

The Language of Murder: The Use of Language Surrounding the Jack the Ripper Case and its Connection to Victorian Discrimination

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This research project examines the infamous Jack the Ripper case from the Victorian era and its connection to Victorian discrimination. Focusing specifically on the Victorian's ideas surrounding female gender identity and their assumption of female fragility as well as Victorian xenophobia and antisemitism as societal influences, the paper shows how these assumptions may have caused the public to overlook possible suspects due to these assumptions and discriminations being enforced by the theories and stories published in highly sensationalized stories in popular newspapers of the time. Newspaper reports on the case from papers such as *The Times*, *The Star*, and *Reynold's Newspaper* make up the bulk of research material consulted in the paper. Previous research on Jack the Ripper was also consulted to form a base of 'fact' to compare the newspapers' 'fiction' against. Most previous Ripper research focuses on the murderer's identity and the motives behind the murders, but very few have included gender, xenophobia and the role of newspaper sensationalism into their work. This paper makes no claims to the Ripper's identity, but mainly tries to find a reason that, to this day, the infamous serial killer remains shrouded in mystery.

In August of 1888, the small district in England's East End known as Whitechapel was thrown into chaos when the body of Mary Ann Nichols was found dead and ripped apart on Buck's Row.¹ The following police investigation would last for several weeks, involve several more victims, and not turn up a single useful suspect. Nichols was the first of the canonical five victims of the infamous serial killer who would, in time, become known as Jack the Ripper. Over the course of the next several months, four other women would be murdered and by the early days of November, Jack the Ripper's canonical five would be assembled.² In the years that followed, many more names would be added to the list of Ripper victims, further clouding

the already mysterious case. The Whitechapel murders (also known as the Whitechapel Atrocities and the East End Atrocities) captivated as much as it terrified Victorian England and the newspaper industry was quick to grab onto this hot new story. Every paper reported on Jack the Ripper's latest murder, even in places as far away as America. Sometimes the story was slapped on the front page with 'Jack the Ripper' in as large of letters as possible, such as the local Whitechapel paper: the *Pall Mall Gazette*, while others had it on further back pages in a small column, such as London national newspaper: *The Guardian*. No matter where the papers decided to place their story, the sensationalism of crime ran as a constant throughout all the stories. The language journalists used in reporting the Whitechapel murders was meant to thrill and terrify and the so called "facts" sometimes strayed far from the truth, especially when concerning

¹ John McCourt, *Jack the Ripper: Prime Suspect*. Netflix Instant Streaming. Directed by France d Chiera. N.d. 2012.

² John McCourt, *Jack the Ripper*

the actual murderer, whose identity to this day still remains unknown. The suspect list is a problem on its own as it is highly sensationalized and riddled with stereotypes as the journalists attempted to profile the suspects with no real evidence. This misstep in profiling may have caused police detectives at the time to overlook prime suspects and led the public to look to different areas of the population for suspects, allowing the Ripper to keep on ripping. The language surrounding the Whitechapel Murder case is sensationalized and overtop in order to draw in readers, but, by studying the way newspaper and journal writers of the Victorian era wrote about the murders and Jack the Ripper, the Victorians revealed a lot about the way their society worked, such as their fear of 'others' and their view of women.

Newspapers were crucial to Victorian English society. They were "the context within which people lived and worked and thought, and from which they derived their...sense of the outside world."³ This influence strengthened in the Victorian era as Britain's reading population expanded with "the increasingly widespread habit of reading newspaper at all levels of society."⁴ This expansion of the reading population was supported by a boom in newspaper production.⁵ A great number of newspapers

were produced in Great Britain during the Victorian era with "well over 600 titles [...] produced in the London area" alone in the 1800s.⁶ The expansion of the reading population also created a divide between upper class London newspapers such as *The Times* and lower class, local newspapers such as *The Star*. This division was mainly marked by the invention of Victorian New Journalism. Matthew Arnold, famous Victorian poet and criticizer, defined Victorian New Journalism,⁷ as being "able, novel, varied, and sensational, [and] also filled with sympathy and generosity" and known to "[make] assertions based on wishful thinking rather than fact."⁸ This Victorian New Journalism is closest to the tabloid newspapers enjoyed by people today, which may give a sense of how this new form of journalism operated.⁹

