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DECIPHERING HANNIBAL LECTER: SOCIOPATH or SUPERHUMAN?

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ABSTRACT

The world one lives in is a dystopia, and it requires a hero to save it. Friedrich Nietzsche had envisioned such a man who had the potential to show the world the right way. This *Urbemensch* will become their leader, and his ideals will replace the old ones. He should be creative, incorruptible and has the herculean task of waging war with the old rules. The world sometimes may not be able to digest what the *Urbemensch* has to teach, and he may be declared insane by the people. This research article explores a sociopath from literature, namely Dr Hannibal Lecter, to find out whether they possess the qualities required for an *Urbemensch*. Through an examination of their characters, the research article concludes that Hannibal had the potential to become *Urbemensch*, but he could not completely fulfil his destinies, making him "*Alter-Urbemensch*".

Keywords: *Urbemensch*, Nietzsche, Overman etc

Solving a Sociopathic Riddle

It is said that the Devil has all the best tunes. Man's obsession with evil is as old as humanity. Evil fascinates man and inspires in him a world of wonder, like virtue never can. Perhaps this is why there are so many works of fiction in this world that glorify murderers and villains. Of all kinds of murderers, the society is always interested in that rare group of criminals called serial killers. In most cases, these cold blooded criminals are psychopaths. A very striking feature about these murderers is that most of them do not feel even a shadow of guilt for the crimes they have committed.

Literature has gifted this world with numerous serial killers who can be considered as the ultimate personification of evil. But few are more captivating than Dr Hannibal Lecter, the cannibalistic psychiatrist, born from the pen tips of Thomas Harris. Harris made him one of the antagonists in his book *The Red Dragon* (1981). His character gained more prominence in its sequel *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988). The third book in the series, called *Hannibal* (1999) placed him directly under the spotlight as the protagonist. He got another book in his name called *Hannibal Rising* (2006), which traced his history and evolution as a serial killer. The series of books became popular, and were made into immensely successful movies that are considered as classics. They catapulted Dr Lecter into heights of fame, where he still remains.

In *Hannibal*, one sees the fusion of razor sharp intellect with the savage qualities of a beast, a rare combination that made him such a thriving psychopath. This small slight man may not look much of a threat to

anyone at first glance, but looks can be deceptive. His hands are strong enough to break one's neck and his movements are quick and agile like a cat. This, combined with his merciless mind and appetite for human flesh makes him one of the most nightmarish sociopaths in literature. His infinite strength, ability to manipulate and control people and the brutal crimes committed give him an almost invincible image. One starts to wonder if he has capabilities beyond the average man, perhaps that of a super human.

The famous German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was the first to write about humans who were born to become supermen. In the prologue to his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1891), Nietzsche announced the death of modern man and the advent of a new man, the *Übermensch* (Nietzsche 17), who is free from the rules of the society. He talks about this "overman" (13) as a human being of extreme potential, who has completely mastered himself. Being a man of immense talent, he uses his gifts to lift humanity to higher levels. He has the ability to influence others and even predict their actions.

### Thus Spoke Nietzsche

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche is a prominent German philosopher who lived in the nineteenth century, who shocked the world with his declaration that "God is Dead" (Nietzsche 13). Before he gave it the name "*Übermensch*", Nietzsche had talked about self-enhancement and self-configuration of the individual. He felt that we wouldn't be able to find our true self within us, but rather beyond us. "Your true being does not lie buried deep within you, but rather immeasurably high above you" (102). For Nietzsche, the idea of *Übermensch* was more of a vision than a theory. He never explained in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1891) what he meant by *Übermensch*, only intimidated:

The *Übermensch* shall be the meaning of the earth! I entreat you my brethren, remain true to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of supra-terrestrial hopes! . . . Behold, I teach you the *Übermensch*: he is this lightning, he is this madness! . . . Behold, I am a prophet of the lightning and a heavy drop from the cloud: But this lightning is called the *Übermensch*. (14)

