



Mental Health Review Journal

Emerald Article: La femme fatale: the female psychopath in fiction and clinical practice

Caroline Logan

Article information:

To cite this document:

Caroline Logan, (2011), "La femme fatale: the female psychopath in fiction and clinical practice", *Mental Health Review Journal*, Vol. 16 Iss: 3 pp. 118 - 127

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/13619321111178078>

Downloaded on: 11-07-2012

References: This document contains references to 23 other documents

To copy this document: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by

For Authors:

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service.

Information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

With over forty years' experience, Emerald Group Publishing is a leading independent publisher of global research with impact in business, society, public policy and education. In total, Emerald publishes over 275 journals and more than 130 book series, as well as an extensive range of online products and services. Emerald is both COUNTER 3 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

La femme fatale: the female psychopath in fiction and clinical practice

Caroline Logan

Caroline Logan is a Consultant Forensic Clinical Psychologist in the Greater Manchester West Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust, Manchester, UK and is also based at the University of Manchester, Manchester, UK.

Abstract

Purpose – *Literature and legend features many dangerous female characters. However, in fiction (and in film), it is the male psychopath who dominates. In the scientific literature, research into psychopathy in men also dominates. Studies of the nature and treatment of this severe personality disorder in women are sparse and little is known or agreed about its presentation in this group. Consequently, psychopathy is not routinely assessed in women and the harmful potential of some can be overlooked leading to failures in the management of risk, especially towards partners and children. The purpose of this paper is to explore how psychopathic women manifest the traits of their disorder compared to men.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This paper focuses on the representation of women in fiction who appear to demonstrate psychopathic traits. Several relevant works of fiction will be identified but three texts are described in detail and their female characters and storylines explored.*

Findings – *Gender differences and practice implications are highlighted. Specifically, the paper explores the nuanced ways in which women execute their harmful conduct on others and their most likely relationships with the victims of their aggression; comparisons with men are drawn throughout. Further, comparisons are drawn between the psychopathic female characters created by men and women writers.*

Practical implications – *The study of psychopathic women in fiction is an invaluable adjunct to empirical research as a way of understanding the phenomenology of psychopathy in this group.*

Originality/value – *This paper is the first to examine the representation of psychopathic women in fiction and to propose the value of fiction in the study of this particular group of clients.*

Keywords *Psychopathy, Women, Gender, La femme fatale, Personality disorder, Fiction*

Paper type *Conceptual paper*

Introduction

Psychopathy is one of the most emotive psychological constructs of modern times. Denoting now a very specific and severe personality disorder, its most characteristic symptoms – a profound self-centeredness and grandiosity, an arrogant and deceitful interpersonal style, deficient emotional experience and understanding, and behavioural irresponsibility and instability (Cooke and Michie, 2001; Hare, 2003) – have been identified in individuals in social and political history and in fiction for thousands of years. Our most recent thinking on the subject has been the most detailed and precise, and this work will be summarised briefly in the first section of this paper. However, the phenomenon of the psychopath – what it is like to be married to a psychopath or governed by one, or to be the victim of a psychopath or even to be one – is possibly the most captivating aspect of this devastating condition. These villains fascinate us at the same time as we are repulsed and horrified by their actions, and this contradiction fuels their notoriety in history and their popularity in fiction (Faulks, 2011).

However, it is the female psychopath who is the focus of this paper. She too is present among us, in some of our families and social groups, in some of our workplaces and in the public eye, throughout history and across fiction. As will be discussed shortly, she is thought to be

less common than her male counterpart and something of a rarity in forensic practice (e.g. Logan and Weizmann-Henelius, in press). Further, she is not regarded with the same fear as the male psychopath; on the whole, women are not physically harmful to the same degree or with the same frequency as men and they rarely attack strangers, and this is thought to be the case with psychopathic women too (Weizmann-Henelius *et al.*, 2003). So why worry about psychopathic women?

