

The Victims of Jack the Ripper:  
The Casualties of the “Purification” of Society due to the Second Industrial Revolution  
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Many believe sacrifices must be made to achieve a greater good. This was the mindset within the city of London in 1888, specifically within the district of Whitechapel. During this period, working women were thrust into the new realm of white-collar jobs. These jobs gave a hardly livable wage and rationalized their means to forfeit their virtue by becoming prostitutes as an end to achieve the opportunity to live a comfortable life. They seized this newfound opportunity, and they were able to climb the socioeconomic ladder. Concurrently, Jack the Ripper applied this consequentialist point of view through his heinous murders of prostitutes by believing it to be a way to purify the streets of London. Now, through a closer examination of the conditions and reactions of society during the time of the 1888 ‘Whitechapel Murders,’ one may see that not only did the second wave of the Industrial Revolution create conditions hospitable to prostitution, but they also resulted in Jack the Ripper's motivation for his crimes and the public’s detached fascination of the crimes and the victims.

In the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a boom in the supply of workers in the prostitution industry. This boom gave insight into an underground culture that had begun to rise to the surface and the societal changes that came along with it. However, this shift was not welcomed by all and often met with resistance. Many changes were occurring within English Urban Society, specifically with industrialization. According to Timothy Gilfoyle, a professor of history at Loyola University in Chicago, the economic and sustenance development of, “industrialization and [other] economic transformations created a ready supply of migratory, independent, low-wage-earning women, many whom viewed prostitution as a viable economic alternative to poverty.”<sup>1</sup> Many English women saw themselves and their families suffering and wished for a better life. Not only was prostitution just a way to make ends meet, but Gilfoyle also explains, “[P]rostitution served as a transitory stage for working-class women, after which they left such work and reintegrated themselves into society.”<sup>2</sup> The end goal of prostitution was not to rake in all the money possible and live a life of sin, but rather to create a better world for themselves and their future. The sacrifice these women had to make was not out of selfishness and lust but rather out of ambition and strength.

However, many did not see it that way. The newfound freedom that came with this money and sexual liberation created a sea of discontent. Gilfoyle continues,

Women, as ‘public’ figures, were simultaneously viewed as endangered and a source of danger. After 1880, London females broke with their ascribed, bounded roles and moved

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<sup>1</sup>Timothy J. Gilfoyle, “Prostitutes in History: From Parables of Pornography to Metaphors of Modernity,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 104, no. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, February 1999): 117-141 at 125.

<sup>2</sup> Gilfoyle, “Prostitutes in History,” 128.

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about in the ‘wrong’ parts of the city. Women occupied multivalent, symbolic positions in this ‘imaginary landscape,’ emblems of conspicuous display, lower-class rebellion, and sexual disorder.<sup>3</sup>

Whitechapel specifically became one of these areas, and had an extremely prevalent population of prostitutes. According to a report from *The Times* on January 31, 1887, “...the fearful prevalence...of a gross state of street prostitution attended by features of a very disgusting character, particularly between the hours of 10 and 12 at which it is not fit for any respectable female to walk about and young men cannot do so without molestation.”<sup>4</sup> They were obtaining their money in ‘dirty’ and ‘immoral’ ways. The worry began to arise of what else these women could do since, “Prostitutes formed a subterranean counter-society, an explicit moral, social, sanitary, and political threat. They symbolized disorder, excess, pleasure, and improvidence [...] Ironically the regulations discourse treated prostitutes as a separate category of women, while their very own data revealed that prostitutes were ‘very much like most other women’.”<sup>5</sup> This statement is within the sense of what the conditions and lifestyle of Whitechapel entailed. According to *BBC America*, “Overcrowding and a shortage of housing created the abyss of Whitechapel. For most of the population in the East End, one lived and died in the same neighborhood in which they were born. Hope was in short supply.”<sup>6</sup> The culture within Whitechapel was very much oriented towards making money by any means necessary to get by; a similar sentiment with most of lower-class society. The broad idea of society at that time believed these women to be a counterculture of their own culture, however, the truth of the matter is they were as much ingrained into it as everyone else. In the same article by *BBC America* the statistic is given, “In Oct 1888, the Metropolitan police estimated there were just over 1,200 prostitutes working the streets in Whitechapel alone.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the prostitution workers were truly a large number within this growing community and served an integral part within the culture of London as a whole. Even so, the sentiment of these victims being outcasts did not go away. In fact, as time drudged on, many became more restless and judgmental of these women.

