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Jack the Ripper: British Gender, Class, and Crime in 1888

By Cameron Arnold

At 3:40 AM on August 31, 1888, a woman was found murdered and left on the street in Whitechapel, London. Her throat was slashed, and she was stabbed multiple times in the abdomen. Her body was mutilated and disfigured. Following her death, another four women were found under similar circumstances. Due to the vicious manner of these women's deaths, the police confirmed that they were all done by the same killer. History dubbed him Jack the Ripper.

The true identity of Jack the Ripper was never discovered. Examining London society in 1888 through the lens of the Jack the Ripper case will reveal how class, gender, investigative methods, and press all contributed to the vulnerability of the women targeted by the killer. The victims were all lower-class women. The lack of forensics rendered the police ineffective and the fetishism of the crimes from the press confused the investigation. These women had little to no protection from the hardships of the East End and there was little the police could do to help.

Relevant British History

In order to understand these murders, it is important to know what was happening in British history at this time. The Victorian era is marked by the paradigm shift from an agricultural to manufacturing way of life, largely owed to the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution prompted a change in economics in Victorian England. Though the steam engine was invented over a hundred years before, it only became common in factories during the mid-1800s. This allowed for new jobs and major urban growth, London being no exception. Despite its already large population, people from all over England came to live in London for job opportunities in factories, the docks, and other trades. These jobs, however, did not always present new economic prosperity for the individual workers, and conditions in "sweated"

industries were very bad. Workers did demand change. For example, in June of 1888, Annie Besant organized the London matchgirls strike to fight back against the terrible conditions presented in the match making factory.¹ London, however, was not like all other industrial cities. London had a rich history and was filled with many different walks of life, ranging from rich nobles to poor street rats. London was a special hub for politics and commerce as well as industry. London functioned as a melting pot of both class and culture during this time.²

Context: Whitechapel

The industrial boom caused the already densely populated slums to radically expand. London differentiated itself into different districts including Whitechapel, or East End, the location of the Jack the Ripper murders. Though many parts of London had their slums, Whitechapel had especially appalling conditions. This district was mostly inhabited by the lowest class. Finding work was hard, if not impossible, without resorting to extreme measures. Work that was available was often done in abusive conditions, worse than the abuse people suffered from factories. The streets were crowded, dirty, and not well lit. Many people resorted to living in lodging houses that had rooms that could be rented for nights or weeks at a time. These rooms were far uncomfortable, unsanitary, and dangerous. Whitechapel's streets were also an unorganized maze of dodgy alleys, full of hidden alcoves and places to hide. Rife with prostitution and bars, Whitechapel was a breeding ground for crime. Public drunkenness was common. Petty crimes such as theft and vandalism were part of daily life. Gangs dominated the

¹Richard Jones, "Jack the Ripper 1888," Jack the Ripper - History, Victims, Letters, Suspects., accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.jack-the-ripper.org/>.

²Kristen Lopez, "Victorian England: Society, Social Classes and Culture in the 1800s," Study.com, May 26, 2022, study.com/learn/lesson/victorian-england-society-social-classes-culture-1800s.html.

streets and controlled major prostitute rings. The police largely ignored their crimes. That is, until the murders of Jack the Ripper.³

Class and Women's Roles

In addition to the major population boom in the city of London due to the industrial revolution, there was also a cultural shift in social classes. Prior to the Victorian Era there was essentially only an upper and lower class. The upper classes contained nobility and wealthy landowners while the lower class contained the servants and peasants.⁴ With the Industrial Revolution came the rise a new middle class. The upper class transformed themselves from not only the nobility and ruling class, but also business owners that managed the new industries that arose during this time. The middle class became the group of professionals that could afford homes and an education, but still did not make as much as the upper class. The working class was a very large group ranging from skilled workers to the very poor. In the case of the latter, entire families, including children, often shared a single room. Work was hard to find, and women often resorted to prostitution so they could afford a place to stay and some food to eat.⁵

The rise of class issues also came with the rise of gender issues. Similar to class, prior to the Victorian Era, role of gender in society was completely different. Women were a part of their family's businesses, helping with basic duties like bookkeeping in addition to their domestic duties.⁶ But with the Victorian Era, there emerged a different look at the woman's role in work. There are three parts to this. The first is the upper and middle class "separate sphere," the second

³ Jones, "Jack the Ripper 1888"

⁴ Lopez, Victorian England: Society, Social Classes and Culture in the 1800s

⁵ "Social Life in Victorian England," British Literature Wiki, accessed March 27, 2023, <https://sites.udel.edu/britlitwiki/social-life-in-victorian-england/>.

