

An Assassin on the Couch

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LOS ANGELES — Like the bizarre configurations of a psychedelic light-show, one man's devils and dreams, thoughts and musings permeate the hot, stuffy haze of an eighth-floor courtroom here. In the austere gray Hall of Justice, Sirhan Bishara Sirhan's private and unconscious self has been laid bare by the tools of psychiatry.

Last week four psychologists and two psychiatrists, all defense witnesses, drew pictures and showed slides, talked about ink blots and apperception tests, Rorschach and Wexler. Test after test was meticulously explained, and little by little their picture of Sirhan came into clear view.

Heart of Plea

He has a seemingly normal exterior, the doctors told the jurors, and they used these many tools to pry it off. Underneath, they contended, was a schizophrenic, paranoid, often psychotic young man.

This testimony is the heart of the case. The defense has pleaded Sirhan innocent, although it admits daily he killed Senator Robert F. Kennedy last June. Using the accepted California defense of "diminished capacity," it is offering an unusually large amount of psychological testimony to support its contention that he did not have the capacity to plan and carry out, maturely and rationally, a first-degree murder.

Defense Strategy

The law of "diminished capacity" which the California Supreme Court has upheld on appeal for almost 20 years, has enabled defense attorneys to use psychological evidence, where appropriate, to show that their client was mentally ill and therefore unable to form the necessary motive for his crime. Con-

sequently psychiatrists and psychologists are being called upon more and more to testify in capital cases.

The Sirhan case with seven doctors is the most dramatic and certainly the most publicized use of this law to date. "Sirhan is a perfect example of diminished capacity," defense counsel Grant B. Cooper explained. "Our whole case depends upon convincing the jury he's sick. The problem is how to show them that a man who looks normal, is schizophrenic, paranoid and nuts."

Weird Insights

All last week, as the psychiatric testimony unfolded, bizarre, often weird insights into the young defendant filled the courtroom. There were his Rorschach visions of crushed frogs and ballet dancers, fried legs and "a profile exploding." One by one the Rorschach ink blots flashed on the screen on top of the attorneys' table. Everyone searched to find the images Sirhan had seen during examinations in his cell. Where was the werewolf? Where was the bird he found soaring downward to plunge his talons into the raw, red meat?

Normal or Diseased?

The doctors, pointing out de-capitated, castrated and deformed things he had imagined, spoke of his suicidal and homicidal tendencies, his repressed hostilities, "gross mental fragmentation."

The prosecution, however, spoke normality. And consequently two conflicting pictures of Sirhan confronted the courtroom. Did he kill the man he once thought was a saint because he was diseased or determined?

—According to the prosecution, Sirhan is only as abnormal as all murderers and was certainly

rational enough to premeditate the assassination. Consequently, the prosecutor tried to discredit the doctors' analysis of Sirhan and to invalidate psychological findings and tests in general.

"The art of psychiatry is not sufficiently advanced or perfected yet to operate in a court of law," Chief Deputy District Attorney Lynn D. Compton, a former football star, told reporters. "I think legally a man's acts speak for themselves. Psychiatrists only distort the actual facts."

Psychiatric Picture

As day after day psychologists and psychiatrists painted a picture of severe mental illness and personality decay, Sirhan, hearing the diagnosis for the first time, changed continually. Sometimes he seemed to drift away, calm, oblivious of everything. At other times, sad and morose, he watched and listened, as spellbound as the jurors and the spectators.

"It doesn't seem like they're talking about me," he whispered once during cross-examination to Michael A. McCowan, the 35-year-old defense investigator. "I don't feel like I'm here."

—LACEY FOSBURGH