When one comes to understand the circumstances and drives of these women, then an observation of the public opinion of prostitutes is in order. The general public saw prostitutes in a dehumanized and demonized sense, making them more vulnerable to violence and mistreatment. Due to the moral and physical uncleanliness of the work, prostitution was put under intense regulations with extreme punishment if not followed. Previous to ‘the Whitechapel Murders,’

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<sup>3</sup> Gilfoyle, “Prostitutes in History,” 127.

<sup>4</sup> “Prostitution in London 188-1889: The Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885,” *Jack the Ripper 1888*, <https://www.jack-the-ripper.org/1888-prostitution.htm> (accessed 1/3/2023).

<sup>5</sup> Gilfoyle, “Prostitutes in History,” 121.

<sup>6</sup> “Anglophenia Whitechapel,” *BBC America*, <https://www.bbcamerica.com/blogs/whitechapel--1015283#> (accessed 1/4/2023).

<sup>7</sup> “Anglophenia Whitechapel.”

“Since the 1860s the police had been granted the power under the Contagious Diseases Acts to apprehend women of doubtful virtue in the streets and insist that they be medically examined; if found to be diseased, they could then be detained in lock hospitals.”<sup>8</sup> These were cruel and humiliating conditions that these women had to face during this time. The 10<sup>th</sup> article of the 1868 Acts states, “The Local Government shall have power to appoint persons to make periodical examinations of registered women in order to ascertain whether at the time of each such examination they are affected with contagious disease.”<sup>9</sup> This act meant that women had to put themselves in the vulnerable position of being ambushed by examiners at any time.

By being lawfully registered as a prostitute, women were signing away their right to privacy of their medical well-being. They were not given the same courtesy of self-autonomy as other women with health issues but rather treated as less than human. A pamphlet written by Doctor John Birkbeck Nevins in 1891 lays out the Acts and their, “[e]ssential principal ... [as a] combination of Hygienic surveillance of common prostitutes and hospital provision of their treatment, along with a modified revival of personal penalties upon such women which had characterized former periods of the treatment of prostitutes.”<sup>10</sup> English women were seen as objects of the state, to be used, inspected, and thrown as those in charge deemed fit. They were under extreme control and restraints which lessened their mobility and liberty. Doctor Nevins carries on, clarifying,

The essential features of the Acts were that the women were to be placed upon the Police Register, and rendered subject to many penalties from which they could only be removed by magisterial authority; that they were to submit their persons to periodical examinations for the special form of disease called Venereal, with all which that involved against womanhood; and that there were to go to prison if they refused or neglected to submit regularly to these examinations. They were subjected by successive Acts to greatly increased compulsory detention in hospital, from 3 months at first to 6 months in 1866, and to 9 months in the “Amended” Act of 1869, and if they left the hospital without the consent of the Medical Officer, they were to go to prison for a period of two months, but without hard labour. But as this penalty was not found to have “terror” enough, the Amended: Act of 1869 raised the penalty to three months’ imprisonment with hard labour, and other penal conditions were added.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Emma Liggins, “Prostitution and Social Purity in the 1880s and 1890s,” *Critical Survey: 'New' Female Sexualities 1870-1930*, vol. 15, no. 3, (Brooklyn, New York: Berghahn Books, 2003): 39-55 at 39.

<sup>9</sup> “Act No. XIV of 1868,” *India Code*, [https://www.indiacode.nic.in/repealed-act/repealed\\_act\\_documents/A1868-14.pdf](https://www.indiacode.nic.in/repealed-act/repealed_act_documents/A1868-14.pdf) (accessed 1/3/2023).

