

Robert Benjamin Smith: An Analysis

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BACKGROUND

Robert Smith's father served in the Air Force. As a result, the family moved several times. Smith reportedly hated school and had difficulty making friends. He was intelligent, but for some reason had to repeat grades. Whether this was a result of the frequent relocations or something else is unknown. Smith had significant deficits in physical coordination; he not only was "weak, slow, and clumsy," but he could not ride a bicycle or tie his shoes. His peers reportedly "avoided him or teased him."¹

His heroes included Caesar, Napoleon, and John F. Kennedy. Kennedy's assassination had a devastating impact on him. Following this, he chose more disturbing heroes, such as Lee Harvey Oswald, John Wilkes Booth, Jesse James, and Hitler.² In high school his grades improved, but his social skills didn't. He was recognized as bright by enough peers to be elected to student council, but he didn't have friends and he didn't date.³

Two influential events occurred in 1966: the mass murder by Richard Speck and the massacre by Charles Whitman. These incidents apparently sparked Smith to want to carry out his own attack and become just as infamous as Speck and Whitman: "I wanted to get known, just wanted to get myself a name."⁴

THE ATTACK

Robert Smith considered committing a shooting at his high school where he thought about killing his teachers. He decided instead to attack a local beauty salon that also was a cosmetology school. His behavior was remarkably calm and callous. He rounded up a group of women and their children, made them lie down, and began shooting them. When one of the wounded

women was squirming, he stabbed her with a knife.⁵ During the massacre, Smith was laughing. He later reported having felt exhilarated while killing. When asked about shooting a baby, he replied, "Well, it was going to grow up and become an adult."⁶

When the police arrived, he casually announced, "I shot some people . . . They're back there."⁷ He later stated that he had been disappointed that there hadn't been more people to kill. When asked what he would have done if his mother and sister had been there, he said: "I would have shot them, too."⁸ In fact, he reportedly had once planned to kill his father with a knife, waiting for him to come home so he could murder him.⁹ The motivation for this remains unknown.

Regarding the motivation for the massacre, Smith stated, "I wanted to kill about 40 people so I could make a name for myself. I wanted people to know who I was."¹⁰ Another possible

ROBERT BENJAMIN SMITH

Date: **12 November 1966**
School: **Rose-Mar College of Beauty**
Location: **Mesa, AZ**
Age: **18**
Killed: **5**
Wounded: **2**
Outcome: **Prison**
Shooter population: **Aberrant adult**
Psychological type: **Psychopathic**
Attack type: **Random**

For an explanation of the populations, psychological types, and attack types, see "About the Site" at schoolshooters.info.

factor was his hostility toward women. He reportedly “entertained fantasies in which women were shot or stabbed.”¹¹ This would explain his choice of the beauty salon as the location for his attack.

During the trial, he wrote several notes to another inmate. One said, “My attorney is making everyone think that I’m completely insane.” Another one included a statement that to avoid a prison sentence, “I’m trying for that hospital.”¹² His attempted insanity plea was not successful.

ANALYSIS

Robert Smith presented with a grandiose view of himself, and though this could have been a delusion of grandeur, it is also in keeping with the extreme narcissism of a psychopath. This distinction was addressed by Katherine Ramsland:

Robert Smith’s court-appointed psychiatrist diagnosed him as schizophrenic, but others thought him merely antisocial. He said he had felt exhilarated after the shootings and had no regrets. The idea that he felt like an all-powerful god and had no feelings for anyone else was a strange notion in those days and seemed delusional.¹³

Ramsland concluded by stating, “It seems likely, given what we now believe we know about psychopaths, that today Robert Smith would have been diagnosed with APD [antisocial personality disorder] or psychopathy.”¹⁴ (The concepts of antisocial personality and psychopathy are closely related.) Though the details on Smith are few, based on the available information, he appears to fit the category of psychopathic school shooters.

In fact, the feeling of god-like power he apparently reported to the psychiatrist is remarkably similar to what Eric Harris (Columbine High School) wrote about repeatedly. Harris’s writings are full of a towering sense of superiority and desire to have the power to play God.¹⁵

Smith’s psychopathic traits include a complete disregard for human life, including both strangers and his own family. He exhibited an absence of empathy, and actually found mass murder exhilarating. (Similarly, Eric Harris demonstrated incredible callousness during the attack, laughing as he gunned down cowering students.) Despite having shot seven people at close range and also stabbed one of them, he was calm and nonchalant with the police. These behaviors during and in the immediate aftermath of killing are consistent with what has been seen among other psychopathic school shooters.