Women who are psychopathic – they have either been diagnosed as such or psychopathic traits are thought to be present and a relevant explanation for their conduct – are harmful to others. They can damage the physical wellbeing of others just like men, but more effectively than psychopathic men, they damage relationships, the emotional wellbeing of others, and most undermining of all, they damage the sense of self-worth and esteem of those they would have as their victims. This can make the harmful conduct of psychopathic women harder to detect, a challenge to manage, more difficult to prosecute, and their victims can be left unheard and unprotected. In addition, their own distress – the deep-seated insecurity and need for the admiration of others that generates these toxic acts of dominance, coercion and hostility as a way of trying to stay safe and in control of a perilously fragile ego – can go unrecognized and untreated, or treated with the wrong kinds of interventions that may perpetuate rather than diminish problem behaviour. Therefore, we do need to worry about women with psychopathic traits, both to protect their victims and to ensure the most effective responses to the difficulties these women experience and act out.

But what exactly do we mean when we talk about psychopathy in women? This issue of definition is a real concern because our understanding of the construct of psychopathy has been developed almost entirely on observations of men. Indeed, the majority of the academic literature on psychopathy is based on research and practice on men (e.g. Patrick, 2006). In addition, there is an assumption that how psychopathy manifests in men is more or less the same as how it manifests in women (Hare, 2003), despite the inadequate demonstration that this is indeed the case (e.g. Forouzan and Cooke, 2005; Logan and Weizmann-Henelius, submitted) and emerging evidence that suggests otherwise (e.g. Kreis, 2009). Therefore, what we know now will be considered in the second part of this paper.

The third section of this paper will build on the preceding two sections by examining the representation in fiction of women who have psychopathic traits. How authors have characterized harmful women – how they describe or represent their personalities, who they are harmful to and why, and how they protect themselves against attack – will be examined and their work used to illustrate and elaborate upon the sparse scientific literature. A number of works of fiction will be identified but attention will be paid to the characters of the Marquise de Merteuil in the 1782 novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, Veda Pierce in the 1941 novel *Mildred Pierce* by James M. Cain, and Erika Kohut in *Die Klavierspielerin (The Piano Teacher)* by Elfriede Jelinek (1983), published in 1983. The paper will conclude with an overview of the essential differences between men and women in the expression of psychopathy. Some of the ways in which new knowledge about gender differences in psychopathy could impact on practice and on the role of fiction in bringing these changes about will be identified.

What is psychopathy?

Psychopathy is a severe disorder of personality, essentially comprising pathology in a number of the traditional personality disorder types. A pathological level of narcissism is at the core of psychopathy, alongside clinically significant traits of dissocial, paranoid and histrionic personality disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2010). The self-esteem of the psychopath is poorly regulated because of the preponderance of actions oriented towards the protection and sustenance of an inflated but ultimately fragile and unstable sense of self (Ronningstam, 2005). Emotion regulation is compromised by difficulties in experiencing, processing and modulating certain feelings, most especially anger, shame and envy (Ronningstam, 2005). And relationships with others are generally dysfunctional because they are used to protect and enhance the individual's self-esteem at the cost of mutual relativeness and intimacy (Ronningstam, 2005). The extent of pathology is

determined by the severity of both the disorder and its consequences – the clinical significance of the impairment caused – and by the dominance of aggression over shame. Consequently, dissocial conduct is a common accompaniment along with a marked level of paranoia, shallow emotional experience, and insincerity (Patrick, 2006). As much of what we know about psychopathy has been gleaned from its presentation in men, what do we know about the ways in which men and women who are psychopathic differ?