⁶Kathryn Hughes, "Gender Roles in the 19th Century," British Library, May 15, 2014, <http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/gender-roles-in-the-19th-century>.

is the rise of women contributing to the family income through factory work, and the third is the rise of prostitution throughout the lowest class.

Despite, women's assistance with businesses prior, the Victorian era brought about the notion that men and women had "natural" characteristics that contributed to their roles. Men were seen as providers, capable of work and labor. Women were seen as physically weak. Their duty was to maintain the household so it could be comfortable for the men. They were also in charge of preparing the next generation for this way of life. Women were raised to find a husband and take care of domestic duties while men were raised to perform the labor of work to provide for their house. The split of specific gender roles became known as the "separate sphere." This aspect of life was more common in upper- and middle-class society because lower class women could not afford not to work.⁷

The rise of new factory jobs during the Industrial Revolution allowed more women to find work. Some women found more financial freedom and some independence and were able to help their overall family income. Prejudices, however, were still held that they were the weaker sex and most of the upper-class frowned upon their choice to work rather than take care of their families. Over time, skilled factory work was dominated by men, and their wives sought to emulate the "separate spheres" of the upper and middle classes. The poorest women, however, had to work for the sake of their family's survival. They would sometimes pay other women to take care of their children while they were gone, or they would send their children to work as well.⁸

⁷ Hughes, "Gender Roles in the 19th Century."

⁸ "Social Life in Victorian England."

There are two main aspects as to why prostitution became a significant issue in terms of gender roles for women. The first is due to the societal norms of marriage. As mentioned before, it was part of a woman's duty to find a husband. Women were required to remain chaste until marriage. However, this was a double standard. While women were expected to remain chaste, it was normal for men to use prostitutes both before and during their marriage.⁹ Thus, the demand for prostitutes was higher than ever before. The second reason why prostitution became a big issue during this time was due to the economic disparity that accompanied the lower class. The disadvantage of lower-class women often meant they had to resort to prostitution in order to survive since other options were not available to them. They had very few options to earn their keep. Prostitution was a last resort for many of these women.

Both the demand for prostitutes and the necessity of work caused a massive increase in the number of prostitutes working in London. Women were not *just* prostitutes; rather they were forced to resort prostitution. The Victorians maintained the opinion that prostitutes were "fallen women" and went against the very values that they upheld in their society. Despite the societal shame that women received for being prostitutes, there was a demand for it in both the upper- and lower-class spheres.¹⁰

Understanding the context of the time period is necessary for understanding how Jack the Ripper's murders were able to occur and why his victims were so vulnerable to his attacks. The Industrial Revolution brought major changes to the lives of the men and women living in London. Not only did cities expand, but classes differentiated from each other in new ways and gender roles also changed. Jack the Ripper targeted poor women living in Whitechapel who were

⁹ Hughes, "Gender Roles in the 19th Century."

¹⁰Diane Aiken, "Victorian Prostitution," British Literature Wiki, accessed March 27, 2023, sites.udel.edu/britlitwiki/victorian-prostitution.

all suspected of prostitution, at some point lived in lodging houses, and struggled with alcoholism. This all had a major effect on the motivation behind the police and press investigation. These women were seen as unimportant, dregs of society. They were the “fallen” women in Victorian England. Due to the brutality of the murders, people throughout all of London were afraid. The police perhaps cared about solving this case more due to the public’s panic rather than a desire to bring justice for these women.

