



When Crime Fiction Meets Criminology: Routine Activities Theory Analysis of Identity Theft in Mary Higgins Clark's *I'll Walk Alone*

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ABSTRACT

Mary Higgins Clark's *I'll Walk Alone* (2011), which is her thirtieth novel, presents identity theft crime as one of the most dangerous problems of the contemporary digital age. She, through the novel, shows how people can be easy prey to identity thieves and how technological improvements help those thieves and make their actions unbelievable and hard to discover. With the appearance of computers and the internet and the fast development of telecommunication technologies, stealing other people's personal information becomes easy. Clark also concentrates on the harmful consequences of such crime and demonstrates what the victims really need to overcome it. This study analyses Clark's *I'll Walk Alone* through the lens of routine activities theory, demonstrating how crime fiction can be used to clarify criminological issues. The analysis illustrates that Clark's representation of identity theft exemplifies Cohen and Felson's (1979) three essential components of crime: motivated offenders, appropriate targets and the lack of guardianship.

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Keywords: crime fiction, criminology, identity theft, impersonating, Routine Activities Theory and victimology

عندما يلتقي أدب الجريمة بعلم الإجرام: تحليل نظرية الأنشطة الروتينية لسرقة الهوية في رواية "سامشي وحيداً" للكاتبة ماري هيغينز كلارك

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المُستخلص

رواية ماري هاغنس كلارك "سامشي وحيداً" (2011)، والتي هي روايتها الثلاثون ، تقدم جريمة سرقة الهوية باعتبارها واحدة من أخطر مشاكل العصر الرقمي المعاصر. فمن خلال الرواية، توضح الكاتبة كيف يمكن للناس أن يكونوا فريسة سهلة للصوص الهوية وكيف يمكن للتطورات التكنولوجية أن تساعد هؤلاء اللصوص وتجعل أفعالهم غير قابلة للتصديق و صعبة الاكتشاف. فمع تطور تكنولوجيا وسائل الاتصال وظهور الانترنت والحاسوب سرقة معلومات الناس الشخصية لغرض انتحال الشخصية اصبح عملاً سهلاً. كما تركز كلارك على العواقب الضارة لمثل هذه الجريمة و توضح ما يحتاجه الضحايا للتغلب على مشكلتهم. تُحلل هذه الدراسة رواية "سامشي وحيداً" لكلارك باستخدام نظرية الأنشطة الروتينية، موضحةً كيف يُمكن لأدب الجريمة أن يُسلط الضوء على موضوعات علم الإجرام. ويُظهر التحليل أن تصوير كلارك لسرقة الهوية يُجسد الجوانب الأساسية الثلاثة للجريمة التي حددها كوهين وفيلسون (1979): المجرمون ذوو الدوافع، الأهداف المناسبة، وغياب الوصاية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أدب الجريمة، وعلم الإجرام، ونظرية الأنشطة الروتينية، وسرقة الهوية، وانتحال الشخصية، وعلم الضحايا.

1. Introduction

With the beginning of the new digital lifestyle that depends completely on the internet and other technologies, identity thieves start to develop new methods to commit their crimes. As a result, the need to protect one's identity and personal data becomes more important than ever. Mary Higgins Clark's *I'll Walk Alone* is a thriller novel about identity theft, which is one of the most dangerous crimes in the contemporary age. Its depiction of victimisation, fraud, and deception offers a literary framework for examining criminological theories. The following questions are explored in this study using the Routine Activities theory (RAT):

1. How does the antagonist in *I'll Walk Alone* exemplify the routine activities theory concept of a motivated offender?
2. In what ways does the protagonist represent a suitable target according to the routine activities theory principle?
3. How do the habits and vulnerabilities of the main character in *I'll Walk Alone* lead to her becoming a victim of identity theft?
4. How does the application of Routine Activities Theory improve the novel's role in portraying identity theft crime as a public concern?

This paper explains how crime fiction may be used to replicate real-world criminal patterns and how it can be a beneficial multidisciplinary tool for understanding the dynamics of society and the vulnerabilities that exist within it.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Crime Fiction and Criminology:

Before explaining the relation between crime fiction and criminology, it is important to shed light on these two terms and their development. Crime fiction is a literary genre in which the commission and detection of a crime, along with its motives, actions, indictment, judgement, and punishment, are considered one of the main narrative models. Crimes like textualised murder, rape, theft, and assault date back to the first epics and are prevalent in classical and many later tragedies. Ancient tragedies and Elizabethan drama mix justice with guilt, as demonstrated by the characters of Oedipus and Hamlet, who both began as truth-seekers but ended up as criminals. Violent acts like murder and assault are central to these stories, revealing the moral ambiguity of those who pursue truth. Crime fiction flourished with detective narrative, which is characterised by the investigator's adoption as the protagonist, like Poe's Dupin and Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. The first Golden Age of Detection, which focused on short stories, came to an end in 1914. The second Golden Age, which started from the late 1920s to 1939, was characterised by a focus on novels, the emergence of women in crime writing, and the rapid growth of detective fiction in other nations, particularly in America. The American "hard-boiled" novels of Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, and Dashiell Hammett represented a dramatic break from the Golden Age detective fiction tradition. In response, the hard-boiled school blurred the moral lines between law enforcement and criminals by telling graphic, violent stories in urban settings. Since 1945, crime fiction has flourished globally with themes like forensics, sexuality, corruption, and historical intrigue, driven by its strong ties to media and popular culture (Cuddon, 2012).

