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## **Exploring the Dark Persona: Analysing Yrsa Sigurðardóttir's *The Legacy* and *The Reckoning* through Hans Eysenck's Personality Theory**

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### **Abstract:**

This study investigates the interplay between Nordic noir literature and criminal psychology through the lens of Hans Eysenck's Personality Theory. Nordic noir, originating from Scandinavian countries including Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland, is characterised by its dark, atmospheric settings, meticulous environmental detail, and complex, often strong female protagonists. While the genre centres on crime and criminal behaviour, analysing it through psychological theory provides deeper insight into the motivations and personality traits of fictional offenders. Drawing on Eysenck's framework, which correlates extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism with criminal tendencies, this research examines how contemporary Nordic noir authors depict criminal minds and the psychological forces shaping their actions. By integrating literary analysis with criminological psychology, the study illuminates how personality traits are woven into narrative structures and character development, enhancing our understanding of both genre and human behaviour. The scope encompasses a critical reading of select contemporary Nordic noir texts, situating them within broader debates in criminal psychology and literature. Ultimately, this research demonstrates the value of applying psychological theory to literature, offering new interpretive strategies and reinforcing the interdisciplinary potential between criminology and literary studies.

**Keywords-** Crime Fiction, Psychology, Personality Theory, Nordic Noir.

### **Introduction**

For ages, readers have been captivated by the intriguing crime fiction genre. It can take us to the seedy side of society, where mysteries abound and the quest for justice occupies the foreground. This genre continues to enthrall readers with its captivating plots, recognisable characters, and examination of the human condition. Examples include the classic Sherlock Holmes tales and contemporary crime novels' gritty and complex narratives. With the

emergence of psychological thrillers and home noir, crime fiction has seen additional changes in recent years. By constructing intricate novels that delve into the most insidious corners of the human mind, authors like Tana French, Paula Hawkins, and Gillian Flynn have pushed the limits of the genre. The distinction between the victim and the culprit is frequently hazy in these stories, prompting readers to reflect on their own presumptions and moral standards.

Nordic Noir, commonly referred to as Scandinavian crime fiction, is a subgenre within the larger crime fiction category that has grown significantly in popularity over the past few years on a global scale. Nordic Noir, which has its roots in the Nordic nations of Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland, presents a distinctive and engrossing method of crime storytelling. Nordic Noir has captured the attention of readers and viewers all around the world with its ominous and eerie locations, morally complex characters, and study of contemporary concerns. Nordic Noir became well-known throughout the world thanks to the popularity of writers like Henning Mankell, Stieg Larsson, and Jo Nesbø. The realistic and frequently depressing view of society, coupled with intricate characters and plotlines, was shown in Mankell's Inspector Kurt Wallander series, Larsson's Millennium trilogy, and Nesbø's Harry Hole series. While capturing the genre's tone and structure, Jeannette de Beauvoir says "Nordic dramas... share a dark aesthetic, slow-but-compelling pacing, cerebral protagonists, generally a social commentary, and multi-layered storylines." Criminal psychology and crime fiction have a dynamic and synergistic interaction. Crime fiction uses ideas and inspiration from criminal psychology's theories and concepts to develop gripping and realistic stories, while criminal psychology, in turn, gains knowledge and comprehension of criminal behaviour from crime fiction's observations and insights. The intriguing topic of criminal psychology, commonly referred to as forensic psychology, combines the study of psychology and criminology. It involves examining the attitudes, actions, drives and thought processes of people who have committed crimes. Criminal psychologists are essential to the investigation, profiling, and prevention of crimes because they can comprehend and evaluate the psychological elements that contribute to criminal behaviour. David Canter, in his book *Offender Profiling and Criminal Differentiation*, says "the criminal reveals himself not only in his crime but in the way he commits it, the choices he makes, and the meaning he attaches to his actions."

Crime prevention can benefit from an understanding of the psychological elements involved with criminal behaviour. Criminal psychologists can aid in the creation of preventive measures and interventions by identifying risk factors and early warning indicators. They can assist in identifying those who are likely to engage in criminal activity and offer support and interventions to deter them from going down a criminal path.