One of the first figures to whom Nietzsche attributed the title of *Übermensch* was Manfred, the lonely Faustian character in Byron's poem of the same name. He called Manfred "*Übermenchen* who controls spirits" (Safranski 35). This usage is strikingly similar to the way Goethe describes Faust in his poem, where he summons a spirit who calls him an *Übermenschen* (Goethe 198). Having challenged all authoritative powers, Manfred wanders the Alps and finally dies defying the religious path to redemption. *Übermensch* made its second appearance in his book *The Gay Science* (1882). Here, Nietzsche praises "the invention of the gods, heroes, and *Übermenschen* of all kinds" (87). The ideals first embodied by these entities of Greek mythology enabled man to reach the peak of his individuality. According to Kaufmann, "these *Übermenschen* appear as symbols of the repudiation of any conformity to a single norm: antithesis to mediocracy and stagnation" (309)

The meaning of the word *Übermensch* began to evolve and was raised to higher levels during the later stages of Nietzsche's writing. The word started to gain a new meaning that was both broader and narrower than the one it had during its infancy. Rather than a vague reference to the heroes of the past, *Übermensch* became a vision for the future, infusing Nietzsche's earlier philosophy of overcoming oneself to become a new human. He introduced this revelation with the publication of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* :

I teach you the overman. Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him? All beings so far have created something beyond themselves; and do you want to be the ebb of this great flood and even go back to the beasts rather than overcome man? What is the ape to man? A laughing stock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the over man: A laughing stock or a painful embarrassment. (Nietzsche 124)

Nietzsche believed that man can only reach his true potential through the process of self-overcoming and self-realization. If a human being could attain the status of an *Übermensch*, then the rest of mankind would seem primitive to him. An *Übermensch* should have several key qualities, individuality and creativity being the most central of his attributes. But the qualities of an *Übermensch* does not end there. He should be above the norms of the society — a man with his own set of rules. He should be able to influence the masses and control them.

If man should remain within the boundaries set by the society, then he will be led into a life of fruitless decadency. He will become "The Last Man" (Danto 197), the opposite of an *Übermensch*. Rather than pursue his own individuality, the last man would conform to the rest of his kind, content to be like everyone

else. This last man would be an end to the evolution of mankind, and Nietzsche thought this could be avoided by the coming of the *Übermensch*. He arrived at this view of the last man through his observations of the world; the way societies, religions, and philosophies have imposed systems of values on their citizens. Each society has its own set of values, its own interpretation of what is "right" and "wrong", and its own code of beliefs that have shackled the human spirit and denied its right for individuality. Being an *Übermensch* includes the rejection of all traditional paradigmatic values imposed by these external influences.

People often mistake *Übermensch* to be a conqueror, as the synonym "overman" (Nietzsche 17) gives it an aura of an overseer. This notion is incorrect, as political power does not mean a thing to an *Übermensch*, and Nietzsche himself is anti-political. "It is not politics, but art, 'the only counterforce . . . to the denial of life', which is the Overman's medium" (Cooper 328). This underlines the ultimate role of creativity in an *Übermensch*, the need for a constant state of change and inspiration, anything to battle the infernal denizens of decadency and stagnation. Finally, the doctrine of the eternal recurrence plays a role in completing an *Übermensch*. The eternal recurrence is the hypothesis that all things that take place have taken place infinite number of times in the past, and will take place an infinite number of times in the future; everything that occurs will occur again for eternity (Danto 201). This is the ultimate teaching of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1891).

An Overman (Nietzsche 17) will be at peace with this theory, and will be able to make the most out of each moment. Another important concept put forward by Nietzsche is that of the Apollonian and the Dionysian (147). These opposing concepts are the central themes in his major work *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). The Apollonian and the Dionysian represents the opposing forces of nature — the yin and yang (Palmer 11) — the philosophical dichotomy of order and chaos. While this theory is used mainly to describe the characters of Greek mythology, it can also be used to evaluate the actions of man. In Greek mythology, Apollo and Dionysus are both the sons of Zeus (Graves 56). Apollo is the god of reason. Therefore, Apollonian represents structure and order. It is the logical side of a being. Dionysus is the god of celebration. Dionysian represents disorder and chaos. The irrational, impulsive side of a being, where his passion runs free. The Apollonian and the Dionysian is present in every human being. Some are ruled over by Apollo while some by Dionysus. In some there is perfect harmony of both the elements (Nietzsche 164).