Crimes

The Victims

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to note that there is no exact certainty of whom Jack the Ripper killed. As mentioned before, death was common in Whitechapel, and it was (and remains) difficult for investigators to differentiate between the murders done by the Jack the Ripper and the deaths caused by other individuals. Although there are eleven women in the Whitechapel murder file, this essay will focus on the five canonical victims as reported by one of the main police investigators, Melville McNaughton. The five women, listed in order of their deaths, are Mary Ann Nichols, Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Catherine Eddowes, and Mary Jane Kelly.¹¹

Mary Ann Nichols was born on August 26, 1845, and married William Nichols on January 16th, 1864. Though she had five children with her husband, the marriage turned bitter, and the two separated in 1880. From there, Mary Ann fell into severe poverty and turned to alcohol to cope. She made money by working in a number of different workhouses and primarily lived in lodging houses, when she could afford them. She resorted to prostitution, much like

¹¹ Jones, “Jack the Ripper 1888.”

many women in Whitechapel, in order to make up enough money for rent. Nichols had been staying in what was known as the White House common lodging until her last night.¹²

Eliza Anne Smith was born in 1841 and became Annie Chapman when she married John Chapman in 1869. The couple had three children together but split due to Annie's alcoholism in 1884.¹³ Living in the East End, Annie got her money partly from an allowance from her ex-husband, partly from selling her crochet work, and in extreme cases, through prostitution. Annie had been staying in a lodging house called Crossingham's right before her death.¹⁴

Elizabeth Stride was a Swedish immigrant born in 1843. She moved to London in 1866. She married in 1869 and separated in 1877 and had no children with her husband. Elizabeth had a history of drinking and numerous arrests whilst living in the East End. She lived with a man named Michael Kidney beginning in 1885. The couple lived in a lodging house together at the time of her death.¹⁵

Catherine Eddowes was born in 1842. In 1855, she met Thomas Conway, tattooed his initials on her arm, and eventually gave birth to three children. The couple never legally married and separated in 1880. She, like many other of the Ripper's victims, was a heavy drinker and was suspected of prostitution to afford her living. She lived with a man named John Kelly in a lodging house until the time of her death.¹⁶

Not much is known about Mary Jane Kelly's early life. She had been living with her lover, Joseph Barnett, since April of 1887. He told the police what Mary told him about her life, though none of it has been confirmed. She was supposedly born in Ireland and moved to London

¹² John J. Eddleston, *Jack the Ripper: An Encyclopedia* (ABC-CLIO Interactive, 2001). 18.

¹³ Eddleston, *Jack the Ripper: An Encyclopedia*, 29.

¹⁴ Jones, "Jack the Ripper 1888."

¹⁵ Eddleston, *Jack the Ripper: An Encyclopedia*, 40-41.

¹⁶ Eddleston, *Jack the Ripper: An Encyclopedia*, 52-53.

in 1884 where she began working at a brothel. She had gone to France with one of her clients but moved back to London and lived in the East End after a few years. She too suffered from alcohol abuse and most likely continued her work as a prostitute to earn a living. Around the time of her death, Barnette had moved out of the lodgings he and Mary were sharing.¹⁷

The Murders

On the night of August 30, 1888, Mary Nichols was kicked out of her Lodging House at Wilmott due to her being unable to pay the fourpence rent. She knew the only way for her to earn her keep was to resort to prostitution. Nichols told the lodging rent collector, "I'll soon get my doss money, see what a jolly bonnet I have now." At 2:30 AM, August 31, Nichols met with Emily Holland, a friend, and boasted drunkenly of her success of earning her keep three times and spending it on beer. She still needed to make money to pay for rent and left to find a new client. Emily Holland was the last to speak with Nichols before she died. She was found no later than fifteen minutes later by Charles Cross; her throat was slashed all way to her spine and her body was disemboweled.¹⁸

Early in the morning of September 8, 1888, Annie Chapman was turned out of her lodgings at Crossingham's lodging house as she could not afford that night's rent. Though she was inebriated, she was determined to earn enough money to stay in her lodgings. She left the lodging house shortly before 2 AM. Elizabeth Long witnessed Annie talking to a man at 5:30 AM, unsuspecting of the interaction. Only thirty minutes later, Annie's body found by John Davis, mutilated and disfigured.¹⁹

¹⁷ Eddleston, *Jack the Ripper: An Encyclopedia*, 63-64.