Victorian New Journalism was known for being sensational, a word which means "calculated to produce a startling impression."¹⁰ Sensationalism was not new to the English journalistic scene though, with records of sensational crime reporting dating back into the mid-1600s.¹¹ Despite a

³ Lynn Pykett, "Reading the Periodical Press: Text and Context," In *Investigating Victorian Journalism*, 3-18 (Hong Kong: Macmillan Press, 1990) 7

⁴ Judith Rowbatham, Kim Stevenson, and Samantha Pegg. *Crime News in Modern Britain: press reporting and responsibility, 1820-2010*. New York City, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 64.

⁵ Michael Harris, "London's Local Newspapers: Patterns of Change in the Victorian Period," In *Investigating Victorian*

Journalism, 104-19 (Hong Kong: Macmillan Press, 1990) 104

⁶ Michael Harris, "London's Local Newspapers," 104

⁷ Stefano Evangelista. "Matthew Arnold." Oxford Bibliographies. March 02, 2011. Accessed April 29, 2017.

⁸ Perry L Curtis, *Jack the Ripper and the London Press* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 61.

⁹ Michelle Collins, Martin Brunt, and Andrew Cook, *Jack the Ripper: Tabloid Killer*. Amazon Prime Streaming. Directed by Niki Soker. N.d. 2009.

¹⁰ Curtis. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*, 66

¹¹ Curtis. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*, 66-67

long history, sensationalism hit its peak in the Victorian era as newspapers felt they had to compete against the new “penny dreadful” stories for readers.¹² With competition from the penny dreadfuls, “newspaper editors began to assign more space and bigger headlines to any murder”.¹³ Under sensationalism, stories of automobile crashes turned into great calamities and murders became crimes of passion. Newspapers began to read more like novels, especially papers like *the Star* and other New Journalism subscribers which “preferred to summarize the proceedings [of the courtroom]” instead of “printing long transcripts from a trial” such as *the Times* did.¹⁴ The idea of sensationalizing crimes and tragedies like this was to “move the reader to consume the whole story and then buy the next day’s edition in the hope of learning more”¹⁵ and to, simply, up paper sales. This was done through captivating headlines¹⁶, fantastical language, and gory details that would, today, probably shock many readers. Sensationalism was a tool used by all, not just the Victorian New Journalists, to draw readers in and up sales, and the Whitechapel Murders were perfect fodder for such a treatment.

Newspapers around the world grabbed onto the story of Jack the Ripper. The Whitechapel murders left the borders of their small neighborhood and sailed as far as

America and New Zealand.¹⁷ This case was not the first murder to be popular in the news, though. “Murder news [was] like a form of ‘popular entertainment, a spectator sport’” in the Victorian era.¹⁸ Journalists reported murder in a way that “reflected the prevailing aesthetic standards governing crime fiction” of the time, as seen in the penny dreadfuls they were striving to compete with.¹⁹ Not all newspapers were so quick on picking up the story, though. Papers such as *The Star* picked up on the murders long before London newspapers even took interest; Whitechapel was as a “location [...] already notorious” for various crimes, including murder, so another murder in Whitechapel did not first attract national papers’ attentions.²⁰ As soon as victims became linked, the national papers picked up on the story, reporting that “another murder of the foulest kind has been committed in [...] Whitechapel”.²¹ As the case, grew, though, more and more sensationalism was applied and the line between fact and fiction blurred more than it had already begun to. To understand where reality gets distorted, though, one must understand a few facts about the Whitechapel Murders before one can see just how sensationalized it became. Not much is known for certain due to police procedurals at the time and the sensationalized news reports, but what is accepted by Ripperologists to be true is that Jack the Ripper murdered five women,

¹² Curtis. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*, 68

¹³ Curtis. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*, 68

¹⁴ Curtis. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*, 62

¹⁵ Curtis. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*, 69

¹⁶ Curtis. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*, 69

¹⁷ "Press Reports." Casebook. Accessed April 29, 2017.

