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"Instead of Pumping Iron, She was Pumping Bullets into her Husband": The Portrayal of a Female Perpetrator in Nanette Burstein's *Killer Sally*

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Abstract: In the media, the law, and public opinion, women who resort to violence within abusive relationships are often depicted as either victims or monsters. Nanette Burstein's three-part docuseries, *Killer Sally* (2022), reexamines this binary which focuses on Sally McNeil, a former professional bodybuilder who murdered her husband, also a professional bodybuilder, in Southern California in 1995. Drawing on Belinda Morrissey's *When Women Kill* and *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, this article argues that Burstein questions the discursive, performative, and one-sided dimensions of media and legal portrayals of female perpetrators. By placing both the perpetrator and the victim within complex socio-psychological and posthuman frameworks, Burstein broadens the discourse on battered women who kill by granting the perpetrator agency and voice.

The three-part docuseries *Killer Sally* (2022) explores the life and trial of Sally McNeil. A former US Marine and passionate bodybuilder, McNeil was convicted of second-degree murder after ending the life of her husband, Ray McNeil, also a bodybuilder, on February 14, 1995. After serving a 25-year sentence, Sally was released from the Central California Women's Facility in the summer of 2020. Throughout the docuseries, Nanette Burstein delves into Sally's complex past, her tumultuous marriage with Ray, the events surrounding February 14, 1995, and the aftermath. Burstein uses a myriad of sources from courtroom footage, Sally's police interrogations, and private home videos to the media's coverage of the case, to provide depth to Sally's case. The docuseries further features diverse perspectives on Sally's and Ray's personalities by presenting interviews with the prosecutor, Dan Goldstein; the defense attorney, William Rafael; Sally's adult children, John and Shantina; friends of both Sally and Ray; expert psychologist Nancy Kaser-Boyd; and other neutral contributors such as journalist Diane

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Dimond, former IFB Chairman Wayne DeMilia, and Rachel Louise Snyder, author of *No Visible Bruises*, among many others. Based on Belinda Morrissey's *When Women Kill* and *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, this article examines how Burstein's docuseries questions popular cultural stereotypes associated with labels like "perpetrator" and "victim." It further exposes the partiality of legal and media portrayals of a perpetrator, and broadens the discourse about battered women.

Women who commit homicide, as Belinda Morrissey notes, are typically cast as either victims or malevolent figures (167). The victim discourse emphasizes women's oppression and disempowerment. As Robin May Schott states, "victims are typically portrayed as passive, pathetic and backward looking" (179). The monster theory, on the other hand, highlights an underlying fear that women have the power to create and destroy lives. "Women who kill," continues Morrissey, "confirm this archetypal feminine power, reinforcing the terrible antithesis to the myth of the good mother, reminding us that where creativity is located so too is destructiveness" (2). The former narrative supports ideas of "female oppression," while the latter perpetuates ideas of "feminine evil" (Morrissey 7). Such narratives become "conventional stock stories," that ensure the perpetrator is "easily identifiable" and enable "acceptable evaluations," writes Morrissey (9). In both scenarios, the agency of the perpetrators is overlooked: the victim is oppressed, and the wicked one, having lost her humanity, is deemed inhuman (Morrissey 25). In her study, Morrissey discusses how women who killed their batterers, such as Mrs. R., Erika Kontinnen and Pamela Sainsbury, in the court proceedings were often deemed irrational. This reflects, according to her, the legal system's inability to fully recognize the rationality behind their choices in self-defense (102). Morrissey underscores the lack of complexity or intermediate space between within mainstream legal discourse, where specific subjectivities are often emphasized, while others are limited (3).

In accordance with Morrissey's analyses, the legal authorities depicted Sally in a highly sensationalized way. Due to her muscular and robust appearance, she was deemed the perfect perpetrator. Leigh Goodmark lists how Sally defied female norms in several ways: she was a muscular female Marine, supported her husband's bodybuilding career financially, participated in wrestling matches with men who were attracted to her physical strength, had physical altercations with neighbors, police officers, women her husband dated, and confronted her husband about his infidelity. Moreover, she maintained a calm demeanor even on the night of the crime (2022). Because Sally embodied a mix of independence, fearlessness, toughness, and allure, she was perceived as less fragile and less vulnerable. The prosecutor, Dan Goldstein,

labeled her as “a bully” and “a thug,” who bridged the gender gap and become somebody who is “physical [and] confrontational” (Burstein, “The People vs. Sally McNeil”). Sally expresses her dismay and the hurt caused by such a reductive portrayal: “[The prosecutor] said that I wasn’t a real woman. Just because I’m a bodybuilder and just because I’m a Marine doesn’t mean I’m not a real woman. He made me out to be this monster” (Burstein, “The People vs. Sally McNeil”). Such misrepresentations exemplify the systemic biases within a patriarchal culture (particularly within the legal system), which, according to Lex Boyle, actively seeks to “protect normative sex, gender, and heterosexual identity paradigms that the specters of hypermuscular female bodies attack” (135). Sally’s physical strength and her defiance of traditional gender roles were misconstrued as her killing her husband intentionally and in cold blood.

