CHAPTER 7

Jack the Representation: The Ripper in Culture

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Abstract

‘Jack the Ripper’, the serial killer active in London from 1888, has always been a fictional character, owing to the lack of identification and the propagation of often fanciful theories as to his identity. Fictionalised versions of the Ripper murders began contemporaneously with the events, and have proliferated over the succeeding years. The different strands of representation began early. Many of the fictional representations of the Ripper are realist in mode, and sometimes serious in intent, and exhibit a fascination with late-Victorian British history and culture. Others are more sensationalist and show how the Ripper has been influential in the portrayal of sexual violence in popular culture. Still others are fantastical, and in typically making the Ripper a supernatural monster or alien creature demonstrate a tendency to disassociate the Ripper’s murderous misogyny from human masculinity.

Keywords


Over a period of a few months in Autumn 1888, and within a few square miles of east London, five – or possibly more or fewer – women were murdered by the same person or persons unknown. All the victims were at the time of their deaths working principally as prostitutes. Whilst arrests were made, no charges were ever brought, and the perpetrator apparently escaped justice. Lacking a definite identity, contemporary accounts referred first to the ‘Whitechapel murderer’; then, more sensational, and on flimsy witness evidence and through submerged anti-semitism to ‘Leather Apron’ (Gilman 1991: 113–117). When ‘Jack the Ripper’ was added, almost certainly by an enterprising journalist, to this variable nomenclature, the mysterious murderer was provided with...
something that had the semblance of a name, a vocation, and a pathology. The aura of false certainty generated by what is essentially a placeholder name has allowed for the creation – more accurately, perhaps, the accumulation – of a series of descriptors in various categories which serve to identify Jack the Ripper in the popular imagination. Some of these are of the fancy dress variety – top hat, cloak and black bag; others are contextual and associative – fog, gas lamps, cobbled streets, cheery cockney prostitutes; and some partake of different explanatory modes: ‘Jack the Ripper’ signifies a royal cover-up, or a Masonic conspiracy.

Other versions of the Ripper exist, across the whole range of popular representation and academic enquiry. True crime writers and serious historians of the period continue the enquiry into either the identity of the killer(s) or the social conditions which prevailed at the time, and which possibly contributed to the events and the response to them. Some novelists and other creative producers follow a similar route, conducting more-or-less serious investigations into late Victorian British society, or speculative psychological analyses. The plenitudinous Ripper signals a fascination with the murders that has endured throughout the period since their cessation. Whatever the state of interest in Victoriana, the Ripper killings have over more than a century generated their own peculiar discursive domain. Largely independent of trends within historical representation – whether in fiction or historiography – the representation of the Whitechapel murders has in part consisted of the accumulation of ever-more exact and specific detail. This might be considered similar to the standard practices of exhaustively researched historical fiction, “an accumulation of references to clothing, furniture, décor and the like, that produces the past in terms of its objects, as a series of clichés” (Mitchell 2010: 3). However, the objective in many Ripper representations is not merely a quest to convincingly recreate the past, but to reveal it; to make visible that which was hidden, and therefore never part of the historical record. The attitude to the past exhibited in almost all Ripper fictions, whilst not necessarily demonstrating “the self-analytic drive that accompanies ‘neo-Victorianism’” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 5), has always been one in which history is provisional and malleable. Whilst some of the Ripper representations discussed here seem to abandon the historical setting altogether, placing Jack the Ripper in numerous bizarre and exotic circumstances, his very presence always drags the reader back to late Victorian London, swathed in Wildean and Sherlockian fog, but still residually real.

Ripper fictionalisation – realist in mode, albeit with sensationalist genre trappings – has its beginnings nearly contemporaneously with the crimes. In December 1888, international fascination with the Ripper case was evinced