<sup>10</sup> John Birkbeck Nevins, *What Steps Should the State Take to Prevent the Spread of Venereal Diseases?: Paper Read before the State Hygiene Section of the International Hygienic Congress in London, in 1891*, 3, available on JSTOR, <https://jstor.org/stable/60240504>, (accessed 10/31/22).

<sup>11</sup> Nevins, *What Steps Should the State Take to Prevent the Spread of Venereal Diseases?.*” 3.

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The treatment seemed to worsen for women as the acts progressed, suggesting a development in the sentiment towards prostitutes. The registration, holding within hospitals, the punishments, and the overall treatment of women points to the idea that they were seen below other women in society. They were less than human; animals that the government were attempting to control and punish for the disorder. This furthered the isolation between prostitutes and the rest of society, even creating animosity between the two. This set the climate that was hospitable for vigilantes to “take care” of prostitutes.

With a better understanding of these victims’ image, the development of the characterization of Jack the Ripper and his crimes unfolds. Jack the Ripper lived in a world in which prostitution was on every street corner, a practice that has been proven to be caused by the industrial revolution. In the book *Jack the Ripper: the Forgotten Victims*, Paul Begg and John Bennet speak of the police’s interest in prostitution’s correlation to the case. “One essential element in the fascination was the targeting of prostitutes: according to an official police report from October 1888, there were some 1,200 prostitutes and 62 brothels in the Whitechapel (or ‘H’) Division of the Metropolitan Police.”<sup>12</sup> This was astounding number in such a small area for the time but makes sense when taking into account the condition of financial need caused by the industrial revolution. The prevalence of immorality and disorder would be an unavoidable reality to all those in the area because prostitutes would be a part of mainstream culture. Therefore, when in Whitechapel, Jack the Ripper would be constantly faced with the ruin of this residence.

Combined with his twisted mind, this circumstance would have dire consequences for ambitious working-class women. The prevalence of prostitution within the community is seen with the victims. “[T]here were only five victims, sometimes known as the ‘canonical five’: Mary Ann Nichols, Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Catherine Eddowes, and Mary Jane Kelly.”<sup>13</sup> They faced extreme hardships in their lives and were working any way they could to put food on the table. In the case of Mary Ann Nichols, “Her reliance on prostitution as a convenient way of getting money to pay for a bed led to her death in the quiet, poorly lit Buck’s Row.”<sup>14</sup> This was the case for other victims of Jack the Ripper. This “canonical five” were trying to make a living in an unconventional way and had the unfortunate luck of crossing the path of a psychopathic killer.

The characterization of Jack and his views on his victims can be seen in his letter entitled “Dear Boss” where it reads, “I am down on whores and I shant quit ripping them till I do get buckled.”<sup>15</sup> From these letters one can infer the twisted nature of this man and the disdain he felt for his victims. He even insulted their character by demeaning Mary Ann Nichols. Additionally,

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<sup>12</sup> Begg, Paul and John Bennett *Jack the Ripper: The Forgotten Victims* (New York: Yale University Press, 2013), 16.

<sup>13</sup> Begg and Bennett, *Jack the Ripper: The Forgotten Victims*, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Begg and Bennett, *Jack the Ripper: The Forgotten Victims*, 67.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Jones, “Dear Boss,” in “The Dear Boss Letter- Yours Truly Jack the Ripper,” available on *Jack the Ripper 1888*, <https://www.jack-the-ripper.org/dear-boss.htm> (accessed 10/17/2022).

in another of his letters, Jack wrote, “[Y]ou’ll hear about Saucy Jacky’s work tomorrow double event this time number one squealed a bit.”<sup>16</sup> He referred to his victims as numbers. He saw them as victories and scores rather than human beings, a common practice among cold-blooded serial killers. Individuals like Jack see their victims as another box to check, not as valuable human lives.