¹⁸ Jones, "Jack the Ripper 1888."

¹⁹ Jones, "Jack the Ripper 1888."

The first time the press was involved in the murders was on September 5 when *The Star* accused a man nicknamed the “Leather Apron” of the first two murders. On September 10, the police arrested “Leather Apron,” John Pizer. He was released shortly after providing an alibi for the two murders. A group of men, headed by George Lusk, formed the Mile End Vigilance Committee to help the police catch the murderer that same day.²⁰

A letter addressed to “The Boss” at the Central News Agency was written and signed “Jack the Ripper.” The agency ignored this letter for a couple days and only sent it to the police on the September 29. The police ignored the letter as well, believing it to be fake. They only took the letter seriously after receiving notice for two more murders the next day. This letter would lead to the serial killer’s infamous title.²¹

On September 30, the murderer would take two victims. Beginning with Elizabeth Stride, who left her lodging house for a night out on the town early Saturday night of September 29. At 12:45 AM the next morning, Israel Schwartz witnessed Elizabeth fighting with a man and thought it was a domestic squabble. At 1 AM, her body was found by Louis Diemshutz, with blood pooling around her head. His approach to the murder scene most likely scared the killer away. Most historians believe that the reason there were two murders this night was due to Jack the Ripper’s inability to carry out his full plan with Elizabeth Stride.²²

Catherine Eddowes left her lodgings that same evening to earn money to pay for rent. Concerned for her safety, her husband cautioned her about the murderer that was stalking the streets. She responded, “Don’t you fear for me. I’ll take care of myself, and I shan’t fall into his hands.” Later she was arrested for her drunkenness. She was released shortly after midnight and

²⁰ Jones, “Jack the Ripper 1888.”

²¹ Jones, “Jack the Ripper 1888.”

²² Jones, “Jack the Ripper 1888.”

three men saw her around 1:30 in the morning. Roughly fifteen minutes later, Police Constable Alfred Watkins found her dead. Following the same pattern as before, the killer slashed her throat and mutilated her body. He also slashed her face and took “souvenirs” from her corpse, including her kidney and part of her apron, though it was found later that night.²³

The next day, the police released the letter from Jack the Ripper to “The Boss” into the newspapers. This sparked the major coverage surrounding the murders. Another letter reached the Central News Agency on October 6 supposedly from Jack the Ripper. Unfortunately for the police, by releasing the original letter to the public, a series of fake letters were written purely for publicity. On October 16, George Lusk received a letter “from Hell” and a kidney that was suspected to be from the body of Catherine Eddowes. However, many doctors and police believed this to be a prank from a medical student and unrelated to the murders at hand.²⁴

The last of the crimes occurred over a month later. Early in the morning on November 9, a faint cry was heard from the room of Mary Kelly. It was not until 10 AM later that day that a man named Thomas Bowyer went to Mary’s room to collect rent and found her dead. She was described to be skinned down to the bone. Mary was the only one to be killed in her home, and her murder scene was the only one to be photographed. She is considered the last official victim of Jack the Ripper.²⁵

Investigation

Evidence and Forensics

The police arrested multiple people, but no one was officially found guilty. The murders stopped as suddenly as they started and continue to remain a mystery today. The physical

²³ Jones, “Jack the Ripper 1888.”

²⁴ Jones, “Jack the Ripper 1888.”

