

Why did the
whitechapel murders
attract so much
attention in 1888
analysis essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Whitechapel murders were the first sexual serial killings in England, perhaps in the world. This made people particularly interested in them, as they were something completely new. The manner of death was also particularly gruesome – the women were brutalised and disembowelled. Their throats were cut from ear to ear, so deeply that it almost seemed the Ripper was trying to behead them. At the last murder scene, that of Mary Kelly, police are said to have been uncertain whether the remains they were dealing with were animal or human, because she had been so horrifically slaughtered.

Dr Bond wrote that the arms and face had been “hacked beyond recognition”. Her “heart had been cut out and could not be found”. It was believed by all but one doctor that the murderer had to have some anatomical knowledge into where to find the organs, how to recognise them when found, and how to get to them. The morbid fascination in these killings continued throughout them all. In the decade before the Whitechapel murders, there had been just 14 newspapers in existence.

When the stamp duty on newspapers was lifted, this number boomed to 168. This meant that there were a huge number of newspapers competing for readership, each trying to dream up the best headlines and show the best images, with interesting text. The Elementary Education Act, in 1870, meant that everybody had to go to primary school to learn the basics of reading and writing. Because of this, many more people could read, so hundreds more were buying and reading the newspapers. This era was also the birth of tabloid journalism.

Every paper was covered in sensationalistic headlines, grabbing the attention of a passer-by and making him want to buy a paper to read the accompanying story. All of the newspapers had many images in them, lurid and grotesque renditions of the murder scenes, although they were inaccurate. The actual murder scenes were much worse than these sketches. They also had a lot of short interviews, where a reporter would go around asking people questions, to collect the “soundbites” of the time.

The famous “Dear Boss” letter, originally believed to be from the Whitechapel murderer, is in fact believed to have been invented by two journalists looking for another angle to their story. Instead of being sent to Scotland Yard, the most likely place for it to be sent if the murderer were taunting the police, it was sent to the Central News Agency. It was the first use of the name “Jack the Ripper”, which sounded so much better in newspaper headlines – “Ripper strikes again” had a much better ring than “Another Whitechapel murder”.

The Victorian people were very prim and proper. The male dominated society appeared to deny everything pertaining to the flesh – in extreme cases, even piano legs were covered for fear that a man might look at one and think of a woman’s leg. However, the society that invented bathing machines so that not one inch of a woman’s body was exposed to public view had a vast number of prostitutes. They existed not only in poor areas like Whitechapel, where subsisting women sold themselves to poor sailors for pence, but also in the West End, where they served the more wealthy clients.

This meant that despite the apparent denial of prostitution and the widely held belief that “ the skeleton in the bedchamber” was merely for continuing the family line, hundreds of wealthy men would buy themselves the services of a prostitute regularly. Prostitutes were looked on as “ fallen women” who enjoyed what they did, rather than the starving women who turned to prostitution occasionally in order to pay for food and lodging. All the blame was placed with the women themselves, and none with their clients, despite the fact that without clients, there would be no prostitutes.

The Victorians had a fascination with the Whitechapel murders, but did not seem to care about the victims. It seemed that to middle-class minds, prostitution was a bigger sin than murder. George Bernard Shaw wrote, “ Jack the Ripper does the poor a favour”, not meaning that he believed prostitutes should be killed, but that the murders brought attention to Whitechapel, and with this came the exposure of their shocking poverty. Hundreds of news reporters wrote about the area, and with the murder details had to go the appalling living conditions endured by families in Whitechapel.

There was also a political dimension. The murders occurred just before the first election to the London Council, and also just before the first Mayoral Elections took place. A new party had just emerged - the Radicals, who wanted to “ do more for the poor”, in areas such as Whitechapel. With the murders drawing attention to the area, this seemed quite a good policy. It was also mentioned at the time whether the murders would have happened in the prosperous West End of London. If they had occurred, would more

effort have been put into catching Jack the Ripper? Would he have been caught?