Not only that, but Jack the Ripper also found amusement and novelty in his kills and their “trophies.” He attempted to use the blood of his victims to write to the police. He went so far as to say, “I write to you a letter in black ink, as I have no more of the right stuff.”<sup>17</sup> On top of that, the use of the word “right” also suggests that the murder and the use of the material was the correct thing to do. He takes every bit of dignity left of these women and spills it for his own pleasure. This is also seen in the injuries he inflicted upon his victims where he, “had extracted and taken out the uterus” and one victim’s “throat had been cut through to the spine and her face had been mutilated by deliberate, often quite delicate, cuts.”<sup>18</sup> Jack the Ripper was defacing the victim and attacking the very thing that gave them the power he so disdained. He wanted to bathe in the remembrances of destroying what made these women the lesser version he despised. He inferred even more pleasure when he wrote, “Say Boss, You seem rare frightened...hope to see you when I don’t hurry much.”<sup>19</sup> He was not only taunting the police but also insinuating spending extra time at the crime scene. Jack the Ripper wished to take in every second of the crime and soak in it. The disdain he felt for these women is heavily insinuated from the phrasing he used in his letters to describe the women; and his heated hatred is left pulsating from the gruesomeness of his attacks. Therefore, Jack the Ripper’s crimes were the product of a deep-rooted hatred for prostitutes and what they represented. He wanted to dash all that the “canonical five” stood for. And from the descriptions in his letters to the police and media, it is evident he found pleasure in destroying victims and what they stood for.

After examining the actual innerworkings of the crimes, one must turn an eye to the public reception of the crime. Although many were appalled by the crimes of Jack the Ripper, they felt a sense of removal and disgust for the victims due to their work and way of life. For many reading the stories of the crimes and the letters from the killer, this seemed too out of reach to grasp the consequences. One such example of this was in a report for *The Sunderland Echo* on August 31 where it states,

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<sup>16</sup>Richard Jones, Saucy Jacky,” in “The Dear Boss Letter- Yours Truly Jack the Ripper,” available on *Jack the Ripper 1888*, <https://www.jack-the-ripper.org/dear-boss.htm> (accessed 10/17/2022).

<sup>17</sup>Richard Jones, “Mr. Lusk’s First Letter,” in “The Dear Boss Letter- Yours Truly Jack the Ripper,” available on *Jack the Ripper 1888*, <https://www.jack-the-ripper.org/dear-boss.htm> (accessed 10/17/2022).

<sup>18</sup>Begg and Bennett, *Jack the Ripper: The Forgotten Victims*, 33; 70.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Jones, “Another Letter,” in “The Dear Boss Letter- Yours Truly Jack the Ripper,” available on *Jack the Ripper 1888*, <https://www.jack-the-ripper.org/dear-boss.htm> (accessed 10/17/2022).

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The body was immediately conveyed to the Whitechapel mortuary, when it was found that besides the wound in the throat, the lower part of the abdomen was completely ripped open, with the bowels protruding.

The wound extends nearly to her breast, and must have been effected with a large knife.

The hands are bruised and bear evidence of having engaged in a severe struggle. Some of the front have been knocked out, and the face is bruised and discoloured.

In Whitechapel naturally the greatest excitement prevails and several persons in the neighbourhood state that an affray took place early in the morning, and they think that during this the murder was committed.<sup>20</sup>

To the general public and writers for the media, the crimes were a tale, and they were the audience of this fantastical plot. Craig Monk states, “[T]he Ripper’s victims are themselves often reduced to ‘stage props’ in discussions of these crimes.”<sup>21</sup> The victims of the crimes were usually not seen as individuals, but rather as the part they had to play.

For society, these women could have been anyone with any background. The victims were a name in the story, but when their livelihoods were added to the mix, their individualism set them even further apart from society. For example in a September 1st report in *The Daily News* about the murder of Mary Ann Nichols she was described to be, “worse for liquor,” and “had been wandering about ... [since] [s]he was first admitted to the workhouse seven years ago, and from this point appears to have entered upon a downward career.”<sup>22</sup> Upon reading this, many began to formulate an opinion of these victims’ lifestyles and detach themselves because of their “shameful” behaviors. Begg and Bennett describe, “As one woman after another was murdered and horribly mutilated, the details that emerged of the grim lives they had led shocked many at home and abroad.”<sup>23</sup> People were baffled by the idea of their sympathy lying with these women of the night. Readers were drawn even closer to the story, yet they all were disconnected from the crime. For so long these women were painted as villains who were tarnished in society, yet, in that moment they could have been seen as the humans they were. The issue was the story became a commodity and the media delivered all they could about the actual crimes, as opposed to the life stories of these individuals. Therefore, the image painted in one’s head when talking about ‘the Whitechapel Murders’ is not one of the heartbreaking stories of the new working-class of women struck down

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<sup>20</sup> “The Murder of Mary Nichols – Press Coverage,” *Jack the Ripper 1888*, <https://www.jack-the-ripper.org/mary-nichols-newspaper-reports.htm> (accessed 1/2/23).