Because of its originality and solid theoretical foundations, Hans Eysenck's (1917–1977) contribution to the study of personality has received widespread recognition. Eysenck, who was regarded as an iconoclast, enjoyed questioning the accepted conventions of the day. He disproved the personality ideas put forth by psychologists of his time, including Sigmund

Freud and Jeffrey Alan Grey. He presented his own personality model and theories. The PEN model of personality, which is based on Eysenck's Theory of Personality, identifies three basic aspects of personality: neuroticism, extraversion, and psychoticism. He was confident in his notion that personality traits constitute significant predispositions to criminality when he tied these three aspects of personality together with other elements to criminality. According to Eysenck, criminal behaviour can be easily identified if such personality traits and dimensions are deliberately and thoroughly investigated. The PEN model of personality, which is based on Eysenck's Theory of Personality, identifies three basic aspects of personality: neuroticism, extraversion, and psychoticism. He was confident in his notion that personality traits constitute significant predispositions to criminality when he tied these three aspects of personality together with other elements to criminality. According to Eysenck, criminal behaviour can be easily identified if such personality traits and dimensions are deliberately and thoroughly investigated.

Born in 1973, Icelandic novelist Vilborg Yrsa Sigurdardottir is a writer of children's books and mystery fiction. She's considered one of the most well-known and prestigious crime fiction writers. Sigurdardottir's first Nordic noir novel, *Last Rituals*, was released in 2005. She has gained notoriety for writing many crime novels since then. Most of her writings have been translated into over thirty different languages. Her best-known work, *The Legacy*, which sets up the Freyja and Huldar trilogy about a police detective and a child psychotherapist, has made her the most admired Nordic noir author in the world. She is now considered one of Scandinavia's greatest writers after penning additional volumes in the series.

*The Legacy* by Yrsa Sigurðardóttir explores the relationship between trauma, retaliation, and moral uncertainty while placing itself within the psychological suspense genre. The main character is Rikhardur, a policeman in Iceland's crime division, whose identity as a spouse and a law enforcement official is severely disrupted when he learns of his wife Karlotta's covert abortion. Feelings of betrayal and disillusionment overwhelm Rikhardur, who takes on the roles of both victim and transgressor by launching a methodical campaign of retribution against those involved in the procedure. In addition to adhering to the rules of crime fiction, Sigurðardóttir's story emphasises the protagonist's psychological breakdown, providing a lengthy reflection on the brittleness of justice, the destructive power of vengeance, and the moral voids that underlie human nature.

*The Reckoning* presents a harrowing exploration of vengeance and the failures of institutional justice. When Dagmar's daughter, Vaka, becomes the victim of Jon Jonson, a convicted paedophile prematurely released from prison, Dagmar's grief catalyses a methodical pursuit of retribution. The narrative interrogates the moral ambiguities of taking justice into one's own hands, as Dagmar systematically targets those she deems culpable. Through this dark trajectory, the novel examines the psychological and societal consequences of a justice system that leaves victims powerless, framing vengeance as both a personal and ethically complex response to systemic failure.

**Literature review**

Previous literature shows that criminal psychology has been used to analyse some of the crime fiction novels and movies; however, its use for the study of the Nordic noir genre, and more so the chosen texts, is yet to be explored. Previous studies have mainly concentrated on psychological thrillers, modern crime fiction, and detective fiction and provided insights into the psychological aspects of criminal acts, narrative conventions, and the evolution of the genres.

A significant conference paper released by the University of London in June 2014, entitled *Between Suspense and Psychological Thriller – The Examination of Criminal Intrigue, the Psychology of Guilt, and Abnormal Human Behaviour in Patricia Highsmith's Strangers on a Train and The Talented Mr. Ripley*, explored the relationship between suspense and psychological aspects of Highsmith's works. The research analysed such works from the perspective of personality disorders, identity crises, and internal conflicts with an emphasis on the psychological complexity of guilt and deviant behaviour.

In addition, a 2019 University of Nottingham research paper, *Demystifying the Criminal Mind: Linguistic, Social, and Generic Deviance in Contemporary American Crime Fiction*, examined contemporary American crime fiction from an interdisciplinary perspective. The author examined three major types of deviation: stylistic (in the formation of criminal mind styles), literary (in subverting the conventional parameters of the crime fiction genre), and social (in reconfiguring criminal behaviour within the narrative context). Moreover, a 2014 Ph.D. dissertation from Mahatma Gandhi University, *On the Trail of Mysteries: Detextualizing the Criminal and the Detective in Crime Detective Fiction*, mapped the development of detective fiction and explored the presence of the detective as well as the criminal. The research emphasised detective fiction's positioning within a Western popular canon, which sustains a culture of social discipline and order.