### **Confessions of a Cannibal**

"A census taker tried to quantify me once. I ate his liver with some fava beans and a big Amarone" (Harris 27). Meet Dr Hannibal Lecter, a character notorious for his savage crimes in English Literature. A cold blooded murderer who enjoys feeding on the human flesh, Dr Lecter is an incarnation of evil. He can bite the tongue off his victim and swallow it while keeping a steady heartbeat (14).

Hannibal's life, especially his past played an important role in shaping his character. Therefore, it is important to trace his life story that spans the four books of the Hannibal Series. Hannibal Lecter was born into a wealthy aristocratic family in Lithuania in 1933. He was named after his ancestor, a warlord called "Hannibal the Grim" (Harris 5). The Second World War split the family and poor lost his family including his favourite Mischa cannibalized by a gang of looters. He somehow manages to escape from them, but he was forever traumatized by his sister's death. Mischa's face will continue to haunt him throughout his life. He since then believed that there was no real justice in this world.

After young Hannibal's escape from his captors, he was found by a tank crew and brought back to his old castle which is an orphanage now. There, Hannibal was a constant target of bullies. But he fought them back aggressively, and often got into trouble. He was really kind to the younger children, and used to let them tease him, often giving them his treats. Hannibal never forgot about what happened in the lodge that day and he tried to keep that memory fresh in his mind so that he could one day find each one of them, to make them pay for what they had done. When he was thirteen, his uncle found him and brought him to his home in France. There he met his aunt, Lady Murasaki, with whom he developed a strong bond. At age thirteen, Hannibal committed his first murder, killing Momund, a local butcher for insulting his aunt. He sliced off Momund's two cheeks and ate them. Here began his saga as a cannibalistic killer.

Due to his excellent academic performance, Hannibal became the youngest person to be admitted to a medical school in France. But even as he led this normal life, he never forgot about the promise that he had

given Mischa — to find out and murder everyone who had a part in her death. True to his word, he was able to find each one of his captors and kill them. He was arrested, but got away due to lack of evidence. Within a short span of years, Hannibal became one of the most renowned psychiatrist in Baltimore. Funded by his wealthy patients, he led a luxurious life. Hannibal began his killing spree soon enough. He was known to kill at least nine people before his capture by Will Graham, an FBI profiler. He also tried to murder Mason Verger, his patient who was known to molest children. The attack left Mason paralyzed for life. Following his arrest, he was presented in front of the court. He was declared insane and was not given the death penalty. He was sent to Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane for nine consecutive life terms.

Hannibal was given the nickname "Hannibal the Cannibal" by a tabloid called National Tattler. He was described as "a pure sociopath" by Chilton (Harris 13), the administrator of the hospital. Many in the psychiatric circles called him a monster. But the truth was that there was no name fit enough to describe him. While in custody, Hannibal was subjected to various psychological experiments, but he was considered as far too sophisticated to be studied. Since he was a genius psychiatrist, he knew how all their tests work, and could easily con them. During his term in the Baltimore hospital, Hannibal helped the FBI solve two cases. In the first case, he gave valuable information to Will Graham that led to the capture of a serial killer called the Tooth Fairy (Harris 81). In the second case he helped Special Agent Clarise Starling to capture another murderer called Bufflo Bill (21). It was his involvement in the Buffalo Bill case that Hannibal had the opportunity to escape. He murdered two officers, two paramedics and a tourist while performing his escape. His life on the run as a museum curator in Florence ended when his identity was discovered by Detective Rinaldo Pazzi, seven years after his escape (76). He had the FBI chasing him, along with the men of Mason Verger, a surviving victim, and Agent Starling.

