Augsburg Honors Review

Volume 11 Article 4

2018

Deconstructing "Jack": How Jack the Ripper Became More Fiction Than Fact

Erin Thompson
Augsburg University

Deconstructing "Jack": How Jack the Ripper Became More Fiction Than Fact

Erin Thompson
Augsburg University

Abstract

Serial killers have become as much a part of popular culture as athletes and celebrities in the modern age. However, no killer in history remains as identifiable in today's culture as Jack the Ripper. His name appears in over one hundred books, films, and television shows despite the fact that the murders he committed and the subsequent investigations remain relatively unclear. Regardless, for over a century scholars and historians alike have attempted to understand and unmask Jack the Ripper. While the identity of this elusive killer remains unknown, the stories that Jack the Ripper inspired have led to the creation of a legend.

This mythical version of Jack the Ripper continues to be the real-life example of a gothic monster created in the nineteenth century, as his story brought the social anxieties and dangerous unknowns surrounding East London together with the population's morbid curiosity about the dark side of humanity. The consequences of the overwhelming press coverage and the perpetuation of unverifiable and often sensational claims about "Jack's" identity have had a lasting effect on society's fascination with serial killers. The persistent disconnect between killers and the "legend" that their name takes on afterward began with the creation of the gothic genre and its impact on perceptions of Jack the Ripper in poverty-stricken East London.

According to criminologist Jack Levin, every year in America there are approximately twenty active serial killers responsible for some 200 deaths[1]. Though the term 'serial killer' originated in America in the 1970s by FBI investigators Robert Ressler and John Douglas, serial killers were not created in the middle of the twentieth century, nor was it solely an American issue[2]. This is why serial killers are almost as widely recognized around the world as the most famous celebrities. Any mention of the crimes committed by Ted Bundy, Aileen Wuornos, or Jeffrey Dahmer can be enough to send shivers down the spine and pique almost anyone's morbid curiosities. What tends to happen, however, is the disconnect between the person and the "legend" that their name takes on afterward. No killer in history embodies this more than the mysterious figure of Jack the Ripper. Today, he can be thought of as two separate entities: Jack the Ripper of the real world and Jack the Ripper of sensational legend. Since little is known about the former, one must analyze the latter to understand the fascination with such a character. When looking into the way Jack the Ripper's legend has been crafted through different forms of literature and through film, it is clear that without those sensational stories and fictional thrillers, it is likely no one would remember the man at all.

The process of creating this second "Jack" came about over a few centuries as the gothic genre was developed. The beginning of Jack the Ripper as more mythology than reality came into existence not with the first woman he murdered, but in 1764 when this genre began. It was characterized by its elements of fear, horror, and death alongside more seductive or romantic emotional elements. The first piece of work largely heralded as the first gothic novel was *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole in 1764, but *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley and the works of Edgar Allan Poe in the earlier half of the nineteenth century are the most famous for embodying the gothic style of writing. Though appearing several decades before Jack the Ripper's first kill, the legacy of the gothic genre, accompanied by the dreadful state of Victorian England, made the killings much more profitable as entertainment.

Rising social issues in this era necessitated ways for people to evade reality. By 1888, Great Britain's population was booming and its economy was struggling to keep up. The Industrial Revolution led to major economic and social changes in the population; the work became harder as mass-production became prominent in factories. Children were entering the workforce at young ages, and safety was not required for manual labor. Economic historian T. S. Ashton described the hours they were being forced to work, as well as the conditions of factories as "harmful to the health and morals of the young."[3] The influx of Jewish and Irish immigrants into the country exacerbated the issue, leading to overcrowding in the city, especially in the poorer districts of London's East End. As expected, the lower class was the most affected by the Industrial Revolution, and none of these conditions were helped by the Poor Law

[1] Ron Meyer and Mark Reeder, writers, "The Monster Within and Among Us: The Case of Jack the Ripper," in *America's Serial Killers: Portraits in Evil*, dir. Ron Meyer, Mill Creek Entertainment, 27 January 2009.
[2] Becky Sullivan, "The FBI Investigator Who Coined The Term 'Serial Killer'," National Public Radio, Inc., 29 December 2013, https://www.npr.org/2013/12/29/258160192/ (accessed 14 December 2017).
[3] T. S. Ashton, *The Industrial Revolution, 1760-1830* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 159.