The genre of Nordic Noir has also not been explored much with respect to criminal psychology. Even though it has been studied concerning other dimensions such as the historical, social or moral perspectives that it reflects but the psychological aspect has not been explored much. In 2015 a journal published by “International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies” entitled *‘Men Who Hate Women’: Masculinities, Violence and the Gender Politics of Nordic Noir* attempted to study the novels of Steig Larsson and suggested that his novels are used to bring forth the idea that beneath popular imaginaries of seemingly peaceful societies, Nordic noir exposes violent masculine authority as an expression of the relationship between the individual and neoliberal state in the twenty-first century

Although these studies present valuable insights into crime fiction, psychological thrillers, and detective fiction, they leave a gaping hole in how criminal psychology has been applied to Nordic noir. This study endeavours to fill that gap by critically examining chosen Nordic noir texts within the framework of criminal psychology to further enrich the current body of work on the genre.

**Discussion:**

According to psychologists, criminality or criminal behaviour is the result of a variety of internal and environmental variables rather than something that is inherited or genetic. Criminal psychologists delve into the criminal's psyche while analysing his behaviour to determine what motivated him to engage in criminal activities. Deborah Schruman-Kauflin, in relation to profiling violent offenders, states that "Murderers, rapists, and serial offenders do not erupt from a vacuum; their crimes are the culmination of psychological predispositions and environmental pressures" (200).

In his Personality Theory, Hans Eysenck makes connections between specific personality traits and taught behaviours and criminal behaviour. The PEN model, which he developed, categorises personality into three levels or categories. The three components are neuroticism, extraversion, and psychoticism. The personality trait known as neuroticism is characterised by low self-esteem, poor emotional regulation, and mood swings. This dominant personality type is characterised by moodiness, anxiety, irrationality, emotion, and tension. Eysenck and Eysenck (1975) describe a neurotic person as: an anxious, worrying individual, moody and frequently depressed. He is likely to sleep badly, and to suffer from various psychosomatic disorders. He is overly emotional, reacting too strongly to all sorts of stimuli, and finds it difficult to get back on an even keel after each emotionally arousing experience. His strong emotional reactions interfere with his proper adjustment, making him react in irrational, sometimes rigid ways. If the highly neurotic individual has to be described in one word, one might say he was a worrier; his main characteristic is a constant preoccupation with things that might go wrong, and a strong emotional reaction to these thoughts.

Dagmar from *The Reckoning* demonstrates similar psychological characteristics. She mercilessly murders several people because they didn't do anything to bring justice to her daughter, who was raped and killed by a man. Dagmar kills close to five individuals in her search for retribution and justice. She severed a man's hands with a chainsaw, causing him to bleed to death. The conversation between Huldar and Erla while discussing the pathology report describes the possible crime "The man was alive when his hands were cut off. So, the pathologist believes. Though he's added all kind of disclaimers." The rumour that the victim had been alive had probably been triggered by the grisly nature of the discovery. Do they know what was used? Was it a knife or a saw?" "A chainsaw." Erla shook her head. "No. But the pathologist thinks it's likely. The chances that he bled to death are a result of this... procedure...are pretty high" (Sigurdartottir, *The Reckoning* 51).

When she sees Jon Jonsson, the person who killed her daughter, walking around freely, Dagmar, who has poor emotional and self-control, loses her composure. Because the police did not inform her of Jon Jonsson's release, she goes there and causes chaos. Even though she had been actively hunting for a reason to murder him. She had gone to Einar's house only to frighten him, hoping that he would disclose the truth, but as she stared at him,

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she lost control and slammed his head onto the table, piercing his head with glass and gushing blood everywhere.

According to Eysenck, those with high levels of neuroticism frequently experience emotional instability and may become aggressive or enraged at the mere sight of unpleasant stimuli, which makes them irrational and unmanageable. A similar idea has been put forth by Hollin when he states that “neuroticism can contribute to impulsivity and emotional instability, which are often observed in criminal and antisocial populations.”

Dagmar had no other thoughts since her rage was so overwhelming. In exchange for Throstur's silence regarding Einar's death, she threatened to kill all those accountable for his sister's illness, including her daughter Vaka. Dagmar reasoned that by doing so, she would be assisting Throstur and his sister while also avoiding any guilt. According to Eysenck, individuals with neurotic personality traits get unreasonable and lose their sense of judgment. They are satisfied with their behaviour as long as they can defend it to themselves. According to Dagmar, jailing Jon Jonsson for several years would not be fair, and she should take action herself. In the novel, Orri told Freyja: Dagmar became completely obsessed with vengeance. At first, he tried to ignore it. He thought she wasn't serious; it was just a phase she was going through. But as time went on there was room for nothing else in her life and in the end their marriage broke down. He waited until the Supreme Court had given its verdict, hoping that she would feel Jon had got his just deserts, but that wasn't enough for her. She went on plotting how to kill all the people who had been implicated in Jon's first acquittal. In her eyes they were equally culpable. The final straw came when she started stockpiling all kinds of tools, sulphuric acid and other worrying stuff” (Sigurdardottir, *The Reckoning* 368).

