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# Narratives of Violence: The Last Messages of Mass Murderers

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## At a Glance

Before committing acts of mass murder, some perpetrators leave behind writings, videos, or manifestos—what researchers call *legacy tokens*. These final messages serve as an attempt to justify their violence, explain their motivations, or ensure that their story is remembered.[1] This article explores how legacy tokens function as performances of identity, and how offenders use storytelling to explain their violence, seek recognition, and give meaning to their actions.

*Keywords: Mass murder, Legacy tokens, Manifestos, Terrorism, Narrative identity, Performance theory, Dramaturgy*

## Introduction: Why Study Final Messages?

What do mass murderers want us to remember? Some try to shape how the world will see them through the legacy tokens they leave behind. These messages take different forms. Some, like the lengthy ideological manifesto of Brenton Tarrant, lay out extremist worldviews in detail. Others, like Elliot Rodger's autobiography, are deeply personal, steeped in rejection and resentment. In cases of *familicide*—where someone kills their spouse and children, often followed by suicide—legacy tokens are often brief notes giving explanations or practical instructions.[2]

What unites these messages is their purpose: they are not just explanations, but *performances*—crafted narratives meant to shape how the offender is remembered. Performance theory, a framework from sociology and theatre studies, helps explain this impulse. By viewing human behaviour as a series of roles performed for others, performance theory highlights how legacy tokens function as final acts of self-presentation, crafted to script meaning and shape identity.

This article explores what these final messages reveal about mass murderers, how they differ across offender types, and what they can (and cannot) tell us about the emotional logic of vio-

lence. Readers will gain insight into how storytelling and self-presentation intertwine in these acts, and why understanding these texts is vital for both prevention and public comprehension of mass violence.

## Patterns in Legacy Tokens

Across cases, certain emotional and psychological themes consistently appear. Anger, resentment, rejection, paranoia, envy, and narcissism dominate many legacy tokens, shaping narratives of grievance and self-justification.[2] These emotions often interact, reinforcing violent thinking. For instance, narcissism often blends with envy: offenders who feel undervalued may direct their rage toward those who seem to possess the status or relationships they desire.[2]

Legacy tokens are not incoherent rants. Instead, they often display surprising levels of organisation, narrative control, and rhetorical awareness.[3] Some mass murderers write with dark irony or flair, crafting texts designed to be read, shared, and remembered. Brenton Tarrant structured his manifesto like a political polemic, even including questions he expected the media to ask after his attacks. This deliberate engagement with future audiences underscores the performative nature of legacy tokens.

In short, legacy tokens are not impulsive outbursts but calculated narratives that merge personal grievance with ideological or symbolic goals in an effort to justify violence. This strategy is especially pronounced among lone-actor terrorists.

## In-Group vs. Out-Group: The Justification for Violence

A common narrative technique in the manifestos of lone-actor terrorists is self-mythologising — portraying themselves as heroic defenders of an "in-group" against an "out-group". The in-group is the community to which the offender claims allegiance, and is depicted as pure, righteous, or victimised. The out-group is anyone seen as a threat. This simple divide, us-versus-them, provides a moral framework for violence. Dehumanising language reinforces the division, reducing the out-group to symbols of decay or danger. Recurring themes of survival, purity, and revenge further strengthen the belief that their violent actions are not only justified but necessary.[3]

For these extremists, defending the in-group becomes indistinguishable from self-preservation. They often tie their personal identity, and even their death, to the imagined survival of the group. Their sense of self becomes *fused* with the collective, blurring the boundary between individual and group action.[3] For example, Brenton Tarrant described himself as an "ethno soldier" protecting the white race from invasion, framing mass murder as defence of his in-group rather than senseless aggression.