Psychopathy in men and women

It is self-evident that the power one holds and the domain in which one holds it influences the methods used to abuse that power (Logan and Weizmann-Henelius, in press). In general, the aggression of women results in physical violence less frequently than is the case with men; women who feel anger towards others are more likely to turn that anger on themselves in the form of self-damaging acts (Motz, 2001) and violence towards others is the exception rather than the rule (Logan and Weizmann-Henelius, in press). In general, when women do direct their anger at others, their victims are usually those closest to them – those with whom they are most intimate and identify themselves, namely their partners, their children, family members, and friends (Robbins *et al.*, 2003). Further, the harm they direct towards others is more likely to feature relational rather than physical aggression; that is, the deliberate manipulation of or damage to relationships such as by actual or threatened withdrawal of love or friendship, refusing to talk to the other person, excluding or banishing the other person from the in-group to which they thought they belonged (e.g. the family, the circle of friends), telling lies about the other person to promote their rejection by other members of the in-group, and so on. These acts of aggression are often difficult to detect by outsiders – and difficult to prove and manage, such as by social services, schools and workplaces – but they are acutely felt by their victims, especially if they result in the intended rejection or exclusion. Compared to men, women excel in this form of aggression and the pain of exclusion from the group is more keenly felt because of its more singular importance to women (Crick, 1995).

The presence of psychopathy in an individual – and the degree to which it is present – increases both the opportunities and triggers for aggression and the severity of the aggression then demonstrated. Psychopathy increases the risk that the individual will perceive threats from others in the form of acts of disrespect, disloyalty, criticism, or disobedience (Logan and Johnstone, 2010). The response to the perception of threats such as these is first an emotional one – shame, humiliation, guilt, and envy, for example – which is felt like an unjustified attack. The response, therefore, is a self-righteous one, attacking the other in ways that are proportionate both in nature and in scale to the injury experienced (Logan and Johnstone, 2010). In less disordered individuals, much of this retributive action can take place in fantasy. In those with more severe levels of the disorder, however, the retribution may be acted out – relationally, as is often the case with women, and physically, as is often the case with men. The more severe the disorder is, the more severe, persistent and pervasive the harm that is done.

In conclusion, the principal tools of domination among psychopathic men are physical mastery and control while among psychopathic women, it is the manipulation of the minutiae of their close relationships. What motivates them both is the achievement of power and control over others and the expectation of gain, especially material gain, which is used in turn to provoke the admiration and envy of others and ultimately the glorification of the self. But we are more confident about our understanding of men who are psychopathic than about women who are psychopathic. The scientific literature on men is many times the size of that on women and gender differences in the expression of psychopathy are barely examined. There may be several explanations for this – ignorance of the harm potential of women is one and the more ready identification of their status as victims rather than perpetrators is certainly another. What can be added to our understanding of psychopathic women and our recognition of their potential by considering their representation in fiction?

Psychopathic women in fiction

Bad women in fiction have variously been described as bitches, calculating gold-diggers, sinful sirens, evil stepmothers, twisted sisters (all Aguiar, 2001), also as evil (Noddings, 1989), hard-boiled (Grossman, 2007), and most famously, as *les femmes fatales* (Doane, 1991; Hanson and O'Rawe, 2010). Rarely are they described as psychopathic, a term more frequently associated with bad men. Yet, what all of these descriptors of badness in women characters suggest are to varying degrees the features of psychopathy: a pattern of relationships with others that demonstrate a lack of care and empathy regardless of their closeness; a tendency to dominate and manipulate others in order to get one's own way; the presence of deceitfulness and insincerity; an absence or a deficiency of remorse for hurting others; self-centredness; a sense of entitlement; and a pattern of self-justification (Logan and Weizmann-Henelius, in press). Bad women in fiction may not be labelled as psychopathic but with even some of these characteristics, they become worthy of our consideration. Why? Because fiction offers us the opportunity to think about people – and about good and evil – as reflective observers rather than as scientists, and because “it's in the power of [the] experiences [of characters in fiction] that we see our own lives in a new light” (Faulks, 2011). Therefore, through our understanding of the representation of bad women in fiction we might come to know and understand more than we do now about bad women in real life.