¹⁸ Curtis. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*, 83

¹⁹ Curtis. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*, 87

²⁰ Rowbatham, Stevenson, Pegg. *Crime News in Modern Britain*, 63

²¹ "Another Murder in Whitechapel." *The Times* (London), September 1, 1888.

known as the canonical five, by the names of Mary Ann Nichols, Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Catherine Eddows, and Mary Jane Kelley.²² Several other victims have been added to the list such as Annie Millwood, who was attacked several months before any of the canonical five, and Martha Tabram, who falls closer in time to the canonical five murders and is more in the style of the Ripper killings.²³ Some victims on the extended victims list are not even real, such as Fairy Fay.²⁴ The addition of fictional victims is one example of sensationalism, as “the more victims there were, the more sensational the case”.²⁵ Most of the victims were ripped apart in some fashion, some with viscera, such as intestine, removed and some with viscera missing entirely.²⁶ The final victim, Mary Jane Kelley, had practically been flayed and dismembered, certainly the most brutal of the Ripper killings.²⁷ From this style of killing, newspapers employed their next tool of sensationalism: making assumptions as to what kind of person the murderer must be; creating human stories for the victims and the killer sensationalized the case as human stories gave journalists more material with which to report.²⁸ Many theorized that the Ripper was a doctor given the surgical nature with which the incisions were made.²⁹ Others suggested he might be a

butcher.³⁰ These facts about the Whitechapel murders get distorted through the sensationalized newspaper reports, leaving readers today to sort through fact and fiction to find the morsels of truth.

Though there are many ways to sensationalize a case, the language of the newspaper reports on the Ripper is a prime and relatively easy example to spot. The first time this sensational language can be spotted in the papers is in their titles. *The Star* and the *Pall Mall Gazette* were by far the most sensationalized of the newspapers that reported on the Whitechapel murders, their reports reading more like fictions than fact-informing articles. Their titles were eye catching, containing words like “horror”,³¹ “tragedy”,³² and “shocking”³³ on multiple occasions. The *Pall Mall Gazette* even had a title that read “Another Murder-and more to follow?”, drawing readers in with the hopes of more murders.³⁴ This was all strictly juxtaposed with *The Times*, whose titles were dry and to the point, stating: “Another Murder in Whitechapel”³⁵ or “The Whitechapel Murders”³⁶. *Reynold’s Newspaper* bridged the gap between the

²² John Eddleston. *Jack the Ripper: Encyclopedia*. London: Metro, 2010.

²³ Eddleston. *Jack the Ripper*

²⁴ Eddleston. *Jack the Ripper*, 1

²⁵ Eddleston. *Jack the Ripper*, 1

²⁶ “The Victims of Jack the Ripper.”

Casebook. 1996. Accessed March 16, 2017

²⁷ Eddleston. *Jack the Ripper*, 67-71

²⁸ Rowbathan, Stevenson, Pegg. *Crime New in Modern Britain*, 72

²⁹ Collins, Brunt, Cook. *Jack the Ripper: Tabloid Killer*.

³⁰ “Whitechapel. Piser Released in the Absence of All Evidence Against him.” *Casebook*. Accessed March 16, 2017.

³¹ “A Whitechapel Horror.” *The Star* (Whitechapel), August 7, 1888.

³² “The Whitechapel Tragedy, Verdict of the Coroner’s Jury on Revolting Murder.” *The Star* (Whitechapel), August 24, 1888.

³³ “The Shocking Murder in the East End.” *Pall Mall Gazette* (London), August 24, 1888.

³⁴ “Another Murder-and more to follow?” *Pall Mall Gazette* (London), September 8, 1888.

³⁵ “Another Murder in Whitechapel.” *The Times* (London), September 1, 1888.