Criminology, according to Robert Longley (2024), is "the study of crime and criminals, including the causes, prevention, correction, and impact of crime on society" (p.1). The field of criminology emerged in the late 18th century in response to humanitarian movements that criticised the criminal justice and prison systems for their perceived inefficiency, arbitrariness, and brutality (Bernard and Mannheim, 2025). In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Cesare Lombroso, the founder of modern criminology, used scientific methods to study criminal tendencies and showed that crime was inherited. Lombroso's research attempted to understand crime's causes, which is currently the aim of contemporary criminology. Modern criminology studies crime causes, criminal laws, and law enforcement. It uses natural and social sciences to distinguish between pure and practical research, as well as between statistical and intuitive problem-solving. Nowadays, criminologists employ science and technology to examine crime, establish policies, and create community-oriented and predictive policing. They work in government, private research, academia, and law enforcement. Criminological theories investigate illegal activity and the causes of increasing crime rates. Biological theories suggest human characteristics. Classical theories emphasise fair punishment. Positivist and general theories reject classical theories, while sociological theories suggest individuals respond to social pressures and circumstances. Theories like cultural transmission, strain, social disorganisation, labelling, routine activities, and broken windows contribute to understanding the causes and factors of crime (Longley, 2024).

Criminology and crime fiction exhibit several similarities, both apparent and subtle. Both examine crime's definition, causes, and prevention by institutional, individual, or other means. They also study whether a crime is produced by groups, individuals, laws, or psychological elements and how to examine the intricacies of criminal behavior to understand all aspects of specific actions and their legal and social bases. The two fields also study criminal causes, deeds, the crime's legal and social origins. Crime fiction and criminology disclose important social perceptions of crime due to their complexity. Criminology examines and deters crime. This genre attracts criminal writers. Crime fiction often reflects criminology, with characters representing both classic and developing crime views. Crime fiction examines how social and personal factors affect criminal behavior through characters like doctors, psychologists, and criminals. These examples show how the genre analyses criminality from different social and historical perspectives. Crime fiction interacts with historical and

modern criminology, either explicitly or implicitly, reflecting a wider interest in police procedures, detection sciences, and various models of criminality, including biological, sociological, and psychological perspectives, as well as changing public and academic views on crime as a legal concept (Levay, 2020).

2.2 Identity Theft Crime

Identity theft has existed for a long time. In the past, it was committed by murdering a victim and impersonating him. In the 20th century, with the technological advances and the growing number of individuals in urban areas, it became a less bloody crime and a more common and widespread one (Whiting, 2013). As a term, the earliest known use of the noun “identity theft” was in 1964 (“Oxford English Dictionary”, 2025); however, it was not considered a federal offense until 1998 (Hoffman and McGinley, 2010). Its targets are both individuals and business. The most notable change in the history of identity theft began with the technological developments of the 1990s (Whiting, 2013). Impersonation (the old form of identity theft) became less successful over time as new forms of personal-identifying information appeared. Modern technology has revolutionised the collection, usage, and storage of personally identifiable information. As a result, the techniques employed to perpetrate identity theft have progressed from basic impersonation to a more tech-driven form of the crime (Hoffman and McGinley, 2010). In other words, the digital era has significantly increased the risk of exposing one’s private data and identity. The extensive utilisation of computer databases and the Internet for information storage and transmission has facilitated the act of identity theft. Identity criminals either access computer databases that contain personally identifiable information or duplicate or modify fingerprints that have been recorded or transmitted electronically. Empirical studies demonstrate a consistent rise in identity theft offences, resulting in significant financial burdens for victims (Saunders and Zucker, 1999).

Before examining the definition, mechanisms, and implications of identity theft, it is important to know what identity is. Identity distinguishes a being or individual from others. It refers to socially meaningful and fixed traits that make individuals proud having them. These traits shape the individuals as groups, such as being men or women, and influence how members of other groups communicate and interact with them (Al-Dirawi, 2025). According to Scott F. Kiesling (2013), “identity is how individuals define, create, or think of themselves in terms of their relationships with other individuals and groups, whether these others are real or imagined” (p. 450). He also adds that identity is a condition or a process of one’s relationship with others. John Sileo (2010), who concentrates on digital identity, indicates that identity “is made up of any name, number, or attribute that provides information on us or allows access into further personal data about us” (p. 16). Through his work, he exhibits the challenges that individuals and organizations may face in managing identity in a world dominated by digital data. Silo emphasizes that identity is tied to personal data that is found on line and when this data is stolen or exploited identity theft occurs. He also adds that there are different sources of identity and it is important for everyone to know these sources in order to protect himself from identity theft. They include sources that can be found in person’s own person, in his home, on his computer, online, in his car, at work, in business...etc. He also sheds light on the different ways through which identity theft can be committed, like using technology, through direct physical contact, through institutions that “mishandles a victims data”, and finally through friends and family members. Criminals can exploit weak passwords, phishing scams and data breaches to steal identities.

According to (“Merriam-Webster dictionary”, 2025) identity theft is “the illegal use of someone else’s personal information (such as a Social Security number) especially in order to obtain money or credits.” Michael J. Arata Jr. in his book *Identity Theft for Dummies* (2010) defines identity theft as “use[ing] another person’s personal information (such as name, Social Security Number, and date of

birth) to fraudulently obtain credit cards or loans, open a checking account, or otherwise gain access to money or goods in the other person's name" (p.9). Based on the above definitions, it becomes clear that everyone is in danger of being a victim of identity thieves regardless of his/her age or gender. Even children can be a potential target.

