

5 Psychopathic Movie Characters: Are They Realistic?



Not too long ago, two researchers at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, Samuel Leistedt and Paul Linkowski, identified and watched 400 films released between 1915 and 2010 that showcased psychopathic movie characters. From it, they selected 126 roles based on the realism and clinical accuracy of their observable psychopathic traits for further analysis (read the full paper [here](#)). As I explained in a book chapter titled “Psychopaths in Film: Are Portrayals Realistic and Does It Matter?” (view/download the PDF [here](#)) in the book “[The Criminal Humanities](#),” they made several interesting conclusions:

- The clinical and behavioral portrayal of psychopaths have become clinically and behaviorally more realistic over time, but many psychopathic movie characters remain exaggerated, caricature-like, and stereotypical, which help to perpetuate misconceptions, and sometimes glorify psychopathic behavior.
- Secondary and prototypical were the most common types in the male group and secondary and manipulative leading among the female characters.
- The development of secondary types is more influenced by environmental and societal experiences than the inherent traits that define primary psychopaths.
- The prototypical subtype has high overall PCL-R scores, as well as high scores on the interpersonal, affective, and lifestyle factors. Interpersonal factors include glibness, grandiosity, pathological lying, and cunning. Affective traits are a lack of remorse, guilt, emotional depth, empathy, and responsibility. (The PCL-R, or Psychopathy Checklist – Revised, is the gold standard used to measure psychopathy.)
- High scores distinguish manipulative subtypes on the interpersonal and affective factors, but lower scores on the lifestyle factor, which include excitability, impulsivity, irresponsibility, and lack of realistic goals.

The study found that the most realistic of the psychopathic movie characters is Anton Chigurh in “[No Country for Old Men](#),” and that he share several traits with real-life American hitman, [Richard Kuklinski](#), who had the nickname “Iceman.” Of the movies on their list, only one other opened in the past ten years: “The Lovely Bones” (2010). I selected the following five movies from the past decade based on a realistic depiction of psychopathy in a lead character, as well as well-rounded

types that are a fair representation of psychopathy across age, gender, and setting.

#1: No Country for Old Men (2007)

“You think when you wake up in the morning yesterday don't count. But yesterday is all that does count. What else is there? Your life is made out of the days it's made out of. Nothing else.”

In “[No Country for Old Men](#),” Chigurh is a hitman with no remorse or compassion. With his signature weapon, a captive bolt pistol, and back-ups, a sound-suppressed Remington 11-87 semiautomatic shotgun, and TEC-9 pistol, he is an archetype of unstoppable evil. He decides the fate of his victims with a coin toss. In his hunt for a satchel holding US\$2.4 million from the scene of a drug deal gone wrong, Chigurh ruthlessly hunts everyone involved down.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38A__WT3-o0

He always kills with deliberation and never at random or without purpose, although his reasons sometimes seem abstract. It appears he sees himself as an instrument of fate, holding those accountable who deserve it. The actor, Javier Bardem was awarded an Oscar, a Golden Globe and a BAFTA for his performance as Anton Chigurh.

#2: There Will Be Blood (2007)

“I have a competition in me. I want no one else to succeed. I hate most people.”

In this [movie](#), a silver miner, Daniel Plainview, played by Daniel Day-Lewis, was leading a tough life with his son when he heard about an oil find that he left to pursue. He made a lucky strike and became rich, but his moral compass got lost in the process. He works hard but does whatever it takes to achieve his goals, including making use of others at their expense.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FeSLPELpMeM>

Plainview's selfishness and greed build as he prospects for oil and eliminates his competition. In a sense, the movie reflects the dark side of corporate greed that is so evident today, especially in the financial sector.

#3: We Need to Talk About Kevin (2011)

"I didn't care about anything. And there's a freedom in apathy, a wild, dizzying liberation on which you can almost get drunk. You can do anything. Ask Kevin."

In "[We Need to Talk about Kevin](#)," the mother struggles to live her child, despite the increasingly vicious things he says and does. One a successful travel writer, Kevin's mother, Eva Khatchadourian, played by Tilda Swinton, struggle to make ends meet as a clerk in a travel agency. After a traumatic incident, she became meek and scared and lived a solitary life. At the time, Kevin approached his 18th birthday, but letters written to her estranged husband offer a view of the past, with Kevin growing up showing no affection or moral responsibility toward his family or community.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGjjK5SMbJA>

He progressively became worse and regarded everyone with contempt and hatred, especially his mother. He systematically antagonized and sabotaged her from an early age. In front of his father, he maintained an innocent persona, which causes a rift in the marriage that eventually ended in separation. He also maliciously targeted his younger sister, his mother's favorite, killing her pet rodents and burnt her with drain cleaner. In real time, Kevin is in prison for committing a school massacre, attacking nine classmates and two staff members, after murdering his father and sister.

#4: Gone Girl (2014)

"It's a very difficult era in which to be a person, just a real, actual person, instead of a collection of personality traits selected from an endless Automat of characters."

A few weeks ago, I wrote about Amy Dunn in the movie "[Gone Girl](#)," and the narcissistic traits that

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she presented, together with [four other narcissistic lead characters](#). She also showcased a range of psychopathic traits, which include lack of remorse and a moral compass, pathological lying, a disregard of societal norms, and craving control.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ym3LB0IOJ0o>

In the role, Amy Dunn, played brilliantly by Rosamund Pike, enacts revenge on her cheating husband, an elaborate act that she has planned for a long time. While meticulous planning and revenge are not core features of a prototypical psychopath—they are more impulsive and cold—such a blend is common among the so-called dark triad personalities. Here, narcissistic, psychopathic, and Machiavellian traits co-exist, which makes a person more unstable in the reactive and selfish sense. Although their actions are often deliberate and planned, their reasoning may appear abstract and illogical. However, they always focus solely on their own needs and desires and will do whatever to achieve it, even with breathtaking risk and consequences.

As I have explained in another [article](#), some of the differences between psychopathy (or antisocial personality in clinical terms) and narcissism are that narcissists try to cling to relationships, they take revenge when their pride is wounded, they are reactive more than proactive, and self-obsessed rather than driven by self-interest.

#5: The Wolf of Wall Street (2013)

“No matter what happened to you in your past, you are not your past; you are the resources and the capabilities you glean from it. And that is the basis for all change.”

Many critics blamed “[The Wolf of Wall Street](#)” for glamorizing greed and psychopathic behavior, a story based on the memoirs of Jordan Belford, a former stockbroker who pleaded guilty to fraud and related crimes in 1999 in connection with stock-market manipulation and a penny-stock scam. He spent 22 months in prison and paid \$110 million in restitution as part of a plea agreement in which he gave testimony against many partners and subordinates.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idAVRvQeYAE>

In the role, Jordan Belford, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, rose to an incredibly wealthy stockbroker living the high life before coming to a fall for crime and corruption. Even then, he coldly gave others up to save himself. Surrounded by beautiful women, alcohol, drugs, and lots of cash, he built the company that he started to dizzying heights, going to outrageous extremes in the process. He

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thrived on the money he was making and the worship of his loyal employees.

So, with Belford's extreme self-centered behavior, having little empathy, reduced emotions, and indifference to the pain of others, he is a typical psychopath, albeit with some narcissistic features as well. As with the other four characters in this article, his own success and satisfaction are paramount; others are just tools to use and discard without a second thought, causing incredible pain and suffering at home, work, and in their communities.