This logic is not exclusive to terrorists. Pseudocommandos (mass murderers obsessed with weapons, power, and revenge) also display a kind of in-group loyalty, but in a narrower, more personal way. Rather than rallying around political or racial causes, they identify with other social outcasts.[4] Likewise, many school shooters often frame their peers as status-driven elites,

positioning themselves as the righteous avenger of the marginalised. In these cases, narcissism, envy, and in-group identification fuse into a dangerous sense of entitlement to revenge.

## Age, Fame, and Legacy Construction

A striking generational divide exists in legacy token construction. Younger offenders pursue status, recognition, and symbolic immortality, while older offenders respond to status loss, financial failure, or social decline by seeking a final sense of control. The difference reveals not only contrasting motives but distinct forms of storytelling. The following section explores how age and life stage shape these divergent narratives.

### *Younger Mass Murderers: Violence as a Status Performance*

Younger perpetrators, especially school shooters and ideologically motivated attackers, often portray their violence as a transformative act, a way to rewrite their social identity. They want to be remembered, quoted, or feared. They craft their messages for maximum visibility and frame their acts as part of a continuing story. Fame-seeking mass murderers tend to be younger and choose public spaces to ensure an audience.[5]

Envy plays a central role. As Minihane et al. note, extreme envy can fuel a desire to destroy what one cannot attain.[2] School shooters, for instance, frequently attack the institutions where they felt excluded, rejected, or mocked, turning sites of humiliation into stages of vengeance.[5]

Performance is key. These offenders treat violence as a spectacle: a stage for recognition. Their manifestos, videos, and social-media posts are rehearsed acts of self-presentation, borrowing imagery and phrases from past killers in a macabre cycle of imitation and competition. Elliot Rodger's YouTube videos, and Tarrant's live-stream and manifesto, reveal a deliberate effort to control how their story would be seen, shared, and remembered. Legacy tokens, videos, weapons, and even music become props in their final performance—one designed to go viral.

### *Older Mass Murderers: Control, Loss, and Resignation*

Older mass murderers, particularly those targeting family members or workplaces, tell a different story. Their writings are shorter, more pragmatic, and devoid of theatrical self-mythologising or comparison to previous killers. These offenders do not seek fame; instead, they frame their acts as the only remaining way to regain autonomy in their lives.

Many see themselves as losing control over their lives, whether due to financial instability, family breakdown, or declining social status.[5] Their legacy tokens focus on personal grievances, resentment toward specific people or institutions, and a sense of final agency. Their narratives are often fatalistic, and sometimes apologetic. In cases of familicide, commonly carried out by males,[5] the act may also be a final, patriarchal performance, a display that the offender still controls his family—even as he destroys it. Violence here is not about recognition: it is about resignation.

An evolutionary lens helps explain this divide. Younger males are typically more prone

to risk-taking and status competition, especially when they perceive themselves as having a lowly social rank. Older males, facing decline or social isolation, may use violence as a last assertion of autonomy over a life spiralling out of control. These biological pressures interact with cultural and psychological factors; no single cause suffices. What matters is how these pressures are narratively expressed, either as quests for glory or as acts of resignation.

Ultimately, these differences remind us that mass murder is not a single phenomenon, but a set of related performances shaped by age, social position, and perceived injustice. Legacy tokens serve as scripts through which offenders seek meaning at the edge of annihilation. One generation performs rage to be seen and immortalised; the other performs control and attempts to excuse the inexcusable.

## Violence as Performance: Staging the Final Act

The act of mass murder is rarely spontaneous.[5] It is planned, rehearsed, and symbolically charged. Drawing on Goffman's model of social performance, which views human behaviour as a series of deliberate roles through which people manage how they are seen by others, this violence can be understood as the culmination of a long backstage process.[6] For Goffman, the backstage is where people prepare the identities or roles they present to the world. For mass murderers, this space is darkly inverted: instead of practising ordinary social roles, they rehearse a violent public identity, crafting legacy tokens that script their final performance. These writings and videos are rehearsals for the performance to come—scripts through which offenders practise how they wish to be seen. As Schechner argues, rehearsal is not separate from performance but part of it—a mode of becoming the role one intends to play.[7]

When the attack begins, the perpetrator steps onto the front stage. Legacy tokens double as both script and stage direction. Offenders cast themselves as soldiers, martyrs, or tragic heroes, drawing on familiar cultural and cinematic tropes. In doing so, they enact what Schechner calls restored behaviour—ritualised gestures and narratives borrowed from predecessors.[7] Mass murderers often reference previous killers, enacting and perpetuating a violent cycle.