Hannibal escapes the clutches of both the police and the goons of Mr Verger. He tries to psychologically brainwash Agent Clarise, with whom he was in love with. She was by then equally captivated by Hannibal. Clarise turned into his counterpart, seduces him, and the couple vanish, and were last spotted in Buenos Aires, Argentina. This was the last that anyone knew about Hannibal. Dr Hannibal Lecter has a way of intriguing the readers. His character acquires an almost superhuman quality as the series develop. One may wonder whether he could be something more than just a sociopath, and he becomes comparable to the *Urbemensch* (Nietzsche 13).

One of the very first attribute that Nietzsche gave to his Overman was creativity. It was not limited to artistic creativity, but could be anything. Dr Lecter was a talented artist, being able to draw using both hands. His cell at the hospital was full of stunning sketches of landscapes that he drew from sheer memory. He was an excellent cook, and enjoyed cooking delicious meals to his friends. He was also a proficient musician. He also used to enjoy going to the Opera. Hannibal had an extraordinary sense of smell. Not only could he capture smells better than an average human being, he could also store them in his memory. Smell was a sense that was as strong as sight for him. A darker and more twisted side of his creativity can be seen in the way in which he killed his victims, each one different than the other. Always an admirer of art, Dr Lecter had a way of serving poetic justice to his victims. One of his victims, a bow hunter, was murdered and arranged in the style of a medieval drawing Wound Man. Rinaldo Pazzi was hanged and disembowelled like his ancestor. It was also similar to the death of Judas. Donnie Barber, one of his final victims, was arranged in the style of the Blood Eagle, a Norse method of execution.

Kaufmann described the *Urbemensch* as having his own value systems (Kaufmann 307). He should be above the rules of religion and the society. Hannibal was independent like the *Urbemensch*. He was not full of the ideas that society imposed on him. Hannibal, from his very childhood was unconventional. His sister's death made him lose faith in God. He no longer trusted humans, and always kept a distance from them. He never allowed anyone to influence him. Hannibal by all means had no respect for the rules of the society. He believed that he was superior to the people he met. He therefore felt no guilt in murdering them. He did not believe that he was in the wrong.

When Clarise Starling told him that 'evil' and 'destructive' are the same, he replied "Evil's just destructive? Then *storms* are evil, if it is that simple. And we have *fire*, and then there's *hail*. Underwriters lump it all under 'Acts of God' " (Harris 25). He further talks about God and destruction — "If He's up there, He

just loves it . . . Typhoid and swans - it all comes from the same place" (25). This startling and controversial take on God is what sets Hannibal apart. Although he doesn't proclaim that "God is dead" (13), like Nietzsche did, he had his own opinion about God. It is interesting to note that he doesn't mock God. He merely feels that destructions are intended by God. Like storms, fire, and hail, Hannibal becomes a destructive force, which he does not regret being.

Another important feature of the *Übermensch* is vitality. He should be a man of great energy, always full of life. It is not just physical fitness that is meant here. It is about mental fitness — to possess a strong mind. Hannibal was a sociopath and his mind was in no way healthy according to the society. But there is no doubt that he had a powerful mind. Eight years in solitary confinement did not break him. The medical tests by Chilton, his abuses and punishments, the idea of spending his entire life in that cell — none of this could weaken his will. He was ever alert and always knew that he was going to escape one day. Physically, Hannibal was a man of immense strength, almost too healthy for his age. The most astonishing thing about him is that he felt no pain, and if he did, he did not show it. Even when Cordell, one of Verger's men, shoved a burning hot poker into Hannibal's chest, he did not even batter an eyelid. Nowhere in the series will we find an exhausted Hannibal. He is a powerhouse of energy.

Hannibal was someone who had embraced his Dionysian nature. While he had the class of an Apollonian, he was dominated by the Dionysian. He had a wild, carefree creativity in him that was captivating and terrifying. Hollingdale described the *Übermensch* as someone who organized the chaos within. Dr Lecter thrived by doing exactly this. His sister's death shook him and caused an explosion in him. He had very little memory about it, but it was something that he could never forget. His mind was in pieces afterwards, and the incident even rendered him mute for several years. He was however able to create an order in his mind even in this situation by focusing his energy on planning revenge. The most extraordinary feature of his mind was his memory palace. He had in his head created a palace where he can store memories. There he can wander from room to room, exploring the memories that he wants to. In his palace he has stored all the information from every book that he had ever read. His mind is so well organized that it was impossible to imagine the owner of this mind to be a murderer.