The media’s portrayal of Sally also reveals their tendency to compartmentalize and categorize female perpetrators. Journalist Diane Diamond states that while domestic abuse was a central element of Sally’s defense, media coverage often focused on her physical appearance. Phrases such as “brawny bride,” “pumped-up princess,” and the striking statement, “‘Instead of pumping iron, she was pumping bullets into her husband,’” were used to describe her (Burstein, “The People vs. Sally McNeil”). Reflecting on this sensationalized coverage, Dimond admits, “That’s the way it was back then. That is what got the audience to come in and stay” (Burstein, “The People vs. Sally McNeil”). This inclination towards dramatic narratives over the actual legal details is also observed by criminologists Peter N. Grabosky and Paul Wilson,

> [T]he coverage of detailed and arcane legal proceedings is labor intensive, and media organizations devote few resources to reporting them. Too often, unfortunately, court reporters are not trained to do their task. They show disinterest in any legal problems that develop in the course of a trial and, as with crime news generally, look for the dramatic and entertaining rather than the politically and socially important features of a trial. (131)

The criminal court can become a spectacle due to a lack of nuanced and comprehensive reporting by journalists who, due to their own biases, interests, and incompetence, may influence the outcome of a case.

On the other hand, expert psychologist Nancy Kaser-Boyd and Sally’s defense attorney explained Sally through Battered Woman Syndrome (henceforth, BWS), which is a result of continuous domestic abuse. A battered woman is someone “who is repeatedly subjected to any

forceful physical or psychological behavior by a man in order to coerce her to do something he wants her to do without any concern for her rights" (Walker xv). Kaser-Boyd's assessment emphasizes the dire circumstances Sally faced, such as fractured bones, strangulation, and isolation, which, in her view, lead to Sally's perpetration of murder on that night (Burstein, "The People vs. Sally McNeil"). Sally's defense attorney, William Rafael, strategically utilizes this discourse of the battered woman to portray Sally not as an agentic criminal but as a victim responding to her environment (Burstein, "The People vs. Sally McNeil"). However, Mark A. Drumbl identifies the broader problematic aspects of such defense strategies in criminal trials. According to him, "the defense, exercising the responsibility they have to zealously represent the accused, also participates in a competing game of essentialization that inflates the innocence, cluelessness, and powerlessness of the perpetrator" (122). Similarly, while BWS offers a context for the defendant's actions, it reinforces restrictive stereotypes about women (Morrissey 22). BWS renders them as helpless, powerless, and subjugated entities.

During the trial, Sally's image was constructed differently by several parties involved in the proceedings. While the prosecutor painted her as a monstrous figure, the media sensationalized her persona. Conversely, both the psychologist and the defense presented her in a sympathetic light and accentuated her status as a victim. Burstein, thus, emphasizes the partial and manipulative discursivity and performativity of judicial processes. Subjectivity is shaped and enacted through language, concepts, theoretical frameworks, and societal systems and put into boxes (Morrissey 66). In contrast to the negative and simplistic narratives, Burstein offers a more comprehensive view of Sally, placing her at the forefront, digging into the socio-cultural, emotional, and material environment that shaped both her and Ray, ultimately endowing her with agency.

Burstein focuses extensively on Sally's and Ray's socio-cultural milieu and the dynamics between the two. As Paul Reynolds emphasizes, "an agent and their actions cannot be removed from their situatedness in social and cultural contexts" (204). In "Valentine's Day," Burstein delves into Ray's own troubled past. The audience is told that his mother gave him to his aunt when he was two weeks old. However, he was brought up in poverty and was sexually abused by the person who was living with them. The audience also learns about the intense pressure Ray was under to win competitions and how this changed his personality. "'He said that I was inferior, and that he was the more, uh, superior bodybuilder, and everything should go toward him,'" Sally states (Burstein, "Valentine's Day"). She adds, "He didn't think he was good enough. This is a guy that's, at that point, he's like 240 and doesn't think he's big enough.

Men kind of reverse anorexia" (Burstein, "Valentine's Day"). According to DJ Jeffers, a friend of Ray's, despite his kind and loving nature, he had a short fuse and was abusive towards those around him (Burstein, "Valentine's Day").

