

Clay Shrout: An Analysis

Peter Langman, Ph.D.

THE DAY OF THE MURDERS

On the morning of 26 May 1994, 17-year-old Clay Shrout went outside to his father's jeep and took the gun stored in the glove compartment. He then went to his parents' bedroom where he shot his father and mother in the head; he wounded his father and killed his mother. He then went to the bedroom of his 14-year-old sister, Kristen, and shot her in the head. Then he went back to his parents' room:

My dad was sitting there on the bed ... He said something like, "Oh my God"; something to that effect ... And I got scared when I saw him, and I fired two more shots at him ... After the first shot he just kinda fell over like flat sorta, he was just lying there and there was a weird noise coming from him, like first I thought that he was having trouble breathing. Then I decided it was blood flowing out the hole or something, and that was when I fired the second shot and he was on the ground. I fired that one into the head also.¹

After that, his sister, Lauren, age 12, was awake. He went into her room, talked with her briefly, and shot her, "putting a bullet in Lauren's brain as they spoke."²

Following this, Shrout got ready for school. When he left his house, he saw someone from the neighborhood. He announced to the person, "You don't know me ... but my name is Clay Shrout and you're going to hear a lot about me today. I'm going to be on CNN."³ He called a friend and announced he had killed his family, but the friend didn't believe him. Shrout stopped at a store to buy two juice packs, and then went to Danielle's house. He had taken her to the prom two weeks prior. He then drove with her to his school, entered his math class, showed them his

gun, and held them hostage. He eventually let everyone leave and surrendered. He intended to kill his English teacher and an assistant principal. Why he didn't seek them out is a mystery.

BACKGROUND

Shrout's family was upper-middle class. Materially, there was nothing lacking. The family reportedly was stable, with no known abuse, dysfunction, or other significant problems. His parents were active at church, and both were Sunday school teachers. Shrout's mother had been involved with three different

CLAY SHROUT

Date: **26 May 1994**
School: **Ryle High School**
Location: **Union, KY**
Age: **17**
Killed: **4**
Wounded: **0**
Outcome: **Prison**
Shooter population: **Secondary school**
Psychological type: **Psychopathic**
Attack type: **Targeted**

Note: Though Clay Shrout did not commit a school shooting, he intended to and came very close to doing so. He is categorized as a secondary school shooter even though he did not carry out his plan. For an explanation of the populations, psychological types, and attack types, see "About the Site" at schoolshooters.info.

PTAS and had been president of one of them. She had a teacher career but gave it up to care for her children. Her father was an instructor at Georgetown College.⁴

One of ShROUT's friends said that CLAY's sisters got lots of hugs and "I love you" comments from their mother, whereas he rarely saw CLAY receive such affection.⁵ Assuming this was true, it could indicate favoritism toward the girls, but could also have been because ShROUT didn't want his mother hugging him and saying "I love you" in front of his friends.

ShROUT was a bright young man who typically earned good grades. He also worked part-time at a fast-food establishment. He reportedly was not good in sports.⁶ According to one friend, ShROUT was picked on,⁷ but another friend said, "He wasn't mistreated; he wasn't bullied."⁸ He not only had numerous friends, but even after he committed mass murder, a dozen friends showed up at the courthouse to support him, including Danielle, who called out "I love you, CLAY."⁹ He clearly was not a loner.

CHANGES IN ADOLESCENCE

Many people noted that ShROUT changed dramatically in the year or two leading up to the attack. He began wearing all black clothes and combat boots.¹⁰ He also changed his image by using an over-the-counter medication to lose weight, "going from a chubby to a frail teen-ager."¹¹

He bragged about drinking vodka¹² and using marijuana, crack, and LSD.¹³ (In fact, the police somehow had heard that he might be using LSD and were planning to interview him on the day of the attack, but by the time they found him, he was already in custody for murder.¹⁴ Whether or not he was high on the day of the attack is unknown because he was not drug-tested.¹⁵)

ShROUT talked about killing people¹⁶ and became obsessed with weapons, amassing a collection of knives, num-chucks, death stars, brass knuckles, a sword, and a BB gun.¹⁷ ShROUT talked about how much fun it was to steal, and stole things from a record store. A friend commented, "To him the fact that he was able to do something without getting caught was a challenge, a thrill."¹⁸ ShROUT also "bragged that he had a contingent of 50 friends ready to steal a stoplight."¹⁹ He also studied how to build bombs, buying *The Anarchist's Cookbook* and downloading instructions from the internet. He bragged he could build a bomb that would "blow up the whole neighborhood."²⁰ He reportedly built bombs in his bedroom.²¹

ShROUT also developed an interest in the occult, vampires, and Satanism. He reportedly had posters with Satanic messages all over his bedroom wall,²² and owned the book *The Complete Book of Spells, Ceremonies & Magic*.²³ He even cut his forearm with ten horizontal cuts, allegedly as part of a vampire ritual.²⁴

His mood became erratic, with angry outbursts, sometimes to the point of "frantic rage" in which he would "kick the family's two caged Dalmatians."²⁵ He also reportedly experienced depression, particularly after a break-up in December 1993, and even talked about suicide.²⁶

WHY KILL HIS FAMILY?