Many studies have found that identity theft is a compound crime. In their "Identity Theft Literature Review", Graeme R. Newman and Megan M. McNally (2005) clarify that identity theft cannot be considered as a crime by itself. Still, it is a combination of many other crimes like, check and card fraud, financial crimes, internet scams and many other crimes. They assert that identity theft consists of not just various crimes but also of "many different situations and event sequences. [So, in order to understand it], [t]here is a pressing need [...] to break down the crime "identity theft" into smaller, specific components" (p.3). According to them, identity theft is a "dual crime" because there are two victims; "the individual whose identity was stolen and the business whose service was stolen" (p.21).

The ways and the methods through which identity thieves commit their crimes take many forms. Maedeh Mosharraf and Fatemeh H. Haghightkhan (2023) in their article "Exploring Identity Theft: Motives, Techniques, and Consequents on Different Age Groups" explain that several factors, including the motive behind the act and the victim's carelessness, determine these ways. The methods used to steal information can include the following: social engineering (spamming and all types of phishing), exploiting weaknesses in computer software or information systems, malware (utilizing secure applications for harmful purposes), eavesdropping (spying) and data and information collecting. They also add that:

Many of these methods can be utilized for the purpose of stealing information across various scenarios. However, certain strategies are designed with specific objectives in mind. For instance, whaling attacks are meticulously planned to achieve genuine financial or commercial goals and are seldom employed in other situations. Additionally, Wi-Fi phishing primarily targets IoT devices. While thieves employ a range of techniques, some thefts occur due to consumers' employment of weak passwords. Using a password that is easily guessed or reusing the same password for multiple accounts increases the risk of data breaches. Data theft can also result from poor password practices, such as writing passwords on paper or sharing them with others. (p.69)

Identity theft can take many different forms, each with its own set of risks and obstacles. Understanding these types can help in reducing the risk of becoming a victim of such a dangerous crime. The most common forms are criminal, medical and financial thefts:

Financial identity theft includes activities like credit card fraud, tax and mail fraud, passing bad checks, and so on. Of course, the identity thief's objective is to not pay back any of the borrowed money but, instead, to enjoy spending it. Criminal identity theft is used to commit crimes in another person's name and to finance criminal activities with the use of credit cards in someone else's name, selling people's identities, and even terrorism. Medical identity theft is when someone assumes your identity for medical reasons and/or for someone else to foot the bill. (Arata Jr, 2010, p.10)

In most cases identity theft crime is hard to detect and prevent. Most victims are unaware of the crime until it has a detrimental effect on their lives. Many victims learn about the theft after getting a call from their credit card company's fraud department, and some learn about it when they see charges on their credit card accounts that they did not approve. Others learn after finding unapproved activities on their phone or cell bills. The victim may be forced to pay for bills they did not assume or receive

credit cards that they did not apply for or overdue bills that do not belong to them. The victim may also be arrested for a crime that they did not commit (Hoffman and McGinley, 2010). Furthermore, there are no witnesses to offer helpful information because the actual crime scene is a computer. The time and effort required to investigate identity theft is another complicated aspect: "In an era where law enforcement budgets are being slashed, police departments give priority to violent crimes. Often little or no money is left over for less serious felonies" (Whiting, 2013, p.27). Finally, identity theft is a harmful crime that requires increased awareness, improved safeguards, and adequate resources to protect individuals in an increasingly digital society.

2.2.1 Identity Theft Effects:

Identity theft, as any other crime, directly affects the victim's life. Committing a crime using the victim's identity has catastrophic results. These results, in their depth and size of damage, depend on the type of identity theft that the victim experiences. The harm is not only financial, but it affects the victim's whole life. According to Michael Aaron Dennis (2025), identity theft is not an ordinary crime, but it is a cybercrime that has a strong effect on the victim's psychological and physical life. He takes the United States as an example. There, the people have a Social Security number that serves as an identification number. Access to this number helps the thieves to get the victims' documents. Monika Nowikowska (2023), in her "Identity Theft. Protection of Personal Data in Cyberspace" indicates that identity theft can destroy the victim financially, physically, emotionally and socially. Financially, identity theft might result in financial difficulties that continue for months or even years. Thieves can use stolen accounts to access investment and other financial accounts, which could have an impact on mortgage or retirement. The emotional (psychological) damage that might follow identity theft is the next consequence. Identity theft is frequently an unidentified crime that can evoke a wide range of emotional responses. Anger is the initial emotion that victims may feel. However, additional challenging and persistent emotions may arise after the initial shock. Stress, anxiety and suicidal feelings are among many emotions that the victims may suffer from. Nowikowska adds that physical symptoms could potentially be a sign of identity theft. They include inability to focus, body pain, sweating, heart and stomach issues and sleep issues.

Socially, impersonation and identity theft can seriously damage a victim's reputation and value, and they often require a lot of difficult work to fix. Victims may thus struggle to prove their innocence and experience social rejection. Furthermore, as cases of theft and impersonation increase, societal trust diminishes, causing extensive social consequences (Mosharraf and Haghghatkhah, 2023).