Amendment Act of 1834. Poor Laws had been in effect for centuries and sought to relieve the middle-class of the high rates they were paying to help the indigent lower class survive. The "New Poor Law of 1834" aimed to push the lower class to work harder for their livelihoods by making workhouses as labor-intensive and horrible as possible; this attempted to show the impoverished that they could improve their lives by gaining enough money to leave the appalling conditions.[4]

Rising poverty rates, terrible working conditions, and laws aimed at making life for the impoverished miserable led to a new wave in crime. It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that official police records were documented. This makes it difficult for one to assume that crime rose during this time period, as many citizens of that time feared. What knowledge can be gleaned is that the age of incarcerated prisoners rose over those few decades in the mid-1800s. As one researcher reported, "In the 1830s and 1840s up to 50 percent of prisoners were in the 15-25 age; by 1890 some 60 percent were over 30 years."[5] Altogether, overcrowding, poverty, and crime combined to craft a dreadful picture of London in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and no place more-so than London's poorest district, Whitechapel.

Jack the Ripper was not the only active murderer in London's East End during this time period. The Whitechapel Murders involved eleven attacks on lower-class women beginning in April 1888 until February 1891. Only five of these victims are widely attributed to the work of Jack the Ripper, due to the level of precision and brutality the slayings contained. Today's fascination with the killer who lusts for blood is not a new one, nor was it a new phenomena then. However, something changed when Jack the Ripper slew Mary Ann Nichols in London's East End on August 31, 1888, and then nine days later murdered Annie Chapman.

Kirk Gill, a true crime writer, named two things that made Jack the Ripper so sensational: the large presence of the press in London at that time, as well as the fact that the murderer sent letters to the press, becoming intimately involved with them.[6] In addition to the brutality of the murders, it was a story that sparked both fear and intrigue in the general public, to the surprise of many. These were women in their late forties, prostitutes prone to alcoholism, most of them having abandoned their families in some way or having been widowed. Professor of Criminology at the University of Houston Steven Egger refers to prostitutes as "the Less-Dead"—what today is generally referred to as a "high-risk victim."[7] These are victims who are heavily marginalized by society and who usually garner less sympathy than those of a higher social standing. This can also refer to runaway children, the mentally ill, and the disabled. Likewise, author and journalist Judith Flanders wrote that the press at this time were "relatively reticent in describing sex crimes," so it was a change for these stories to be so prominently displayed

[4] "Poor Law Reform," Parliamentary House of Commons and House of Lords, *Parliament.uk*, 1989, http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/poorlaw/.

[5] David Jones, *Crime, Protest, Community, and Police in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1982), 6.

[6] *America's Serial Killers: Portraits in Evil*, 2009.

[7] *America's Serial Killers: Portraits in Evil*, 2009.

in the newspapers.[8] None of this mattered to citizens of London as the population of the East End banded together to hunt this vile criminal who would dare strike fear in the East End under the noses of those officer's seeking to maintain order.

Jack the Ripper struck twice on September 30, 1888. His first victim that night was Elizabeth Stride, but her body had not been mutilated to the extent of the others, raising questions as to her identity as a "Ripper victim." It is likely one will never ascertain that she was truly his victim, but many suspect the reason for the second death that occurred that same night was due to an interruption in Stride's murder, leaving the deed unfinished to the Ripper's satisfaction, and leading him to take another life that night. An hour after the discovery of Elizabeth Stride, the police found the body of Catherine Eddowes, her murder leaving no doubt as to the perpetrator.

There were no new murders throughout the month of October, and people began to frequent Whitechapel more easily, relaxing to the idea that the serial of dark murders were finally behind them. However, somewhere between November 8-9, 1888, the Ripper struck unexpectedly, and on a victim slightly different than those who came before. Mary Jane Kelly was in her early twenties and beautiful, making her a favorite prostitute for many men. Unlike the other victims, Kelly was not killed out in the streets, but in her own single-room apartment. This gave the killer privacy and enough time to do with the girl what he liked. Kelly sustained the worst mutilations of the five universally acknowledged Ripper victims, so disfigured that she had to be identified by her eyes and the color of her hair.[9] Of the organs taken from the body, Kelly's autopsy states:

> "The uterus and kidneys with one breast [were found] under [her] head, the other breast by the right foot, the liver between the feet, the intestines by the right side and the spleen by the left side of the body. The flaps removed from the abdomen and thighs were on a table."[10]

Mary Jane Kelly would be Jack the Ripper's swan song, though there were other murders which followed, less gruesome and sensational in comparison. These stories of murder became not only a form of morbid curiosity of the evils that lurked behind average-looking men and women, but put a microscope on public fascination with the darker side of humanity. These five murders have been enshrined not only in what remains of newspaper archives of the autumn of 1888, but also in a rather unexpected form.

