



# Unveiling The Personalities Of Female Characters In Select Crime Fiction

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## Abstract:

Crime fiction has fascinated readers through the ages. This paper explores the changing portrayal of female characters in crime fiction. Early works often relegated women to stereotypical roles: the victim, the femme fatale, or the sidekick. Characters like Miss Marple and Miss Loveday Brooke offered glimpses of more complex heroines, but it was not until the mid-20th century that authors like Dorothy L. Sayers and Patricia Highsmith challenged gender norms with characters like Harriet Vane and Tom Ripley. *The Silent Patient* by Alex Michaelides serves as a case study. While Alicia Berenson, the accused murderer, displays psychological complexity, she remains somewhat limited. Kathy Faber, Theo Faber's wife, embodies a different stereotype – the cheating spouse. In contrast, Clarice Starling from Thomas Harris' *The Silence of the Lambs* exemplifies a more modern heroine. Intelligent, resourceful, and haunted by her past, Clarice navigates a male-dominated world with both strength and vulnerability. By analysing both characters through Eysenck's PEN model, the paper highlights the enduring influence of past portrayals while celebrating the emergence of multifaceted female characters who challenge expectations and drive the genre forward.

**Keywords:** Crime fiction, *The Silent Patient*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, Eysenck's PEN model

In early crime fiction books, female characters were frequently depicted in restrictive and stereotypical ways. Many literary critics contend that women's roles in these books were frequently consigned to those of the sufferer, the femme fatale, or the sidekick. Rarely did they have the chance to perform independently or develop into completely realized characters. Like any other genre, crime fiction had been primarily written

by men, who fashioned prototypical male protagonists, villains, detectives, and criminals, while presenting marginalized female characters.

In early crime literature, the victim archetype was one of the most frequently used kinds of female protagonists. These women were frequently depicted as being defenceless and in desperate need of male heroes. Usually youthful, attractive, and harmless, their murders or disappearances served as plot devices to advance the plot. *A Study in Scarlet* by Arthur Conan Doyle and *The Women in White* by Wilkie Collins are two examples of this kind of figure.

Another typical feminine archetype in earlier crime fiction novels is the femme fatale. Typically, these women were depicted as seductive, cunning, and deadly. They enticed men into risky circumstances or conned them into performing crimes using their allure and attractiveness. *The Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett and *The Big Sleep* by Raymond Chandler are two examples of this kind of figure.

The sidekick was a third archetype for female protagonists in early criminal literature. These women were frequently depicted as devoted helpers to male investigators or law enforcement officers. They helped and supported the masculine protagonist, but they hardly ever had their own plots or stories. Instances of this kind of character can be found in works by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, such as 'Miss Marple' and Irene Adler.

There were noteworthy instances of female characters, though, who were presented as complicated and multifaceted. Female figures in crime fiction have changed and refined as the genre has developed, mirroring the shifting views and standards of society. Miss Loveday Brooke, a character who first appeared in a collection of tales by Catherine Louisa Pirkis in the late nineteenth century, is one of the first instances of a female investigator in criminal fiction. Mistress Brooke is an astute and tenacious detective who employs her knowledge and instincts to solve crimes. Also, several iconic female characters were created by Agatha Christie in the early twentieth century, including Tuppence Beresford and Miss Marple, who collaborated with her husband to find a successful detective agency. Miss Marple uses her understanding of human nature and her connections in her small town to solve murders.

According to the early famous English writer Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* “Only Jane Austen did it and Emily Brontë. It is another feather, perhaps the finest, in their caps. They wrote as women write, not as men write. Of all the thousand women who wrote novels then, they alone entirely ignored the perpetual admonitions of the eternal pedagogue—write this, think that. (4.32)”. Women have made a significant contribution to literature by exploring societal norms. Jane Austen was a pioneer in this, repeatedly exploring the expectations placed on women, usually involving marriage and gentility. Her writings examined the Victorian era's vanity for societal norms. Like how taboo topics like women's sexuality and passion frequently find expression in the writing of women. Despite being regarded as a taboo subject in society, Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* amply displays the female protagonist's passions.

In the middle of the twentieth century, authors like Dorothy L. Sayers and Patricia Highsmith developed female characters who questioned conventional gender norms and standards. While Tom Ripley, Highsmith's anti-heroine, defies gender stereotypes by being both manipulative and emotionally complicated, Sayers' investigator Harriet Vane is a powerful and autonomous woman who refuses to be defined by her interactions with males. More lately, female characters with flaws and complexity who are capable of both heroism and villainy have been developed by crime authors like Gillian Flynn, Tana French, and Karin Slaughter. By questioning conventional gender norms in the category, these authors have offered readers a broader variety of female characters to explore.