2.3 Routine Activities Theory:

Routine Activities Theory is a criminological theory developed by the sociologists and criminologists Marcus Felson and Lawrence E. Cohen in 1979. They took inspiration from Amos Hawley's (1950) theory of human ecology, which focuses on the ideas of sustenance and co-dependency (Madero-Hernandez and Fisher, 2012). Nicholas Branick (2015) in his "Routine Activities Theory" states that Hawley, in his theory, examines the time dimensions of human action within communal settings. Branick notes that Hawley identified three essential elements of collective human activities: "rhythm (the normal recurrence of events), tempo (the number of events in a certain period of time), and timing (the coordination and intersection of behaviors in the environment)" (p.1). Cohen and Felson modify these three elements to articulate the routine activities theory as an ecological framework for understanding criminal behavior.

Routine Activities Theory concentrates on the study of crime as an event, with an emphasis on its relationship to place and time, its ecological aspect and the consequences of it (Miró-Llinares,

2014). By focusing on the environmental context rather than the criminal's past, this method highlights the importance of situational elements in preventing crime (Jennings, 2015). This theory explains why crime happens in certain situations rather than interpreting criminal attributes such as temporal displacement, offender characteristics, and so on. In the past, it was conceptualised to direct-contact predatory and property offenses; however, its applicability has since expanded to analyse a broader range of improper behaviours (Argun and Dağlar, 2016).

Routine Activities Theory suggests that for a crime to take place, three essential conditions are required in both space and time: a motivated offender with the intent to commit the crime, a suitable target for the offender, and the absence of qualified guardians who could potentially prevent the crime from occurring (Branic, 2015).

2.3.1 Motivated Offender:

The term "motivated offenders" refers to those "individuals and groups who have both the inclination and ability to commit crime for various reasons" (Bossler and Holt, 2009). Certain theories emphasize the significance of the social environment surrounding offenders, suggesting that their decisions are derived from a reasonable evaluation of the target's accessibility. Some other theories investigate the environment in which the offenders live. This hypothesis asserts that the crime rate is primarily influenced by the number of motivated offenders in the community, which includes the unemployed, drugs addicts, alcoholics, and youths. Others believe that daily activities are shaped by socialization and the moral standards established for individuals. Social connections and control significantly prevent individuals from engaging in illegal activities, serving as a barrier that separates and discourages criminal activity (Maloku et al., 2024).

2.3.2 Suitable Target:

A motivated offender must find a suitable target in order to commit his/ her crime. The suitable targets, which can take many different forms, are determined by the type of the crime and the situational context. Examples of suitable targets could include a house to break into or a valuable item to steal. Alternatively, an individual could be an attractive target, like a thief who notices someone wearing an expensive jewelry (Jennings, 2015). In other words, any person, thing or location that might be appealing and profitable for thieves can be a suitable target. Simply an appropriate target is something visible, has a high value, can be reached easily and gives criminals immediate profit (Argun and Dağlar, 2016).

2.3.3 Absence of Capable Guardians:

Guardianship denotes the ability of individuals or objects to effectively deter criminal activity. This factor is considered protective, whereas other aspects of criminal opportunity are regarded as risk factors. It is expected that individuals with lower levels of guardianship are more susceptible to victimization (Madero-Hernandez and Fisher, 2012). Researchers examine the concept of capable guardianship through various methodologies. Formal guardianship, exemplified by police officers, is regarded as a method of crime prevention. It may also include individuals, such as neighbors, who provide protection against potential criminal activity. Tangible objects or environmental features, including security cameras, signs, and fences, can also function as guardians. Effective planning and neighborhood design can enhance local guardianship by reducing opportunities for crime and limiting potential offender engagement (Jennings, 2015).

2.4 Routine Activities Theory and Cybercrimes:

Cybercrime, which appears as a consequence of the ongoing advancements in information and communication technology, is defined as “any criminal activity which takes place on or over the medium of computers or internet or other technology recognized by the Information Technology Act” (Goni, 2022, p.9-10).

Routine Activities Theory, as mentioned before, concentrates on criminals who interact with their targets directly and in specific locations. But what about crimes that do not require any direct contact or certain places, like online crimes (cybercrimes)? Many researchers tried to study and apply the routine activities theory on cybercrimes. Among them are John E. Eck and Ronald V. Clarke (2003), who in their "Classifying Common Police Problems: A Routine Activity Approach", refer to the possibility of using the routine activities theory in studying and analysing cybercrimes. They state that “[r]outine activity theory can be expanded to accommodate action at a distance by making one modification. If the target and the offender are part of the same geographically dispersed network, then the offender may be able to reach the target through the network” (p.34).

The components of this theory can be used to analyze both traditional crimes and cybercrimes. When all three components are present, a cybercrime may occur similarly to a regular crime. An offender selects an appropriate victim based on accessibility. However, in the context of the internet, proximity is defined differently. It is not necessary for the victim and the offender to be present when a crime is committed online. Everyone may be reached online with only a click. Cyberspace is a kind of circle or point where motivated criminals and victims share a connection (Hasan, 2022). In this type of crimes, the target visibility and accessibility is shifted from physical world to the internet. Due to the increased accessibility and exposure of targets, cyberspace gives potential criminals additional and better opportunities. There are no physical or geographic restrictions on reaching any location on the internet. Potential criminals can take advantage of new possibilities and tools made available by the internet to either commit crimes or enable them to do so (Nahar and Emran, 2021).

