monster" (Harris, 1988, p. 62). He is dubbed a "monster" by FBI Section Chief Jack Crawford (Harris, 1988, p. 6), called the "monster of monsters" by the Italian policeman, Pazzi (Harris, 1999, p. 190), and characterized as a "monster" by former FBI agent Will Graham (Harris, 1981, p. 5), who expounds on the term:

He's a monster. I think of him as one of those pitiful things that are born in hospitals from time to time. They feed it, and keep it warm, but they don't put it on machines and it

dies. Lecter is the same way in his head, but he looks normal and nobody could tell (Harris, 1981, p. 47).

The invocation of the label is not entirely without foundation. For one thing, the character of Hannibal Lecter has maroon eyes, and his red eyes seem to assume increasing importance in each successive novel. In *Red Dragon* (1981), Harris writes that “Dr. Lecter’s eyes are maroon and they reflect the light redly in tiny points” (p. 54). Later, in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), Harris mentions Lecter’s red eyes on three occasions. By the time of *Hannibal* (1999), Lecter’s maroon eyes have become the stuff of legend. Although “[h]is eyes reflect light redly ... they do not glow red in the dark, as some of his keepers have sworn they do” (p. 136). That said, sparks do occasionally fly behind those crimson eyes (Harris, 1988, 1999). Lecter’s maroon eyes also figure prominently in the films. Consider the eerie crimson-eyed image used to publicize the movie, *Hannibal*.

Figure two: Advertising for the film, *Hannibal*.



Lecter's maroon eyes are not his only unusual feature; Lecter also had six fingers on his left hand (Harris, 1988). "The hand was shapely ... and the middle finger perfectly replicated. It is the rarest form of polydactyly" (Harris, 1988, p. 21). The left hand – the *sinister* – is associated with the shadowy, the irrational, and the malignant – while the right is associated with morality and correctness (Pirsig, 1991). In Biblical numerology, six denotes imperfection, sin, and evil. A sixth finger on the left hand, then, might symbolize something like unnatural wickedness.

In Harris's literary world, Lecter's famous fingerprint card has become a desirable collector's item, and the original is framed on the wall of the FBI's Identification Section in the same way that his letters are framed on the walls of university psychology departments (Harris, 1999). By the time of *Hannibal*, Lecter has amputated one of the fingers to conceal his identity. Although he retains five knuckles, his x-rays are those of a man who was born with six digits on his left hand.

But there is more to the character of Lecter than maroon irises and a wicked sixth finger. There is something animal, something bestial about him (Harris, 1999; Sexton, 2001; Sundelson, 1993). In particular, there is something distinctly reptilian about Lecter (Johnson, 2001). When he finds the automobile of Clarice Starling, Lecter tastes her steering wheel like a serpent:

Dr. Lecter got into the car, into air that was intensely Clarice Starling. ... Then, as though it had a mind of its own, the pointed pink tip of his tongue appeared, like a small snake finding its way out of his face. Never altering expression, as though he were unaware of his movements, he leaned forward, found the leather steering wheel by scent, and put around it his curled tongue, cupping with his tongue the finger indentations on the underside of the wheel. He tasted with his mouth the polished two o'clock spot on the wheel where her palm would rest. Then he leaned back in the seat, his tongue back where it lived, and his closed mouth moved as though he savored wine (Harris, 1999, pp. 284-5).

But Lecter is not entirely reptile. There is also something mammalian about him. Thus, Harris describes Lecter as "a cemetery mink ... down in a ribcage in the dry leaves of a heart" (Harris, 1988, p. 215; Harris, 1999, p. 148) and describes his clothing as pelt-like.

The character of Hannibal Lecter also possesses unusual, possibly superhuman, powers. As a trained psychiatrist, he has learned to evaluate human behavior, but Lecter has honed this skill to a superhuman edge. He is a human lie detector, knowing when people have been frank and when they have been deceptive. Dr. Lecter sees deep into people. Indeed, his gaze is so intense that it hums (Harris, 1988), and so penetrating that Sundelson (1993) describes him as possessing x-ray vision. Perhaps Sundelson is correct: in *Hannibal*, Author Harris tells us that as Lecter walks, he has no need of light. Apparently, Lecter's weird maroon eyes allow him to see in utter darkness.

