

Victorian Culture and Society: Jack the Ripper as Victorian Entertainment

by Jamie Kinsler

Throughout the fall of 1888 Jack the Ripper terrorized the East End of London, England. Although the Ripper's crimes were heinous and grotesque, they managed to captivate the entire country, serving as titillating entertainment for the repressed Victorian culture. These crimes, widely reported in the newspapers, provided an outlet for sexual and violent frustrations.

Jack the Ripper began his crime spree on Friday, August 31st. His first victim was 42-year-old Mary Anne Nichols, who like his other victims, was a drunken prostitute. Because she was a prostitute her murder created no sympathy with the "respectable" classes. Instead, the publicized horrific story of her torture and mutilation began a cult of perverse fascination. As the London Times reported, "The public excitement has not abated to any appreciable extent, as was shown by the crowded state of the streets in the neighborhood of Whitechapel yesterday."¹ The Ripper struck again on September 7th. Annie Chapman, another prostitute, was found dead lying in the street.

At first, the murders looked like a quarrel over purchased sex. The victims were common targets for violent behavior, in that they were poor, immoral, and lived in a bad area. However, by the third and fourth murders, which occurred on the evening of September 30th, 1888, the public became aroused with horror. Now the Whitechapel murders were undoubtedly the act of a serial killer. "This morning the whole city was again startled by the news that two more murders had been added to list of mysterious crimes that have recently been committed in Whitechapel."² Attention now became focused on the odd sexual details of the murders.

Most Victorians believed the prostitutes of England were nothing more than wasted souls. "The fully fallen woman, the prostitute, should be treated like the cross between the criminal and the down-and-out which she is: she has just the same claim upon society ... as any other member of the dangerous classes; and ... is as much entitled to charitable succour as any other person engaged in a life immoral, disgusting, and ruinous both to body and soul,"³ Most Victorians felt prostitutes were of a separate class of woman; who corrupted the men and contaminated the Army with their diseased immoral bodies.

Although the murdered women were of a lower class, their mutilation became an issue of distress for most Victorians. "The examination was most minutely made, and lasted upwards of 2 and-a-half hours, after which the mutilated portions were sewn to the body, and therefore the coroner's jury will be spared the unpleasant duty of witnessing to horrible spectacle presented to those who discovered the murder."⁴ Jack the Ripper's mutilating style tended to focus on the abdominal cavity. He often disemboweled and removed his victim's sexual organs. This fact captivated the sexually repressed Victorian society.

Victorians could now fantasize about the unthinkable. "Through fantasy, elite men were able to project their sexual fears and anxieties on to a male killing force, but in the person of the detective hero they quickly invoked a super-rational super ego to hunt down those same desires and to restore order."⁵ Respectable English society justified reading the

sexual and violent descriptions of these crimes, believing they were doing their duty as concerned citizens searching for a killer. The frenzy over Jack only grew. He murdered once again on November 8th, 1888. Once again, the victim was a prostitute, a young, pretty woman, known as Mary Jane Kelly.

“The head had been severed and placed beneath one of the arms, the ears and nose had been cut off, she had been disemboweled and the flesh was torn from her thighs, some of the organs were missing.”⁶ His crimes only seemed to worsen in nature. He was pure evil, and Victorian society loved it. “Retrospectives of the life stories of the victims were juxtaposed to future projections of “more murders to follow,” sensational language of “bloodthirsty monsters” and “friends” in human shape” intensified, as did the reports of copycat activities on the part of men who menaced women.”⁷

The people of England surprisingly realized the correlation between poverty stricken women and crime. The murders allowed for respectable women to participate on a charitable level, while fulfilling their puriant interests as well. Respectable Victorian women now had a new reason to socialize, all in the hopes of stopping a savage murderer through direct social involvement. “Her mangled remains provoked a crisis of conscience over the failure of Christian charity and the social organization to address what Punch labeled the “nemesis” of poverty and social neglect in Whitechapel.”⁸ Now, the values of the common Victorians were reinforced. The murdered women were poor, drunk, and immoral. Victorians felt the horrid crimes of Jack the Ripper were a direct result of these symptoms.

The English society was obsessed with Jack’s crimes. Although most lived in safe neighborhoods, they could not forget the danger lurking across the city. The situation only escalated when Queen Victoria issued a pardon, via the London Times. “Murder-Pardon,-Whereas on November 8 or 9 in Miller-Court, Dorset-Street, Spitalfields, Mary Jane Kelly was murdered by some person or persons unknown: the Secretary of State will advise the grant of Her Majesty’s gracious pardon to accomplice, not being a person who contrived, or actually committed the murder.”⁹ This pardon allowed for any accomplice to come forward without prosecution, as long as they were not the actual murderer. Although no one confessed, the royal attention validated the frenzied emotions of the Victorians.