On the internet, avoiding motivated thieves is challenging; it resembles living in the same neighborhood. In actual life criminals are in search of a physical location to assault a victim; however, the internet is an excellent alternative. The victim can be attacked remotely by a criminal. Attackers use cyberspace tools to identify their targets. Cybercrime typically targets information that is intangible and stored digitally. In other words, hackers target digitally stored content, especially intellectual property such as trade secrets, software, audio files, movies, and private financial information. Since digitally processed material is regarded as “weightless,” the target is more susceptible to deletion. Additionally, information in cyberspace is more appealing because it costs nothing to reproduce, modify, or remove. Intellectual property can be stolen for nothing, and multiple people can own the same digital item. They select victims based on their online activity (Hasan, 2022). In other words, the likelihood of becoming a victim of cybercrime is higher for those who participate in activities that reveal financial or personal information. Therefore, people’s online lives, or how long and how often they use the Internet, can be used as a measure of their online lifestyle and be used to determine how vulnerable they are to cybercrime (Nahar and Emran, 2021).

In cyberspace, a firewall, anti-virus, anti-spyware software, and a strong password serve as technological guardians. This software must be updated by users. Otherwise, its capacity to detect all forms of threats will be undermined. These technological protectors are occasionally susceptible to new viruses, though. For this reason, developers must frequently enter data on identifying and eliminating new viruses. Thus, for a technological guardian to safeguard cyberspace, appropriate upkeep is required (Hasan, 2022).

3. Methodology:

This study applies routine activities theory to examine aspects like the chosen targets, the motivations and actions of the offenders, target's vulnerability to victimization, the role of guardianship, and the breakdown of both institutional and personal protective measures. By using textual analysis, the study pinpoints the crucial scenes in *I'll Walk Alone* where identity theft occurs.

4. Mary Higgins Clark's Life, Works, Themes and Heroines:

Before analyzing the novel according to the routine activities theory, it is necessary to shed light on Mary Higgins Clark's life, work, and themes and present a short summary about the novel.

The American novelist Mary Higgins Clark (1927-2020) is a best-selling author of suspense and mystery novels. She was raised in a low-income household and held a variety of jobs before attending New York University to study creative writing. Her first thriller, *Where Are the Children?* (1975) was a multimillion-dollar success. Clark was a Dame of the Order of Saint Gregory the Great and received 17 honorary doctorates (De Roche, 2003).

Clark has authored two children's books, a historical novel, a biography, four collections of short stories, and thirty-eight suspense novels. She co-authored five suspense novels with her daughter, Carol Higgins Clark, and collaborated on the *Under Suspicion* series with another best-selling author, Alafair Burke. Her works are in print in the United States alone, with over 100 million copies. Her novels have sold out all over the world (Trojan, 2020).

Authors such as Mary Roberts Rinehart, Charlotte Armstrong, Agatha Christie, and Josephine Tey served as inspiration for Mary Higgins Clark, a master of mysterious and thrilling tales that highlighted the courage and cunning of common people. Clark's female characters are intelligent, independent, fearless and often single young women in their early thirties. Despite their personal suffering, they are open to love and encounter men who can improve their lives. They, in spite of their challenges, represent moral principles and appropriate behavior. Clark's criminals, on the other hand, symbolize wickedness and moral decay, driven by wealth, power, and status, and psychological suffering. At the end of her story, offenders are punished, restoring order, as suspense novels traditionally support law and order, implying that even primitive human instincts can be subdued (De Roche, 2003).

Clark transformed fear into cunning satisfaction. Her writing is clean—no sex or bad language—her heroines are charming, and her resolutions are delicate, with just the right amount of surprise. Her writings embody the essence of an aunt who loves tabloids and is always ready to speak to you about incredible danger that is waiting to find you (Weinman, 2020).

By placing her stories in midtown Manhattan, retirement communities, or cruise ships, Clark employs time and place to heighten the suspense in her works. She makes the "What if" ideas relevant and believable by using normalcy. Drawing on their unease by analyzing their effects on everyone, Clark recognizes the loneliness and disappointment brought on by societal problems including robberies, kidnappings, and murders. She, a young widow, examines the feelings of grief, anger, guilt, and depression that one might experience after losing a loved one. Especially in *Before I Say Good-Bye* (2000), her writing goes beyond the bounds of genre fiction. Clark's suspenseful books seek to establish order in a chaotic world where evil affects people's daily lives. She believes in ethics and the strength of regular women, who fight evil with honesty, integrity, compassion, and bravery. In her book, the restoration of order is often complex; however, when achieved, it serves as a powerful and reassuring affirmation of humanity (De Roche, 2003).

The story of *I'll Walk Alone* is about a young lonely woman (Zan). She had her own business as a successful interior designer (Moreland Interiors, on East Fifty-eighth Street). She started her work after her separation from her ex-husband Ted (Edward Carpenter). Before that, "she had been the chief assistant to the famed designer Bartley Longe. Even then she'd been recognized as one of the bright new stars in the field" (Clark, 2011, p.9). She saw Longe as her enemy because "it was incomprehensible to her that [he], who had so valued her while she was his assistant, had so utterly turned on her" (Clark, 2011, p. 25). She worked with him for nine years. He was a difficult man with an unstable temper and a demanding schedule, but she was so patient because she "knew that she was learning a lot from him" (Clark, 2011, p. 26).

Zan's son, Matthew, was kidnapped from his stroller in the middle of the Central Park. On that day Zan was meeting a client (Nina Aldrich) who gave a vague alibi to the detectives. His babysitter (Tiffany) was asleep, and when she woke up, the baby was not in his stroller. This accident happened two years ago when Matthew was three years old. From that ominous day Zan did not have a good day. She cannot forget her son and the only place that sometimes helped her to retreat from the pain of losing him was working in her office. She spent most of her money on private investigators and psychic quacks. Zan accused no one but Longe. She saw him as her enemy who wanted to destroy her life.