It is not only Lecter's vision that is unusually acute; Lecter also possesses an unusually developed olfactory sense. Like other wine enthusiasts, Lecter derives a great deal of satisfaction from the bouquet. But scent plays an unusually important role in Lecter's world. In *Hannibal*,

when he exits a building, Lecter tests the air. Smells matter to him. Consider Dr. Lecter's arrival at the Farmacia di Santa Maria Novella, described as one of the best-smelling places on Earth:

He stood for some minutes with his head back and eyes closed, taking in the aromas of the great soaps and lotions and creams, and of the ingredients in the workrooms. ... For him the air was painted with scents as distinct and vivid as colors, and he could layer and feather them as though painting wet-on-wet. Here there was nothing of jail. Here the air was music. Here were pale tears of frankincense awaiting extraction, yellow bergamot, sandalwood, cinnamon and mimosa in concert, over the sustaining ground notes of genuine ambergris, civit, castor from the beaver, and essence of the musk deer. Dr. Lecter sometimes entertained the illusion that he could smell with his hands, his arms and cheeks, that odor suffused him. That he could smell with his face and his heart (Harris, 1999, p. 187).

Even after years have passed, the smell of Will Graham's familiar and "atrocious" aftershave is enough to wake Lecter from sleep (Harris, 1981, p. 54), and Lecter correctly ascertains that Clarice Starling uses Evyan skin crème and sometimes wears L'Air du Temps, although she had not worn it that day (Harris, 1988). He can even smell the fresh band aid that Starling wears on her calf, concealed under her trousers. Starling suggests that Lecter "can smell everything" (Harris, 1988, p. 24).

Lecter also has an uncanny sense of hearing, making it very difficult to slip up on him (Harris, 1981). It is nearly impossible to surprise Lecter, but it is relatively easy for Lecter to surprise others. Lecter is capable of moving almost silently (Harris, 1981, 1988), with impossible speed (Picart & Greek, 2003), and with unusual grace (Harris, 1981).

There are other aspects of Lecter that seem more than human. Lecter is able to penetrate the minds of others. Under Lecter's scrutiny, Will Graham feels "that Lecter was looking through to the back of his skull. His attention felt like a fly walking around in there" (Harris, 1981, p. 54). Lurking in his mind, Lecter manages to stay with Graham, even when physically separated from him by five doors (Harris, 1981). For precisely this reason, Jack Crawford warns Starling, "You don't want Hannibal Lecter inside your head" (Picart & Greek, 2003, p. 52). Later, Lecter uses his penetrating focus to induce another inmate to swallow his own tongue (Harris, 1988), an ironic act in light of the fact that Lecter, himself, had previously ripped out and swallowed the tongue of one of his victims (Harris, 1981, 1988). Still later, when a Gypsy looked into Lecter's face, she "felt sucked to the red centers of his eyes, felt the huge cold vacuum pull her heart against her ribs" (Harris, 1999, p. 155).

Lecter also has a superhuman constitution. He is freakishly strong. "[S]ize for size he is as strong as an ant" (Harris, 1999, p. 366). Given that an ant can lift fifty times its body weight (Bailey, 1999), Hannibal Lecter must be capable of lifting about eight thousand pounds, more than 1,500 pounds more than Paul Anderson, the Guinness World Record holder successfully lifted in 1957 (Kiiha, 2005). Lecter is also unusually resistant to drugs. "They tried sodium amytal on him three years ago trying to find out where he buried a Princeton student He gave them a recipe for dip" (Harris, 1981, p. 108). Later, when Lecter's enemies apprehend him with a tranquilizer dart of acepromazine in the neck, they have to use "a big dose in a critical place"

(Harris, 1999, p. 388). He is also supernaturally stoic. When one of his enemies seared his chest with a glowing poker, searing his flesh and crisping his nipple through the shirt, he denies the man the pleasure of a reaction. “Dr. Lecter did not make a sound” (Harris, 1999, p. 415).

The character of Lecter also exercises an unnatural dominion over wild animals. Foiling his enemies’ plot to feed him alive to feral Sardinian pigs, Lecter walks through their ranks, unmolested (Harris, 1999). Witnessing this, one of the pigkeepers becomes terrified, stating in broken English that “the pigs, you must know, the pigs help the Dottore. They stand back from him, circle him. They kill my brother, kill Carlo, but they stand back from Dr. Lecter. I think they worship him” (Harris, 1999, p. 427).