Around this same time, escaping the poor state of London in the nineteenth century became possible through a new literary development in Great Britain. The rapid industrialization of England and advancement of technology made it possible for cheap forms of entertainment to reach the lower class at faster rates in the shape of penny dreadfuls—small books published in weekly installments (much like TV episodes in the present age), generally costing no more than a penny. The majority of these small books focused on Great Britain's crime life and became essential to the rise in literacy rates

[8] Judith Flanders, *The Invention of Murder: How the Victorians Revelled in Death and Detection and Created Modern Crime* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011), 430.
[9] Philip Sugden, *The Complete History of Jack the Ripper* (London: Robinson Publishing Ltd., 1994), 310.
[10] Stated in post-mortem report by Dr. Thomas Bond, Thomas Schancher, "Mary Jane Kelly," *Casebook* (1996-2013), http://www.casebook.org/victims/mary_jane_kelly.html.

amongst the poor and uneducated during this time. These cheap books, in an attempt to make fast money, told fantastic stories that instantly captured the attention of young readers and the lower class. They introduced audiences to the likes of Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street in *The String of Pearls: A Romance*, and the vampire Sir Francis Varney in *Varney the Vampire*, whereby the first literary tropes of fictional vampires was born. Both tales are believed to have been written by James Malcolm Rymer and Thomas Peckett Prest, whose penny dreadfuls crossed paths with both fantasy monsters and criminal activity, as did the hundreds of others that came out from the middle to the late nineteenth century.[11]

Newspapers took to blaming penny dreadfuls for the apparent uptick in criminal activity, yet at the time, most London "dailies" were hardly any better in the new era of "if it bleeds, it leads" journalism, a phrase coined by Eric Pooley in 1989.[12] According to journalist Frank Harris, the public at this time was generally interested in two things: "kissing and fighting." Harris himself catered to these two delights of which, according to historian L. Perry Curtis, Jr., "set the standard for lowbrow sensationalism."[13] Curtis would go on to say:

> The Whitechapel murders proved a journalistic windfall...What transpired in London...was not just a series of five sadistic murders but a serial story combining mystery and sensation-horror... cobbled together by a metropolitan press eager to boost sales.[14]

It became quite clear during this time that murder was lucrative, and almost every newspaper, novelist, and penny dreadful wanted a share of the profits.

While newspapers reported almost daily on the Whitechapel Murders and Jack the Ripper, the first penny dreadful to showcase Jack the Ripper was *The Curse Upon Mitre Square* by J.F. Brewer. Written in October of 1888, it depicts the murders of Jack the Ripper in a context that was familiar to the lower class. For the first time, even before his murder-spree was over, Jack the Ripper had become a fictional villain, the way he is often envisioned now. Brewer's book attributes the brutal murders in Whitechapel to a supernatural curse upon Whitechapel by a former monk. It seems a ridiculous notion, but according to Cindy Collins Smith: "*The Curse Upon Mitre Square* is certainly a shameless bit of exploitation fiction" yet it allowed Victorian audiences to pretend that the notion of a human being perpetrating the slayings was impossible and must be the work of a "malign supernatural agency."[15]

Several books were written in the following years about the ghastly murders and the baffling perpetrator, often mixing in supernatural elements that were so prevalent in the gothic genre. Even books written before "Jack" appeared in Whitechapel became

[11] Helen R. Smith, *New Light on Sweeney Todd, Thomas Peckett Prest, James Malcolm Rymer and Elizabeth Caroline Grey* (London: Jaryndyce, 2002), 28.

[12] Eric Pooley, "Grins, Gore and Videotape: The Trouble with Local Tv News," *New York* 22, no. 40 (1989): 36-44, 37.

[13] L. Perry Curtis, Jr., *Jack the Ripper and the London Press* (New York: Yale University Press, 2001), 62.

[14] Ibid., 115.

[15] Cindy Collins Smith, introduction to *The Curse Upon Mitre Square* by J. F. Brewer (London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co., 1888), vii-viii.

connected to the case. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, written by Robert Louis Stevenson in 1886, was instantly connected to the Ripper case in the media because the popularity of both the fictional Jekyll-Hyde duo and the real-life Ripper helped ensure great reactions from the public.[16]

Likewise, one of the most famous gothic characters in the world who shares several similarities with the Ripper is the vampire of *Dracula*, written by Bram Stoker in 1897. In fact, vampires play a significant role in how many people viewed the Ripper. For example, the first nonfiction work published a month after Mary Jane Kelly's death by Sam'l E Hudson likened the Ripper to "that abhorrent race of human vampires" and compared the murders to the brutality described in Edgar Allan Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue*.[17] Some tales of the Ripper picked up on racist themes present at the time of the killings. Hudson described "some people with anti-symitic (sic) tendencies... spreading the idea that the Jews were at the bottom of the butcheries."[18] Still others took to blaming "a Jewish, French, Italian, or Asian maniac," and comparing the murders to "Red Indian savagery" or Whitechapel to the "African jungle."[19]