Zan and Ted used to meet on Matthew's birthday even after his disappearance. They met at a restaurant called the Four Seasons Restaurant. While they were speaking, Zan's assistant came into the restaurant saying that reporters with cameras from *Tell All Weekly* came to her office looking for her. They said that they had photos that showed Zan as the kidnapper of Matthew. These photos were taken by a guy from England who was at the park the day Matthew disappeared. Hearing this, Ted became angry and grabbed Zan by the shoulders, shouting and cursing: "Damn you! Damn you, you self-pitying lunatic, [...] Where is my son? What did you *do* to him?" (Clark, 2011, p. 48). This event is followed by many events that showed that somebody has stolen Zan's identity.

Suddenly after being a victim for two years, Zan became a criminal who is not only accused of kidnapping her son but also of killing. Alongside this accusation, Zan discovered that someone was using her credit cards and charging clothes and an airline ticket to her name. In other words, someone had stolen her identity and impersonated her. All this put her in an embarrassing situation. She does not have anything or anyone to help her. Zan "found herself pushing back against the almost physical feeling of being caught in a riptide, of a fierce current dragging her underwater. She gasped for air, as the sense of not being able to breathe overwhelmed her" (Clark, 2011, p. 80). After these dreadful events, Zan was put into jail, but with the help of her friends Willy Meehan and Alvirah, she was able to be free.

At the end of the novel, Zan, with the help of Kevin Wilson, the Meehan family, Penny and many others, was able to discover the criminals who stole her son, impersonated her and tried to destroy her completely.

5. Analysis: Routine Activities theory in *I'll Walk Alone*

5.1 Motivated Offender:

Routine activities theory "presumes that some members of society will be motivated toward criminal behavior and will seek to act on these motivations when opportunities arise" (Branic, 2015, p. 1). In Mary Higgins Clark's *I'll Walk Alone*, Ted Carpenter (Zan's ex-husband) is a compelling example of a motivated offender and identity thief. He is driven by a toxic combination of personal animosity and ruthless opportunism. Obsession, retaliation, and a desire to destroy Zan Moreland's life piece by piece are the driving forces behind his actions. He is an extremely crafty and psychologically motivated

criminal. Ted accomplished a long-term plan that involved identity theft, financial destruction, and the horrifying kidnapping of Zan's son, Matthew. Ted's aim as a motivated offender and an identity thief was to destroy Zan professionally, socially and financially.

Following the breakdown of their marriage, Ted initiated his long-term plan. Zan married him in a period of deep sorrow following the death of her parents in a car accident. Later, she lamented the decision, realising it had been made during a period of emotional vulnerability. Believing that she had unjustly imposed her sorrow on Ted, she decided to leave him. Feeling deceived, Ted formulated a complex plan for revenge. He started it by secretly setting up cameras to keep an eye on Zan's movements and steal her identity. Aware of the strong emotional connection Zan shared with their child, Matthew, he aimed to end it.

Ted had two different plans for victimising and stealing Zan's identity. The first one is impersonating Zan by another woman and the second one is stealing her digital identity. Ted manipulated two individuals to carry out his plans. They became his tools to commit his dirty crimes. The first was Larry Post, who was his handyman, cook, and driver. Ted gave Larry the task of managing the technological installations at Zan's home and workplace, which included configuring the TVs, lighting, and computer network. Larry's real job, which Zan was unaware of, was to place a covert camera in her bedroom so Ted could surreptitiously watch and record her private information. The second person Ted manipulated was Glory (Margaret Grissom), whom her roommate Angela Anton once praised as "a fabulous makeup artist [who] could change the way someone looked in a heartbeat" (Clark, 2011, p.347). Ted enticed Glory with money and convinced her to play the role of Zan. With her impressive wig collection and remarkable makeup skills, Glory was able to mimic Zan's appearance so convincingly that she was mistaken for her, even while abducting Matthew from his stroller. Ted provided Glory with detailed information about Zan including her outfits, which made the impersonation believable. By orchestrating this deception, Ted essentially steal Zan's identity in an attempt to destroy her reputation.

Ted's second plan involved assuming Zan's identity online to ruin her professional image. He accessed her accounts and performed transactions that she had neither authorised nor even contemplated. Ted made purchases using her credit card, buying clothes, furniture, and additional items. He also purchased a one-way first-class ticket to South America in her name, ordered supplies for a contract she did not possess, and drained her bank account. In Chapter forty-one, Detective Charley Shore asked Josh, Zan's assistant, when they noticed someone was using Zan's account. Josh responded that it all started with the unexpected ticket purchase; followed by expensive clothes bills and unexpected messages from sellers regarding unrequested carpets, fabrics, and decor items. Zan was bidding to decorate three model apartments in Kevin Wilson's building. Kevin admired Zan's thoughts and personality and preferred her over her rival (Longe), so he decided to choose her. However, as false allegations portrayed Zan as a kidnapper, Kevin began to reevaluate, but he ultimately stuck to his original decision. In chapter twenty-five, Clark sheds light on the problem of employment that victims of identity theft may face:

"Ms. Moreland," Kirk began, hesitantly. "There really isn't any point in your waiting to see Kevin — I mean Mr. Wilson. Earlier this morning, he asked me to pack your proposal and return it to you. In fact, it's right there if you want to take it now, or else I'll have it delivered to you, of course" (Clark, 2011, p. 116).

