

The historical context of early 19th century and interest in criminals



In the early nineteenth century, an interest in criminals and the common highwayman arose in Europe. Many magazines in London, such as Bentley's Miscellany, Fraser's Magazine, and The Athenaeum featured sections that were reserved for stories about highwayman and their numerous adventures. The growing interest in the subject inspired many authors to write about the various exploits of popular criminals and highwayman.

Some prominent examples of this type of novel were Edward Bulwer's Paul Clifford (1830) and Eugene Aram (1832); Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist (1838-39) and Barnaby Rudge (1841); and William Harrison Ainsworth Rookwood (1834) and Jack Sheppard (1839-40). Several of these novels were based upon famous crimes and criminal careers of the past (Eugene Aram, Dick Turpin in Rookwood, and Jack Sheppard); others derived from contemporary crime (Altick, 1970, p. 72). Although many authors chose to base their stories on criminals, William Harrison Ainsworth's Rookwood and Jack Sheppard are two of the best examples of the theme of 'crime and punishment' in the nineteenth century.

Ainsworth started his writing career as a writer of Gothic stories for various magazines. Gothic elements are included in Ainsworth's novel: the ancient hall, the family vaults, macabre burial vaults, secret marriage, and so forth (John, 1998, p. 30). Rookwood is a story about two half-brothers in a conflict over the family inheritance. The English criminal who Ainsworth decides to entangle in Rookwood was Dick Turpin, a highwayman executed in 1739. However, echoing Bulwer, Ainsworth's explanation for his interest in Dick Turpin (like Bulwer's explanation in his choice of Eugene Aram as a subject) is personal and familial (John, 1998, p. 31). Though the basis of the novels

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seem similar, Ainsworth treated Dick Turpin in a different way than Bulwer treated Eugene Aram. Ainsworth romanticizes history, but basically sticks to the facts (as far as he knew them). Perhaps more importantly, Ainsworth does not pretend that the Turpin he invents is the real Dick Turpin, nor does he attempt to elevate Turpin's social class status (John, 1998, p. 32).

Ainsworth recalls lying in bed listening to the exploits of 'Dauntless Dick', as narrated by his father. Despite Ainsworth's infatuation with the criminal, the real Turpin was no more interesting a character than an ordinary cat burglar. Besides highway robbery, his affairs included stealing sheep and breaking into farmer's houses, sometimes with the aid of confederates; and he took a turn at smuggling (Hollingsworth, 1963, p. 99).

Although Turpin appears in a considerable part of the novel, he really has no effect on the plot. He stole a marriage certificate, but the incident was not important to the plot. Although Turpin does not have much to do with the plot, he helps the novel celebrate the life of a highwayman. Ainsworth's Turpin was essentially innocent and good-natured, though courageous and slightly rash. He was very chivalrous and attractive in the eyes of the lady. An example of Turpin's personality is shown in an incident in Rookwood when he goes to a party at Rookwood Hall under the alias of Mr. Palmer. He makes a heavy wager against the capture of himself to a lawyer/thief catcher. Unreal as he was, Turpin undoubtedly was the cause Rookwood's success. Rookwood went into five editions in three years. This fact shows that Ainsworth's enthusiasm with criminals found its favor with the public. The success of Dick Turpin in Rookwood repeated in Ainsworth's Jack Sheppard (1839); in both cases the fact that the criminals were given a

crude vitality and individualizing speech entirely denied to other characters was taken to indicate the approval of their actions (Horsman, 1990, p. 88). The novel was separated in three 'epochs', 1703, 1715, and 1724. Its plot is less complicated than that of Rookwood. It is the story of two boys that are brought up as brothers: one (Thames Darrell) virtuous and one, (Sheppard), good hearted but mischievous. Jack Sheppard, like Rookwood, was written as a romance, but not in a Gothic setting. Unlike Rookwood, the whole story centers around Jack and his antics.

Throughout the novel Ainsworth stuck to history as best as he could. The real Jack Sheppard was born in 1702 and hanged at Tyburn on November 16, 1724, at the age of 21. He became a carpenter's apprentice when he was 15. The record shows that he never committed a crime until the age of 20. One may wonder why Ainsworth chose a character with such a short career in the crime business. The answer lies in the fact that the real Jack Sheppard was known for his daring escapes from incarceration. First, he escaped from a small prison called St. Giles Round-House. After he was reincarcerated, he and Edgeworth Bess (a supposed romantic interest of Sheppard at the time) escaped from Clerkenwell. The feats that probably made Sheppard most famous was his two escapes from the famous Newgate prison. These escapes were the 'meat' of the story. Ainsworth very rarely went into detail about the actual robberies, but described the escapes in great detail. For example, he escaped from Newgate the first time by slipping through a crack in the bars of the jail. One of the peculiarities of the event was that only one bar was removed for the escape. Questions have been raised whether or not it is possible for any human, besides a child, to fit through a gap that small.

After the escape, Sheppard was caught and returned to Newgate 11 days later. On October 15, he made his most famous escape of all, this time from a deeper part of the penitentiary. Sheppard was left unattended during the evening. He slipped his unusually small hands out of the heavy irons that bounded him, removed an iron bar fixed in a chimney, and worked his way to freedom through an incredible series of locked doors and walls. After he had escaped, he hid, but he left London only once. Jack went to see his mother, while on her death bed she begs him to leave the country, but Jack refuses to leave. After she dies, Jack goes to her funeral, and in front of everyone bows at his mother's grave. He is apprehended by authorities and never escapes from prison again. The personality of Jack Sheppard won the hearts of readers everywhere. Upon completion of the novel, it was dramatized at an incredible rate. Eight versions of the novel were produced in London—an unheard of number of dramatizations of that time. As a serial in Bentley's *Miscellany*, Jack Sheppard ran for thirteen months, through February 1840. Bentley issued the book in three volumes in October 1839, shortly after Ainsworth had completed the novel. The sales were tremendous. Jack Sheppard sold 3,000 copies in a week. Exactly why there was so much enthusiasm for these types of novels is a matter for wonder. Ainsworth's novels had, it is true, the elements to make a popular success: a spotless hero and an underdog to sympathize with, both pitted against a fearful villain; a glimpse of aristocracy, a suggestion of sex, hairbreadth adventures, and plenty of virtuous emotions (Hollingsworth, 1963, p. 140). Rookwood and Jack Sheppard are prime of the 'criminal' theme that was popular in the early nineteenth