One of the first novel-length fiction books about the Ripper specifically was *The Lodger* by Marie Belloc Lowndes, written in 1913. This book is special to the Jack the Ripper story not so much for its literary aspect, but because it became the premise for the first attempt to bring Jack the Ripper to the silver screen in 1927. The film would be directed by none other than the "Master of Suspense" Alfred Hitchcock, who would later refer to *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* as his first true "Hitchcock film" due to it containing many of the darker themes that would be present in much of his later work.[20] The silent film portrays the murdered women as being young, blonde, and beautiful showgirls; the killer himself is the somewhat Americanized version of Jack the Ripper (as he was in Belloc Lowndes' book), called "the Avenger" rather than "the Ripper." The lodger referred to in the title is a handsome young man whom audiences are led to believe is the murderer. He moves into a rented apartment near where the murders have taken place and later becomes involved with his landlords' daughter, Daisy, who is young, blonde, beautiful, and also a showgirl—the perfect victim for the "Avenger." As the murders continue, the nameless lodger is made to appear more and more suspicious, causing trouble for his landlords who fear for their daughter's relationship with him.

Although the ending of both the book and the film are meant to be ambiguous as to the positive identification or whereabouts of the murderer, Hitchcock was forced to change the ending to his film due to the requirements of the actor Ivor Novello's managers. At the time, Novello was extremely well-regarded in Great Britain and therefore it was deemed unacceptable for him to portray a madman.[21] Hitchcock instead

[16] Joyce Carol Oates, "Jekyll/Hyde," *The Hudson Review* 40, no. 4 (1998): 603-608, 603.
[17] Sam'l E Hudson, *"Leather Apron," or the Horrors of Whitechapel, London* (Philadelphia: Town Printing House, 1888), 4.
[18] Ibid., 13.
[19] L. Perry Curtis, Jr., *London Press*, 115; 126.
[20] Donald Spoto, *The Darker Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* (New York: Little Brown & Co, 1983), 84.
[21] Richard Allen and Sam Ishii-Gonzales, *Alfred Hitchcock Centenary Essays* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), iv.

crafted a twist ending for *The Lodger*, indicating that the lodger, who is almost killed after being wrongly accused, was innocent all along and the real killer had already been arrested. The audience never sees who the true "Avenger" is, but instead are shown how the lodger and Daisy manage to live happily ever after.

This film was remade in 1936, but more popularly so in 1944 by director John Brahm, this time putting the story of Jack the Ripper back in London with his proper name. Likewise, Brahm changed the names of the landlord, the daughter, and several other characters, though he kept to Lowndes' original storyline. It opens with a man reading from a police inquiry requesting the assistance of anyone with information that might lend fruit to the search for the murderer in Whitechapel. As the gentleman walks away, the audience sees several policemen guarding the dark streets of Whitechapel, looking for any signs of mischief or mayhem. There are men in organized search parties carrying bats and clubs whom the police acknowledge amiably before continuing on their patrol. The relationship between the two groups is clear within the first few minutes: it no longer matters who captures the maniac or how they do so, only that the killer is brought to some form of justice for his abhorrent crimes.

This time, the women introduced as possible victims are slightly older, drunk, of a lower class, and prostitutes. When one of them is attacked in a dark alley, one female remarks of the killer: "Like a shadow, he was." She then looks at the body and says: "she's the fourth he's done around here. Right in the streets, under your very noses." The next scene is of newspapers being delivered, all proclaiming the Ripper had struck again in Whitechapel, in the same sensational fashion it was reported in reality.

Unlike both Lowndes' book and Hitchcock's movie, there is no doubt that "Mr. Slade", as the lodger initially introduces himself (taking the name "Slade" because it is written on a street sign), is Jack the Ripper. Also unlike the lodger's relationship with the daughter Daisy in Hitchcock's story, the lodger's relationship with the daughter, here named Kitty, is vaguer and has fewer romantic connotations, thereby lending more evidence to Mr. Slade's guilt. The ending of *The Lodger* (1944) shows Slade on the run from the police and an angry mob. He is shot at and cut up, but manages to escape through a window into the River Thames, disappearing into the dark fog of London, never to be seen again as his body is dragged down the river into darkness. Just as in real life, Jack the Ripper evades identification and capture.