Throughout the novel, Clark explores the impact of reputational damage on employment prospects. The secretary, Louise Kirk, saw Zan as "a lying kidnapper" and a "mentally ill" woman. Kirk's

dialogue reflects her own skepticism. She couldn't fathom why Kevin valued her and warned him that Zan posed a risk both professionally and personally.

Later in the novel Clark clarifies how a motivated offender improves his plans in alignment with his individual interests. Ted's plans shifted from impersonating and psychological torture to actual physical harm. As the narrative progresses, it demonstrates Ted's readiness to kill anyone who challenges his plans. He tried to kill Zan, Glory and Father Aiden, as shown in chapter 27:

He had put the plan in motion. Step by step he was now bringing it to a head. He knew it was time. Gloria was getting too restless. Also, he had made a terrible mistake when he told her that it would be necessary to kill Zan and make it look like a suicide. Gloria had only gotten into it for the money he promised her. She didn't understand that it would not be enough simply to make Alexandra Moreland dangle in the wind to public ridicule. He would not be happy until Zan was dead (Clark, 2011, p.123).

And when Glory asked him about the reason behind Zan's killing he assured her that he did not intend to do so and what he told her before was out of anger. But his inner monologue reveals a darker determination (killing Glory and Zan):

Not for the same reason I'm going to kill you, he thought. You know too much. I'd never be sure that so-called conscience of yours wouldn't start bubbling to the surface. As for Zan, I won't be happy until they are planning her funeral (Clark, 2011, p. 163)

When Ted feels that he could not control everything and that the plan begun to take another direction, he intends to kill his son, Matthew. He confesses all this to Father Aiden when he went to church to kill the father:

"I'm not sure you'll want to forgive me, Father, because the crimes I am going to commit are quite a bit more serious than the crimes I have been committing. You see, I am going to kill two women and a child. You know one of them, Zan Moreland. And beyond that I can't take a chance on *you*, Father. I don't know what you have heard, or what you suspect." (Clark, 2011, pp. 326-327)

Ted's activities exemplify Routine Activities Theory, as his crimes arise from a combination of personal motivation, vulnerable targets, and insufficient protection. His transition from emotional manipulation to intentional violence illustrates how opportunity and the lack of oversight facilitate his more aggressive behavior.

5.2 Suitable Target:

In *I'll Walk Alone*, Zan embodies the characteristics of a suitable target for victimisation, especially when viewed through the framework of Routine Activity Theory. Alexandra's emotional openness, visibility to the public, and absence of protective support leave her particularly susceptible to manipulation and deceit. Zan's loneliness and her small social circle made her susceptible to Ted's plans that targeted her emotional, financial, social, and physical well-being. Their previous life together as husband and wife makes Ted's job easier. According to Nahar and Emran (2021), "interactions between people who shared common lifestyles and interests could expose people to a higher risk of victimisation" (p. 76).

Zan suffered from severe psychological distress as a result of her son's terrible disappearance. Her sadness, uncertainty, and desperation influence her ability to judge and limit her ability to defend herself from exploitation. Zan started to doubt her ability as a mother. In chapter fourteen, she

wondered about Ted's accusations: "Is Ted right? Do I wallow in self-pity and want other people to pity me? Does he mean that I'm one of those crazy mothers who harm their children because they need to be pitied and comforted?" (Clark, 2011, p. 65). In chapter seventeen, Clark intensifies the idea of hopelessness and uncertainty from which Zan suffer: "Am I going crazy? Did I kidnap my own son? And if I took him, what did I do with him? If I can forget what happened less than forty-eight hours ago, what else have I blacked out? She asked herself in despair" (Clark, 2011, p.83). Her ex-husband Ted takes advantage of her emotional vulnerability to further isolate and destabilise her. Zan described her feeling saying: "I feel as if I am living in a nightmare and cannot find my way out of it" (Clark, 2011, p.58).

The other aspect that makes Zan the suitable target is her lifestyle which was vulnerable. As a reputable interior designer in New York City, Zan leads a distinguished lifestyle that enhances her visibility and accessibility. Her public appearances and professional engagement make it easier for the offender to impersonate her and steal her identity, accusing her of crimes she did not commit. Ted, for example, made use of her digital vulnerability to isolate her and damage her reputation. He tried to trap her by using identity theft and forged evidence. He used her credit cards and purchased clothes and a plane ticket in her name. The greater visibility and accessibility of the victims is what facilitates cybercrime, according to Nahar and Emran (2021): "Crime exposure in cyberspace is close to crime exposure in the physical world. However, in cyberspace, target visibility and accessibility are more widespread, providing potential criminals with more and better opportunities" (P.76).