³⁶ “The Whitechapel Murders.” *The Times* (London), December 7, 1888.

two, sometimes having sensational titles like *Pall Mall Gazette* and *The Star* with words like “mystery”³⁷ and “tragedies”³⁸ and other times having simple titles like *The Times* such as “The East End Murders.”³⁹

The second time this sensational language is spotted is within the newspaper reports themselves, especially in describing the Ripper, which harkens back to the aforementioned technique of creating a human story to heighten the interest in the case.⁴⁰ Some of *The Star*’s tamer descriptions of the murderer described him as a “fiendish assailant”⁴¹ and a “mysterious murderer,”⁴² while the more sensational descriptions called the Ripper a “cool, cunning man with a mania for blood”⁴³ and “a noiseless midnight terror.”⁴⁴ As the case went on, the Ripper took on a more monstrous description in the papers, with journalists describing him as “the ghoulish creature,”⁴⁵ a “beast,”⁴⁶ and “half-man, half-

beast,”⁴⁷ taking the human assailant and turning him into a “more ghoulish and devilish brute than can be found in all the pages of shocking fiction”.⁴⁸ The journalists make the Ripper into the penny dreadful villain Mr. Hyde.⁴⁹ *The Times*, drawing away from their straight forward and plain titles, used the word “villain”⁵⁰ to describe the Ripper and describes the case in its entirety as “a complete mystery”⁵¹.

The third place sensational language is noted is in the papers’ descriptions of the victims and their wounds. *The Star* in its tamer states describes the women as “horribly murdered”⁵² and their wounds as “frightful”.⁵³ At other times, the descriptions of the fatal wounds are more in depth, describing how one woman’s “head [was] nearly gashed from [her] body”.⁵⁴ These descriptions of the women and their wounds last pages, giving exact details on the types and colors of clothing they were wearing and the way the incisions were made. *The Pall Mall Gazette* strays away from the gory details, just barely slipping in that the victims were a “ghastly sight”⁵⁵ before attempting to garner sympathy for the

³⁷ “The Whitechapel Mystery.” *Reynold's Newspaper* (London), October 07, 1888. World Cat.

³⁸ “The East End Murders-Latest.” *Reynold's Newspaper* (London), October 14, 1888. World Cat.

³⁹ “The Whitechapel Mystery.”

⁴⁰ Rowbatham, Stevenson, and Pegg. *Crime news in modern Britain*, 72

⁴¹ “The Whitechapel Horror: The Third Crime of a Man who Must be a Maniac.” *The Star* (Whitechapel), September 1, 1888.

⁴² “The Whitechapel Crime: The Inquest on the Woman Nicholas Resumed Today.” *The Star* (Whitechapel), September 3, 1888.

⁴³ “The Whitechapel Horror”

⁴⁴ ““Leather Apron”: The Only Name Linked with the Whitechapel Murders.” *The Star* (Whitechapel), September 5, 1888.

⁴⁵ “Horror Upon Horror: Whitechapel is Panic-Stricken at another Fiendish

Crime.” *The Star* (Whitechapel), September 08, 1888.

⁴⁶ “Horror Upon Horror”

⁴⁷ “Horror Upon Horror”

⁴⁸ ““Leather Apron”

⁴⁹ “Whitechapel: Piser Identified this Morning at Leman Street.” *The Star* (Whitechapel), September 11, 1888.

⁵⁰ “The Whitechapel Murder.” *The Times* (London), September 3, 1888.

⁵¹ “The Whitechapel Horror”

⁵² “The Whitechapel Crime”

⁵³ “The Whitechapel Horror.” *The Star* (Whitechapel), August 8, 1888.

⁵⁴ “The Whitechapel Horror”

⁵⁵ “Horrible Murder in East London: Another Whitechapel Mystery.” *Pall Mall Gazette* (London), August 31, 1888.

victims, describing them as “poor women, miserable, and wretched”.⁵⁶ This was another point that upper class London national papers like *The Times* tended to leave un-sensationalized. They reported the barest facts, mentioning that the victim’s “throat was cut almost from ear to ear” but nothing else about her wounds.⁵⁷ In this case, the sensationalism tends to stay with the lower class, half-penny and penny presses.