<sup>21</sup> Craig Monk, “Optograms, Autobiography, and the Image of Jack the Ripper,” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, Fall 2010): 91-104 at 92.

<sup>22</sup> “The Murder of Mary Nichols – Press Coverage.”

<sup>23</sup> Begg, and Bennett, *Jack the Ripper: The Forgotten Victims*, 2.

by society embodied in a hooded figure; instead, it is the story scandalous of a psychotic killer who preyed upon women of the night.

With all these things in mind, there can be some doubt to the correlation between the victims' image, the motivation of Jack the Ripper, and the reception of society. Many at the time believed that Jack the Ripper was a killer who targeted prostitutes because they were an easy victim. For example, after the murder of Mary Ann Nichols, "The concept of 'the Whitechapel murders' as the work of a lone, crazed killer was born."<sup>24</sup> Jack the Ripper had a sentiment that when paired with a violent mindset, created such heinous events as 'the Whitechapel Murders'. However, why was Jack the Ripper so bound and determined to enact violence against prostitutes? According to Emily Liggins, "A variety of discourses constructed the prostitute either as an innocent victim of male lust or as a 'demon' and 'contagion of evil.'"<sup>25</sup> Therefore, an individual within a certain headspace would look at these women as workers of the devil himself, and by killing them he is doing society a favor as a whole. Jack the Ripper knows his work is twisted and foul, yet he stated in one of his infamous letters, "I love my work and want to start again."<sup>26</sup> This is not only because he had a violent mindset, but also because he saw his work as a good deed done in a dirty manner, while the victims did bad deeds in a dirty manner.

People were torn by his actions. On one hand, he committed the ultimate sin, and on the other, he was saving the purity of society. Jack the Ripper was "solving a problem" that the government failed to resolve. A problem that, if not for the industrial revolution, would not exist. Society was not understanding the whole picture of the circumstances of these women's lives, "[T]hey were actually placing their faith in a photograph of a photograph."<sup>27</sup> Society could only conjure what little details of these women's lives, since they only had the names within the story. All they knew was that the victims were prostitutes who had unfortunately crossed the paths of Jack the Ripper. They did not see the struggles these women faced to put them in the position they were in at that time. If society put in the effort to hypothesize why Jack the Ripper targeted these women, they would see the direct correlation between his desire to purge the streets of London to the hardships of women trying to gain control of their newfound freedoms.

The direct correlation between the Industrial Revolution and Jack the Ripper's crimes is extremely evident. When one looks closer at the historical context of the rise of prostitution within the Whitechapel area, and the rise of traditional values in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the connection is clear. The Industrial Revolution created a new type of work for women, granting them more independence, yet barely livable wages. These women turned to prostitution to fulfill their need for more financial stability but set themselves up for harsh treatment by society through regulations. These reforms set a particular disposition towards prostitution and set them apart from

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<sup>24</sup> Begg and Bennett, *Jack the Ripper: The Forgotten Victims*, 67.

<sup>25</sup> Liggins, "Prostitution and Social Purity in the 1880s and 1890s," 39.

<sup>26</sup> Jones, "Dear Boss."

<sup>27</sup> Monk, "Optograms, Autobiography, and the Image of Jack the Ripper," 92.

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society, which made these women more susceptible to becoming victims of crazed killers, specifically Jack the Ripper. Due to the sensationalized nature of these crimes and the women's backgrounds, the sentiment of society was lost. This unfortunate chain of events is important to remember when studying other cases like it. To study crimes as sensational as Jack the Ripper's, one must look at the historical context. In the end, sacrifices of detail must not be made to fully understand these important events in the past.

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