In the second episode, "The Death of Mr. California," the docuseries further sheds light on Sally's turbulent early life in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Born in 1960, her childhood was dominated by an alcoholic father and a violent stepfather. In order to win her parents' approval, Sally excelled at athletics, swimming, diving, and running. She pursued her passion for sports education at East Stroudsburg State College, but faced financial hurdles, dropping out just a semester shy of graduating when her parents refused to support her. Consequently, she enlisted in the Marine Corps, where she met her first husband, Tony, who was abusive. After leaving him, Sally met Ray McNeil in 1987, and married him within two months. His aggressive nature mirrored the toxic relationships of her past. However, as Burstein states in an interview Matthew Sherwood, just as Ray exhibited violent tendencies, Sally was not the quintessential victim either (2022). She also has a history of violence and trouble during her time in the Marines as well as during her marriage with Ray. One witness recounts an incident when Sally, from her balcony, hurled dumbbells onto Ray's car while he was inside it (Burstein, "The Death of Mr. California").

It becomes clear that, by delving into their relationship, Burstein brings a complex perspective on the often simplistic dichotomy between victims and perpetrators. Mainstream perceptions commonly accept violence against women as prevalent, while violence committed by women is seen as rare (Frigon 4). Clare Bielby elaborates on this, noting that "the categories of 'perpetrator' and 'victim' tend to be gendered male and female respectively" (155) and she further asserts that "[g]ender is constitutive of how we think about the perpetrator, perpetration, and violence" (155). In the series, Sally embodies both roles as a perpetrator and a victim, while Ray, despite his history of abusing Sally and her children, is also portrayed as a victim. Uğur Ümit Üngör and Kjell Anderson observe that, "individuals do not always neatly fall within the boundaries of a given type. In our daily lives, our motivations are not singular … Individual motivations are multiple, layered, and fluid" (10). Traditionally, victims are viewed as "helpless, sorrowful, innocent, and virtuous," while perpetrators are seen as "all-powerful, malevolent, and merciless" (Skloot 313). In foregrounding the blurred lines between the roles of perpetrator and victim, Burstein invites viewers, the media, and legal personalities to take into account the complexities inherent in human relationships and their consequences.

In addition to examining the contextual factors that might lead someone to become a perpetrator, Burstein introduces the posthuman element to challenge viewers' perceptions of the essence of perpetration and the paths to becoming a perpetrator. According to Jonathan Luke Austin, the materiality of the world, namely, "[n]onhuman objects, environments, and phenomena can thus 'compel' violence based on the ways they are collectively assembled in certain environments" (175). He explains that objects are not just tools; they shape our actions, sometimes even towards violence, so understanding them is key to understanding violence itself:

> material objects are not simply the props through which human life plays out but actively shape, direct, and transform human behavior. Exploring the work of perpetrators through posthumanism can thus expand our understanding of the conditions of possibility for perpetration by adding an appreciation of how the "nonhuman" also works to make significant difference in why, how, and when human beings become perpetrators of violence. The perspective allows us to see how violence is often more than human in its coordinates. (169)

Austin asserts that the availability or mere presence of weapons can not only enable violent acts but also mold the character of the perpetrator (172). Sally's crime carried out using the firearm she had in her home, exemplifies how the mere possession of a weapon can transform an individual into a dangerous perpetrator. DJ Jeffers forewarned Ray, stating, "I said, Ray, I said, you guys have that shotgun at the house. Sally has did some crazy stuff. And I told Ray, No, she'll shoot you. I believe she'll—she'll kill you. He kind of laughed it off" (Burstein, "The Death of Mr. California").

The role of the steroids found in Ray's system further complicates the situation. These drugs, known for amplifying aggression, may have contributed to Sally's lethal actions. Sally herself describes Ray's heightened danger, stating, "He had five steroids in him. He was superhuman. He was super strong and he was superfast in a small apartment" (Burstein, "The Death of Mr. California"). The prosecutor also acknowledges the potential influence of steroids and the fact that it received minimal attention. Goldstein elaborates, "Ray had, by the way, five different kinds of steroids in his bloodstream at the time of his death. Sally had one. But Sally's defense was never, um, 'I did this because I was on steroids,' nor was her defense that 'Ray was on steroids, and that's why he was so aggressive towards me.' That—The—The basis of the case, the touchstone of the case, was that the relationship was violent" (Burstein, "The Death

of Mr. California"). This also emphasizes the one-sidedness of the trial and the need to broaden our perspective on the myriad factors that shape individuals into perpetrators of violence.