²⁵ Jones, “Jack the Ripper 1888.”

evidence was minimal. Besides the bodies of the victims, the police did not have any evidence of who committed the crimes. The letters that were supposedly sent by the killer were proven to be gimmicks and did not add to the investigation. The only evidence to build off of came from the night of the double homicide. The first piece of evidence was part of Catherine Eddowes's missing apron, covered in blood. Finding this piece of evidence not only indicated to where the murderer fled but also how much blood would have been on the murderer as he did so. When discovering the apron, the officer also discovered the second piece of evidence. On the wall above the apron, a message was written in chalk. It read, "The Jewes are the men that will not be blamed for nothing." Some have said that this message is coincidental, but if this message were intentional, it would indicate very specific information about the killer: his antisemitism was connected to his desire to kill. Whatever this evidence would be able to provide the police, it was ordered to be quickly destroyed by the police out of fear of anti-Semitic unrest in the Whitechapel district.

Photography was also not widely used in investigations at this time. The only crime-scene photo taken of the Jack the Ripper case was of the last victim, Mary Jane Kelly. The bodies of the other victims were photographed after they were taken to the mortuary. The investigators specifically took pictures of the victim's eyes. Inspector Walter Dew requested these photographs because he believed that images of the killer would be left behind on the victim's retinas. He commented that, "the result was negative" and was unable to retrieve any conclusive evidence from this request. The last piece of evidence from this case was the shawl of Catherine Eddowes, which contained both fragments of the killer's and Eddowes's blood. While in today's world this would have been incredibly valuable, the Victorian Era's technology was simply not advanced enough for this to be of use. Thus, the police did not have a lot of evidence

to work with and what little evidence they did have, was destroyed, mishandled, or generally useless.²⁶

Police

Many historians question how the police even expected to catch the killer with their lack of forensics and evidence. Their main method was simply police presence. They used both their local knowledge of Whitechapel and witness statements to form their suspect pool. There were many officers involved with this case, with backgrounds ranging from the Metropolitan Police and the City of London Police. The lead detective was Inspector Frederick George Abberline. He was put on the case after the death of Mary Nichols in September of 1888 due to his knowledge of the criminal underworld of the East End. Abberline, as well as many other officers, initially suspected the murders to be associated with the gangs that dominated the Whitechapel district. The officers made numerous arrests, though none of them were viable.

The police had no choice but to increase their presence in Whitechapel in hopes of catching the killer red-handed. However, the Metropolitan Police in 1888 were severely undermanned. The Mile End Vigilance Committee was one way the police force was supplemented. In addition to patrolling the streets with the officers, the Committee helped raise money for rewards and attempted to glean information from witnesses for the police. Because of the brutality of the murders, the Metropolitan Police force was additionally supplemented by the City of London Police. Their combined efforts, however, were not effective in stopping the killings or in discovering the identity of the murderer.²⁷

The Press

²⁶ Jones, "Jack the Ripper 1888."

²⁷ Jones, "Jack the Ripper 1888."

News coverage of the Jack the Ripper murders became increasingly more prevalent as the case continued. By the 1860s, newspapers were cheap, popular, and free of censorship. All classes enjoyed reading the news of the day, and politicians that were once vehemently against newspapers, now used them to their advantage. Newspapers were popular, but in order to be successful, publications had to be sensational. The Jack the Ripper case gave publications that sensation.²⁸

It was not uncommon for the newspapers to report on the deaths that occurred in Whitechapel. The victims were all lower-class prostitutes, so their lives were not significant to the average reader. When newspapers first reported on the death of Mary Nichols, not many people were interested. What shocked them was the brutality of the deaths of these women. The papers publicized the deaths of these women to sell copy. The sensation of this news increased when the police decided to publish the letter that Jack the Ripper supposedly sent. After this publication, newspapers published many letters “from” Jack the Ripper in order to spark readers’ interests. Not only did this perpetuate fear for the citizens of London, but it also led many police down false trails. The dangers of publicizing murders and evidence became apparent with Jack the Ripper. It likely assisted the killer get away with his terrible crimes.

