Netflix’s “YOU” (2018) is much more than just a deeply disturbing portrayal of a seemingly unsuspecting and charming protagonist, who, at the core of it all, is a psychopath. Joe Goldberg exemplifies the very traits of uncompromising charisma and meticulous strategizing that we have now come to define as hallmarks of antisocial personality disorder – or maybe, just a genuinely great human being. Is it really, then, possible to realize the potential danger that lurks beneath an unassuming, polite, and helpful facade? And, even if successfully detected, can someone like Goldberg ever thrive in an environment of conventional therapy, and come out of the other end of the tunnel with a newfound sense of empathy and compassion for others? This paper will explore how someone as dangerous as Goldberg can go easily unnoticed for an indefinite amount of time, while taking into account the major obstacles that lie in the path of diagnosing, as well as treating a psychopath.

Goldberg is an extremely complicated character, so much so, that even a neat criteria of ‘psychopathy’ or ‘psychopathic personality’ does not cover the full range of his symptoms, at which point we start to identify symptoms of love addiction and codependency in his behavior. In Season 2, we are given a glimpse into Goldberg’s unstable and disruptive childhood; he was neglected by a physically and emotionally abusive father as well as an absentee mother to whom he was significantly attached. He ended up with blood on his hands at a tender age when he accidentally shot his father dead in a desperate attempt to protect his mother, who then turned him over to social services, after which he was adopted by Mr. Mooney, a bookstore owner, who would physically discipline him by locking him up in a glass cage. Fast forward to adulthood, he becomes obsessively infatuated with women and stalks them, goes on a killing rampage with the intent to ‘protect’ his beloved, lies pathologically, and then always evades discovery by the grace of the best weapon at the disposal of psychopaths – their charisma.

Dr. J. Reid Meloy’s paper “Antisocial Personality Disorder” (2014)explains how diagnosing someone with ASPD is not as straightforward as in the case of other disorders. Due to the seemingly inconspicuous and ‘normal’ façade of psychopathic individuals, their true nature goes undetected. Goldberg is like any other regular person one would interact with; he works as a bookstore manager, engages in everyday conversations with people around him, and even mingles with his girlfriends’ social circles. Moreover, only one out of seven individuals with ASPD are likely to seek treatment (Meloy 18); for instance, the chances of someone like Goldberg seeking help are almost nonexistent due to his history of criminality. Psychopaths will do anything to stay off the radar, which is what makes them effective and careful planners. Hence, Goldberg, having committed multiple murders, would be the least likely candidate to ask for help, and consequently, get diagnosed. Moreover, individuals with the disorder can easily escape diagnosis due to their skilful abilities of deceiving and manipulating doctors (Meloy 3). This is best illustrated by Goldberg’s drawn out pretense in front of Beck’s psychologist, Dr. Nikki, whom he exploits for his own selfish benefit. Thus, their feigned charm, incessant lying, and deception of others makes ASPD sufferers extremely difficult to be identified and diagnosed.

If diagnosing psychopathy was not hard enough, the treatment of the disorder is ridden with far more obstacles than usually encountered in a clinical setting. Psychopaths usually enjoy inflicting harm on people and do not have a legitimate motive for their actions, something which can also then be extended to the hospital staff and put them in physical danger (Meloy 5). Goldberg, although qualifying for the diagnosis of ASPD, does not, in my opinion, fulfil the above criterion for a psychopathic personality: there is always a motive in Goldberg’s mind for targeting all his victims– he feels personally wronged or threatened by them, and wants to ‘protect’ himself or his relationships at any cost. Additionally, although we see an element of impulsivity marking Goldberg’s retaliations, there is not entirely an absence of emotion in him as we do observe in him rare glimpses of guilt and mild compassion towards his victims. But, if sent to treatment against his will, then someone like Goldberg could feel threatened and thus find a rational motive to harm his doctors. In Season 1, upon being discovered, he ends up capturing Beck, his *girlfriend*, in a glass cage and later kills her in cold blood, in addition to many others. Therefore, someone like him would require extra supervision at all times just to ensure the safety of hospital staff (Meloy 8).

Goldberg also exhibits tendencies of fantasizing and idealizing the object(s) of his infatuation. For starters, he obsessively fixates on women he does not even know. In Season 1, he steals Beck’s phone and accesses her personal conversations as well as her social media to acquire information about her. In a clinical setting, someone like Goldberg could manipulate doctors and other patients and use any learned information to hurt and/or control them (Meloy 14). Following from this, one of the most dangerous aspects of a psychopathic personality is its narcissism, whereby the individual has an inflated sense of self-importance which they go to any extent to maintain. Throughout both seasons, we witness how Goldberg lashes out whenever he feels that his control is challenged by another individual, which automatically motivates him to get rid of the hindrance. In this case, that ‘hindrance’ is no longer viewed as a real person with any dignity and emotions (he clearly overlooks the dignity of people he locks up in his glass cage, subjecting them to starvation, sleeplessness, and other inhumane torture) but rather as an object that he can control (Meloy 8). In Season 2, he murders Jasper in what is one of the most graphic moments on the show: he disembodies and then grinds him in a meat grinder. Therefore, a person like Goldberg poses immense danger to the staff and other patients in a clinical setting because they will only be viewed as obstacles, or worse, those trying to dominate him, which can easily hurt a psychopath’s inflated ego and be cause for lashing out in any violent means possible (Meloy 7).

