

“THE FALLEN” - DRAMATURGY PACKET

THE WORLD OF 19TH CENTURY LONDON

- **Trafalgar Square:** the axis between the east and west of the city, the dividing line between rich and poor; an artificial boundary that kept the disenfranchised voiceless.
- **Lower Class Circle of Hell:** alcoholism, malnutrition, disease, domestic violence, girls turning to prostitution to earn money, boys thieving and pickpocketing.
- The nonchalance with which poor men and women embarked upon and dissolved these partnerships horrified middle-class observers.
- **Values of the Victorian world:** male, authoritarian, and middle class. Women had no voice, and few rights, and the poor were considered lazy and degenerate: to have been both of these things was one of the worst possible combinations.

THE WHITECHAPEL MURDERS, “THE AUTUMN OF TERROR”

- One of history’s most notorious murder sprees in Whitechapel, London.
- **The “Canonical Five” Victims of Jack the Ripper:** Mary Ann Nichols, Annie Chapman, Elisabeth Stride, Catherine Eddowes, & Mary Jane Kelly .
- The Ripper had cut the throat of each victim. Four of the five were eviscerated. With the exception of the final killing, these violent deaths occurred in open places, under cover of darkness. He mutilated and disemboweled women, removing organs such as kidneys and uteri, and his crimes seemed to portray an abhorrence for the entire female gender.
- The autopsies concluded that all of the women were killed while in a reclining position. In at least three of the cases, the victims were known to sleep on the street and on the nights they were killed did not have money for a lodging house.
- **Theories about who Jack the Ripper was:** a sailor, a Jew, a butcher, a surgeon, a foreigner, a lunatic, a gang of extortionists (demonizing “othered” communities, letting them become the scapegoat for negative cultural beliefs rather than accepting that the problem might be from within).

THE LETTERS

- A number of letters were allegedly sent by the killer to the London Metropolitan Police Service (often known as Scotland Yard), taunting officers about his gruesome activities and speculating on murders to come. The moniker “Jack the Ripper” originates from a letter—which may have been a hoax—published at the time of the attacks.

MONETIZING & SENSATIONALIZING DEATH

- **Rise of New Journalism, aka “Sensationalism”:** the shift away from primarily parliamentary or political news in daily and weekly periodicals to more popular and often sensational content. Crooked journalists would often fake evidence, create witness accounts, and mislead the police to create racy and sensational stories
- Whitechapel became filled with journalists. They hovered over this seam of sensationalist gold with pencils sharpened.
- In the absence of any conclusive information, the newspapers posited their own theories. Inevitably, embellishment, invention, and “fake news” found their way onto the page (hyperbole became enshrined as fact).
- Much like the inhabitants of Whitechapel’s common lodging houses, the victims of Jack the Ripper and the lives they led became entangled in a web of assumptions, rumor, and unfounded speculation.
- These women’s lives became reduced to Jack the Ripper Tours and merchandise.
- Instead of using the term “prostitute,” most morning dailies preferred such euphemisms as “fallen woman,” “sister of the abyss,” or “woman of the street.” Occasionally a reporter would employ the even more delicate phrase “the frail sisterhood.” Such colloquialisms as “whore,” “harlot,” “trollop,” and “tart” did not appear in the respectable press. The Times, Standard, and Morning Post all referred to the Ripper’s victims as “unfortunates.”
- Committed to the promotion of law and order and public morality, most papers played up not only the brutality of the attacks but also the immoral lifestyles of the victims

THE CONFLATION OF ‘FALLEN’ WITH IMMORALITY

- Technically, a **“fallen woman”** equates prostitution. However, the term “fallen” became generalized by society to connote whatever they deemed unvirtuous of women in the Victorian Era.
- **Female Immorality** = leaving the familiar home in any capacity (aka a “broken women”), homelessness, outcasts, prostitution, drunkenness
- Some people believed that, with the victims of Jack the Ripper being “fallen,” they were somehow to blame for their own murders. In this light, Jack the Ripper was seen as making contributions towards cleansing the East End of London of impurity/immorality

“It was Victorian society that killed these women long before the Ripper got to them”
The Five, by Hallie Rubenhold

DEATH HUNTERS

- **Death Hunters** = men engaged in vending last dying speeches and confessions, selling accounts of all the murders that become topics of public conversation.
- **Broadside Ballad** = a narrative song or poem printed on one side of a single sheet of paper
- **Cocks** = fictitious narratives in verse or prose, of murders, fires, and terrible accidents, sold in the streets as true accounts → if there are no truths to sell, Death Hunters might sell cocks, making them "murderers" in their own right, inventing truths and deaths out of thin air.

MURDER BALLADS

- **“Ballad” as a Performance:** The success of chapmen (traveling salesmen of small printed wares) or hawkers (less seemly characters who "cried" their wares in public), relied on their ability to perform the ballads. Their showmanship a function of their salesmanship, these ballad-sellers needed no permission or special license to perform and sell the ballads. The ballad was first and foremost an exciting performance, "belonging to the 'show business' of the time." Peddlers sang them on street corners and in fairgrounds, telling tales of the Hog-faced woman or a recent battle in Ireland. These stories drew a crowd around the seller; in fact, the ballads were often written with that purpose in mind.
- **The Allure of Murder:** Hanging days were big business for ballad and chapbook sellers, who belted out the murderer's supposed lamentations in rhyme and song. Nothing sold better than criminal tales, and as soon as an execution was announced, every penny bard and printer in the county scrambled to get a version of the story in ink. Often, these “true” last confessions, some purportedly spoken on the gallows, were being sold in the prison yard before they were even uttered
- **Part-Fact, Part-Fiction:** These songs were often based on true stories, real murders whose names have worn away with time. Murder ballads were part history, part gossip, part folklore. “A lot of the stuff would be ripped from the headlines of newspapers, from local newspaper articles,” Smith says. “As well as changing things around so that the rhyme scheme worked.” They were never the whole truth, just a version of it. Murder ballads have twisted the truth over the years, turned victims into instigators, killers into heroes. “Usually ballads are written to tell women how to behave”
- **A Cautionary Tone:** The cautionary tone of early ballads is troubling - they make clear to us that if you're a woman, your murder, no matter the motive behind it, was at least partially your fault. It could be you rejected the affections of a man who was otherwise decent, but your scorn drove him into a fit of violent passion. Maybe you were too naïve or trusting, following a man into the woods when you should have known that the natural consequence of doing so is death. Or maybe you were too worldly and strayed too far from the path good and decent girls must tread, and we all know what happens to girls who stray, don't we? Ballad broadsheets are strewn with the ancestors of the victim

blaming so many survivors of domestic violence hear today: you provoked him, you should have known what would happen, can't you see you're not blameless here?

QUESTIONS TO KEEP IN MIND

- How can we parse our reasons for continuing to listen to, sing, and write these sorts of songs? Are they warnings not to follow the paths of the victim(s) or the perpetrator(s)? Are they exploitative—taking the stories of real, horrific happenings, the deaths of real people, and using them to make art? Or are they elegiac—a way to remember these long-dead people and their stories?
- How should we, as a society, tackle re-telling stories when “the truth” is subjective?
- Why are we, as a society, so fascinated by and complicit in sensationalizing death?
- Whose stories are worth telling?

Change a few details, update the names, and these ballads could be stories from our own local papers, or even our own diaries.