Results

Due to the lack of forensics and witnesses, the police did not have much to go on in terms of a suspect list. Early on, it was assumed that the deaths were due to the violent gangs that ran prostitution rings. Police moved on from the theory surrounding gangs due to the unlikelihood of continuous murders without anyone providing more evidence. The police had no idea if the

²⁸ Ed King, “British Newspapers 1860-1900,” Gale, 2007, <https://www.gale.com/intl/essays/ed-king-british-newspapers-1860-1900>.

murderer was someone with medical knowledge, a butcher, a local to the area, or someone traveling far to commit the crimes.²⁹

John Pizer, nicknamed the “Leather Apron,” was the first to be arrested early on in the case. He was a local butcher in Whitechapel and was accused of having strong anti-Semitic beliefs. He was the perfect suspect for the police, but his alibi exonerated him. The “Leather Apron” was only the first in a long list of suspects who were accused of committing the murders. He was acquitted of all crimes and the police looked on for their next suspect.

One important suspect was a man named Montague John Drutt. He was a well-educated man who worked in the East End as both a teacher and a bartender. Inspector Macnaghten suspected him as the killer due to his proximity to the killings, Macnaghten’s belief he was insane, and the fact that Drutt’s family suspected him of the killings. Drutt committed suicide shortly after the murders stopped. Macnaghten saw this as an admission of guilt. Historians have since discredited this theory due to the incorrect information Macnaghten used to base his accusations.

Inspector Abberline accused a man named George Chapman, who was eventually arrested and convicted of murder in 1903 that was so similar to the murders done by Jack the Ripper that the police looked into his involvement with the case. Chapman had surgical knowledge and he arrived in England around the same time as the murders began. Despite the strong evidence against him, Chapman never admitted to the Jack the Ripper murders and was never found guilty for the deaths of the five canonical victims.³⁰

²⁹ Jones, “Jack the Ripper 1888.”

³⁰ Jones, “Jack the Ripper 1888.”

Historian, Patricia Cornwell, names Walter Sickert as the killer. She applied modern forensic science to the last of the Ripper case evidence and discovered some interesting facts. Sickert was a painter who was inspired by the murders. His paintings have been famous for depicting parts of the murders that, Cornwell argues, of which only the killer would have knowledge. Additionally, Cornwell found DNA evidence in the letters written from Jack the Ripper that matches that of Walter Sickert. Though this evidence is not perfect, Walter Sickert is a strong contender for the true identity of Jack the Ripper. What largely discredits this theory is the idea that many investigators believe the author of the letters was not the killer. Sickert might have written the letters, but that does not mean he was officially the killer.³¹

Other historians discovered different DNA evidence that convicts another man. David Miller and Jari Louhelainen tested the shawl found on Catherine Eddowes after the attack, which was soaked in both Eddowes and the killer's blood. The DNA found is linked to another suspect, Aaron Kosminski, a Polish tailor who immigrated to London in the early 1880s. Though he was suspected by the police, he was sent away to an insane asylum shortly after the death of Mary Jane Kelly and never arrested. With this new DNA evidence, it is probable that Kosminski was the killer of Catherine Eddowes and is considered by many to be Jack the Ripper.³²

Despite the numerous suspects that both the police at the time and modern historians have found, the true identity of the killer will most likely never be discovered or confirmed. There is simply too much about this case left unknown. There is no way to confirm that the deaths of these women were all committed by the same man or even for the same reasons. Who the killer was is not important to the story of these women. The fact that they shared the same social

³¹ Patricia Cornwell, *Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper, Case Closed* (New York: Berkley Books, 2002).

³²Jari Louhelainen and David Miller, "Forensic Investigation of a Shawl Linked to the 'Jack the Ripper' Murders," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 65, no. 1 (2019): 295–303, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1556-4029.14038>.

position is important to understanding this case. They were all members of the lower-class and were forced to resort to prostitution in order to survive. The lack of evidence and forensic procedures from the police in addition to the mass panic caused by the press allowed the killer to go unpunished by law. By sensationalizing the crimes, the press ignored and degraded the women who died. The identity of Jack the Ripper may never be discovered, but the identities of his victims should be remembered. The Jack the Ripper case goes beyond finding a serial killer, it demonstrates the marginalization and vulnerability of lower-class women.

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