Vengeance is a powerful psychological motivator that can drive individuals to commit criminal acts. It often arises from perceived wrongs or injustices, triggering aggressive impulses and retaliatory behaviour. Dagmar had other methods to vent her fury at Jon Jonsson's release, but she grew irrational and, as a result of her poor emotional control, she chose to express her rage in more violent ways, justifying her acts to herself as doing what was right for the people. Due to her intense emotional involvement in her daughter's murder, Dagmar wished for others to experience much worse suffering than her. She had the option of reporting Jon Jonsson's release to the police, but instead she decided to punish those who colluded in her daughter's case. She began using even more heinous and horrific methods of execution, including cutting off body parts, burning with acid, torturing, and crushing the victim's body until it was unrecognisable.

Erla explains, looking at the body of Benedikt Toft, who was killed by Dagmar: “Maybe for his sake, I hope he didn't know what was coming. But I have a feeling that whoever did this would have gone out of their way to tell him. This stinks of sadism. There are plenty of simpler ways to kill someone, so the intention must have been to make him suffer” (*The Reckoning* 120).

Psychoticism is a third aspect of personality that Eysenck eventually included in his Personality Theory along with extraversion and neuroticism. Psychoticism, out of all the other dimensions, is the most problematic, in Eysenck's opinion. After performing an extensive study and identifying the characteristics he identified among criminals in order to associate psychoticism and criminal behaviour, he added this layer to his hypothesis. Eysenck came to the conclusion that psychotic individuals fit the definition of psychoticism after examining the personality and behaviour of criminals who had committed much more heinous crimes. This was because of how these criminals had carried out such crimes and how they had perceived their own actions. Eysenck defines psychoticism as

We find that such a person is characterised by the following traits: (1) solitary, not caring for other people; (2) troublesome, not fitting in ; (3) cruel, inhumane; (4) lack of feeling, insensitive;(5) lacking empathy; (6) sensation seeking, avid for strong sensory stimuli; (7) hostile to others; aggressive; (8) liking for odd and unusual things; (9) disregard for dangers, foolhardy; (10) likes to make fools of other people and to upset them (Eysenck 58). Rikhardur from *The Legacy*, who ruthlessly murdered three people despite being a police officer himself, exhibited comparable characteristics. Rikhardur, who at first appears to be a devoted police officer, ends up being a man who brutally kills people. He killed three individuals in cold blood, intending to make them suffer as much as possible, and enjoyed watching them pleading for mercy in front of him. He knew his wife was his half-sister, but he wasn't ready to leave the lady he loved. According to Eysenck, some psychotic characteristics manifest themselves from a very young age. If these tendencies aren't controlled, they keep growing stronger and becoming uncontrollable. It is clear from the start of the book that Rikhardur has taken on a peculiar affinity or behaviour towards the girl. The same traits can be seen in Rikhardur as described by Eysenck in his diagnosis of psychoticism, including aggression, cruelty, and pleasure seeking. Rikhardur mercilessly murdered all three women as revenge for his hostility. He had the option of using another method, but he chose to slaughter them ruthlessly and in cold blood. Elisa was strangled by him after he taped up her entire face and shoved a vacuum cleaning tube down her throat. She was first filled with carbon monoxide and phosgene before he used it to remove all the air from her lungs. It was a disturbing scene to see when the police discovered her body. Her body had turned bluish green with her fists clenched strongly. As mentioned in the novel, "Elisa was lying across the double bed. Her head was wound like a mummy in duct tape which obscured her eyes, nose and mouth. Only the upper part of her forehead was visible and the hair sticking up wildly above it. Most disturbing of all, though, was what had happened to her mouth" (*The Legacy* 34)

The description of Elisa's body itself alludes to the horrifying circumstances of the victim's demise as well as the brutality of the perpetrator. Rikhardur, the murderer, goes a little too far in making sure the woman suffers and gives up all hope of her surviving. According to Eysenck, those who exhibit psychotic symptoms are extremely creative and clever, which makes them much more dangerous. They work with extreme accuracy, leaving no space for error on their part. These individuals enjoy strong stimuli, are sensation seekers,

and enjoy making others look foolish. When Rikhardur leaves the police coded signals, he does exactly the same thing, thinking he is tricking them and making their job more difficult. Being a police officer himself, he believed that the police would focus solely on decoding the signals, paying no attention to anything else. Rikhardur also has a propensity to kill for the sheer enjoyment of making his prey quake in their boots. He enjoys seeing the victim fear him, in pain, and pleading for assistance. He grabs a handful of Elisa's hair and tugs so hard that it spills out onto his hand before killing her. He warns her that he will be telling her a narrative, so pay close attention. He even beats her and then makes her laugh as punishment. He drags and shakes her till her brain feels loose within her skull after punching her hard in the back, striking her spine, and taping both hands together. When Rikhardur's victims resist him weakly and eventually lose to him, he feels successful.