Elliot Rodger, for example, meticulously framed his life as a story of injustice and retribution. His retribution video is staged like a villain's monologue, directly addressing the camera as if revealing a master plan. Anders Breivik's manifesto presents himself as a knight in a historical crusade, positioning his actions within a grand ideological epic. Both men use performance to elevate their violence into narrative: they are not just killing but transforming themselves into historical figures.

This notion of transformation echoes Turner's concept of liminality, which refers to a transformative moment or threshold between two states of being.[8] Offenders often treat mass murder as a rite of passage, a crossing from invisibility to infamy, from humiliation to symbolic power. Violence becomes a ritual of rebirth: the failed man re-emerges as a mythic avenger.

Legacy tokens offer a window into this transformation. These texts express narrative identity, the internal story that gives life meaning.[9] While most people seek redemption in their

life stories, many perpetrators construct contamination scripts, in which every good thing is spoiled by betrayal or rejection. For mass murderers, often young men wrestling with isolation and emasculation, violence becomes the only way to rewrite the story, to turn victimhood into power, and insignificance into recognition.

Their goal is not pure destruction; it is symbolic recognition. They want their performance to be seen, interpreted, and remembered. By styling themselves as tragic figures, righteous avengers, or soldiers in a moral war, they turn violence into communication—an assertion that, if they cannot live as someone of value, they will at least die as someone who mattered. This is a vital point which must be acknowledged if we are to make progress in tracking pathways to violence. For some, mass murder is not an explosion of rage but a final, staged attempt at meaning.

## What Can (and Can't) Legacy Tokens Tell Us?

Legacy tokens offer rare insight into the minds of mass murderers, but they are not without limits. Not all mass murderers leave legacy tokens, and those who do may represent a particular kind of killer—one more focused on self-presentation and legacy-building, making it difficult to generalise findings.

Offenders are likely to exaggerate or lie. However, although their stories may not always be truthful, they are always revealing. What matters most is not whether the stories are accurate, but that these stories were seen as worth telling.[10]

These documents remain valuable for researchers, psychologists, and law enforcement. They offer clues into emotional states, warning signs, and patterns of radicalisation—and can also help inform prevention strategies.

## Conclusion: The Importance of Studying Final Messages

Legacy tokens are not afterthoughts. They are central to how many mass murderers understand and justify what they do. These writings are part of a violent performance, an attempt to reshape public narratives, assert power, and ensure the offender's story is remembered.

Studying these texts does not glorify violence; it helps us understand it. By examining how mass murderers frame their final acts, we gain insight into their emotional worlds and the cultural, social, and psychological forces that shape them. Legacy tokens can highlight warning signs, illuminate pathways to violence, and support strategies for prevention, early intervention, and public safety. For psychologists, law enforcement, and policymakers, they remain a crucial—if disturbing—source of knowledge.

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There are no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced this work.

## Author Bio

Keith Minihane is a PhD researcher at University College Cork whose work examines the psychology of mass murder, with a focus on legacy tokens such as manifestos and suicide notes. Drawing on evolutionary theory, performance studies, and qualitative analysis, his research explores how offenders construct meaning, identity, and symbolic intent through acts of mass violence. He has published a systematic review on proximate stressors associated with mass murder, as well as studies on offender motivation and emotional states, including generational differences in legacy token content. His current research employs a pluralistic analytical approach to deepen forensic insight into legacy tokens.

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