In his psychological thriller novel, *The Silent Patient*, Alex Michaelides examines the minds of both masculine and feminine characters. However, Alicia Berenson, a well-known painter who is accused of killing her husband Gabriel, is the book's primary female character. Other main female characters include Kathy Faber, Lydia Rose, Ruth, Indira Sharma and Barbie Hellman.

Alicia, the central character, is an artist who reportedly killed her spouse and later goes mute. Her history, her relationship with her spouse, and the reasons behind her silence are all examined in the book. Alicia's mental state is depicted in the novel as being complicated and incredibly troubled. She has a history of mental disease and has been labelled as selectively mute, meaning that she is unable to communicate in some contexts. Later in the novel, the cause of her mutism is made clear; it was brought about by a traumatic event she experienced when she was a young kid.

The paintings Alicia creates offer a glimpse into her mind and are a significant element of who she is as a person. Her works are frequently dark and unsettling, and they reflect her disturbed and confused mental state. She uses painting to convey her feelings that are difficult for her to verbalise. In the novel, Alicia is portrayed as a complicated person who has been adversely impacted by the traumatic experiences of her life. She has extreme anxiety and melancholy, which are made worse by her loneliness and her husband's killing, Alicia keeps quiet as a form of self-preservation against the hurt and suffering she has endured. As the plot develops, it becomes clear that Alicia's silence is not just a result of her psychic suffering. Instead, she is withholding information about the night of her husband's death, indicating that she may be concealing a deeper and more complicated reason for her actions. It is implied that her silence is both a sign of her psychic anguish and a calculated move on her part to shield herself from the repercussions of her actions.

According to the PEN model theory, proposed and advanced by Hans Eysenck, an individual's personality exhibits three traits: neuroticism, extraversion, and psychoticism. The main protagonist of the novel Alicia Berenson displays all the three-personality dimensions. The first personality trait of extraversion and introversion can be clearly seen through the character of Alicia Berenson. To quote, "I'm writing this in Café de l'Artista. I come here most days now. I keep feeling the need to get out of the house. When I'm around other people, even if it's only the bored waitress in here, I feel connected to the world somehow, like a human being" (Michaelides 129). The personality of extraversion is clearly noted in the above lines. Alicia is a character who pitches for company when she is with the outer world.

However, like every other human, Alicia craves to maintain her space and spend time in closed serenity.

Hi, honey. I saw you weren't in your studio."

I wondered where you were.

I was out, I just got back. Time for a drink? She said this in a baby voice she sometimes uses and that I find irritating.

Actually, I should get back to work.

Just a quick one. And then I have to go. I've got my Italian class tonight. Okay?

Without waiting for a reply, she came in. She said something about how dark it was in the kitchen and started opening the blinds without asking me. I was about to stop her, but when I looked outside, no one was on the street. The man had gone. (Michaelides 226)

Alicia respects her space when she is involved in her duties. She wishes no ounce of negligence or interference from any outside force. In the above extract, we can see how Alicia denies spending time with Barbie Hellman and prefers her obligation to work than camaraderie.

The second personality trait, Neuroticism is evident in the nature of Alicia. She is stressed and worried about being watched. She is skeptical and oblivious about her surroundings. Her higher level of neuroticism makes her emotionally unstable and difficult to tackle stressful situation. “While I was there, I was conscious the whole time of something. I kept looking over my shoulder--- but couldn’t see anyone. But someone was there, the whole time. I could feel it. I was being watched” (Michaelides 225). Alicia was scared and panicked at the thought of the man standing near to her window and watching her. She was searching for the shadow of the man. She wanted clarity on her intuition. She was bent on proving Gabriel about the man being real and that she was not hallucinating.

As soon as I heard that, something in my brain clicked and the jigsaw came together—the picture was complete.

It was him.

And something in me took over, some kind of wild animal instinct. I wanted to kill him, kill or be killed I leaped on him and tried to strangle him and scratch his eyes out, bash his skull to pieces on the floor. But I didn’t succeed in killing him, and they held me down and drugged me and locked me up. And then—after that I lost my nerve. I started to doubt myself again —maybe I’d made a mistake, maybe I was imagining it, maybe it wasn’t him. (Michaelides 321)

The higher psychoticism in her leads to manipulative and destructive behaviors. There are several instances in which Alicia engages in risk-taking behaviors as well as anti-social and violent behaviors. While she is being monitored in a strict forensic unit, she attacks Theo and wounds him badly. She neglected the consequences of her actions despite being placed in a restricted environment under strict surveillance. It is apparent that her thought-process is hostile, and she is capable of killing people without remorse.

