

Victorian Gender and Sexuality—the 1888 Whitechapel Murders

Throughout the year of 1888, sensationalized media released by the *Times* regarding the serial Whitechapel murders tainted the perception of certain populations within Victorian society. Mass-circulated in the form of voyeuristic and dramatized journalistic reports and published letters to the editor, the *Times* articles highlighted and reinforced the “proper” normative societal roles within the changing and modernizing Victorian society. Particularly, the reports’ description of the neighborhoods and spatial context in which the murders took place criminalized and pathologized the impoverished and overcrowded East End of London and the individuals residing within its bounds. Furthermore, the reports used the universalizing principles of space, light, and darkness to define and restrict the roles of women in society. In this essay, I will analyze how the descriptions of architecture and public space revealed the tendency of Victorian society to 1) moralistically vilify the poor and 2) clearly categorize the separate spheres of men and women.

In a September 29, 1888 letter to the Editor of the *Times*, Henry Brudenell Bruce states in response to the Whitechapel Murders that “wherever overcrowding exists it is the origin of all evil. Crime, misery, filth, and degradation are the outcome.”¹ Bruce’s letter reflects the public sentiments towards the East End of London. Although the origin of the Whitechapel killer was unknown, and they perhaps resided in a separate, wealthier neighborhood, the conditions of the East End neighborhood and its residents were pathologized as the cause for the occurrence of crime. In other words, rather than the neighborhood and its residents being treated as a victim to the atrocious crimes, the media stigmatized and treated the neighborhood and its residents as the

¹ Selections from the *Times* on the 1888 Whitechapel Murders. (September 29, 1888)

offender of the crimes: the East End's poor, overcrowded conditions were inevitably seen as the "origin of evil."

The overcrowding that Bruce refers to largely resulted from the crowded conditions of the common lodging houses, which the media reports depict as conducive to allowing for the continued crimes of Jack the Ripper. In a September 11 report speculating the reasons for the murderer's evasion from capture, the *Times* describes how within Dorset-street, "nearly every house in the street is a common lodging-house, in which wretched human beings are, at certain seasons of the year, crammed from cellar to roof."² The report continues to describe how these overcrowded lodging-houses are filled with transient workers with unconventional hours that are "simply asked for the money, and shown up dark stairways." The *Times* reports provide extended descriptions on the lack of surveillance conducted at these lodging houses to influence readers to think that this working-class negligence and disorganizations served as the cause of the crime. The reports suggest that the murders could only operate in the unregulated, dark, and loud common lodging houses.

Furthermore, the September 11 *Times* article continues to contrast the common lodging houses within the East End of London with the housing units in the wealthier neighborhoods of the city. The *Times* article states that the murderer "could not well get rid of (his bloodstained clothes) in any ordinary dwelling-house or public place" and describes how the murderer must have been acquainted with the neighborhood and its numerous police stations that surveilled the neighborhood nightly "on account of the character of many of the inhabitants."³ In describing the upper-class and middle-class neighborhoods of London as "ordinary," the *Times* reports stigmatize the lower class East-End, once again affirming the perspective that the setting of the

² Selections from the *Times* on the 1888 Whitechapel Murders. (September 11, 1888)

³ Ibid.

murders served as the “origin of evil.” Despite the reports’ purpose to objectively speculate and describe the murderer, the report villainizes the residents of the East End with its irrelevant point that numerous police stations exist within the area because of *the character* of the neighborhood’s inhabitants. Rather than focusing on the murderer, the murders, and the murder’s terrorizing effect on the East End of London, the *Times* reports justify the crimes as somewhat appropriate within the context of the working-class neighborhood. The journalistic accounts and letters to the editor distance themselves away from Whitechapel murders, depicting the setting of the East End as non-ordinary, negligent, and wretched. For the middle-class and upper class audience voyeuristically reading the Whitechapel report, the murders signify a plight of the working class, untranslatable to their own context as “ordinary” citizens operating in their “appropriate” context within Victorian society.

The reports’ depictions of the victims’ demise, in relation to geographical setting, also provide a gendered perspective of the “proper” roles for men and women in Victorian society. Particularly the repeated image of *women’s* deceased bodies being found lying in a public, open space possesses the effect of re-instilling the idea of separate and appropriate spheres for men and women. All of the victims depicted within the reports were prostitutes and the *Times’* disapprovingly described these women as straying away from the conventional domestic roles for women. For example, the fourth victim, “Dark Annie” or Annie Chapman is described as the widower of a pensioner. Chapman separated from her husband, sent her two children to disability and educational institutions, and lived a transient lifestyle navigating between common lodging-houses and the street.⁴ The *Times* reports’ dehumanizing description of Chapman’s body being

⁴ Selections from the *Times* on the 1888 Whitechapel Murders. (September 10, 1888)

found in the public space that she reportedly frequented, suggest that Chapman's unconventional lifestyle played a large part in her demise.

Furthermore, the focus on light and the idea of privacy add to the gendered narrative perpetuated by the *Times* reports in reference to the Whitechapel murders. The murders of the prostitutes took place "free from any fear of interruption" and "deficient of light."⁵ The murderer was able to commit his crimes under the veil of darkness within the public space of the yard. The streets within the East End were described to be crowded, loud, and dark; allowing ease for the societal outcasts to move around the city without being seen. Particularly the female prostitutes that fell victim to Jack the Ripper were accustomed to living a public life veiled under the shroud of darkness. The news reports description of the stark difference between light and darkness alludes to the stark difference between what was socially acceptable and socially unacceptable in Victorian Society.

Another account from the October 1st *Times* news report describes how because of the placement of the body, it seemed as if "the moment the murderer had got his victim in the dark shadow near the entrance to the court he threw her to the ground, and with one gash severed her throat from ear to ear."⁶ This association of violence and darkness, and women and public space once again re-instill the Victorian ideal of separate spheres for the men and women. By depicting the public streets as a dangerous, dark space where violence immediately befell upon women, the media reports convince readers to believe that women are not suited for the public sphere. The women prostitutes that lived unconventional and "improper" lives in the public sphere provide as a fearful example of the consequences for women moving out of their domestic roles and into the public sphere.

⁵ Selections from the *Times* on the 1888 Whitechapel Murders. (October 1, 1888)

⁶ Ibid.

The *Times* news reports and included letters to the editor used sensationalized language to describe the events of the Whitechapel murders to an outside audience that resided outside the East End. Embedded within the “investigative” and “medical” reports were degrading characterizations of the female victims and intentional associations of crime, urban space, and deviation from social norms. Particularly, the descriptions of the crowded nature of the lodging houses supported one letter to the editor’s notion that “overcrowding (and poverty) was the origin of evil,” and the associations of darkness, social deviance, and violence embedded within the investigative reports’ descriptions of the scenes of women’s demise supported the idea of separate spheres for men and women in Victorian society.