All of these characteristics – the red eyes, the sixth finger, the ability to see in darkness, the superhuman strength, the acute sense of smell, the dominion over wild animals – suggest that Lecter might really be a monster of some kind. Perhaps the character of Hannibal Lecter is supposed to be a vampire. The suggestion is not as fantastic as it might initially seem. Indeed, author Harris himself hints at the possibility, writing, “It is an axiom of behavioral science that vampires are territorial, while cannibals range widely across the country. The nomadic existence held little appeal for Dr. Lecter” (Harris, 1999, p. 286). It is a basic syllogism. Combining the major and the minor premises yields the result: Lecter is a vampire.

Other commentators have suggested that Lecter is a vampire, as well. Hawker (2001) describes him as “Part Phantom of the Opera, part Bluebeard, a Dracula with a Ph.D. who subscribes to *Gourmet Traveller*.” Picart and Greek (2003) discuss the inextricable relationship between Lecter’s cannibalism and his status as a vampire. Sexton explores the possibility in greater detail, “We learn in *Hannibal* that, like Dracula, Lecter is a central European aristocrat. His father, too, was a count and he believes himself to be descended from a 12th-century Tuscan named Bevisangue (blood-drinker). Like Dracula, Lecter drains his victims” (2001).

Lecter’s vampirism, however, appears to be more psychic than corporeal. Like the predator in Richard Christian Matheson’s (1987) short story, “Vampire,” Lecter finds nourishment in the pain and trauma of others (Picart & Greek, 2003). Like the moths that live on “[t]he tears of large land mammals, about our size” (Harris, 1988, p. 102), Lecter thrives on the torment of others. “It’s the kind of thing he lives on. It’s his nourishment” (Harris, 1988, p. 125). One of the characters in *Hannibal*, Senator McMartin, describes Lecter’s unslakeable thirst for the anguish of others:

When Catherine was missing, when we were desperate and he said he had information on Jame Gumb, and I was pleading with him, he asked me, he looked into my face with those snake eyes and asked me if I had nursed Catherine. He wanted to know if I *breast-fed* her. I told him yes. And then he said, “Thirsty work isn’t it?” It just brought it all back suddenly, holding her as a baby, thirsty, waiting for her to get full, it pierced me like nothing I ever felt, and he *just sucked down my pain* (Harris, 1999, pp. 301-02, italics in original).

He drains his victims emotionally, rather than physically, but the effect is palpable. After Clarice Starling meets Lecter for the first time, she “felt suddenly empty, as though she had given blood”

(Harris, 1988, p. 23). Lecter's intense gaze makes her hear her blood (Harris, 1988), just as it had made Will Graham hear his own blood "like a hollow drumming of wings" (Harris, 1981, p. 58).

Sexton (2001) has persuasively argued that Lecter is a vampire, a character closely modeled upon Bram Stoker's character of Dracula:

Lecter, like Dracula, has superhuman strength; he commands the beasts; and he lives in the night. Barney, the warder, tells Clarice on her second visit that Lecter is always awake at night, "even when his lights are off". Many of his physical attributes resemble those of Dracula. "His cultured voice has a slight metallic rasp beneath it, possibly from disuse," we are told in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Dracula, says Stoker, speaks in a "harsh, metallic whisper". Dracula's eyes are red, Jonathan Harker realizes when he first meets him, in the guise of a coachman. Later, when he sees Dracula with his female acolytes, he says: "The red light in them was lurid, as if the flames of hell-fire blazed behind them." So too: "Dr. Lecter's eyes are maroon and they reflect the light in pinpoints in red. Sometimes the points of light seem to fly like sparks to his centre."

Sexton (2001) further elaborates upon the physical similarities between Lecter and Dracula. He notes that in Stoker's novel, "Dracula has a combination of 'extraordinary pallor' and lips of 'remarkable ruddiness.'" Lecter bears a striking likeness to his literary predecessor: "The only colors in the cell were his hair and eyes and his red mouth, in a face so long out of the sun it leached into the surrounding whiteness" (Harris, 1988, pp. 137-38). From these facts, Sexton (2001) concludes that "[t]here seems little doubt that Harris's success in adding so dramatically to our stock of monsters drew on Bram Stoker's earlier triumph in refining and perfecting the myth of the vampire."