This language does not just point to how sensationalized the case became, though. It also reveals important ideas about Victorian society at the time and their views of certain people. The newspapers, usually the lower class ones such as *The Star* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*, when making assumptions to the murderer’s identity, hardly ever identified him as English. Some of the most favored classifications claimed the Ripper was Jewish,⁵⁸ typically of German⁵⁹ or Polish⁶⁰ descent. *The Illustrated Police News* raised the question as to the Ripper’s race, postulating that the murderer may be a “a negro”.⁶¹ These classifications of the murderer being someone other than an Englishman revealed the English Victorian fear of others. Though police considered the fact that the Ripper may very well have been an Englishman, even at one point considering the Prince of Wales himself a suspect,⁶² newspapers speculated and made

up their own ideas, following the Victorian New Journalism definition of throwing out assertions and revealed the Victorian’s fear of others.

What the papers never quite considered, though, was the fact that the Ripper may have, in fact, been a woman. Through the papers, the murderer is often referred to using male pronouns. Almost from the start of the case, when there is very little evidence on who the killer may be, the papers used male pronouns to describe this “hellish fiend”.⁶³ Although it is true that “there are far less female serial murderers than there are males”,⁶⁴ the fact that newspapers and even the police left out the idea that a woman could have committed these murders reveals a lot about the way they think. Even after finding possible evidence (a second woman’s hat under the skirts of the latest victim) of a woman being the murderer, police, as revealed through the mouths of the journalists, are reported thinking that the “crimes were the work of a man in female attire” before considering it may be a woman.⁶⁵ By leaving the idea of a female perpetrator out of their suspect lists, the Victorian journalists revealed their opinions and ideas on women. They reveal how weak they think women are by not even considering them capable of murder and

⁵⁶ “Another Murder-and more to follow?” *Pall Mall Gazette* (London), September 8, 1888.

⁵⁷ “The Whitechapel Horror”

⁵⁸ “Leather Apron”

⁵⁹ “Whitechapel”

⁶⁰ “The Whitechapel Murders.” *The Times* (London), December 7, 1888.

⁶¹ “A Negro Jack the Ripper.” *Illustrated Police News* (London), October 11, 1890. World Cat.

⁶² Eddleston. *Jack the Ripper*, 195

⁶³ “WHITECHAPEL. THE MURDER MANIC SACRIFICES MORE WOMEN TO HIS THIRST FOR BLOOD. TWO VICTIMS THIS TIME. BOTH WOMEN SWIFTLY AND SILENTLY BUTCHERED IN LESS THAN AN HOUR.” *The Star* (Whitechapel), October 1, 1888.

⁶⁴ “Female Serial Killers.” *Psychology Today*. Accessed April 28, 1888.

⁶⁵ “Another Murder in Whitechapel: Supposed ‘Jack the Ripper’ Crime”. *The Manchester Guardian*, February 14, 1891. Accessed March 23, 2017.

reveal how little they think of women by considering everyone else but them as suspects. This Victorian idea of docile and weak women may have led police, journalists, and the public to look in the wrong direction for the murderer, letting the murderer go free.

The Whitechapel murders have long since haunted England and the world. The unsolved, brutal murders of five, or even more, women, captivated the public's imaginations as newspapers picked up police reports and spun them into sensationalized tales of intrigue, gore, and speculation. The newspapers' tendency to use sensationalism, though, when it came to labelling suspects, made many major mistakes. By assuming the murderer was everyone but an Englishman, the newspapers might have accidentally drawn the public away from the murderer who was stalking their streets. The newspapers' habit of sensational writing also revealed the Victorian's ingrained gender ideas and xenophobia, which may have even drawn them away from the possibility that "the terror of Whitechapel" might have been a woman.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ "WHITECHAPEL."

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