***The Murderous Trail of Charles Starkweather***

Reinhardt, James Melvin , (1960). The murderous trail of Charles Starkweather.The police science series., (pp. 3-14). Springfield, IL, US: Charles C Thomas Publisher, xiii, 151 pp. doi: 10.1037/11594-001

*\*James Melvin Reinhardt spent 30 hours interviewing Charles Starkweather during the arrest and trial process.*

**The Mask**

Charles Starkweather, nineteen year old killer from Lincoln, Nebraska, was executed in the electric chair at the Nebraska State Penitentiary shortly after midnight on June 25, 1959. He had come from a relatively poor family. He was not as tall as the average boy his own age; and according to the tests administered by the trial psychologists, his intelligence was average. Charles Starkweather was no ordinary criminal. He belonged to no hoodlum gang; he was not a sex maniac; he had no juvenile court record. When the body of Robert Colvert, his first victim, was found, no one told the police to question Charles Starkweather. Yet he was admittedly involved in the murder of eleven people before he was twenty years old. All but one were slain in a mad reign of fury that lasted seven days. Charles quit school at sixteen. One of his teachers said that he wouldn't accept responsibility. He exhibited an interest in art and woodwork. There was no sustained drive. He had no occupational skills that he seemed to use profitably, though his own hands kept his hot rod running. His jobs were lifting jobs; he never held one long. These are the obvious facts. They do not explain why he killed. The answer must surely be found in the warped values this boy read into life. His ego was empty and defeated; he imagined himself rejected by society, as symbolized by social position and power. These things--position and power--he could not hope to attain and hold by honest toil. Without them, as he had come to believe, life was worthless. There came to him the appearance of a short road to power--the way of the gun.

**The Future was Spent**

Fifty days after Charles Starkweather killed Robert Colvert, he and his 14-year-old girl friend set out on a reign of murderous fury that lasted eight days and left ten more people dead. None of the eleven had ever injured Charles in any way and at least four of them had befriended him on one or more occasions. This chapter chronicles the events of the killing spree and the subsequent execution. Life, for itself, was absurd to Charles Starkweather. His victims simply "got in (his) way." He would rather "burn" than to escape the chair on a plea of insanity. He resisted the efforts of his court-appointed attorneys to save his life, on that plea, to the end. His ego could find nothing hard or cold or nerve-testing in the cruelties of an insane man. He had shot his way into the annals of crime. He was not about to spend the rest of life in a "stinkin' asylum."

**He “wanted to explode”**

The life history of Charles Starkweather points to a chain of crises situations that began with Charles' first day in school. Perhaps the most ominous elements in these situations were an extremely timorous nature and an uneasy endemic attachment to the family scene. Hate, suspicion and a hunger for power closed off the road to the joyousness of generosity and trust. Nothing got through his fear, hate and distrust. Hate was an alloy of fear. He had lost the capacity to find immunity from hate. He could not free himself from suspicions that gave rise to it. What death or unhappiness brought to another was unimportant in itself. His girl friend's mother; an aged man; an infant lying upon the floor: What claims had they to life? For Charles they had none that he was bound to respect. Before the Colvert murder, life's purposes had for Charles become narrowed and legitimate interests restricted to purely biological and egoistic satisfactions. Moral considerations were ineffective. Murder became an essential series of events in the rapid emergence of his terrifying demands. He had long "been tormented" by an increasingly galling sense of failure. Urge by urge, impulse by impulse he came to the end of dilemma. An indestructible rage had at last set him free. He could now spill himself out over the "world" he hated. He could kill and thrill with a gun, a knife and a girl. He could now say "I am master. I take what I want!" Also included in the chapter are samples of Charles' handwriting. The first four pages are from his "life story." The remaining specimens are written replies that he gave to a series of questions asked him, in the prison, six weeks before the date of execution as originally set by the court.

**The Time Came**

Charles Starkweather went to school. On that first day he thought a "mean-looking kid stared" at him. He sought the face of the teacher. He thought she had deserted him. He was alone in a strange, new world. Even his own voice abandoned him. Finally it stammered in his ears. He was frightened and he hated school. He could not see with the joyous eyes of the children around him. The teacher tried to tell him how to play with the other children but that, he thought, was because she didn't like him. Hate fed hate. Suspicion fed suspicion. The most ordinary incidents became evil to Charles. He learned quickly to exaggerate. He was driven by his own anxieties and fears to build up an elaborate bulwark of defenses. He withdrew himself. There, inside himself, he brooded, and played with bizarre and fantastic scenes. He couldn't remain withdrawn forever. Some word, some movement, even the silence of another, brought him out into the open. Whether withdrawn or in the open, he rarely felt secure with other children. Inside he was obsessed with a sense of "failure," with fantastic dreams of power, or mastery over someone else. Outside he swaggered and blustered, even while he opened doors for the teachers, erased blackboards, made flowers for the Christmas time; and he fought. And so hate incorporated hate, suspicion incorporated suspicion, fear incorporated fear. The fusion built up defenses against the threat of invasion by any countervailing forces of love or co-operative good will. The depth and dynamic nature of his hate and distrust, however, could not permit a withdrawal from the world. There was no choice but to distrust, to hate, and to hunger for power. So his imagination played upon the scenes in which he could dominate others; of ways of putting objective reality into his imagination. The isolated and undramatic circumstances in which his life pattern found expression made him a brutal killer. In another place and time, and in a different social life with a different ring of human worries and anxieties, he might well have commanded the wholesale "rape of the innocent" to the glory of his memory. He was hardly more a mad man and a fool than Hitler was when he set out to take the world by brutal force. And surely he was no worse than many another who had commanded vast armies to massacre whole populations. I cannot say that Charles Starkweather ever exhibited a sign of genuine remorse in my long sessions with him, either before or after his trial. The boy's mother believed that Charles was genuinely remorseful, and though she is ordinarily a quiet undemnonstrative woman, her eyes seemed to be sparked with anger when the defense counsel sought to show that her son was incapable of remorse.

**The Investigation -- The Police and the Public**

A sober and dispassionate note came into the chorus of criticism with the arrest of Charles Starkweather and Caril Fugate in Wyoming. There was, however, no sign of abatement. The situation apparently gave the Lincoln City Council and the Lancaster County Board of Commissioners no alternative. They authorized an "impartial" inquiry into the conduct of the Starkweather investigation by a "specially qualified criminologist." Harold G. Robinson, member of the investigative staff of the California Bureau of Criminal Investigation and former FBI Agent, was invited to make the inquiry. Mr. Robinson arrived in Lincoln on March 10th, and submitted his report on March 22, 1958. Because of a widely expressed professional interest in this inquiry and the importance that it has for law enforcement officers generally, the report is extensively reproduced here.

**The Trial**

The summary of the murderous scenes along the horror-stricken path of Charles Starkweather and Caril Fugate is based upon Charles' own statements to investigating authorities and his testimony in court. No one at the murder scenes but Charles and Caril, lived to tell what happened.