The murders of Jack the Ripper were now not only socially entertaining, they were now an issue of politics as well. “But a more tangible danger to the Ministry, curiously enough, is to be found in what the civilized world knows now as the Whitechapel murders, if it should happen when Parliament meets that the strange assassin is still undiscovered, or if more horrible crimes be committed, there would be a storm let loose in St. Stephens.”¹⁰ According to the New York Times, the English society identified so strongly with the crimes, that they could have interrupted the meetings of Parliament by protesting an unfit Police force, not capable finding a killer.¹¹

The interest in the murders continued to escalate, as rumors and suspicions circulated throughout London. Some believed the Metropolitan Police Force was involved in a grand cover-up to protect the perpetrator. Others believed the Queen herself was in some

way connected to the crimes. “No one was above suspicion ... Sir Charles Warren, Chief of Metropolitan Police, was to be suspected of his involvement in a “cover up,” and even Queen Victoria’s own grandson Prince Edward, was at one stage considered to be a Ripper Suspect.”¹² Respectable Victorians thought the Queen’s grandson was never questioned in the murders because she protected him from the police with her influence and political power. The speculation continued to grow. Soon papers began reporting about the murders in a more dramatic manner. Jack had been dubbed the “Leather Apron,” due to his meat-butcher technique of murder.

The mystery surrounding Jack’s identity manifested into a common topic. Like an entertaining parlor game, the issue was scandalous and heated. Speculation about Prince Edward’s involvement was probably the most talked about. “According to this scenario, Prince Eddy, a somewhat unconventional member of the royal family, married and had a child by a lower-class shopgirl, in an effort to silence a blackmailer or put an end to scandalous rumors, some person or persons eliminated those who knew about Eddy’s liaison.”¹³ Due to the high profile of the royal suspect, the Victorian society focused its attention on this theory.

While some Victorians felt there was a royal connection, others believed the mystery Jack, although not royal, was an upstanding member of society, perhaps even a doctor. “The British Medical Journal, referring to the Whitechapel murders, says: the coroner’s theory that the assassin’s work was carried out under the impulse of a pseudo-scientific mania has been exploded by the first attempt at serious investigation, it is true that a foreign physician inquired a year ago as to the possibility of securing certain parts of the body for scientific study.”¹⁴ Many people felt that Jack the Ripper was probably a doctor due to his fascination and knowledge of dissection and dismemberment of the human body. The idea that Jack could possibly be a member of the upper class made the tale of his crimes even more fascinating.

English society followed the papers as if they were soap operas. Almost everyday there was new news to be reported about Jack. Soon the Police began to publicize their investigative techniques. “After the discovery of the murder on Friday morning great curiosity was expressed as to whether bloodhounds would be used to endeavor to trace the murderer to his hiding place, but these much-talked-of animals were not forthcoming.”¹⁵ The detective’s actions were scrutinized daily. Their failure to produce a suspect would soon turn into a gossiping issue.

Victorian culture was so consumed with the matter of Jack that people began to commit copycat crimes. “Great excitement was caused shortly before 10’o’clock last night by the arrest of a man with a blackened face who publicly proclaimed himself to be “Jack the Ripper.”¹⁶ The man mentioned above was not the Ripper, and was instead a well-known, 35-year-old doctor. His confession was not warranted; he was dubbed a crazy man and never taken seriously. Even members of upstanding society became overwhelmed with the magnitude of the Ripper’s actions that some Victorians went so far as to pretend to be him. They were probably trying to pursue the thrill of killing without committing murder.

Victorian society felt that immoral actions, like those of the Ripper, were not something one should speak about. Although it was not proper for someone to speak of bloody murder, Victorians could get away with conversation about the Ripper’s latest crime. This was an indirect approach to understand and communicate their feelings about

immoral behavior. Although the upper classes felt they had no part in immoral actions, the impure actions and lifestyles of the working class still intrigued them. "Immorality signified all the practices of working-class life leading to an ungovernable and disruptive behavior: lack of self-reliance, ignorance, criminality, the threat of political sedition and of course sexual impropriety."¹⁷ Although most of England believed the immoral tendencies belonged to the lower classes, they were faced with the possibility that someone of the upper-classes was indulging in the crime of murder.

The mystery surrounding Jack's identity soon turned toward an anti-Semitic attitude. Some Victorians believed the Ripper was a Jew. This allowed respectable Victorians to indulge in anti-Semitism, to express unrespectable feelings. "Leather Apron's candidacy also gained support from the Pall Mall Gazette, which republished a description of "Leather Apron" compiled by a Star reporter after he had made inquiries among a number of "polyandrous" women in the East End: a man of "sinister" expression, with "small" and "glittering" eyes, "repellent grin," his business was "blackmailing women" late at night--his name nobody knows, but all are united in the belief that he is a Jew or of Jewish parentage, his face being of a marked Hebrew type."¹⁸ The idea that Jack was of Hebrew origin gave the Victorians a whole new rumor to circulate, one which encouraged English nationalism and racism.