The impact of Jack the Ripper and his career as a murderer continues still, by the way many killers have subsequently contacted the press, and even in such inane things as a name. It was because of the popularization of the name Jack the Ripper that every serial killer afterward has had a nickname; Gary Ridgway was known as the Green River Killer, David Berkowitz as Son of Sam, Richard Ramirez as the Night Stalker, etc.[22] It became a way to memorialize some of the most abominable people, but it also fictionalized them in a way. For those who were never caught like the Zodiac

[22] *America's Serial Killers: Portraits in Evil*, 2009.

killer in California or the West Mesa Bone Collector, the nicknames create for them a legendary status that continues on in popular culture. Jack the Ripper killed only five women in London in 1888, yet his name conjures an image of an immortal villain in a timeless tale of sensationalized murder.

Jack the Ripper's mark on history lies in what remains of the police files buried somewhere in Scotland Yard's archives, on the graves of each of his victim's (the ones canonically accepted), and in today's popular culture. Though he remains one of the most popular figures in both a literary and historical context, Jack the Ripper was and is someone that the world knows almost nothing about. It is for this very reason that many authors and researchers are drawn to the topic of the Ripper, because "each [writer] fills in the blanks according to [their] own needs" whether it be a nonfiction "whodunnit" mystery, a psychological thriller, or a supernatural fantasy.[23]

At the close of the nineteenth century, a legend was born both realistically and in the world of fiction. Jack the Ripper, while a horrific serial killer, was and continues to be the real-life example of a gothic monster created in the nineteenth century. His crimes brought together the generic crime thrillers of penny dreadfuls, nightmarish fictional creatures of classic gothic literature and ignited a continuing cycle of books, movies, and television shows. Without the development of the gothic movement before Jack's time, the world may not have devoured the story of the Ripper as they did. Yet without Jack, the gothic, thriller, and horror genres of books and film might not have survived this long. After all, Jack's story is one that never truly ends, leaving the possibilities open and endless.

[23] Cindy Collins Smith, introduction to *Mitre Square*, xi.

References

Allen, Richard and Sam Ishii-Gonzales. *Alfred Hitchcock Centenary Essays.* London: BFI Publishing, 1999.

Ashton, T. S. *The Industrial Revolution, 1760-1830*. London: Oxford University Press, 1948.

Curtis, L. Perry Jr. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*. New York: Yale University Press, 2001.

Flanders, Judith. *The Invention of Murder: How the Victorians Revelled in Death and Detection and Created Modern Crime*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011.

---. "Prostitution." British Library, 14 May 2014. https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/prostitution# (accessed 14 December 2017).

Hudson, Sam'l E. *"Leather Apron;" or the Horrors of Whitechapel, London*. Philadelphia: Town Printing House, 1888.

Jones, David. *Crime, Protest, Community, and Police in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1982.

Lowndes, Marie Belloc and Eliot Stannard, writers. *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock. W & F Film Service Ltd. 14 February 1927.

Lyndon, Barré, writer. *The Lodger,* directed by John Brahm. Twentieth Century Fox. 19 January 1944.

Meyer, Ron and Mark Reeder, writers. "The Monster Within and Among Us: The Case of Jack the Ripper." In *America's Serial Killers: Portraits in Evil*, directed by Ron Meyer. Mill Creek Entertainment. 27 January 2009.

Pooley, Eric. "Grins, Gore and Videotape: The Trouble with Local TV News." *New York*, 9 Oct 1989, 36-44.

Oates, Joyce Carol. "Jekyll/Hyde." *The Hudson Review* 40, no. 4 (1998): 603-608.

Schancher, Thomas. "Mary Jane Kelly." *Casebook*. http://www.casebook.org/victims/mary_jane_kelly.html (1996-2013).

Smith, Cindy Collins. Introduction to *The Curse Upon Mitre Square* by J. F. Brewer. London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co., 1888.

Smith, Helen R. *New Light on Sweeney Todd, Thomas Peckett Prest, James Malcolm Rymer and Elizabeth Caroline Grey*. London: Jarndyce, 2002.

Spoto, Donald. *The Darker Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock*. New York: Little Brown & Co., 1983.

Sugden, Philip. *The Complete History of Jack the Ripper*. London: Robinson Publishing Ltd., 1994.

Sullivan, Becky. "The FBI Investigator Who Coined the Term 'Serial Killer'."National Public Radio, Inc., 29 December 2013. https://www.npr.org/2013/12/29/258160192/ (accessed 14 December 2017).

Webb, Simon. *Bombers, Rioters, and Police Killings*. Yorkshire, Great Britain: Pen & Sword History, 2015.