Carl Jung called the *Übermensch* the "new God", but Hannibal was no God. But he took the duty of God into his own hands. It was God's duty alone to take life. Hannibal took the act of taking life into his own hands. He was playing God by defying him. However, it is safe to say that Hannibal was his own God. He did not believe in the divine power, and considered him the master of himself. This was characteristic of the *Übermensch*. Like the *Übermensch*, Dr Lecter had the uncanny ability to manipulate people. His words had the power to make them do what they ordinarily wouldn't. When he was practicing as a psychiatrist, he was able to influence Mason Verger to mutilate himself. When he was a patient in Baltimore State Hospital, he talked his inmate Miggs into committing suicide. He also encouraged Sammie, another inmate, to write poetry. He was able to manipulate a murderer called the Red Dragon into attacking Will Graham. He was able to fool the hospital staff into thinking of him as a model patient. He was also able to shake the mind of Officer Starling during their meeting.

Although Hannibal was a sadistic cannibal, there are instances that show that he was not pure evil, as some may describe him. To Mischa, his little sister, he was a kind brother. He looked after her, forsaking his own pleasures for her. During his time in the orphanage, he was friendly to the younger children. He never bullied them and instead happily let them tease him. What sets him apart from most sociopaths was that he was never unkind to animals. He had a deep relationship with them. He did not fear them, nor did they fear him. Even aggressive dogs do not attack Hannibal. There is an instance in the book *Hannibal* where he almost gets the airs of a superhuman. Verger breeds a group of man-eating wild pigs especially for killing Hannibal. Towards the end of the book, Hannibal and Clarise, along with a few of Verger's men gets trapped in with the pigs. The pigs charge at them. Hannibal, who was carrying an unconscious Clarise, stands perfectly still. The pigs, smelling no fear in him, passes by, choosing to attack the other men instead. Here we see that even nature does not want to destroy Hannibal. Here, Hannibal the man becomes Hannibal the 'Superman'. Dr Hannibal Lecter was a man of intellect that could be compared to that of the living legend Stephen Hawking. No one can question his capabilities. Creative and independent, he is a man with his own set of ideals,

although they cannot be digested by the society. He is a man immune to drugs, a manipulator who cannot be manipulated. His hunger for knowledge is as strong as his hunger for human flesh. An admirer of art, Hannibal is man of class. He holds humanity in contempt. Man is to Lecter what an ape is to man - A laughing stock or a painful embarrassment (Nietzsche 13).

#### **Destiny Deprived: The Fate of the Fallen Angels**

From immemorial time, human beings are notorious for being inhumane. This is perhaps due to the fact that the world in which they live in is a dystopia. Friedrich Nietzsche had envisioned such a man who had the potential to show the world the right way. According to him, a time will come when humanity can no longer depend on the existing moral codes. A day will come when religion loses its legitimacy. This *Übermensch* then has the herculean task of waging war with the old rules. If he wins this war he will be hailed the leader of humanity, but if he fails, he will forever be an outcast. Since his ideals are so different, so appallingly bold, he will be declared insane by the people. Like Copernicus was called crazy for stating that earth revolved around the sun, the philosophies of the *Übermensch* might get scorned upon in his time. This is the reason why we cannot rule out the fact that certain social outcasts might, in fact, have the potential to become the *Übermensch*.

Dr Hannibal Lecter undeniably shows striking similarity to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. He is a man who stood against normality. He detested ordinariness and was successful in leaving their signature in the minds of the people. He undeniably intelligent, although they use it to commit crimes. An utter disregard for religion is something else that they share with the *Übermensch*, as they were both nihilists. It is perhaps an Overman's frustration with the common man that led to his life of crime. Not being able to fulfill his destiny could be the reason for which he took revenge on man. Hannibal thus became the fallen angel, even though his wings were the brightest of all.

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