In addition, Smith tried to use deception to go to a hospital rather than a prison. Wayne Lo (Simon’s Rock College), another psychopathic shooter, also tried to feign insanity to avoid criminal responsibility for his attack. Finally, seeking fame through murder is a callous, status-seeking, narcissistic drive. Eric Harris wanted to be famous and Wayne Lo was excited to be on television following his shooting. In fact, both Lo and Harris

hoped that movies would be made about them.

Unlike most psychopathic shooters, Smith was neither charismatic and charming nor abrasive and belligerent. He most resembles Robert Poulin (St. Pius X), who was a quiet kid on the periphery of his peer group. Like Smith, Poulin did not date and was hostile toward women. In fact, on the morning of his attack, Poulin raped and stabbed to death a girl he had a crush on. Thus, both these marginalized perpetrators sought out women as victims; in addition, Eric Harris fantasized about rape.

Like Poulin, Smith resembles what Dr. Theodore Millon described as a “nomadic antisocial.”¹⁶ Such people exist on the margins of society, feeling like misfits or outcasts. They are not content with this existence, however, and “beneath their social withdrawal are intense feelings of resentment and anger.”¹⁷ When their anger reaches the breaking point, “these antisocials may act out impulsively, precipitously discharging their pent-up frustrations in brutal assaults or sexual attacks upon these weaker than themselves.”¹⁸ Smith carried out just such an attack, indiscriminately shooting women and children and getting a thrill out of doing so.

There are other factors worth noting. As stated elsewhere (in my book *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators*,¹⁹ and in the document “Patterns Among School Shooters: Body-Related Issues and the Military”²⁰), many school shooters were not good physical specimens. They had various biological or health-related issues that made it difficult for them to feel good about themselves as males. In addition, many of them had family members who served in the military. Finally, many perpetrators had an obsession with the military and often aspired to be soldiers.

Smith fits all of these categories. He was unathletic, clumsy, and couldn’t even tie his shoes. His father was a retired major in the air force. Whether or not he ever had military aspirations is unknown, but he had a fascination for military icons such as Caesar, Napoleon, and Hitler. It is possible that his father’s masculinity as demonstrated by his being a soldier contrasted sharply with Smith’s own sense of self as failing at manhood. Murder may have provided a sense of power for someone who otherwise felt powerless; this would explain his laughter and exhilaration. In addition, his apparent inability to engage with girls may have resulted in profound frustration and resentment, which may have fueled his fantasy – and the eventual reality – of killing women. This, too, may have served to elevate his sense of manliness.

One final pattern will be noted. In my book *School Shooters*,²¹ I point out the parallels among Robert Poulin, Wayne Lo, and Eric Harris. All three had biological challenges to masculinity. All three were psychopathic school shooters. All three committed their attacks at age 18. All three had fathers who served in the air force. Like Poulin, Lo, and Harris, Robert Smith was an 18-year-old psychopathic shooter with biological challenges and a father who served in the air force. The extent to which history repeats itself is sometimes startling.

NOTES

- 1 Mara Bovsun, "Beauty Salon Massacre," *Daily News*, 25 March 2008.
- 2 Bovsun, "Massacre."
- 3 Bovsun, "Massacre."
- 4 Bovsun, "Massacre."
- 5 Bovsun, "Massacre."
- 6 "Robert Benjamin Smith," *Murderpedia*. <http://murderpedia.org/male.S/s/smith-robert-benjamin.htm>
- 7 Bovsun, "Massacre."
- 8 Bovsun, "Massacre."
- 9 "Smith," *Murderpedia*.
- 10 Bovsun, "Massacre."
- 11 "Smith," *Murderpedia*.
- 12 "Trials: Two States of Mind," *Time Magazine*, 3 November 1967.
- 13 Ramsland, Katherine. *Inside the Minds of Mass Murderers: Why They Kill*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005, p. 37.
- 14 Ramsland, *Mass Murderers*, p. 40.
- 15 Langman, Peter. "Themes in the Writings of Eric Harris." Available at www.schoolshooters.info.
- 16 Millon, Theodore. *Disorders of Personality: DSM-IV™ and Beyond*. New York: Wiley, p. 452.
- 17 Millon, *Disorders of Personality*, p. 453.
- 18 Millon, *Disorders of Personality*, p. 453.
- 19 Langman, Peter. *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.
- 20 Langman, Peter. "Patterns Among School Shooters: Body-Related Issues and the Military." Available at www.schoolshooters.info.
- 21 Langman, *School Shooters*, p. 157.