

Response Essay: Midnight Phantom (1935)

Student's Name

Institutional Affiliation

Course

Professor's Name

Date

Response Essay: *Midnight Phantom* (1935)

Cesare Lombroso laid the foundations of criminology as it is studied and practiced today. He claimed that criminals have distinct physical features that could be used to identify them. Another of his significant contributions to the field is the characterization of four types of criminals: insane, occasional, born, and criminals of passion (McShane, 2013). The movie *Midnight Phantom* (1935), however, dismisses Lombroso's theories and claims that detecting a criminal is much more complex. According to the movie, there is no remarkable difference between the physical and mental attributes of criminals and non-criminals.

Considering the criminological theories in question, the murderer in the movie *Midnight Phantom* seems to be a 'criminal of passion' – at least based on how Lombroso defined it (McShane, 2013). Lombroso's theories and methods were conventional, but he did steer criminological research in a more scientific direction. Prof. David Graham's process of investigating the murder seems to be corroborated by Lombroso's hypothesis that criminals have different physical attributes and behavior. However, when Graham himself turns out to be the murderer, it shows that we cannot identify a distinct anthropological criminal type – as Goring argued in *The English Convict* (first published in 1913).

Lombroso did not think women are capable of devious crimes and Graham believed that too. One of Graham's dialogues in the movie illustrates that. When Mary Ryan is defending herself, Graham tells Catherine that "your mother didn't do it... women are not capable of doing a job of that kind, they kill rather crudely" (00:47:00). This shows that Graham did not want a woman to be given credit for his crime, because he didn't think that women could accomplish such an intricate murder.

Lt. Burke can identify Graham as the killer because he pays attention to the clues and physical evidence instead of focusing on apparent motives. Thus, the underlying premise appears to be that 'one cannot identify a criminal just by observing their physical attributes'. Graham's behavior is more in-line with Goring's theories. The movie under discussion was not released long after Goring's work was published. Goring asserted that criminals are as intelligent as common law-abiding people (Bean, 2003) and this is quite a pertinent factor to how Prof. David Graham in *Midnight Phantom* dupes everyone and carefully hides his own crime.

Graham's behavior indicates that he is a well-adjusted psychopath. Everything he does in the movie can be considered to be normal behavior. In fact, he comes off as a very intelligent and clever man. In the closing scene of the movie, Burke tells Diana that Graham's crime was motivated by his obsession with a woman. Graham wanted to commit a perfect crime to get what he wanted. His deed appears to be a 'crime of passion' at the outset but the amount of planning and effort he puts into the murder shows that he is a psychopath.

According to modern approaches, crimes are caused by deviant behavior. The deviance approach focuses on three factors: time and space, absence of guardianship, and appropriate targets. Graham's behavior also falls under deviance because instead of using fair means to get his love or accept his failure, he creates a setting in which he can commit a very clever crime. In doing so, he uses time and space, and the absence of suspicion against him for his own benefit. Therefore, we see how Lombroso's theories are replaced by the modern ones in the *Midnight Phantom* movie.

References

- Webb, H.S. (Producer) & Ray, B.B. (Director), (1935), *Midnight Phantom* [Motion Picture], United States: Reliable Pictures, Retrieved 20 February 2020, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pW6PRty0whQ&feature=emb_logo.
- McShane, J. (2013). *The inside story of the greatest scandal in TV history*. John Blake. 113–126.
- Bean, P. (2003). *Crime: critical concepts in sociology*. Routledge. 98–112.