Individuals high in psychoticism are more likely to act on hostile impulses without regard for social norms or the consequences of their actions, which can make revenge a particularly compelling motivator. Their emotional detachment and reduced empathy can intensify retaliatory behaviour, as they may perceive acts of vengeance as justified or necessary. Moreover, the combination of high impulsivity and low inhibition characteristic of psychoticism can escalate minor conflicts into criminal or violent acts driven by a desire for retribution.

When Rikhardur goes to murder Astros, he follows suit. After tormenting and abusing her, he hands her a pencil and instructs her to calculate the likelihood of something happening using arithmetic. Astros, a biology instructor, was unsure of what the man wanted her to do. As the writer tells that when Astros heard his voice, "she didn't recognise the voice but could tell that the man was beside himself with rage, his voice was quivering with hatred" (*The Legacy* 172). Rikhardur makes sure he gets satisfaction from seeing his victim sob and tremble in front of him. Before killing them, he makes his victims perform odd tasks.

Eysenck included a lack of empathy and indifference to others as psychotic qualities in his description of psychoticism. According to him, those who exhibit these attributes don't feel bad about their behaviours or deeds. They don't care about the repercussions as long as they can defend their behaviour to themselves and believe it to be morally, ethically, or personally right. As Eysenck explains, "High scorers on the Psychoticism (P) are conceptualized as "cold, impersonal, lacking in sympathy, unfriendly, untrustful, odd, unemotional, unhelpful, antisocial, lacking in insight, strange, with paranoid ideas that people were against him" (H. J. Eysenck & S. B. G. Eysenck, 1976, p. 47).

Even after being finally apprehended by Huldar and Freyja, he shows no sign of regret or shame for his deeds. Rather, he was ecstatic about what he had accomplished and was grinning throughout, even as he said that he had originally intended to murder Sigvaldi but substituted his wife Elisa as his punishment because he was not at home. Rikhardur lost interest in other things as he became so absorbed in his make-believe world. Even after



learning the truth about his relationship with Karlotta, he continued to be unconcerned by the idea that she was truly his half-sister. Despite the fact that Karlotta had left him the moment she learned the truth, all he cared about was being with her as his spouse. Karlotta learning the truth from Karl's mother is the one thing for which he harbours remorse. He now regrets not killing the woman and leaving her instead, without even threatening her with dire consequences.

This illustrates Eysenck's claim that people who exhibit psychotic symptoms don't feel bad about their actions as long as they can defend them to themselves. When Huldar tries to make Rikhardur aware of the horrific and brutal atrocities he had performed, he claims that all he had done was adopt much simpler methods to make the people pay for what they had done to him, rather than feeling responsible or repenting. He claims that despite what he has done, he is not a complete monster and that he is capable of much worse atrocities.

Vengeful behaviour is especially common in those with high psychoticism, who are impulsive, aggressive, and lack empathy. The psychological trigger of vengeance can intensify these characteristics and raise the probability of hostile or vengeful behaviour. This combination contributes to the explanation of why some personality types are more likely to conduct crimes driven by retaliation.

### **Conclusion**

In the study of criminal behaviour and personality, Eysenck's Theory of Personality establishes a new standard. Even though there are many theories that speculate on the potential causes of criminal behaviour, the Eysenckian theory has received the most praise from psychologists. In addition to outlining the psychological factors that contribute to criminal behaviour, he offers answers and advice on how to look into and stop criminal activity.

Crime fiction writers frequently draw inspiration from criminal psychology. The subject offers a variety of information about criminal psychology, investigation methods, and psychological theories that can be incorporated into interesting stories. To create complex and realistic storylines, authors may consult research on criminal profiling, forensic psychology, and the psychology of violence. These components make crime fiction more interesting and thought-provoking. Criminal psychology and crime fiction have a mutually beneficial and enlightening interaction. Intricate storylines in crime fiction are influenced by the study of criminal psychology, while criminal psychology gains from an understanding of the motivations and actions portrayed in crime fiction. Crime fiction can explore psychological depth thanks to this interaction, and criminal psychology can learn from and be inspired by fictional portrayals.

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