The harmful potential of women was overlooked for many years in literature (e.g. Aguiar, 2001; Atwood, 1994) as well as in clinical practice (e.g. Motz, 2001) in favour of a view of women as the “virtuous victims of oppression” (Aguiar, 2001, p. 1). Atwood questioned whether it was “somehow unfeminist to depict a woman behaving badly” (Atwood, 1994, p. 1). She concluded that it was not and proposed instead that fiction needs these characters more now than ever because of feminism: “Women characters, arise!” she exclaims, “Take back the night!” (Atwood, 1994, p. 7):

[. . .] female bad characters can also act as keys to doors we need to open, and as mirrors in which we can see more than just a pretty face. They can be explorations of moral freedom – because everyone's choices are limited, and women's choices have been more limited than men's, but that doesn't mean women can't make choices. Such characters can pose the question of responsibility, because if you want power you have to accept responsibility, and actions produce consequences. I'm not suggesting an agenda here, just some possibilities; nor am I prescribing, just wondering. If there's a closed-off road, the curious speculate about why it's closed off, and where it might lead if followed; and evil women have been, for a while recently, a somewhat closed-off road, at least for fiction-writers (p. 8).

But they do exist in fiction, these female bad characters, and Table I lists a sample of the works in which they feature. The themes explored across these works of fiction – and many others besides – include the following:

1. the control and manipulation of others for the purpose of gain, such as money, power, increased status, or sex/love;
2. alternatively, the defence of gains already made in response to actual or perceived threat; and
3. the control and manipulation of others for the purpose of revenge or punishment.

Three texts will now be examined to illustrate some of the ways their fictional female characters and the storylines demonstrate their psychopathic characteristics.

Les Liaisons Dangereuses

Les Liaisons Dangereuses is a novel made up entirely of written correspondence between the central characters. Its protagonists are the widowed Marquise de Merteuil and the unmarried Vicomte de Valmont, who enjoy an intimate but not at all exclusive relationship. The story is about the Marquise's revenge on a former lover, Gercourt; she plans to humiliate him after his forthcoming wedding to the 15-year-old virgin, Cécile Volanges, by ensuring she is deflowered before the ceremony and having this become publicly known subsequently, thus ensuring he becomes “the laughing stock of Paris” (Laclos, 1782/2009, p. 26). She delights

Table 1 List of works of fiction featuring women with psychopathic traits

<i>Year of publication</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Character(s)</i>
Various, unknown Manuscript originally dated between 700-1000 AD	Various, not always known e.g. 2001 translation by Seamus Heaney	<i>The Bible</i> <i>Beowulf</i>	e.g. Delilah, Salomé Grendel's mother
Between 1603-1606	William Shakespeare	<i>King Lear</i>	Goneril and Regan
Between 1603-1607	William Shakespeare	<i>Macbeth</i>	Lady Macbeth
1782	Pierre Choderlos de Laclos	<i>Les Liaisons Dangereuses</i>	Marquise de Merteuil
1812 onwards	Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm	e.g. <i>Aschenputtel</i> (Cinderella)	Step-mother and step-sisters
1848	William Thackeray	<i>Vanity Fair</i>	Becky Sharp
1867	Émile Zola	<i>Thérèse Raquin</i>	Thérèse Raquin
1880	Émile Zola	<i>Nana</i>	Nana Coupeau
1887	Rider Haggard	<i>She</i>	Ayesha
1890	Henrik Ibsen	<i>Hedda Gabler</i>	Hedda Gabler
1913	Edith Wharton	<i>The Custom of the Country</i>	Undine Spragg
1928	Aldous Huxley	<i>Point Counter Point</i>	Lucy Tantamount
1934	James Cain	<i>The Postman Always Rings Twice</i>	Cora Papadakis
1939	Raymond Chandler	<i>The Big Sleep</i>	Carmen Sternwood
1940	Raymond Chandler	<i>Farewell My Lovely</i>	Helen Grayle/Velma Valento
1941	James Hamilton	<i>Hangover Square</i>	Netta Longdon
1941	James Cain	<i>Mildred Pierce</i>	Veda Pierce
1943	James Cain	<i>Double Indemnity</i>	Phyllis Nerdlinger
1973	Toni Morrison	<i>Sula</i>	Sula Peace
1983	Elfriede Jelinek	<i>Die Klavierspielerin</i> (<i>The Piano Teacher</i>)	Erika Kohut
1993	Margaret Atwood	<i>The Robber Bride</i>	Zenia Arden
1995-2000	Philip Pullman	<i>His Dark Materials</i>	Marisa Coulter
2003	Zoë Heller	<i>Notes on a Scandal</i>	Barbara Covette