The lack of capable guardianship also makes Zan the suitable target. Zan had friends and coworkers, but she did not have constant and helpful support. Her friends, such Alvirah, Willy, and Father Aiden, did not believe she was innocent at first, which makes her feel alone. Without faith and protection, the offender could change her situation without facing instant resistance. Alvirah speculated that Zan may suffer from a split personality. Willy, on the other hand, suggested, "I honestly think she's mentally ill. I just hope that when she was irrational, she didn't do anything to that little kid" (Clark, 2011, p. 240). Father Aiden also wondered about her personality: "Does that young woman indeed have a split mind—or what is the new term for it, a dissociative identity disorder?" (Clark, 2011, p. 175). Charley Shore, her lawyer, questioned her credibility. Josh her assistant, expressed his concern for her safety, and stated, "You need to be protected from yourself" (Clark, 2011, p. 129). In chapter fifty-seven, Clark portrays the feeling of loneliness and hopelessness that overwhelmed Zan. She could not prove her innocence, and what hurt her more was the treatment of her friends. Zan expressed her feelings of being doubted by her nearest companions:

Because you don't believe that I didn't order any of it, or have any part in those transactions, do you? I know that. And I know Alvirah and Willy and Charley Shore all believe that I'm mentally ill, and that's putting it kindly (Clark, 2011, P. 296).

Zan made desperate efforts to convince her friends, the police and the society that she was not guilty. She also tried to express that what she truly needed from them was empathy rather than pity. Her heartfelt appeal to Alvirah emphasized this:

"Alvirah, on Matthew's life, I swear before God, I am innocent. You're a good detective. I've read your book. You've solved some pretty important crimes. Now I am going to ask you to rethink this awful mess. Say to yourself, 'Zan is innocent. Everything she has told me is true. How do I go about proving her innocence instead of just pitying her?' Is that possible?" (Clark, 2011, pp. 330-331)

In summary, Zan's psychiatric condition, lifestyle, and restricted support system made her an appropriate target. Her circumstances allowed the offender to dominate her life with minimal opposition and the greatest impact. Her narrative exemplifies the intersection of emotional trauma and social exposure, which might create settings suitable for victimisation.

5.3 Absent Guardianship

In *I'll Walk Alone*, the offender's complicated plan is largely facilitated by the idea of absent guardianship. Zan, the heroine, finds herself vulnerable due to the absence of protective oversight in her personal and professional life, compounded by the emotional trauma stemming from her son's abduction. The absence of guardianship is depicted in the novel in a number of ways, including social alienation, absence of security protocols, and shortcomings in law enforcement.

Zan is an easy target for manipulation due to her status as a single mother who has faced emotional and practical loneliness. Inadequate digital defences allowed the attacker to impersonate her and plan her end. Law enforcement, on the other hand, distrusted her rather than helped her. Zan's digital identity was readily stolen, suggesting that institutional policies failed to safeguard her financial and personal information.

Through Zan's journey, Clark discusses the shortcomings of contemporary support systems and the severe consequences of their absence during times of crisis. Zan also suffered from social alienation because of identity theft. She lost the social support from her friends and co-workers who may have protected her from manipulation. Even Father Aiden O'Brien and the ex-cop Neil Hunt, who suspected something was wrong, did nothing. Neil Hunt had seen Zan while he was walking to his apartment on Eighth Avenue Monday at the same time she was in the church but with different clothes, which indicates that someone was impersonating her, but he did nothing to stop the impostor. They all stayed silent and sceptical until the end, when the truth became clear and they decided to stand beside Zan.

Even the law enforcement started to question her and dismissed her claims. The detectives who were responsible for Matthew's case were Detective Billy Collins and his partner, Jennifer Dean. They investigated the circumstances of the kidnapping, gathering evidence and interviewing witnesses. Throughout the novel, the detectives questioned several suspects, including Zan herself, to determine their role in the kidnapping. Detective Dean accused Zan of intentionally visiting Nina Aldrich's (a client who presented a vague alibi to the detectives) townhouse, snatching Matthew and hiding him in the cellar. Zan objected and pointed out that she owned the key and had been going there regularly for weeks because she was responsible for "decorat[ing] the entire house from top to bottom" (Clark, 2011, p. 232). Zan cried and requested them to find out who altered the photographs to show her carrying Matthew from the stroller instead of implying that she had taken her own child. Dean assured her that their tech staff had gone over the photos, and it appeared that they were not decorated. Zan accused Longe of impersonating her. Detective Dean attempted to convince Zan that her work was more important than Matthew, but Zan refused and asked them to examine her calendar of appointments from the moment of his birth until his disappearance. Then she shouted, "Why are you torturing me? Why aren't you searching for my little boy? Why won't you believe me that those photos are not of me? You think I'm crazy. You're the ones who are blind and stupid" (Clark, 2011, p. 238).

The novel transforms absent guardianship from a mere plot device into a cautionary lens to examine vulnerabilities in the actual world. This suggests that in the absence of guardianship, individuals—particularly women—must improve their own resilience, regain their identities, and face the social systems that failed to protect them.

6. Conclusion

Mary Higgins Clark's portrayal of identity theft in *I'll Walk Alone* is in line with the Routine Activities Theory, which indicates that crime is the outcome of three factors: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and a lack of qualified guardians. In this paper, the analysis of these factors demonstrates how criminal fiction has the potential to both reflect and transform perceptions of cybercrime. By exploring technology and human behaviour, the story encourages readers to stay alert. It serves as a reminder that whereas advancements can enhance our lives, they simultaneously generate new vulnerabilities. The main problem in the novel occurs when Zan, the protagonist and a successful interior designer, becomes vulnerable and falls victim to crime due to her trust in others and adherence to her routines. Ted (the criminal) takes advantage of the weaknesses and gaps in digital security and institutional authority to start his plan to hurt others. The book explains how everyday activities can cause crime in ways we don't predict. *I'll Walk Alone* shows how everyday actions can be dangerous in a world that is becoming more and more computerised. Therefore, the routine activities theory is a beneficial way to look at weaknesses in both real life and fiction.

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