But perhaps Lecter is *not* a vampire. Perhaps he is an altogether different species of monster. Perhaps he is the devil. Several commentators have argued for this reading. Dunant (1999) and Kloer (2002) have argued that as the Devil has become ridiculed in popular culture, the serial killer has assumed his role. As our most celebrated serial killer, then, the character of Hannibal Lecter is our new Satan. Sundelson (1993) entitled his article about Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*, "The Demon Therapist and Other Dangers" while Suraiya (1999) claims that "the good Dr. Lecter goes on from strength to satanic strength." Dery calls Dr. Lecter an "Antichrist Superstar" (1999, p. 40); both Johnson (2001) and Whitty (2002) associate Lecter with the proverbial "man of wealth and taste"; and Sexton (2001) argues that, in *Hannibal*, Lecter is "Satan, the only other figure of evil who is wise as well as malevolent, who understands but does not sympathize." Whitty (2002) expounds upon the theme:

There is something more to Lecter, something that sets him apart, and it is the simplest thing of all: The man is Evil itself. Lecter isn't just devilish, he's the Devil – and the clues are so thick that even the dim Dr. Chilton would have to recognize them. For example, like most pop-culture images of Lucifer, Lecter is erudite and wickedly witty. He enjoys ruling over the damned at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, tormenting sinners and teasing his doubting interrogators. The Satan who tempted Jesus in the desert would approve of Lecter's attempts to push brave FBI agents into despair. The Devil who dispenses chilly epigrams in Shaw's "Don Juan in Hell," the

demon who taunts Father Karras in William Peter Blatty's "The Exorcist" – both would recognize Lecter as a brother under the scaly skin.

In several passages, author Harris hints at the possibility that Lecter is the Devil, as well. Whether Lecter's pseudonym, Dr. Fell (Harris, 1999), is an allusion to Lucifer and the fallen angels of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667/1981) is uncertain, but there is no question that at least one inhabitant of Harris's literary universe recognizes Lecter as the Devil. After meeting his crimson gaze, the Gypsy Romula speaks with wide, terrified eyes: "That is the Devil ... Shaitan, Son of the Morning, I've seen him now" (Harris, 1999, p. 156). Referencing this passage, Suraiya (1999) writes, "Hannibal has transformed himself into ... the 'monster' of the Judeo-Christian tradition starting from Lucifer, Milton's 'Star of the Morning', who arraigned himself in dubious battle against the hosts of heaven."

There is additional literary evidence for Lecter's diabolical identity. Like Satan in the Book of Job (1:7, 2:2), Lecter goes "to and fro in the earth and walking up and down on it" (Hawker, 2001). These clues, coupled with Lecter's extraordinary strength, phenomenal sensory acuity, maroon eyes, and sixth finger, imply that there may be more than a whiff of brimstone about the character of Hannibal Lecter.

CONCLUSION

"The mind needs monsters. Monsters embody all that is dangerous and horrible in the human imagination."

Gilmore, 2002, p. 1

Man or monster? Ultimately, it is unclear precisely *what* Hannibal Lecter is. Author Thomas Harris makes it clear that he is a genius of "infinitely rare" caliber (Harris, 1988, p. 190), and that he is neither motivated by madness nor the hunger for fame. But it is not clear whether Lecter's genius can explain his crimes. An extraordinarily high IQ, such as Lecter's, can lead to feelings of isolation and frustration (Hollingworth, 1942; Towers, 1990), which can in turn lead to offending (Chase, 2003; Higdon, 1999). Thus, Lecter's cannibalistic murders could be the indirect consequence of his immeasurable intelligence. But it is far from clear that the character of Hannibal Lecter is even a human being. He might be a bona fide monster of some kind. He might kill, and dine on human bodies, because he is a literally a monster.

There is ample evidence in Harris' novels to support the claim that Lecter is a non-human monster. The character of Lecter certainly exhibits the physical features of a monster: he has crimson eyes, six fingers on his left hand, superhuman strength, and unnaturally sharp senses. Lecter may be a vampire (Sexton, 2001), consuming psychic pain as well as the flesh and blood that he consumes as a cannibal-killer, or he may be the Devil (Dery, 1999; Whitty, 2002), the physical embodiment of evil. It has been suggested that the character of Hannibal Lecter is so memorable because he emerges from paradox (Oleson, 2005b). It could simply be the case, however, that Lecter is such a successful villain because we love monster stories (Skal, 1993), because we need monsters (Gilmore, 2002) and because the Lecter novels skillfully combine the police procedural with particularly resonant elements of the supernatural horror story (Picart & Greek, 2003).

ENDNOTE

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