in the planning of this revenge, in her cruel manipulation of the gauche Cécile and the girl's mother over many months, and she recruits the willing Vicomte to aid her, resulting in him eventually deflowering the girl himself in an act of rape. But there is fierce competition between the Marquise and the Vicomte and eventually they turn their aggression upon themselves. They ruin one another but tragically, they ruin everyone caught up in their amoral games too.

The character of the Marquise illustrates a number of the core features of psychopathy. First, her harmful conduct is motivated by a desire for revenge – to humiliate Gercourt before all Paris – and revenge at any price (e.g. the life of the innocent Cécile). However, her plans are grossly disproportionate to the actual harm Gercourt caused her. Gercourt ended his relationship with the Marquise because he found another lover. But this rejection was perceived by the vain Marquise as the most crippling blow – he humiliated her – therefore she must humiliate him in return and in a fashion directly proportionate in nature and severity to the injury she perceived him to have caused her. Thus, it is via an intimate relationship that she proposes to damage him.

Second, she takes months to plot and enact her plans. Over this time, she has many opportunities to reflect upon the harm she is causing others in the long term. But she does not stop for empathy and instead uses quiet moments to make her plans more robust and ultimately damaging to those against whom they are subsequently enacted. Further, she feels no remorse at all and instead, challenges the Vicomte to do more and more wicked things to please her, which he obligingly does.

Third, she is exquisitely manipulative and deceitful. She pretends compassion and love for others but she is in fact seeking information she can use against them or their confidence in her that she can later exploit:

A latter-day Delilah, I have always, as she did, devoted all my powers to springing the important secret. Oh, I have my scissors to the hair of a great many of our modern Samsons! (Laclos, 1782/2009, p. 186).

And she pretends compassion and love for Cécile most of all but only so that she can ensure that the girl does what she is supposed to do. For example, the Vicomte's rape of Cécile threatens her plans because the girl wants to tell her mother about the dreadful thing that has happened to her. Cécile confides in the Marquise, thinking the older woman is her friend. The Marquise's response is a letter (105) in which:

- she mocks Cécile in order to embarrass her or make her feel ashamed;
- she questions the girl's judgement and understanding of what happened to her in order to make her feel stupid and childish;
- she threatens to withdraw her friendship from the girl; and
- she tells the girl what she must do now, not to protect or look after Cécile but to keep the girl acting according to her plan for revenge on Gercourt.

For her acquiescence, the Marquise promises that their friendship will be restored: "I shall kiss you instead of scolding you, in the hope that you will be more reasonable in future" (Laclos, 1782/2009, p. 252). But on the same day, she writes to the Vicomte "I beg of you, take some pains with the child. Let us work together to make her the despair of her mother and Gercourt" (Laclos, 1782/2009, p. 254).

Mildred Pierce

Mildred Pierce was published in 1941. Set in California in the 1930s, it is the story of the difficult relationship between a middle class housewife – Mildred – and her manipulative and greedy daughter, Veda. The story begins with the social standing of the family being dramatically diminished by the Depression and by the infidelity of Bert, Mildred's husband. She leaves him, taking their two daughters, and sets up a small home, supporting them on her salary as a waitress, an occupation she keeps from Veda because it would make the child ashamed. Mildred works hard to please Veda. She starts a business making pies, which becomes very successful. She pays for Veda to have all kinds of lessons and opportunities, none of which Veda appreciates. And when her youngest daughter Ray dies of pneumonia, Mildred is grateful that it was not Veda because, however awful Veda is to her mother, Mildred loves her more than anyone. But to Veda, her mother is just a cash cow to be milked at will, and periodically Veda tells her mother how ashamed and embarrassed she is of her. The emotional pain she inflicts on the loving Mildred is terrible, and the more she does to please her daughter, the more torturous Veda becomes.