One reason ShROUT gave for killing his parents was simply that they would interfere with his plan to run away:

I decided that they would try to stop me or they would call the police on me or something would happen, and I decided that I didn't want to be stopped, so I decided I had to kill them. I mean, I didn't really want to, but there really wasn't any way around it."²⁷

The officer who heard ShROUT's explanation said, "He's probably the darkest person I've come into contact with ... He showed no emotion. He was so matter-of-fact."²⁸

Not only was it a cold-hearted reason, but it apparently was not the real reason. Though friends of his viewed his parents as lenient,²⁹ ShROUT was furious at them for exercising their parental authority over him. There was his general complaint that he felt

trapped in a way, like there is no room for me anymore ... Like colleges. Everyone decided that I had to go to college. That was decided before I was born ... I resented them trying to make me out a special mold without asking me what I really wanted to be first."³⁰

More specifically, however, ShROUT was angry because they gave him consequences for his misconduct. His parents reportedly caught him with drugs and alcohol.³¹ He was grounded because his grades had dropped to Cs, Ds, and Fs. When he was suspended for taking a stun gun to school, his parents again grounded him and also took away his weapons collection, heavy metal music, and computer.³² The significance of this is made clear by the fact that ShROUT, after killing his parents, went back into their room to reclaim his possessions.³³ He did this even though he presumably knew that he would be dead, in jail, or on the run by the end of the day. ShROUT told police that he was angry about his weapons being taken, and stated, "All that I resented was when they took my weapons away ... They took my weapons and something happened."³⁴

Though ShROUT admitted that he and his mother argued a lot, he said, "I didn't hate her ... Every time I was around her I just got real frustrated. My dad and I got along real well, though."³⁵ Not well enough, apparently, to keep him from shooting his father in the head.

His parents set limits on him and took away his possessions – not much of a motivation for murder, but it was a grievance. But why kill his sisters? One answer he gave was his older sister could have called the police and stopped him from running away. This was the same excuse he gave about having to kill his parents. On another occasion, however, he said the following, which explains nothing: "The only reason I shot my sisters was because, OK, the only reason I did that was just because they were there ... And there wasn't anything I could do about it, 'cause I figured I had to get out of there."³⁶

WHY BE HOMICIDAL TOWARD SCHOOL PERSONNEL?

Shrout's academic performance, which had been very high, had crashed in the weeks or months leading up to his attack. As noted, his grades plummeted to Cs, Ds, and Fs.³⁷ Even in math, in which he excelled, he had handed in a test paper without writing anything on it.³⁸ Perhaps he was angry about his academic decline, blaming it on the teachers rather than on his own lack of effort.

More specifically, however, Shrout was enraged by his English teacher and an assistant principal. Shrout's grade in English had dropped from a B+ to an F in one quarter, and he reportedly believed the teacher was unfair to him. In addition, the English teacher reportedly had called his parents earlier that week because he had failed to hand in an important assignment.³⁹

The assistant principal was an intended victim because he was the one who had confiscated Shrout's stun gun and suspended him.⁴⁰ Shrout had been given 50 hours of community service for the infraction, but the police had not been involved.⁴¹ Shrout told police he was angry about losing his stun gun; he was so angry, in fact, that "he even drew a picture of that assistant principal tied to a pole with gasoline poured around him."⁴²

IN COURT AND PRISON

During one of his hearings, Shrout "seemed very calm, cool and collected,"⁴³ which is remarkable for a teenager facing possible life imprisonment for mass murder. Interestingly, though Shrout pleaded guilty but mentally ill, "news reports indicated he had not sought mental health help while behind bars."⁴⁴

Shrout has not been a model prisoner. As summed up by one journalist: "From 1995 to 2002 he racked up 29 pages of disciplinary actions, and discovery of his plans to escape and his possession of a steel bar prompted his move from a minimum-security facility to a maximum-security one."⁴⁵

PSYCHOPATHIC TRAITS

Clay Shrout's behavior indicates multiple traits associated with psychopathy. He engaged in a variety of antisocial behaviors, including theft, making bombs, cruelty to animals, bringing a stun gun to school, and illegal substance abuse, which was not limited to alcohol and marijuana, but reportedly included crack and LSD.