Significantly, in the docuseries, Sally takes center stage, sharing her personal story in a sit-down interview. Hilary Earl contends that, by "[reconstructing] the self-understanding of the perpetrators, not only by reading, observing, and analyzing their comportment at trial, but also by taking seriously and evaluating the reasons they have given for their own behavior," (117) we can attain a more comprehensive understanding of them. Sally says that, although she attempted to seek help from the authorities due to the abuse she endured, her pleas were often trivialized or ignored. For instance, when she reported issues with her first husband, the police simply advised her "to leave, and let him calm down" (Burstein, "The Death of Mr. California"). Similarly, with Ray, when she complained about him, he was momentarily taken into custody but was soon released (Burstein, "Valentine's Day"). These examples demonstrate that the system can be masculinist, excluding women's experiences from its parameters. Morrissey critiques the ways "both law and media [represent] these women's abusive relationships with their male partners as unusual, and their murders as extraordinary, rather than as the worst results of an institution of marriage which historically and traditionally has enshrined unequal relations between men and women" (Morrissey 20). Burstein, thus, draws attention to the lapses in official intervention, which neglected to protect the battered woman.

Sally also took proactive measures, intending to end her relationship with Ray. However, the tragic incident occurred before she could finalize her decision. In a *The Daily Show* interview, Rachel Louise Snyder aptly describes the complexity of such situations, stating that leaving "is a process, not an event. It often takes years for battered women to leave" (2022). Marian Duggan further illuminates this by pointing out that "[t]he volatile nature of domestically abusive relationships also accounts for the back-and-forth nature that a couple may go through with respect to being together" (168). Shantina's account echoes this pattern, "My dad would come back, bring flowers and candies, and tell [my mother] he loved her, and he was gonna change, and . . . And it never got better. It got worse" (Burstein, "Valentine's Day"). These statements highlight the harrowing and complex path victims navigate in the quest for a life free from abuse.

Furthermore, Sally asserts that her actions were in self-defense when she took her husband's life because she became aware that he was going to kill her (Burstein, "The Death of Mr. California"). It is pivotal to recognize her sense of agency and her acknowledgment of responsibility in her act of killing. She clarifies her stance, mentioning, "In my perspective,

when under attack . . . I have the right to defend myself" (Burstein, "The Death of Mr. California"). In another instance, she declares, "[y]ou threaten to hit me, I'm gonna hurt you before you hurt me" (Burstein, "The Death of Mr. California"). These statements suggest Sally's self-worth and her determination to retaliate, as Morrissey also argues when she writes that a woman who kills "asserts a self dedicated to placing herself first" (97). By presenting Sally as more than a victim, namely, as a battered woman with agency, Burstein expands the discourse on battered women, which depicts them only as victims. As Morrissey states, "[n]arratives which assert these murders as precipitated by self-defense, and not provocation or Battered Woman Syndrome, form the apex of these contemporary efforts to humanize and make women who kill agentic" (Morrissey 29). In doing so, Burstein, to some extent, changes the perception of such women, acknowledging their cognitive faculties and decision-making capabilities. The idea that a woman can be strong, autonomous, and a fighter while simultaneously being a victim should not be an oxymoron. Recognizing these complexities is vital, especially in legal settings, as judgments made there can have profound consequences for an individual's life and freedom.

To conclude, Burstein questions the simplistic victim/perpetrator dichotomy in her portrayal of Sally. *Killer Sally* shows that neither Sally, who suffered abuse, nor her slain husband can be labeled as pure victims or pure villains. By highlighting the familial, marital, posthumanist, personal influences as well as the neglectful authorities, Burstein sheds light on the constraints of the paradigms used to categorize perpetrators and underscores the importance of the complex factors that led Sally to murder her husband. Furthermore, the docuseries emphasizes the importance of personal agency. As Morrissey suggests, an alternative perspective on the battered woman can be proposed, one where the women can be both proactive and responsible, but also deserving of understanding and forgiveness (68). Building on this, is it not possible for a woman to be in a sound state of mind, commit the crime, and still be vulnerable and receive a reduced sentence? Thus, Burstein advocates for a nuanced understanding of individuals who commit such acts. Consequently, Burstein encourages a more open discourse on domestic issues rather than silencing or shaming them. "Domestic violence is a huge issue globally," she points out, "and the way that our society handles it, including the United States, really needs reckoning" (Burstein qtd. in Michallon 2022). It can only be hoped that women who kill can be understood within John Hoffman's "momentum concept," "one which 'unfolds' so that it is possible to continuously rework it in a way which realizes more and more of its egalitarian and anti-hierarchical potential" (*Gender and Sovereignty* 23). According to Hoffman, it is "an idea that captures both the continuity a concept has with the

past as well as the need to reformulate it in the light of changing historical conditions" (*A Glossary of Political Theory* viii). Women who commit homicide should be viewed as a momentum concept, aiming for a more comprehensive understanding, acknowledging the ever-changing nature of societal values and perceptions.

Nota Bene:

It is crucial to note that the intent of this essay is not to suggest that Burstein's series condones or justifies Sally McNeil's actions. Rather, it posits that Burstein seeks to offer a more comprehensive and unbiased portrayal of Sally McNeil and her crime.

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