Veda is psychopathic. She is dedicated to material gain and to acquiring the worship of others – through her acknowledged beauty and her singing. Veda has sexual relationships with men in order to be better placed to manipulate them for money – she does not love them. Indeed, nowhere in the book is the reader given an indication that Veda has caring feelings or the capacity for empathy towards anyone. She bullies and manipulates her mother because Mildred is rendered naïve by her devotion to her daughter, something that Veda sees as a weakness and mocks her for unceasingly. Therefore, the key characteristics that Veda demonstrates are the psychopath's lack of emotional depth, lack of remorse, lack of anxiety, lack of care and lack of empathy – Veda is deficient in the critical ways that could make her human; she is a "cold beautiful creature" (Cain, 1941/1985, p. 504). And these deficiencies enable her to persist in prioritizing her own needs over those of others, regardless of the cost to them, and in seeking more and more admiration, regardless of her ugliness inside.

Veda's torture of her mother – and Mildred's persistent victimization – is the crux of the story. Veda is a seducer of men, but she has seduced her mother also, to believe a fantasy of Veda that does not really exist and to enable her to extract not just money from her but also a petty sense of power; in Mildred's misery, Veda finds strength, glory, and satisfaction. Veda says she wants to get away from her mother: "with enough money, I can get away from you, you

poor, half-witted mope” (Cain, 1941/1985, p. 507). However, Veda returns to her mother over and over again in the book because it is only in witness of the pain she causes Mildred that Veda’s sense of domination is realized.

Die Klavierspielerin

Erika Kohut is a piano teacher at the Vienna Conservatory and a former concert pianist. She is in her late 30s and unmarried, and she lives in a cramped old apartment with her mother. Erika’s relationship with her mother is very intense and over-involved – both women are dependent on one another and Erika is deeply resentful of this fact. Erika has a very complex sexual life. When the book opens, the reader sees Erika watching others having sex, paying to watch women perform sexually for men, and mutilating herself in a way that sexually arouses her. She begins an intense relationship with a young piano pupil, Walter, who is 17 years of age and apparently attracted to Erika. Erika is possessive of him and disturbed by his flirtatious relationship with a violin student until Erika puts into her coat pocket a broken glass, which destroys the young girl’s playing hand. Walter wishes to commence a sexual relationship with Erika, but Erika resists. Eventually, however, their relationship does become sexual and Walter is initially repulsed by her desire that he be violent towards her. She becomes more demanding of him, rejecting and punishing, until he visits her in her apartment and with her screaming mother locked in her bedroom, Walter beats and then rapes Erika. The following day, Erika takes a knife and goes to confront Walter. But she stabs herself instead and returns home to mother.

Erika is an extremely complex and disturbed woman. Full of self-loathing and repression, it may seem that she shares little with the harmful but charming women considered above. But they do have some features in common. Erika has in common with Veda a relationship with her mother that is both cruel and torturous and based on a hateful mutual dependency. Also, Erika has in common with the Marquise an alliance with a man that is sexually aggressive and competitive in nature, which motivated her spiteful and very personal violence towards Walter’s young admirer. However, Erika illustrates one important additional psychopathic trait. She is not like the Marquise or Veda in being beautiful and seductive – la femme fatale. On the contrary, Erika is a repulsive character whose control over others is as physical as it is relational. She is emotionally intense and demanding, yet she is emotionally cold and very distant from others. Her psychological disturbance is deeply entwined with her sexual perversity. Also, unlike the Marquise and Veda who simply use men to acquire what they need, Erika’s relationship with Walter was an instrument of self-abuse making her altogether more complex and real.

Concluding comments

There are many great female characters in fiction who demonstrate important features of psychopathy. A very small number of those characters have been identified here and only three have been illustrated in any detail. These three characters exemplify psychopathy to varying degrees and in different ways. But what they all illustrate is the minutiae of the symptoms as they present in women. In the final section of this paper, the differences between men and women in terms of the manifestation of psychopathy will be revisited and conclusions then drawn about what practitioners can learn from studying psychopathic women in fiction.