Victorian women gleefully gossiped about Jack's actions. It was an excuse for these respectable women to talk about sex. They could now feel comfortable speaking about such taboo topics because it would now be in the name of public safety. "Women in Whitechapel were both fascinated and terrified by the murders: like their male counterparts, they bought up the latest editions of the half-penny evening newspaper; they gossiped about the gruesome details of the murders; and they crowded into the waxwork exhibits and peep shows where representations of the murdered victims were on display."¹⁹ Victorian women now could meet and socialize over discussions about the murders. Jack the Ripper's crimes provided an outlet for their repressed immoral thoughts and fantasies. No longer would women dream about such bizarre occurrences, they could indirectly participate through reading graphic depictions of sexual violence.

Victorian women formed an alliance of terrified citizens. They could relate to each other through validation of their fears. The violent crimes of Jack the Ripper allowed for the most reserved and proper women to act somewhat irrationally. "Mary Hughes, a secondary-school teacher who lived in the West End in 1888, recalled how terrified and unbalanced we all were by the murders, he seemed around the corner, although it all happened in the East end, and we were in the West; but even so, I was afraid to go out after dark, if only to post a letter."²⁰ The fear Jack inspired in Victorians was a refreshing emotion. Most Victorian women had probably never felt such excitement.

Jack the Ripper was never apprehended. After 1888, the police believe he either lost his appetite for killing, moved on to another area, or died. "There are an amount of theories published, some scientific, others ingenious, and others stupid; there are plenty of clues also, but they are slight and show no sign of developing the murderer."²¹ Although the police had some clues, they did not have the right ones. They had no good description of the killer, nor did they have a tangible murder weapon. The identity of Jack the Ripper, to this day, remains one of England's greatest mysteries.

The violent crime spree of Jack the Ripper tragically ended several women's lives. Although this is a true misfortune, there are some vague positive effects as well. The

murders helped unite a nation. They induced scarcely visited emotions, while entertaining the Victorians through readership and conversation. Jack's crimes brought attention to much needed social reform in the poorer sections of England, such as the East End. "The killings in a more efficient fashion than any parliamentary bluebook or social commentator's pamphlet, revealed the extent of rot in the East End."²² The horrors of murder and torture overshadowed most class divisions. No Victorian agreed with Jack's actions, but all unconsciously related in some way to the crimes, therefore they were unified as one class.

Jack the Ripper's crimes produced an instant cult of readership and intrigue. Victorians now had a common topic to speculate and gossip in relation to their everyday lives. The topic was grotesque and shocking, normally unspeakable for their generation. Jack's murders successfully served as a proper outlet for subdued thoughts and repressed emotions, through the form of entertainment.

Notes

- 1 The London Times, November 12, 1888, pp. 1-3.
- 2 The New York Times, October 1, 1888, p. 1.3
- 3 Mason, Michael, *The Making of Victorian Sexual Attitudes*. (Oxford University Press: New York, 1994.) p.59.
- 4 The London Times, October 1, 1888, p. 1.
- 5 Walkowitz, Judith, *City of Dreadful Delight*. (University of Chicago Press, 1992.) P. 132.
- 6 The New York Times, November 10, 1888, p. 1.
- 7 Walkowitz, p.204.
- 8 Walkowitz, p.205.
- 9 The London Times, November 12, 1888, pp. 1-3.
- 10 The New York Times October 7, 1888, p. 1. Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Who Was Jack the Ripper. www.accomodata.co.uk/suspects.htm
- 13 Cox, Don Richard, "Jack the Ripper" *Victorian Britain: an Encyclopedia*, (Garland Publishing: New York, 1988.) p. 408.
- 14 The New York Times, October 5, 1888, p. 1.
- 15 The London Times, November 10, 1888, p. 1.
- 16 The London Times, November 12, 1888., p.3.
- 17 Mort, Frank, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England Since 1830*. (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1987.) p. 37
- 18 Walkowitz, p.203
- 19 Ibid p.221
- 20 Walkowitz, p. 224.
- 21 The New York Times, October 2, 1888.
- 22 Haggard, Robert F., *Jack the Ripper As the Threat of Outcast London*. (Cocran Department of History at the University of Virginia: 1993.) Volume 35, p.10. [www://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/EH/EH35/haggardl.html](http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/EH/EH35/haggardl.html)

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