Another prominent character who appears in the novel is Theo Faber's wife, Kathy. She is different from Alicia, as she is depicted as a loving and devoted wife who is attempting to assist her husband in coping with his personal psychological problems. In comparison to Alicia's unstable mental state, Kathy's character serves as a positive role model as a female character. But without her husband's knowledge, Kathy cheats on Theo by having an illicit romance with Gabriel. Theo frequently believes that Kathy is better at faking in everyday situations because she is a trained actress. Fascinatingly, Kathy's development throughout the novel exemplifies the difficult contrast between speech and silence: whereas she starts out as one of the most talkative, outgoing characters, by the end of the book, she is essentially mute and engulfed in her own quiet melancholy. Signs of Psychoticism can be seen in Kathy Faber when she continues to cheat on Theo even though he is her husband. She was not cautious to keep her laptop containing her obscene emails with her lover close. Infidelity is not an accepted social norm and Kathy was showing it with poorly calculated behaviour.

Another character of the novel is Barbie Hellmann who is the obtrusive and loud neighbour of Alicia. She is the only one who visits Alicia in the grove and is often described as someone who is a supreme megalomaniac, and she is the one who hears gunshots while Alicia murders Gabriel.

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I was out, I just got back.

Time for a drink? She said this in a baby voice she sometimes uses and that I find irritating. Actually, I should get back to work. Just a quick one. And then I have to go. I've got my Italian class tonight.

Okay?

Without waiting for a reply, she came in. She said something about how dark it was in the kitchen and started opening the blinds without asking me. I was about to stop her, but when I looked outside, no one was on the street. The man had gone. (Michaelides 226).

Ruth, a psychotherapist who was recommended to Theo by the university counselling service to counsel him, is another female figure in the novel. She is described as Theo's mentor, and he recollects her in his memories. She is portrayed as a frank and perceptive counsellor who guides Theo through some emotional struggles, but her presence in the narrative is relatively brief. Ruth also plays a major role in leading Theo in the right way.

In the novel, Ruth prompts Theo to consider his own feelings and views towards Kathy after he learns that she was unfaithful. She also requests him to share his thoughts on her, his likes and dislikes of her, and his aspirations for the partnership. Theo was able to learn more about himself and understand why he is attracted to Kathy as a result of this. Ruth stresses the importance of honesty in a therapist and a companion above all else. Ruth also shows Theo how to relate to his patients on a human level. Ruth is one of the important female characters who play a major role in the Theo's character development and contributed to the novels progress.

*The Silence of the Lambs*, written by Thomas Harris, features several notable female characters. The female protagonist of this novel is Clarice Starling, a bright young FBI trainee who is assigned to question the infamous serial killer Dr. Hannibal Lecter, to learn more about Buffalo Bill, another murderer. Her intellect, resourcefulness, and compassion make Clarice a captivating heroine. Clarice is a complicated and dynamic character who is resolved to succeed in a profession that is controlled by men.

Clarice's tenacity is a crucial element of her personality. She lost her father at an early age and lived in destitution her entire life. She persisted though, and in the hopes of making a change, she entered the FBI. She approaches the difficulties of the case with a strong sense of resolve and character. She is also haunted by her past. She is plagued by the recollection of the screams of the sheep she heard as a young child and the pain of her father's passing. She now has empathy for victims, and these events have inspired her to fight for their rights. Clarice's sensitivity is another element of her personality. She is still a young lady trying to find her position in a male-dominated society despite her tough exterior and professional attitude. Her encounters with Dr. Hannibal Lecter, who becomes her guide and friend, make this weakness especially clear. Clarice Starling is a character who exhibits three dimensions of PEN model of personality. On the extraversion-introversion scale, she is in the middle. She is outgoing and likes to be around people, but she also appreciates her alone time.

Throughout the novel, her introverted personality is evident. She does not engage in small talk and seems uncomfortable doing so. In contrast to superficial interactions, she prefers to have meaningful conversations with others. "Starling came from people who do not ask for favours or press for friendship, but she was puzzled and regretful at Crawford's behaviour. Now, in his presence, she liked him again, she was sorry to note" (Harris 6). The introverted nature of Clarice makes her extremely observant and thoughtful. Her acute sense of detail and nuances makes her more observant than others. Her introversion also allows her

to think deeply and analyse situations thoroughly, which is useful to her work as an FBI agent. In addition to enjoying her solitude, she is often seen alone engaging in deep thought. She is portrayed as someone who uses introspection to understand herself and the world around her and finds comfort in her own company. “Starling wanted to concentrate. She wished she were alone in the apartment, but she knew she was lucky the place wasn't full of cops” (Harris 192).

Clarice is also a character who displays low psychoticism. In contrast to people with high psychoticism, those with low psychoticism are usually calm and rational in their thinking, and less prone to make reckless or impulsive decisions.

Clarice Starling flinched as the first of the heavy steel gates clashed shut behind her and the bolt shot home. Chilton walked slightly ahead, down the green institutional corridor in an atmosphere of Lysol and distant slammings. Starling was angry at herself for letting Chilton put his hand in her purse and briefcase, and she stepped hard on the anger so that she could concentrate. It was all right. She felt her control solid beneath her, like a good gravel bottom in a fast current (Harris 12).

Starling's anger at herself for allowing Chilton to place his hand in her briefcase and purse, which caused her to feel guilty. She is likened to a solid gravel bottom in a swift current but manages to hold back her rage and keep her cool. This implies that Starling is able to maintain control and concentration despite the difficult circumstances.

Clarice does not exhibit the kind of impulsivity or aggression that would be characteristic of someone with high psychoticism, despite the fact that she is undoubtedly capable of violence as shown by her training in self-defence and firearms. In reality, she frequently demonstrates thoughtfulness and caution in her actions, carefully weighing the possible outcomes of her choices. Clarice is a complex character with some peculiar personality characteristics, but she does not generally behave in a way that would be expected of someone with a high level of psychoticism.

Clarice Starling is presented as a character in *The Silence of the Lambs* who has a strong sense of resolve, intelligence, and resourcefulness. However, she also displays several traits of neuroticism throughout the novel. The level to which a person is vulnerable to negative feelings like anxiety, depression, and rage is referred to as neuroticism. Clarice's neurotic tendencies are a result of her past experiences. She lost her father

when she was a young kid, and the traumatic events of her early life have left her feeling incredibly alone and insecure.

Clarice Starling was excited, depleted, running on her will. Some of the things Lecter had said about her were true, and some only clanged on the truth. For a few seconds she had felt an alien consciousness loose in her head, slapping things off the shelves like a bear in a camper.

She hated what he'd said about her mother, and she had to get rid of the anger. This was business (Harris 27).

Clarice appears to be feeling a range of feelings in these lines, including excitement, exhaustion, and anger. She is also aware that while some of what Lecter said about her was true, it was not completely accurate in others. The expressions, "slapping things off the shelves like a bear in a camper" and "an alien consciousness loose in her brain" may allude to a brief sensation of being out of control or overwhelmed by her emotions. This might be interpreted as a manifestation of her high degree of neuroticism, which makes her prone to strong emotions and sometimes unable to control them.

Clarice's friendship with Dr. Hannibal Lecter also reveals some of her neuroticism. Clarice continues to converse with him despite knowing he is a perilous and cunning person in an effort to understand the killer's motivations. This behaviour can be viewed as an example of obsessive-compulsive disorder because as the plot of the story develops, Clarice finds it harder and harder to control her obsession with Hannibal.

Descending through the asylum with Alonzo toward the final keep, Starling managed to shut out much of the slammings and the screaming, though she felt them shiver the air against her skin. Pressure built on her as though she sank through water, down and down.

The proximity of madmen--- the thought of Catherine Martin bound and alone, with one of them snuffling her, patting his pockets for his tools-- - braced Starling for her job. But she needed more than resolution. She needed to be calm, to be still, to be the keenest instrument. She had to use patience in the face of the awful need to hurry. If Dr. Lecter knew the answer, she'd have to find it down among the tendrils of his thought. (Harris 131)

These lines from the novel imply that she is under a lot of stress and pressure, which could be linked to how she is neurotic. Starling's description of feeling as though she is sinking through water and that there is pressure building all around her indicates that she is overwhelmed and finding it difficult to manage. Given that people with high levels of neuroticism frequently experience stress, anxiety, and other negative feelings, this may be linked to her neuroticism. Overall, despite being a strong and capable protagonist, Clarice Starling's neurotic tendencies give her character more depth and aid in how she changes throughout the novel.

The daughter of a US senator who is kidnapped by Buffalo Bill, Catherine Martin, is another significant female figure in the book. Catherine is a strong and resilient character who refuses to give up hope and actively works to try to flee Buffalo Bill despite spending a large portion of the book imprisoned and in danger.

By analysing both the female protagonists through the Eysenck's PEN model theory, it is seen that high levels of neuroticism are evident in both *Silence of the Lambs*'s Clarice Starling and *The Silent Patient*'s Alicia Berenson. Clarice is continuously trying to live up to expectations as a result of the memories of her father's passing. Alicia experiences extreme anxiety and struggles to manage her emotions. Due to their introversion, both of the protagonists avoid social situations. Alicia rarely interacts with others and spends most of her time alone, while Clarice is preoccupied with her job and has few close relationships. According to the PEN model theory, Clarice Starling and Alicia Berenson share some characteristics, but overall, their personalities and behaviours are very different. The two characters live in separate worlds, have different problems to solve, and employ various coping strategies.

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