Psychopathy in men and women revisited

It has been the premise of this paper that the scientific study of psychopathy does not represent well the subtle ways in which the genders differ in the expression of the core features of the disorder. Therefore, the study of fictional women who characterise some of those features permits an opportunity to observe and understand them. So, what do we observe?

First, evidence for the presence of psychopathic traits in a woman will be most prominent in her intimate relationships – with partners, children, family members, friends and colleagues – which will be characterized by a persistent lack of empathy, care, commitment

and attachment. These relationships will also feature a variety of relational processes that are inherently aggressive and whose purpose it is to control the other person in order that they provide the psychopath with what they require – power, status, sex, money, possessions, and so on. While these characteristics will also be detected in the intimate relationships of psychopathic men, psychopathic women are less likely to physically leave or move on from those relationships (e.g. such as with a child or parent) and their damaging nature is less likely to be detected and therefore may be enduring. The cruelty of the mother-daughter relationships in *Mildred Pierce* and *Die Klavierspielerin* are an illustration of this point, but so too is the protracted and toxic relationship between the Marquise and the Vicomte.

Second, women with psychopathic traits dominate others in a variety of subtle ways that appear to be less frequently in the gift of men. The Marquise de Merteuil's expertise at manipulating all of those around her, most painfully Cécile, her capacity to feign love and care in one breath whilst expressing contempt and disregard in the next leaves even the equally psychopathic Vicomte surprised. In addition, the very personal nature of the pain inflicted on Mildred by Veda, on Gercourt by the Marquise, and by Erika on Walter's young admirer points to both a greater understanding of the particular vulnerabilities of their victims as well as a more profound absence of empathy at their exploitation.

Finally, the badness of some women does not always result in visible acts of harm that might result in arrest and prosecution. Justice may prevail in the denouncement of the perpetrator – the fate of the Marquise de Merteuil – but equally, victims may accept their treatment and carry on – like Mildred Pierce or Erika Kohut's mother – because the damage is subtle and emotional rather than physical. The badness of many men is often more obvious because it is less subtly carried out against more visible victims prepared to complain and because serious physical violence is a real possibility with widely accepted consequences.

Conclusion

In this paper, psychopathy has been described and the nuances of its presentation in women illustrated in the actions of three famous female characters in fiction. A number of points were raised by this exercise: that the harm psychopathic women do will be most obvious in their intimate relationships; that psychopathic women excel in the manipulation of others and in the use of highly personal aggression often of an emotional or relational kind to enforce their domination; and that their hurtful acts are routine, often undetected, and their underlying psychopathology rarely recognised. However, one further point can be made about the presentation of psychopathic women, in particular, those in fiction. It is notable that many of the works listed in Table I feature femme fatale characters and that most of those that do were written by men. Beverly Gross posited that “the bitch means to men whatever they find particularly threatening in a woman and it means to a woman whatever they particularly dislike about themselves” (Gross, 1994, p. 148). If this view of bitches is extended to women with psychopathy and to fiction on the subject, it may be hypothesized that the character of la femme fatale represents what men can find threatening in a woman – their sexual domination. Only with her destruction, which is the outcome of most novels featuring this kind of character, is natural order resumed. On the whole, women do not create femme fatale characters in their fiction. Instead, women writers tend to create female characters who show what most dislike about themselves: If you're a woman, the bad female character is your shadow; and as we know from the Offenbach opera *Tales of Hoffman*, she who loses her shadow also loses her soul (Atwood, 1994, p. 8). Erika Kohut may be just such a character – lacking beauty, grace, and love, she contaminates and destroys rather than nurtures and creates, making Jelinek's creation both someone we can relate to and utterly repulsive. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that psychopathic women created by female authors are uncommon and, whilst often critically acclaimed, rarely popular, most certainly when compared to the male creation, les femmes fatales.