The danger posed to clinical staff by a psychopath remains ever-increasing as other aspects of their personality, such as a lack of remorse and anxiety, as well as the psychological defenses they employ, serve to create a huge barrier in the effective treatment of their disorder. Although, we can use Goldberg’s genuinely empathetic bond with Paco (in Season 1) and Ellie and Delilah (in season 2) as evidence to argue in favor of his having a sense of humanity, that is where the real danger lies. Goldberg relates with some of these other characters owing to his personal childhood trauma, or simply just because of his overly protective instincts, which, although points to his more humane side, renders anyone slightly off that spectrum at a big risk of being his target. Unless he is able to relate with someone or develop a genuinely sympathetic bond with them, Goldberg generally views the world with eyes of suspicion and only puts himself and his safety first. So, yes, we can establish that psychopaths are not entirely devoid of emotions, but those emotions are only felt in relation to very specific individuals owing to selfish factors which draw the psychopath towards them. All others, whether a real danger or not, are seen as threats to be eliminated, often with no accompanying anxiety. Hence, the inability to experience optimum amounts of anxiety can seriously interfere with the treatment process which relies, more than anything else, on the emotional understanding between a therapist and patient (Meloy 6). If the therapist is instead seen as a threat, then that puts them in danger of becoming one of the victims of their patient, just like Dr. Nikki who was stabbed and then framed by Goldberg for Beck’s murder. However, the biggest danger lies in treating an individual who feigns emotions in order to deceive their therapist, thereby projecting the impression of recovery (Meloy 8). Goldberg specifically attends funerals of his own victims and feigns sorrow, without any hesitation. Secondly, certain levels of anxiety are necessary to boost the recovery process in terms of the inspiration it provides one to change (Meloy 6). Thus, with their inability to feel basic emotions, those with ASPD are extremely difficult to treat.

One of the primary defense mechanisms used by psychopaths is projective identification (Meloy 7), which allows them to identify aspects of themselves in the therapist, hence giving them a clear cut motive to harm the therapist. At the end of Season 2, for example, Goldberg attempts to murder Love, his girlfriend, when he realizes she is exactly like him: she had also committed several atrocities out of a need to ‘protect’ herself and her loved ones. At that moment, she mirrors Goldberg’s self, and when he identifies the worst parts of himself in her, he is ready to kill her until she reveals that she is pregnant with his child.

So far, this paper has laid out all the obstacles present within the psychopathic patient that can hinder effective therapy. But, this is not all. The challenges faced by therapists in treating patients of this caliber, and their consequent reactions, are also extremely crucial to the treatment process. The following are some of the reactions patients may provoke in their therapists (which could hinder the treatment process): “therapeutic nihilism” is an attitude of pure contempt or condemnation (a belief that the patient will never recover) by the therapist, brought on by the exasperation of trying to treat a psychopathic patient (Meloy 10). This can result in a feeling of pure hatred towards the patient, which is dangerous territory to tread for a therapist, especially with their commitment to professionalism. Contrary to this, some therapists may feel guilty or powerless, especially when the patient is not getting better despite their best efforts. This can thus lead to a loss of confidence in their own professional abilities (Meloy 11), while serving as the perfect foundation upon which the manipulative psychopathic patient can devalue and mock the doctor. Finally, some doctors may also end up becoming sexually attracted to the charm and dark aura of such individuals (Meloy 12), which can completely threaten professional boundaries, as well as put the therapist’s life in extreme peril (especially in the case of a male psychopath and a female doctor). If there is one thing that “YOU” makes perfectly clear, that is just how convincing Goldberg’s charming persona is: it draws unsuspecting women to him, which almost always ends badly for them.

In conclusion, it is evident that the effective diagnosis and treatment of individuals with ASPD on a psychopathic level is virtually impossible, unless they are willing to change, which, with most individuals, is not the case. However, stepping away from the generic outlook on psychopathic patients, I feel that someone like Joe Goldberg does have hope of recovering. For the purposes of this paper, I solely detailed his diagnosis of Antisocial Personality Disorder, but that is not what the entirety of his complex personality can be limited to. His excessive insecurity, love addiction, and abandonment issues all link way back to his unstable childhood and need for love. We do glimpse the occasional bouts of humanity in him, which make him a viable candidate for treatment. The real problem in Goldberg’s case then, in my opinion, is not the treatment but rather the diagnosis. He is as normal seeming like the next person you might encounter on the street, he is charismatic and friendly, works the humble job of a bookstore manager, and loves to read. He is the last person one would suspect to have committed close to ten murders (both seasons combined), tortured people in a glass cage, stalked women and to have stolen their intimate possessions without their knowledge. The real danger, then, lies in not knowing how many Joe Goldbergs surround you in your everyday life, undetected and undiscovered. And that, to me, is more unsettling than I can articulate in words.

# Works Cited

“YOU.” Netflix, Warner Horizon Television, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/search?q=you>.

Meloy, J. Reid. “Antisocial Personality Disorder.” Gabbard's Treatment of Psychiatric Disorders, 2014, http://drreidmeloy.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/2007\_AntisocialPerso.pdf