The murder of his parents and sisters demonstrated a profound lack of empathy, and his subsequent lack of apology and apparent lack of guilt or remorse indicate an absence of conscience. In addition, the calmness and matter-of-fact presentation, even in the wake of having just killed his entire family, is striking. This post-attack nonchalance has been in seen in

other psychopathic shooters (Robert Benjamin Smith, Brenda Spencer, Valery Fabrikant, Wayne Lo, Barry Loukaitis, Drew Golden, Andy Williams, and T. J. Lane), but none of them had just shot their mother, father, and sisters in the head. Shrout's lack of agitation in the wake of such a horrific act indicates an incredible callousness.

His rage toward his parents and school staff because they set limits on him and gave him consequences for his misbehavior suggests that he felt he was above the rules. He apparently believed he ought to be able to do what he wanted and resented anyone who told him otherwise and who exercised power over him. Not long before the attack, Shrout asked a friend about the best way to kill someone; the friend was concerned and inquired if Shrout were planning on killing his parents. Shrout said, "No, but my parents are kind of just getting in the way."⁴⁶ This highlights the triviality of motivation that is sometimes seen among psychopaths. Drew Golden reportedly was tired of his teachers "crap," which apparently referred to nothing more than their expectations that he behave in class. Michael Slobodian sought to kill two teachers because they reported to his mother that he was cutting classes. The mere existence of social expectations can be intolerable for psychopaths, and they react with rage to people who have power over them.

This dynamic also indicates an inability to accept the consequences of his own behavior, feeling like he was the innocent victim of unreasonable authority. Shrout's continued misconduct in prison is further evidence of his disregard for rules and authority.

He also had a desire for status and fame that is consistent with the extreme narcissism of other psychopathic killers. He reportedly bragged about his drug use, bragged about stealing, and bragged about his bomb-making expertise. After killing his parents, he bragged to a stranger that he was going to be on CNN. As noted by one reporter, "Danielle said Clay might have enjoyed the news media circus his case has generated. 'He always wanted to make it big ... he's got it.'"⁴⁷ This desire for fame, even through grisly violence, has occurred with many psychopathic school shooters, including Robert Benjamin Smith, Brenda Spencer, Wayne Lo, Eric Harris, Robert Steinhauser, and Tim Kretschmer.

COMMENTARY

Shrout not only shares multiple traits with other psychopathic shooters, but he has other things in common with school shooters in general. First, he had significant distress related to his romantic failures, with a reportedly devastating break-up several months before his attack. How much this contributed to his attack is unknown. For Shrout, romantic rejection might have resembled the limits set by parents and teachers in that it was another situation in which he felt powerless. Girls, like authority figures, can make a boy feel small and helpless, an experience which can easily lead to rage in a psychopath.

Another interesting aspect is the role of education in Shrout's life. His grandfather was a college instructor, both parents taught in Sunday school, his mother had a teaching career, and though she gave this up, she remained very involved in education, serving on three PTAs and being president of one of them. Education apparently was very important in the family. This may have meant that Shrout's academic and disciplinary problems loomed extra large and caused more conflict than they might have in another family. This dynamic has occurred with other school shooters and is discussed elsewhere (see my book *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators*, as well as "Education: Failures and Family Involvement"⁴⁸).

In addition, Shrout rebelled against the entire life plan that he saw as having been decided for him before he was born. He resented the parental expectation that he go to college and said he felt trapped in a life in which he had no control. How much pressure was actually put on him is unknown, but because psychopathic personalities are highly sensitive to issues of status and control, even normal parental expectations may have generated homicidal rage in Shrout.

In *School Shooters*, I noted that of the six shooters discussed in the book who killed family members, five of them killed relatives who had been involved in education. Adding Shrout to this list means that six of the seven perpetrators I have studied who killed their relatives killed family members who had been teachers or were otherwise connected to education. Perhaps some of these were coincidences, but the pattern is striking.

Shrout may also have had issues with his sense of himself as a male. He reportedly had been chubby and used a weight-loss medication to slim down. Perhaps he lost too much weight. This combined with his lack of athletic prowess may have been significant blows to his masculinity. One reporter referred to his "frailty and sports ineptitude."⁴⁹ Another described him as a "slight, bespectacled youth."⁵⁰ Many other shooters had body-related issues (see my book *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators*, as well as "Patterns Among School Shooters: Body-Related Issues and the Military"⁵¹). I speculate in these works about the impact of a sense of damaged masculinity, and the potential attempt to resolve this by seeking to establish one's manhood through military aspirations. In Shrout's case, I have not seen that he had any military aspirations, but his obsession with weapons may have been his attempt to feel powerful and be impressive to people. Similarly, his interest in Satanism and casting spells may have been a manifestation of his desire for power and/or an attempt to be seen as a formidable figure. As a friend commented, "I think Clay was trying to give himself a tougher, scarier image."⁵²

The use of guns and violence to enhance one's identity has been seen in other shooters. On the day he bought his first firearms, Eric Harris wrote, "I am fucking armed. I feel more confident, stronger, more God-like."⁵³ After complaining about the status that society gives to jocks and preps, Kimveer Gill wrote of guns as "the great equalizer."⁵⁴ After Elliot Rodger ob-

tained a gun, he wrote, "Who's the alpha male now, bitches?"⁵⁵ Shrout's collection of weapons, his bomb-making activities, and his eventual murders may have been his attempt to become an alpha male.

Clay Shrout's violence may have been a result of his rage at people who put limits on his life, as well as a way of establishing a powerful male identity for himself. In the words of one of his friends: "He wanted attention. He wanted to show everyone that he was someone . . . He did that. Now, there's no more identity crisis. Now, he knows who he is – a killer."⁵⁶

NOTES

- 1 Paul A. Long, "Shrout Lawsuit Settled: Grandparents Agree on \$1M Insurance," *Kentucky Post*, 6 November 1998.
- 2 Long, "Shrout Lawsuit Settled."
- 3 Lisa Popyk, "All-American Family: 'I Killed 'em All,'" *Cincinnati Post*, 7 November 1998.
- 4 Connie Remlinger and Debra Ann Vance, "Fatal Day Began with Trip to Father's Car to Get a Gun," *Kentucky Post*, 27 May 1994; Gail Gibson, "Slain Family Laid to Rest as Hundreds Search for Answers," *Lexington Herald-Leader*, 30 May 1994.
- 5 Popyk, "All-American Family."
- 6 Popyk, "All-American Family."
- 7 Popyk, "All-American Family."
- 8 Julie Irwin Zimmerman, "Schoolhouse, Rocked," *Cincinnati History*, 1 June 2012.
- 9 Bill Estep, "Youth Pleads Not Guilty in Slayings; Florence Teen's Friends Gather Outside Courthouse," *Lexington Herald-Leader*, 28 May 1994.
- 10 Popyk, "All-American Family."
- 11 Paul A. Long, "Shrout Drug Use Probed; Suspect's Attorney Fends Off Agents," *Kentucky Post*, 2 June 1994.
- 12 Monica Dias, "Friend Was First to Hear Tale Too Grisly to Believe," *Kentucky Post*, 27 May 1994.
- 13 John C. K. Fisher, "Shrout Aftermath: Life Term, Few Answers," *Kentucky Post*, 15 October 1994.
- 14 Long, "Shrout Drug Use."
- 15 Fisher, "Shrout Aftermath."
- 16 Associated Press, "Shrout's Friends Say He Became Distraught Over Punishment," Associated Press, 27 May 1994.
- 17 Popyk, "All-American Family," and William Croyle, "Recap: Events in Day of Terror," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 25 May 2004.
- 18 Popyk, "All-American Family."
- 19 Dias, "Friend Was First to Hear."
- 20 Popyk, "All-American Family."
- 21 Dias, "Friend Was First."
- 22 Popyk, "All-American Family."
- 23 Croyle, "Recap."
- 24 Popyk, "All-American Family."
- 25 Popyk, "All-American Family."
- 26 Associated Press, "Shrout's Friends."
- 27 Paul A. Long, "His Anger, Their Horror," *Kentucky Post*, 26 May 2004.

- 28 Long, "His Anger."
29 Popyk, "All-American Family."
30 Croyle, "Recap."
31 Croyle, "Recap."
32 Popyk, "All-American Family."
33 Popyk, "All-American Family."
34 Croyle, "Recap."
35 Croyle, "Recap."
36 Long, "His Anger."
37 Popyk, "All-American Family."
38 Zimmerman, "Schoolhouse, Rocked."
39 Croyle, "Recap."
40 Popyk, "All-American Family."
41 Associated Press, "Shrout's Friends."
42 Croyle, "Recap."
43 Estep, "Youth Pleads."
44 Cindy Kranz, "Prison Behavior a Problem: 29 Pages of Infractions in Decade Behind Bars," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 25 May 2004.
45 Zimmerman, "Schoolhouse, Rocked."
46 Associated Press, "Shrout's Friends."
47 Estep, "Youth Pleads."
48 Available at www.schoolshooters.info.
49 Popyk, "All-American Family."
50 John C. K. Fisher, "Shrout Aftermath: Life Term, Few Answers," *Kentucky Post*, 15 October 1994.
51 Available at www.schoolshooters.info.
52 Popyk, "All-American Family."
53 "Eric Harris's Journal," p. 10. Available at www.schoolshooters.info.
54 "Kimveer Gill Online (Electronic Version)," p. 15. Available at www.schoolshooters.info.
55 Elliot Rodger, "My Twisted World," p. 113. Available at www.schoolshooters.info.
56 Popyk, "All-American Family."