Implications for practice

- Practitioners, qualified and in-training, are recommended to respect the educational potential of novels, plays and short stories as much as their text books, certainly in relation to their understanding of the phenomenology of mental disorder in general and psychopathy in particular.
- Fiction informs practitioners but it can inform clients too, and its awareness-raising potential should be considered as part of an overall treatment intervention.
- Practitioners are advised not to overlook the harm potential of some women just because they do not have a history of physical violence. Repeated and credible complaints of verbal or emotional abuse or neglect in those otherwise presenting as assertive and charming should alert the practitioner to the possible presence of psychopathology, and psychopathy ought to be a consideration, especially if the complainant is vulnerable or a dependent.

References

- Aguiar, S.A. (2001), *The Bitch is Back: Wicked Women in Literature*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, IL.
- American Psychiatric Association (2010), *Personality and Personality Disorders*, American Psychiatric Association, Arlington, VA, available at: www.dsm5.org/ProposedRevisions/Pages/PersonalityandPersonalityDisorders.aspx
- Atwood, M. (1994), *Spotty-handed villainesses: Problems of female bad behaviour in the creation of literature*, Transcript of speech, available at: <http://gos.sbc.edu/a/atwood.html> (accessed 14 February 2011).
- Cain, J.M. (1941/1985), *The five great novels of James M Cain*, Pan Books, London.
- Cooke, D.J. and Michie, C. (2001), "Refining the construct of psychopathy: towards a hierarchical model", *Psychological Assessment*, Vol. 13, pp. 171-88.
- Crick, N.R. (1995), "Relational aggression: the role of intent attributions, feelings of distress, and provocation type", *Development and Psychopathology*, Vol. 7, pp. 313-22.
- Doane, M.A. (1991), *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, London.
- Faulks, S. (2011), *Faulks on Fiction*, BBC2 documentary, BBC, London (Broadcast between 5th and 26th February).
- Forouzan, E. and Cooke, D.J. (2005), "Figuring out *la femme fatale*: Conceptual and assessment issues concerning psychopathy in females", *Behavioural Sciences and the Law*, Vol. 23, pp. 1-14.
- Gross, B. (1994), *Bitch. Salamagundi*, Vol. 103, pp. 146-56.
- Grossman, J. (2007), "Film noir's 'femme fatales' hard-boiled women: moving beyond gender fantasies", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, Vol. 24 No. 1, pp. 19-30.
- Hanson, H. and O'Rawe, C. (2010), *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Hare, R.D. (2003), *Psychopathy Checklist-Revised*, 2nd ed., Multi-Health Systems, Toronto.
- Jelinek, E. (1983), *Die Klavierspielerin*, Serpent's Tail, London.
- Laclos PAFC (1782/2009), *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Penguin Popular Classics, St Ives.
- Logan, C. and Johnstone, L. (2010), "Personality disorder and violence: making the link through risk formulation", *Journal of Personality Disorders*, Vol. 24, pp. 610-33.
- Logan, C. and Weizmann-Henelius, G. (in press), "Psychopathy in women: presentation, assessment and management", in Häkkinen-Nyholm, H. and Nyholm, J.O. (Eds), *Psychopathy and Law*, Wiley, Chichester (in press).
- Motz, A. (2001), *The Psychology of Female Violence: Crimes Against the Body*, Brunner-Routledge, Hove.
- Noddings, N. (1989), *Women and Evil*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Patrick, C.J. (2006), *Handbook of Psychopathy*, Guilford Press, New York, NY.

Robbins, P., Monahan, J. and Silver, E. (2003), "Mental disorder, violence and gender", *Law and Human Behaviour*, Vol. 27, pp. 561-71.

Ronningstam, E.F. (2005), *Identifying and Understanding the Narcissistic Personality*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.

Weizmann-Henelius, G., Viemerö, V. and Eronen, M. (2003), "The violent female perpetrator and her victim", *Forensic Science International*, Vol. 133 No. 3, pp. 197-203.

Corresponding author

Caroline Logan can be contacted at: caroline.logan@gmw.nhs.uk

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: reprints@emeraldinsight.com
Or visit our web site for further details: www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints