

**RIPPING YARNS:  
THE NARRATIVE CREATION OF JACK THE RIPPER**

by

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, much critical attention has focused on the impact of the serial killer figure on such established literary genres as detective and gothic fiction. The present study reverses this mode of inquiry by looking at the effect of modernist and post-modernist narrative in shaping the cultural construction of archetypal serial murderer Jack the Ripper. Texts discussed include The Whitechapel Murders Papers (1889), Adelaide Belloc-Lowndes' The Lodger (1913), Iain Sinclair's White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings (1987) and Charles Palliser's Betrayals (1994). Of specific concern is the way in which the aesthetic co-option of serial murder has continually worked to obscure and depoliticize its gendered nature. The study closes by suggesting ways in which the wrongs of the Ripper might be re-written in order to produce a less misogynist and exotic conception of multiple murder.

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## INTRODUCTION

I'm not a butcher, I'm not a Yid  
Nor yet a foreign skipper,  
But I'm you're own lighthearted friend,  
Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper. (Kelley 14)

This taunting missive, sent from the alleged Ripper to Sir Melville MacNaughten in 1889, foregrounds the most notorious aspect of the Whitechapel murders: the absence of the culprit's identity. In the century following the close of London's infamous "Autumn of Terror", this space of absence has been flooded by a myriad of competing theories. Fiction writers and pseudo-scientific journalists alike have cast the perpetrator as doctor, butcher, artist, Prince, midwife and diabolist, each new conjecture appearing more enticing and provocative than the last. The Ripper case has become the ultimate site for a kind of "whodunit" role-playing game, in which lay enthusiast and self-declared expert can pit their logic and reasoning against a chaos of conflicting clues and evidence. Great indeed are the implied rewards for the lucky investigator who manages to crack the solution to this puzzling century-old enigma.

As an adolescent, I too was involved in this "Guess-the-Suspect" game, eagerly consuming all the latest offerings from the burgeoning Ripperology<sup>1</sup> industry. My fascination was sparked not just by routine teenage morbidity, but by an earlier proximity to the real. During the latter years of my childhood, the so-termed "Yorkshire Ripper" had been at large only a few hundred miles away from my then home in South-Western Scotland. Contemporary media treatment of this modern-day Ripper suggested that the perpetrator was both awesomely inscrutable and terrifying unpredictable—that, like some sort of supernatural bogeyman he could

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<sup>1</sup> A term which dedicated researchers of the Whitechapel case use to refer to their discipline.

strike anywhere at anytime, with relative impunity. I remember Peter Sutcliffe's eventual arrest for these murders in 1980 coming as somewhat of a ghoulish deflation— here was no mysterious stranger, but rather a pedestrian citizen whose name apparently appeared in three cross-listed police files (Canter 13). Why then the delay in apprehension, one might ask? An anonymous taped confession sent to the police by the alleged perpetrator had suggested that the suspect was from an entirely different geographic region than Sutcliffe. The recording, as it later turned out, was nothing more than a mordant piece of fiction put together by some nameless Ripper wannabe who remains unidentified. One can only imagine how grateful Sutcliffe must have felt towards the prankster at the time for conveniently throwing the investigation off its tracks.

It was while deliberating over this bizarre scenario that the present study suggested itself to me. The confusion over this latter-day Ripper rendered visible a process which has been in place since the days of his Victorian predecessor— a process in which the categorically mundane nature of misogynist violence is produced, manipulated and thwarted by fictional invention. Just as the faked confession in the Sutcliffe case worked to shield the real suspect from view, so have shifting fictional narratives in the last century effectively concealed the actual context of both the Whitechapel murders in particular, and serial murder in general. What do I mean by “actual context”? Following the groundbreaking work of Walkowitz, Caputi and Schmid, this study will recognize the milieu of serial killing as that of *domestic* violence as opposed to that of *exotic* deviance. For despite all the popular rhetoric about serial murder's bizarre randomness and obscure etiology, one of its chief factors remains depressingly constant. Its chief victims are drawn from traditionally disenfranchised subclasses (women, primarily, but also children and gay men), its chief perpetrators routinely associated with the West's gender

(male) and racial (white) centre. This pattern may point to a lot of things, but hardly, as the media coverage of my youth suggested, to the titillating incomprehensibility and esoteric “zaniness” of the crime. Why do we continue to view serial murder as a freak phenomena when its most prominent characteristics place it squarely within the realm of conventional social power relations? Critics have situated the source of this blindness in a number of different arenas— the following study will locate it in fictional narrative.

Fiction has always been the proper realm of Jack the Ripper. Perhaps most noticeably, the lack of definitive evidence as to his identity has forced commentators to embellish their theories with fabrication. Just as many Ripperologists have produced fiction while perusing facts, so too has our culture continually drawn the truth of the case from the pages of popular novels and pseudo-scientific treatises. As we shall see in Chapter One, the *fin-de-siècle* image of the Ripper as pathological physician was drawn from the proto-modernist aesthetics of popular novelists such as Wilde and Stevenson. An examination of The Whitechapel Murders Papers themselves and Adelaide Belloc-Lowndes’ The Lodger will allow us to trace the means by which emergent modernist tropes of the split self were reified in popular constructions of the Ripper. His aesthetic co-option allowed him to be seen as a cultural iconoclast rather than a disturbing avatar of socially-entrenched attitudes towards the disenfranchised and sexually-commodified female body. If we are to understand the import of the Whitechapel murders, we must first interrogate the fictionally-produced myth of their perpetrator’s alterity.

In Chapter Two, our interrogation shifts to a more recent milieu. The post-modern era, characterized by a new spirit of contingency, has produced an explosion of theories about the Ripper’s identity and the etiology of serial murder. We will investigate the political



ramifications of this new multiplicity through an examination of Iain Sinclair's 1987 White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings and Charles Palliser's 1993 Betrays. Whose interests are served, and whose ignored, in the aesthetic production of many Jacks, of innumerable and fractured suspects? How has the post-modern narrative's obsession with pluralism worked to distort or break down the power relations enacted in serial murder? These are but a few of the questions which this chapter considers. We will employ recent feminist, literary and criminological theory in our attempt to reach various solutions.

I propose an approach to serial murder literature which is both discursive and political. Once we recognize that the most canonical elements of the Ripper mythos are the result of an aesthetic production process rather than concrete certainty, it becomes possible to talk about *re-producing* our perception of serial murder in a more efficacious manner, a manner which will focus our attentions on the problem's possible solutions rather than upon its sham inscrutability. It is time to confront our negligent penchant for turning the narrative of the Ripper, and of all the little Jack the Rip-offs who have preceded him in the last hundred years, into neo-Gothic fairy tales and titillating avant-garde spectacles. As a culture, we need to accept social responsibility for our collective fantasies, particularly those which prefer to cast the ritualized slaughter of women as the deeds of a fiendishly fascinating rebel rather than extreme manifestations of an unequal social order.

I want to make a final note on the issue of textual choice. Thousands of volumes have been published on the Ripper since his 1888 inception into the popular imagination, rendering selection for this study extremely difficult. Due to length limitations, it has proved necessary to focus exclusively on those texts which represent a dominant trend of "Ripperature". This has

unfortunately forced the exclusion of various marginal works which would undoubtedly prove invaluable in a larger investigation<sup>2</sup>. I have also, largely by virtue of the project design, had to be restrictive in my selection of specific genres for study. While the legend of the serial killer was initially inaugurated in the print medium, it has more recently been affected and shaped by the conventions of supporting aesthetic genres such as film and popular music. A comprehensive study of the musical and cinematic construction of the mass killer in late twentieth-century popular imagination remains to be written.

Who was Jack the Ripper— insurgent radical, burlesque bogeyman, or convenient and bounded vehicle for the containment of our fears about the violent individual? We will explore all these possible solutions as we turn now to our investigation of the Ripper in turn-of-the-century cultural texts.

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<sup>2</sup> I urge the interested reader to refer to Alexander Kelley's Jack the Ripper: A Bibliography and Review of the Literature for a comprehensive listing of all the available literature.

## CHAPTER ONE: JACK THE RIPPER AND THE BIRTH OF MODERNISM

The popularity of “true crime” literature is certainly not unique to our century. Since the appearance of the Newgate calendar, and arguably much earlier, novelists, poets and ballad mongers have taken crime as subject matter. While Western literary intrigue with lawlessness remains constant, the forms in which this obsession is articulated are in perpetual flux. These fluctuations can and have been explained in a number of ways, including the shifting nature of the referent (crime itself) and the aesthetic sensibilities of the genre’s most prominent innovators. Such approaches are generally characterized by the assumption of a unilinear relationship between crime, as the subject to be narrated, and the resulting literature. By contrast, a discursive approach reverses this process and examines the means by which, to borrow Rothfield’s term, a “general economy of power” (xii) is woven into the perception and subsequent literary dissemination of criminal deviance. This mode of analysis allows us to unveil the specific power agendas which are being served in the formulation not only of new crime literature but also of new crimes themselves.

As strange as it sounds, the Ripper murders were the first sex crimes in our modern sense of the word. (Wilson and Odell 8)

And with this realization comes another— the sense that he is the *first of a kind* [my emphasis], that the death throes of a few whores represent the birth pangs of a newborn species emerging from the womb of time, and that what is being born here will shake the world.

All he wants is a name. (Scott 145)

The notion that Jack the Ripper was the world's first serial murderer, expressed again in these respective "non-fictional" and "fictional"<sup>3</sup> passages, is as old as the Whitechapel Murders themselves. It is also entirely unsubstantiated. The notorious fifteenth-century child-murderer Gilles de Rais and Hungary's Countess Elizabeth Bathory are only the most prominent of the Ripper's pre-Enlightenment forerunners; both Lombroso and Krafft-Ebing record similar instances of multiple, random sex crime prior to 1888 (Lombroso-Ferrero xxiv, Krafft-Ebing 124 *et passim*). Further research would no doubt produce further examples. The high profile of serial murder in our present era, as Philip Jenkins notes, is more likely the result of improved reporting and tracking methods rather than a sudden late twentieth-century explosion of perpetrators. What then is the source of this confusion, if even the briefest of historical surveys reveals that the crime is neither unique nor recent? Perhaps it can be traced to the aspect of the Whitechapel Murders which was indeed new and modern, or, as I shall contend, *modernist*— its mode of narration. This new style of description is best evidenced through a comparison of the Ripper case with the earlier nineteenth-century crime which most proximates it in notoriety and popularity as a source of fiction: the Burke and Hare scandal.

When the Irishman William Burke was hanged for murder in Edinburgh on the 28th of January, 1828, riots broke out all over the city. He and his partner William Hare (let off on a lesser charge for informing on Burke) murdered twelve members of the local populace in order to sell their corpses to local anatomy lecturers. After the hanging, mobs rallied outside the

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<sup>3</sup> A distinction that is extremely difficult to make in examining the corpus of "Ripperana".

building where the culprit's body was being held, demanding that it be exposed to their wrath. Later, in one of history's most profound ironies, Burke's skin was removed, tanned, and sold in strips to an eager public, while Edinburgh University Medical School retained his skeleton for a series of phrenological lectures (Barzun ix). Most curious about these circumstances, however, is the contrast between public attitudes towards the actual perpetrators and the ultimate commissioner of these crimes, the medical establishment itself. Contemporary evidence revealed that Dr. Knox, the reputable independent lecturer who received Burke and Hare's "goods", had on a number of occasions mutilated the distinguishing features of his cadavers lest they be recognized by his students. His knowledge of and complicity in the murders was indisputable. Yet while he did escape a lynching, Knox was exonerated both by the judicial organs of his own profession and (with some small exceptions) the press. The trial notes specify that, "In this affair there has been a clamor raised against medical men on no just foundation; as subjects must be had to lecture upon, or the most useful of sciences must die; and, unfortunately, human prejudices as to sepulture are so strong, that great difficulties occur in procuring bodies for dissection" (Barzun 15). It was far easier to condemn two lower-class Irish "ruffians" and their mistresses than an entire scientific profession.

Sixty years later, the Ripper murders broke out in London's East End, and, despite the absence of concrete evidence, public opinion linked the crimes with a member of the medical establishment. "In that favorite game of the Ripperophiles— guess his identity— the most popular and recurring answer of all is that of an MD", notes Caputi in The Age of Sex Crime; "... That identity provided the first major theory and it remains the dominant fictional explanation; the most common image of the Ripper usually includes a little black doctor's bag"

(123). While medicine had been deemed inculpable in the face of far more damning evidence only a few decades before, doctor-as-suspect became not only a sayable, but an extremely popular solution at the *fin-de-siècle*. Of course, as both Gilman (104) and Leps (118) point out, the murderer was also frequently imputed to be a Jew or a member of the lower social orders. It should be noted, however, that all theories of the Ripper's identity, whether they cast him as subaltern or epitome of the professional class, combine notions of his deviance with affirmations of his rationality and outward normalcy. His continued success in the wake of massive police observation, so the reasoning went, was a result of his sharp cunning and relatively benign appearance. This assumption may well be true, but as the murderer was never caught, all debates on his persona remain moot. In lieu of factual closure, we must focus on the depictions of the criminal which were disseminated. In the case of the Whitechapel murders, the culprit was produced as an insurgent grotesque of rational professionalism and fiendish madness, a stark contrast with the earlier presentation of Burke and Hare as contained embodiments of moral and geographic (by virtue of their Irish origins) Otherness.

What factors created these disparate productions of suspects at both the level of public perception and fiction? Certainly not raw facts alone, for, as we have seen, there was plenty of evidence to suggest widespread culpability in the Burke and Hare case. Neither should we assume that the grotesque rhetoric which inscribes the Ripper was produced simply by his evasion of capture, for almost all subsequent apprehended serial murderers have been presented in the same fractured manner.<sup>4</sup> The difference lies, as this chapter will contend, in the

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<sup>4</sup> Recent press coverage of the Ted Bundy and Paul Bernardo cases come to mind here— the conventional good looks and seeming normalcy of the culprits became as large a focus as the crimes themselves.

epistemological narratives which were invested with an ethos of truth at the time of each incident. These conflicting narratives are realism and early modernism.

The use of these terms will, of course, require some clarification. Both “realism” and “modernism” imply a wide range of techniques and practices which cannot and should not be reduced to a single coherent meaning. Furthermore, we must justify our imposition of these categories, which are typically evoked only in an aesthetic context, upon so-called “real” criminal activity. In his preface to Vital Signs: Medical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Lawrence Rothfield offers solutions to these concerns:

If a literary phenomenon such as realism emerges from a given cultural situation, we need to interpret it not by treating what goes on in a realistic novel as an allegory of the “general economy” of power, but by identifying the specific discourses that are woven into the novel and tracing them in the culture at large back to their disciplinary precincts, the local sites where they exercise their power. Only by proceeding in this way . . . can we hope to understand the cultural struggles in which these discourses engage and the role the novel can play in such struggles. (xii)

In other words, “realism” and “modernism” are not simply restricted aesthetic terms, but rather code words for disparate cultural paradigms enacted in literature. If the terms are produced from culture, it thus becomes possible to refer to specific cultural spectacles as being either realist or modernist. Further, he suggests that realism and modernism should be defined not simply by their narrative techniques or their historical prominence, but by the way that power and knowledge is mapped out in each. I will follow Rothfield’s use of these terms in the following discussion.

Rothfield argues that the ethos which sustained early and mid-nineteenth-century realism was that of “clinicism” (xiii). The appeal of the clinical model as master narrative was a product of many factors, including clinicism’s prominence at the time of realism’s inception and the long-time historical association of medicine with mimesis. Foremost among these was the means by which clinicism defined the individual:

For Balzac, Flaubert, and Eliot, the terms *comprehension*, *individual*, and *sincere* bear connotations that can be described without exaggeration as medical.

Comprehending social totality, in the realistic novel, means defining that totality not only as a milieu (with the biological overtones that word implies), but as a pathological milieu. Capturing the concrete realistically means maintaining faith that details will prove to be “both particular and typical” in the same way that medical diagnosis assumes that signs and symptoms will resolve into cases of disease. The individual, in turn, is defined by realistic fiction as a pathologically embodied person whose limits and potentialities— death and growth— are imposed by organic finitude. (148)

Thus the clinico-realist perspective, shared by novelists and doctors alike at the mid-century, subsumed all social and pathological phenomena within a system of specific etiology.

Individuals became types whose bodily and spiritual progression could be predicted through the observation of distinct symptoms. The insurgency of disease, be it physical or moral, was tamed through its subjection to the diagnostic authority of the novelist/physician. Medicine’s classificatory systems rendered all illnesses *namable* and thus *knowable*, emasculating the threat of sickness with the promise of a future understanding and cure.



The clinico-realist paradigm also operated in nineteenth-century criminology, medicine's sister science in the detection of deviance. It is within the realm of criminological theory that we can best observe the power relations which clinico-realism was used to ratify. The most vocal criminological proponent of realist identity was Cesare Lombroso, often referred to as the "father of modern criminology". First published in 1876, Lombroso's Criminal Man appropriates the realist movement's conception of human limitations and its claims to absolute objectivity. According to an extremely complex system of classification devised during countless autopsies on convicts, he claimed that all anti-social behavior was the result of biologically atavistic characteristics which are often visible on the body of the criminal. A certain hip breadth, nose length, or curve of the lip could indicate in a moment whether the bearer was an upright citizen or a natural scoundrel. Curiously enough, he claimed to have first formulated this theory during the post-mortem of a criminal who he would later (in post-1888 editions of Criminal Man) refer to as "an Italian Jack the Ripper" (5). He recalls the moment as follows:

At the sight of that skull, I seemed to see all of a sudden, lighted up in a vast plain under a flaming sky, the problem of the nature of the criminal— an atavistic being who reproduces in his person the ferocious instincts of primitive humanity and the inferior animals. Thus were explained anatomically the enormous jaw, high cheekbones, prominent superciliary arches, solitary lines in the palms, extreme size of the orbits, handle-shaped or sessile ears found in criminals, savages, and apes, insensibility to pain, extremely acute sight, tattooing, excessive idleness, and the irresistible craving for evil for its own sake, the desire not only to extinguish life in the victim, but to mutilate the corpse, eat its flesh, and drink its blood. (xxiv-v)

The born criminal, however threatening and insurgent, is never able to escape the incrimination manifested on his own face. Later on, the text notes, “There are innumerable cases on record, in which persons quite ignorant of criminology have escaped robbery or murder, thanks to the timely distrust awakened in them by the appearance of individuals who had tried to win their confidence” (50). Lombrosian criminology subjected all miscreants to a Foucauldian field of visibility<sup>5</sup> wherein their biological constitution determined their actions and quarantined them from the species of “normal” humanity.

A number of studies have already pointed out the extent to which Lombroso’s system of classification fed and engendered racist ideologies; there is no need to reiterate their arguments here. It is evident to even the most casual of observers, however, that most of the physiological features which Lombroso deems criminal belong to caricatures of non-white races. Certainly, positivist criminology perpetuated contemporary racism, but, perhaps more importantly for our purposes, it worked to depoliticize the interpretation of all anti-social behavior. Just as the late century press, as Leps notes, worked “to reduce events to their human, individual size; to present European political relations to the rhythm of royal trips and imperial hunting expeditions, and describe strikes as misunderstandings within the family of employers and workers” (106), so Lombroso’s popular system saw prostitution as the product of bad genes rather than poverty and understood riots as the result of the lower order’s biological atavism rather than of social discontent. Of course, we should be wary here of oversimplification; Lombroso actually only recognized one-third of all apprehended criminals as “born” miscreants. The remaining two-

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<sup>5</sup> “He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (Foucault 203). See “Panopticism” in *Discipline and Punish* for a further discussion of power relations and visibility.

thirds were classed into such other groupings as the “criminaloids” and the “insane criminals”, in which the Tainean forces of *moment* and *milieu* played as significant a role as *race* in the production of criminality. Despite this overture to the effects of social environment, Lombroso, however, remained firm in the belief that some degree of primitive atavism or hereditary deficiency lay at the heart of all criminal activity.

The literary and scientific clinico-realists were never able to appropriate the Ripper; denied his body, their chief object of knowledge, they were unable to impose their conception of pathological embodiment upon it. The modernists, as we shall see, had considerably more success, although both groups were initially (and to a certain extent still remain) engaged in contest over the epistemological ownership of the crimes. Once again, it must be reiterated that the categories of realism and modernism are not being used to refer to a particular historical moment (in which case, their use would be highly anachronistic), but rather to specific ways of seeing and narrating experience. Having touched upon the way of seeing offered by the clinico-realist paradigm, it is now time to explicate the vantage of modernism. This comparison will better prepare us to contrast the political efficacy of each model in its struggle over the emerging discourse of serial murder.

If the epistemology of clinico-realism worked to reduce deviance to a problem of individual identity, modernism, by contrast, actively rejected “the bourgeois claim to a stable ego” (Thompson 130). This problematization of fixed identity is, according to Rothfield, one of the three major components of modernism’s rejection of the realist paradigm:

One species of modernism, exemplified in the work of Joyce and Woolf, may be characterized by its technical innovation, its challenging of the realistic novelist’s

claim to the efficiency of his or her techniques . . . the embodied person is no longer the fundamental organized entity from which the novelist begins . . . Kafkaesque modernism challenges realism on the issue of the opposition between truth and pathology (making the pathological perspective truly real). (160-61)

In the third form of modernism, which Rothfield associates with Conrad's work, "the point of attack is neither the embodied self, nor the pathological viewpoint, but the professional ethos, the vocational impulse which . . . sustains both realism and medicine" (161). All three of these branches converge to attack the authority of the physical body as a marker of potential, and, perhaps most importantly, to destabilize the moral dominance of those who have traditionally claimed the objective ability to read the body's meaning. This is not to suggest that the body becomes a meaningless signifier in the modernist paradigm; on the contrary, it becomes a hermeneutic subject. But the meaning of the modernist body, unlike that of the realist, is coded and veiled rather than explicit. This meaning is not explicit to casual observers (Lombroso's "persons quite ignorant of criminology"); its comprehension is instead dependent on the fulfillment of a rigorous interpretive quest. And the bearer of clinical authority is no better equipped to pursue this quest than any other reader. The distinction between professional and intuitive knowledge, pathology and health, is collapsed in modernism's assault on realist paradigms.

We have briefly discussed the effects of clinico-realism upon criminology; what, in turn, might be the impact of modernism's master narratives upon the same discipline? Might it produce a criminal whose actions seem irreducible to pathological meaning and bear little or no relation to his biological or class origins? Might it produce all the tropes which have come to

surround Jack the Ripper as half-patient and half-doctor, half-racial Other and half-indigenous Briton? It is easy, even at this early point, to detect parallels between the modernist project and the construction of serial homicide at the turn of the century. As I turn now to an investigation of two Ripper texts, I will not belabor this connection, but rather return once more to the question of power relations. What was gained in the conflation of early modernist impulses with the reporting and narrative dissemination of London's most notorious serial murderer? What assumptions has this relation either allowed or prevented us from making about the nature of the case? These questions will allow us to gauge the constructed nature of multiple sexual murder, typically presented as an unmediated act of violence, and to set the stage for our later analysis of post-modernism's reinvention of serial homicide.

*A Likely Suspect: The Whitechapel Murders Papers and the quest for the Ripper*

After the double murder of Elizabeth Stride and Kate Eddowes on the 30th of September, 1888,<sup>6</sup> the Lord Mayor's office offered a reward of five hundred pounds for information leading to the capture and arrest of the East End menace. The response was overwhelming. Countless letters were sent to both the C.I.D. and the Mayor's office, approximately four hundred of which have been preserved today in the Whitechapel Murders Papers at the City of London Record's Office. The letters, some now missing and many illegible, were written by a wide section of the local and international community. German scientists, middle-class housewives with professed psychic ability, delusional alcoholics, former soldiers, and the victims' fellow "unfortunates" were but a few of the respondents who felt compelled to add their insight to the investigation. Some of the letters contain elaborate schemes, others only brief requests for a policeman to be

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<sup>6</sup> Recognized commonly as the third and fourth of the Ripper's victims, although "experts" still routinely disagree on the actual number of lives he claimed.

sent to the writer's home. Five hundred pounds was, after all, a lot of money; few people wanted to trust their cunning plans to the arbitrary whims of the London postal system. But what the writers all share is, obviously, a common desire for the success of their solution, whether that desire be financially or morally motivated. As very little concrete evidence was available to the public, however, the greatest hope one had of achieving this success (foregoing independent proof of the killer's identity) lay in guessing or suggesting the most *likely* suspect. And, as we shall see, the public's chief resource in assessing and authorizing the "likelihood" of any particular suspect was narrative itself.

The term "narrative" has a multiplicity of meanings here. The most obvious narrative source of public opinion was the press, an organ which functioned during the murders, as Leps notes, to "produce a consensual position supportive of established power relations, while increasing circulation and taking on the role of champion of truth, and of the just cause" (116). The public turned to the press for information on the new murders, and most significantly, for an interpretive framework for the crimes. An editorial from the September 19, 1888 Times cast the murders as the result of self-perpetuating deviance:

We have long ago learnt that neglected organic refuse breeds pestilence. Can we doubt that neglected human refuse as inevitably breeds crime, and that crime reproduces itself like germs in an infected atmosphere, and becomes at each successive generation more deadly, more bestial, more absolutely unrestrained? It is not that the amount of crime necessarily increases in proportion to its intensity. On the contrary, just as a house is all the cleaner because its rubbish and refuse have all been shot away out of sight, so society at large may show a smaller percentage of crime

when its vicious and criminal refuse has all been segregated in particular spots. (1)

In other words, to paraphrase Gilman's assessment of contemporary Ripper rhetoric, "like begets like" (Gilman 111). The passage both allows the reader to believe that crime is a limited phenomenon which is produced by autogenesis, not by social malaise, and advocates the containment of the criminal classes within a visible and bounded space (Leps 123). Its rhetoric etiologizes deviance as the predictable product of deviance itself, and quells the threat of unpredictability implicit in the murders by suggesting victim and perpetrator are not "you and me" (i.e. the general readership), but neglected human refuse. Law-abiding and financially independent readers need have little fear that the scourge of Whitechapel would venture into their own neighborhood, as the nature of deviance is to remain within its own defined milieu.

This affirmation of the spatialized and self-engendering nature of the crimes, an epitome of clinico-realism's concept of the bordered self, is scattered heavily throughout the letters in The Whitechapel Murders Papers. One writer, a Mr. Henry Armitage, claims that "[t]he Whitechapel Murders are not an English crime, altho [sic] done on English soil" (235). Another suggests that the perpetrator could only be a member of "the lower orders of workers" (135). Most amusing, and most telling, of all is the letter from an anonymous writer which demonstrates the extent to which all non-British Others were amalgamated into one generic whole in the imperial imagination:

Since the religion of Buddha is now practiced under the protecting arm of the British government in London— is it probable or possible that some votary of its sectarians— such for example as the Thugs who are bound to offer human sacrifices to their deity may be the assassin of these unfortunate victims? (117)

The fact that the Thug sect were associated with Hinduism, not Buddhism, and further that the concept of human sacrifice is entirely alien to Buddhist doctrine, is of little concern to the writer. In his search for the likeliest culprit, the Orient as general category becomes a marker for a very specific and extremely vicious form of murder.

The Jack-as-Other theory is represented in twenty-five of the record's ninety-nine "whodunit" letters,<sup>7</sup> rendering it the most popular solution. Terming such letters simply classist or racist misses the point, for such a statement might imply that letters which formulate different solutions are less biased. Almost all of the letters promote, in one form or another, imperialist or anglocentric tropes; what differs is simply their method of articulation. The foreign Ripper letters imply that race and class are simply a manifest quality of moral character, and vice versa. "Other" (i.e. newly visible) crimes, such as serial murder, are conceptualized as the work of "Other" criminals. This thought process is mimicked in the letter which suggests that the killer "may be a large animal of the Ape species belonging to some wild beast show" (150). This obvious allusion to Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in Rue Morgue" is particularly interesting here. First published in 1841, Poe's story of a murderous orangutan is routinely hailed as the first modern detective story (Black 16). In Fiction, Crime and Empire, Thompson claims that the tale exemplifies the "nineteenth-century culture of knowledge" (44). While, as he further suggests, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the protagonist Dupin works in a strictly empirical fashion (45), the detective's ratiocinative method is predicated on the belief that knowledge can be absolute, and that behaviors do reduce to types and conventions when enough

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<sup>7</sup> Not all of the letters propose a theory of the culprit's identity. Many are concerned instead with indicting the police, formulating schemes for the killer's capture, or soliciting professional services.



facts have been obtained. The Jack-the-foreigner letters also affirm the belief in knowledge as absolute. In doing so, they assert the power structures operating within the realist paradigm.

Might we then expect a different “economy of power” to operate in those letters which cast the culprit not as sinister exotic, but rather as a representative of the British professional classes? Might such a configuration prove more politically emancipatory for the victim classes, whose sufferings had hitherto been presented as the result of a self-determined fall? The Jack-as-doctor theory, represented in nineteen of the Whitechapel letters, remains extremely popular. Recent culture has embraced this image of the killer and, accordingly, the rhetorical assumptions about serial murder which it contains. It is therefore important to pay particularly close attention to the tropes at work within these early Doctor Jack letters.

The most striking of the killer-as-medico letters comes from a Mr. Charles Latham, who provides not only a theory of identity but also a possible motive for the perpetrator:

A man of some means and considerable knowledge of surgery and medicine has evolved some theory relative to the generative organs in women, after exhaustive study and research, finds the path blocked from the inability to observe these organs under a condition of activity and excitement . . . brooding upon his failure so affects his mind that he becomes so far mad as to decide to procure what he wants, as ready as possible, under the required conditions of activity; in all other respects, the man is sane. (302)

Murderous tendencies do not necessarily denote insanity. Another writer affirms this point, arguing that the perpetrator cannot possibly be a maniac, for the maniac betrays his nature with “fiendish laughter” and “frenzy and epilepsy” (200). These letters foreground what Rothfield has

identified as modernist traits: the Kafkaesque possibility that psychopathological deviance and sanity can co-exist in one host, and a Conradian critique of medical ethos. After all, any discipline whose elect are capable of such savagery (and Latham seems to suggest that it is the act of over strenuous study itself which has precipitated the crimes) can hardly maintain strong public support. And, indeed, the medical profession was progressively falling into disrepute during the last few decades of the century. Commenting on that period, Rothfield contends: “The double shift in the status of medicine—from an authoritative science to an auxiliary one, and from a progressive to a subordinate social praxis—has important ramifications, including a new wave of antagonism against medicine and medical professionals” (150). The association of the Whitechapel murders with medicine thus worked to trouble further the already declining authority of the profession.

The medicalized Ripper could thus be, and frequently was, read as a symbol of the disruption of the clinico-realist power/knowledge paradigm, a marker for the indeterminate and fluctuating nature of identity. The problem, of course, is that within the rhetoric of modernism, such disruption is typically presented as liberating, as capable of ushering in “a new era of human emancipation” (Thompson 8). By imbuing serial homicide with modernist *topoi*, we create the possibility for the Ripper’s deeds to be celebrated or even commended. Indeed, as Caputi points out, they often are. For example, R.E.L. Masters comments in Sex Crimes in History that the murders were “not committed without a certain redeeming grace, a saving wit, a mitigating sophistication and *savoir-faire*” (81). Saving and mitigating for whom, one wonders? Certainly not for the Ripper’s female victims. The Ripper’s modernist construction not only allied him with the *avant-garde* by emphasizing his fractured identity, but also worked to

transform serial homicide into a problem of *knowledge* rather than of social inequality or misogyny. Only a handful of the Whitechapel letters, and indeed a tiny minority of the studies subsequently published about the case, display any concern with the atrocious living conditions of, and socially negligent attitudes towards, the Ripper's prostitute victims. Instead, efforts are directed towards deciphering the great code of the killer's identity. Rather than asking why this happened, we restrict our inquiries to "whodunit"? Theories upon theories have been produced to attempt to argue this (arguably no longer important) latter question, while the former remains largely ignored.<sup>8</sup> The modernist framing of serial homicide, while not in itself misogynist, has been used to obscure and bypass concerns about the social and gendered context of the crime. For these issues to be addressed, the narrative context in which the Ripper murders are framed must be transformed.

It would be foolish, of course, to suggest that current misogynist glorifications of serial killers as daring and clever chameleons are simply a result of narrative framing; women-hating is the result of a particular system of power and, as such, can permeate all the aesthetic forms and genres which that system produces. Yet narrative has undeniably functioned as the central vehicle for the propagation of an at least apolitical, at most, a blatantly misogynist, interpretation of the Whitechapel Murders. It seems only appropriate that a critique of the Ripper's construction should subvert the narratives which spawned his mythos. One of the most notable, and perhaps most misinterpreted, of these critiques is, ironically, the text which first brought the Ripper-as-Doctor<sup>9</sup> myth to a mass audience: Adelaide Belloc-Lowndes The Lodger.

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<sup>8</sup> Excepting, of course, the excellent work of Jane Caputi, Judith Walkowitz and David Schmid.

<sup>9</sup> Admittedly, Sleuth's profession is never explicitly stated. He does, however, carry a Gladstone bag, and display a penchant for performing late-night laboratory experiments.

***Lodging Complaints: Out-sleuthing the Sleuth in Lowndes' The Lodger***

In the long history of crime, it has very seldom been the case that a woman has betrayed one who has taken refuge with her. The timorous and cautious woman has not infrequently hunted a human being fleeing his pursuer from her doorstep, but she has not revealed the fact that he was ever there. In fact, it may also be said that such a betrayal has never taken place unless the betrayer has been actuated by love of gain or longing for revenge. So far, perhaps because she is subject rather than citizen, her duty as a component part of civilized society weighs but lightly on women's shoulders. (Lowndes 123)

This passage is but one of the many in Lowndes' text which has earned The Lodger, first serialized in 1911, a disreputable standing with feminist scholars. As Laura Marcus notes in her introduction to the novel's 1996 edition, the above passage was frequently cited by Lowndes' anti-suffragist contemporaries as evidence of women's poor sense of civic duty (Marcus xx). Certainly The Lodger is fraught with many elements which seem strange, if not downright objectionable, in our present context. Moving the action from London's East to West End, the novel focuses on a landlady's discovery that her new lodger is none other than the fearsome "Avenger" who has claimed the lives of four women in a two-week period. Most peculiar of all is the protagonist Ellen Bunting's reaction to this revelation. Rather than alerting the police or turning him out of doors, she develops a strong protective instinct, and even a certain sympathy, for this killer whom she terms "a nice gentle gentleman" (199). Near the opening of the novel the narrator remarks, "it hadn't taken the landlady very long to find out that her lodger had a

queer dislike and fear of women . . . but Mrs. Bunting had no very great opinion of her sister women, so that didn't put her out. Besides, where one's lodger is concerned, a dislike of women is better than— well, the other thing" (43). Needless to say, her sympathy for her lodger, the curiously named Mr. Sleuth, is not paralleled with a similar fellow feeling for his "fallen" victims (this time presented as alcoholics rather than prostitutes) when the text occasionally touches upon them.

The narrative, while not stylistically innovative, nonetheless reproduces many of the conventions created by modernism's appropriation of the Ripper. Mr. Sleuth is presented as an amalgam of good and evil, a scientific adept who successfully evades police apprehension (and subsequent epistemological closure) time and time again. Society's conventional organs of deviance detection, the police force and the psychiatric profession, are unable to apprehend him, for his insurgent cunning supersedes their deductive methods. This lack of closure and capture has subsequently become a staple of most modern Ripper fictions. Caputi, who sees this treatment as one of the most damaging elements of the Ripper legend, writes, ". . . the motif of the Ripper's immortality . . . functions not only to signal an eternal continuance of male sexual violence, but, at the same time, to provide a symbolic mirror for the actual imitative and similar crimes that have regularly recurred, as the media recite, ever since Jack the Ripper" (34). Mr. Sleuth, as a physical presence, disappears at the close of The Lodger, but the threat of his potential vengeance towards Mrs. Bunting, and indeed all women, remains thick in the air.

In light of these elements, how can we interpret Lowndes' text as a critique or problematization of serial murder's misogynist construction? It is useful to consider the way in which knowledge as a commodity is deployed throughout the narrative. As discussed earlier,

serial murder was first inducted into cultural consciousness as a problem of *knowledge*. A lucrative award, both financial and moral, awaited the individual who could solve the mystery of the murders. Truth was thus equated with status. The modernist construction of serial murder may have disrupted pre-existing notions of the embodied self, but it did not destabilize the *ethos* of knowledge as a category. In The Lodger, however, knowledge of the killer's identity is neither valuable nor particularly difficult to obtain. Ellen Bunting suspects the guilt of her lodger only a few days after he moves in. After all, his actions are hardly inconspicuous—he turns all the portraits in his room to the wall because he feels the eyes of the female subjects following him, loudly chants misogynist tracts from the bible while locked in his room, and is only ever absent from his lodgings at the times of the murders. His overtness is almost laughable. More amusing still is the inability of the other characters, Mr. Bunting, his daughter Daisy and the policeman Joe Chandler to see the truth which is literally under their noses.<sup>10</sup> Chandler, who from his position might be expected to know most of all about the case, speculates, “I’ve a notion—a savage, fierce-looking devil he must be . . . But I waver . . . sometimes I think it’s a sailor—that foreigner they talk about, that goes away for eight or nine days in-between to Holland maybe or France. Then again, I says to myself that it’s a butcher, a man from the Central Market” (133). While he ponders, Mrs. Bunting remains stubbornly mute. The spectre of the violent male predator may be foreign to Joe and the others, but to her he is all too familiar.

This familiarity comes not only from her relationship with Mr. Sleuth but also from the surrounding environment which is shown to celebrate and spectacularize the Avenger's ritualized acts of gynocide. The text describes the reaction of Mr. Bunting to a newspaper report that the

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<sup>10</sup> Sleuth, on returning from his late-night excursions, conducts “scientific experiments” in the kitchen which fill the house with a “queer” smell.

Avenger has started pinning cards inscribed with his *nom-de-plume* upon his victims. “‘A funny kind of visiting card, eh?’ Bunting laughed. The notion struck him as downright comic” (39).

The same paper notes, only a few days later, that “the *excitement* [my emphasis] grows and grows. It is not too much to say that even a stranger to London would know that something very unusual is in the air” (61). The slaughter of women thus becomes the source of a titillating tourist spectacle rather than of mourning or protest. Those who refuse to join in “the fun” face ostracism. When Chandler reveals to the Bunting family that the Avenger’s knife has been found, the result is general merriment:

“Oh, I’d give anything to see that knife!” exclaimed Daisy, clasping her hands together.

“You cruel, bloodthirsty girl!” cried her stepmother passionately.

They all looked round at her, surprised.

“Come, come, Ellen!” said Bunting reprovingly. (77)

It is the denial, not the celebration, of the murder’s titillating aspects which triggers their censure. Of course, Mrs. Bunting’s objection here is rather curious— she is offended not by the knife’s role in a number of murders, but, as the surrounding narrative implies, by the possibility that it might betray the identity of its owner. Her passionate defense and protection of the man whom she alone knows to be a gynocidal terrorist is the most intriguing and problematic aspect of the text, and deserves further consideration here.

The media sources in the novel make constant reference to the alleged ambiguity of the culprit’s persona. Mrs. Bunting has a difficult time reconciling the media-generated image of the mysterious “Avenger” with the banality of Mr. Sleuth: “Mrs. Bunting always visioned the Avenger as a black shadow in the centre of a bright blinding light— but the shadow had no form

or definite substance. Sometimes he looked like one thing, sometimes another" (114). This fear of the formless is entirely collapsed by the concrete physicality of the man she knows to be the source of the city's terror:

It comforted her to be up there, talking to Mr. Sleuth, instead of thinking about him downstairs. It seemed to banish the terror which filled her soul— aye, and her body too— at other times. When she was with him, Mr. Sleuth was so gentle, so reasonable, so— so grateful. (72)

And, she might also add to the list, so real. The thrall in which the killer holds London is predicated on his presentation as a disembodied subject, a faceless monster who is everywhere and nowhere. In the resulting confusion, all men are potential perpetrators, all women potential victims. But in lodging the Avenger in her dwelling, Mrs. Bunting quite literally contains him. In the flesh, ensconced behind the walls of her house, he is simply a man whose threat may be anticipated and avoided; unleashed into the night, however, he metamorphosizes into a mythic and omnipresent beast. Little wonder, therefore, that she should be so deathly afraid of losing her lodger, for with his absence comes her reinstatement as a victim, not simply of the Ripper's deeds but also of his ubiquitous mythos.

The potential for Mrs. Bunting's victimization at the loss of her lodger is not strictly metaphorical. Before Mr. Sleuth's arrival, the Buntings were on the verge of utter financial ruin. Their venture out of the ranks of servitude into the realms of the marketplace has failed miserably. "Where was the good of having been an upright, conscientious woman all her life long, if it only led to this utter degrading poverty and wretchedness?" (15), ponders the landlady in despair. Her spirits improve dramatically upon the arrival of Mr. Sleuth:



How comfortable it was to know that upstairs, just over her head, lay, in the well-found bed she had bought with such satisfaction at an auction held in a Baker Street house, a lodger who was paying two guineas a week! Something seemed to tell her that Mr. Sleuth would prove “a permanency”. In any case, it wouldn’t be her fault if he wasn’t. As to his—queerness, well, there’s always something funny in everybody. (35)

Having Mr. Sleuth indoors keeps the Buntings “indoors”. And the outside, as both Lowndes and her contemporary readers knew, was the spatial domain of the multiple murderer. All of the Ripper’s victims but the last, Mary Jane Kelly, were killed in public spaces. Indeed, a number of the murdered women apparently encountered him while trying to earn the money for a night’s board. Of course, there is little to suggest that Mrs. Bunting, however impoverished, will go the way of the Avenger’s prey. Her fiercely tee-totaling nature is habitually juxtaposed with their alcoholism. Nonetheless, the text foregrounds the susceptibility of all disenfranchised women, whether by virtue of addiction, old age, or poverty, to exploitation. After the lodger disappears at the close of the novel, Mr. Bunting expresses concern about the safety of his beautiful young daughter Daisy. “Mr. Sleuth won’t hurt Daisy, bless you!” replies Ellen; “Much more likely to hurt me” (250). Lowndes is being strictly accurate to the original case here. The Ripper most commonly preyed upon middle-aged, destitute and so-called “morally tainted” women who were apparently deemed more dispensable than their younger, more virtuous (virtue being a commodity which the poor woman could little afford) sisters.

In the final lines of the novel, we learn that the Buntings have re-entered the service (their boarding house apparently unsustainable without the generous payments of Mr. Sleuth)

and the Avenger has disappeared. Killer and witnesses have thus effectively switched their textual places. The Buntings, once active agents in the free market, are now contained within the home of a respectable lady, while the still-uncaught murderer roams freely and invisibly throughout the countryside. It is this closure, dramatizing the gendered impotence of knowledge in solving or taming the threat of serial murder, that forms the true *dyslogia* of The Lodger.

Lowndes' Ur-text of serial gynocide can and must be read as an enactment of the means by which "old" patriarchal systems maintain their authority within 'new' social phenomena rather than an affirmation of the Edwardian anti-suffragist movement. Knowledge as social currency is of little value to the disenfranchised; Mrs. Bunting must conceal the truth or face destitution and psychological victimization. In emphasizing the mordantly gleeful reception of the murders, Lowndes also suggests that the greater social order has little interest in discovering the truth of sexual murder, which must ultimately be more banal than its legends. The public prefer to retain the image of the killer as bizarre enigma. Indeed, most subsequent film versions have focused on the "mysterious" nature of Mr. Sleuth, rather than upon the dilemma of Mrs. Bunting. This interpretation both misses the point and reinstates the very processes which Lowndes takes issue with in the text—the spectacularization of violence which allows us to be excited by rather than appalled by the mass slaughter of women. A more politically efficacious interpretation of The Lodger, and indeed of the Ripper murders themselves, would have to deconstruct the mythic unknowability of the perpetrator.

It might seem strange to look for such an interpretation in the post-modern genre which, as David Richter has noted, celebrates "the impossibility of solving mysteries, the inadequacy of the epistemology inherent in the detective process, the nausea-provoking contrariness of objects

and clues, the emotional dead-end of aporia” (106). Indeed, these characteristics of the post-modern detective story seem to merge perfectly with what we have acknowledged as the socially-reductive vision of serial homicide. But if one task of the post-modern narrative is to fête epistemological collapse, another is to undermine and expose the arbitrary nature of canonical discourse systems. Thus, while post-modernity has the potential to emphasize further and exaggerate the apolitical unknowability of Jack the Ripper, it is also capable of ridiculing and collapsing the narratives of mystery, prowess and intrigue which surround him. In our next chapter, we will explore the nature and effect of these two contrasting tendencies in Iain Sinclair’s White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings and Charles Palliser’s Betrayals.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### JACKS OF ALL TRADES— SERIAL MURDER IN THE POST-MODERN WORLD

“Well, I don’t know. That’s what everybody wants to know. Why don’t you tell me?” — *Convicted serial murderer Jack Trawick, on being questioned about his motivation during a televised interview.*

In an age which, to paraphrase playfully Deleuze and Guattari, produces schizos in the same way it produces Prell Shampoo (qt. in Harvey 53), convicted multiple murderer Jack Trawick is a relatively minor figure, possessing none of the poetic leanings of “Son of Sam” David Berkowitz or the occult impulses of Nightstalker Richard Ramirez. Nonetheless, his confession to the brutal rape and slaughter of numerous women along the Northwest Pacific coast rendered him attractive fodder to the producers of tabloid television show Final Justice. During the course of his half-hour television interrogation in early 1996, Trawick was run through all the now-familiar representational conventions first established with the Ripper case—much was made, for example, of his benign external appearance and distinguished professional status. Little was made, however, of his profession of complete ignorance regarding his motivations. His claim “not to know”, however sarcastically delivered, was greeted with mute acceptance, even veneration. After all, Trawick was reciting what has become, in our late-capitalist era, the creed of the sexual psychopath. We, like the Victorians, still like to see our serial killers as bizarre grotesques, but are less willing, or able, to etiologize their pathology within a definite causation model.

This reluctance may in part be due to the sheer proliferation of serial murderer images in our own time. While the nineteenth-century had one “Jack” on which to model its diagnosis of

multiple murder, we now have “Jacks of all trades,” a full pantheon of serial killers whose identities, ways of operating and psychological backgrounds are diverse. Sensationalist media coverage of the trials of lesbian serial murderer Aileen Wuornos (whose victims were straight male “Johns”) and Atlanta child killer Wayne Williams have fed public belief that this is a kind of crime which could be committed at any time by anyone for any reason, and that its victims need not necessarily be women. This “belief” remains largely unfounded, as the vast majority of serial murder victims are still females, but nonetheless it remains a popular one. And indeed it was largely in response to this popularity, and the resulting anxiety that it promoted, that the F.B.I. finally coined a term for the phenomena which had been nameless during Whitechapel’s Autumn of Terror. “Serial Homicide” as category is a product of nineteen-seventies criminology, and, true to its post-modern origins, it functions less to define the crime precisely than to signify its multiplicity. In their excellent survey article “The Serial Murderer’s Motivations: An Interdisciplinary Review,” DeHart and Mahoney condense the F.B.I.’s description as follows: “A serial murderer is an individual who murders two or more victims over a period of time which entails breaks. . . between victims; the length of these intervals may range from a few days to several years” (30). What is most striking about this definition is what it lacks; there is little concern or attempt to theorize the identity of the typical culprit, and even the temporal description of the crime is somewhat arbitrary. After all, as the authors later admit, it is possible that many apprehended murderers may have been intending to commit a full series before being thwarted by capture. While we have a term for the problem, we are far less inclined to form a model of the “usual suspect” than the Victorians.

I must correct myself a bit here— it is not that contemporary research organs have shown a reluctance to investigate serial homicide. Indeed, as evidenced by DeHart and Mahoney's listing of thirteen different motivational hypotheses, theories abound. What is missing, rather, is consensus. Granted, much remains unknown about unknown about the crime, but it is curious that its few consistent gender characteristics are generally ignored or trivialized by theorists in favour of more abstract factors (i.e. the urbanization model<sup>11</sup>). It is safe to say that contemporary approaches to perpetrator identity and motive remain highly pluralistic. The irony of this pluralism is particularly evident when we consider Wayne Morrison's suggestion that the deviant criminal in our age acts to ally himself with a *solid identity* which he feels that the surrounding post-modern climate is denying him/her:

[T]he criminal is caught in a net of contingencies, and must fight to make something of himself— the criminal is in danger of not possessing a self— hence the leap into crime is the desperate attempt to exert control over his (non) self . . . He has made himself into a criminal— he has become a subject of the crimo-logos, he has fallen into the circle of the label; he has failed to understand himself (to place himself in a position where he could look at himself and say, 'yes, that is me'). Instead he will become the object of the knowledges of normalcy, the disciplines of psychology which will open out his soul and strip bare his *motivation*, he desires to step out of the circle, but chooses

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<sup>11</sup> A model which sees urban overcrowding as the source of increased sociopathic behavior. As to why urbanization should only produce multiple murder tendencies in a specific (male) portion of the population, it has little to say. Nor does it address the instances of serial murder in rural communities, i.e. the Ed Gein case. [DeHart and Mahoney 30]

the *means* of criminality . . . [T]hrough the criminal act he has taken control of the self, but this self is *now to be controlled and penalized* by the power of others. (Morrison 381-82)

Certainly, anyone with even a fleeting familiarity with tabloid journalism has heard the common refrain of the apprehended sensation killer that they “just wanted to be a somebody.”<sup>12</sup> But the joke, according to Morrison, is on them; for not only does one abnegate the power of self-definition in adopting the role of serial killer, becoming instead the subject of various disciplines, but, quixotically, one seeks stability or self-definition through a course of action whose perpetrators are portrayed, in true post-modern style, as indistinct and unidentifiable. Thus the serial killer in the post-modern era may be said to occupy the same cultural position as he did at the *fin-de-siècle*—that is, a position outside of conventional identity politics. In the nineteenth-century context, as we have seen, this position was that of the anti-realist. His personality was split rather than cohesive or inherited, his mind sharp rather than criminally deficient. So, too, do we now represent the modern multiple murderer’s attempt to “be someone” as outside of the post-modern aesthetic. And what exactly is the post-modern aesthetic? For the purposes of expediency, it will be necessary to sketch out only a brief response to this complex problem.

While my earlier statements may have implied that post-modernism deals strictly with the rejection of identity, I want to stress that it has an equal investment, as particularly evident in the post-colonial process, in the establishment of new or hitherto unacknowledged identity. These processes may seem contradictory until we realize that they stem from a similar renunciation of the master-narratives of hegemonic Western culture. Thus the adoption of a self-defined

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<sup>12</sup> See Black’s chapter on Mimesis and Murder in *The Aesthetics of Murder* for a more comprehensive survey of this tendency.

nationalism by a formerly colonized country is just as “post-modern” as nationalism’s rejection elsewhere, in its resistance to pre-established cultural tropes. Implicit in both the act of acceptance and rejection is an affirmation of contingency and pluralism, those two great buzz-words, among so many, of the late-capitalist era which signify the simultaneous existence of many different realities, many different meanings. Multiplicity remains one of the central theoretical hallmarks of the post-modern, whether one is its fan or critic. Frederic Jameson terms the fractured nature of recent cultural production as “an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history” (qt. in Smyth 24), while Linda Hutcheon recognizes the emancipatory possibilities suggested in the rejection of universals<sup>13</sup> (Hutcheon 118). While these particular scholars have highly different attitudes towards the import and political viability of the post-modern, their positions are united through a common concern with the processes of cultural fragmentation.

While the “reality”<sup>14</sup> of serial murder, as suggested by Wayne Morrison, may represent a challenge to late-capitalist identity politics, then the phenomenon’s fractured cultural reproduction, as evidenced in our earlier discussion of multiple causation models, has become supremely post-modern. While late-Victorian and early modernist accounts of the Whitechapel murders viewed the protagonist from the comforting vantage of sanity, recent serial killer fiction, such as Easton-Ellis’ American Psycho, and films, such as Henry, Portrait of A Serial Killer, have adopted the killer’s point of view, asserting what Harvey calls “the idea that all groups have a right to speak for themselves, in their own voice, and have the voice accepted as

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<sup>13</sup> While acknowledging these possibilities, Hutcheon also recognizes that no rejection of power is ever outside of power itself, thus pluralism and pastiche have as much potential to serve existing institutions as to resist them.

<sup>14</sup> A term which can only ever be used provisionally in this context.



authentic" (48). If the current *mythos* of multiple murder can validate itself in reference to the more positive aspects of post-modernism, it seems only appropriate that it also be subjected to the same kind of critiques that are frequently leveled at this sustaining cultural narrative. From a feminist perspective, the most troubling aspect of post-modern culture has been its tendency to overlook the existence of "macrostructure[s] of inequality" (Fraser & Nicholson 88). Certainly, the rejection of master-narratives, particularly those of gender, race and class, can constitute a threat to hegemonic power on one level, but, as Hutcheon points out, this rejection can also reify inequalities. "It is perhaps liberal to believe that any subversion or undermining of a system of thought is healthy and good," she notes, "but it would also be naive to ignore that art can just as easily confirm as trouble received codes, no matter how radical its surface transgressions" (Hutcheon 110). As Fraser and Nicholson note in "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Post-modernism", the collapse of universals can hardly be redeeming or politically insurgent if it simply enforces old power structures (59). The alert social commentator should be concerned less with the disintegration of hegemonic structures than with the interests which such a disintegration serves.

This point is of particular relevance in the context of criminology. Nancy Hartsock succinctly expresses the frustration of many feminist activists:

Why is it, exactly at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic? Just when we are forming our own theories about the world, uncertainty emerges about whether the world can be adequately theorized? Just when we are talking

about the changes we want, ideas of progress and the possibility of ‘meaningfully’ organized human society becomes suspect? (qt. in Morrison 413)

Why, indeed, is it just when serial murder is being coalesced as a category, that it becomes out of vogue to speak about master-narratives of gender and institutionalized misogyny? Why is biological sex being written out of the discourse of serial sex crime?<sup>15</sup> This state of affairs might be somewhat more acceptable if the disciplines engaged in the study of multiple murder, such as criminology and medicine, were equally hesitant and wary of all subsuming etiologies, but they’re not. While it remains acceptable to claim the phenomenon has its roots in urban overcrowding or poor brain functioning, no one in the aforementioned disciplines seems willing to risk their reputation by situating the crime in the context of a culture which tolerates, even promotes, violence against women. I don’t wish to imply that serial murder can be explicated through a gender framework *alone*; the origins of any kind of deviance are rarely wholly singular. Rather, I think it peculiar this perspective is so routinely ignored in our perception of the crime. While typically female forms of aberrant behavior, such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia, are routinely explained away on the basis of “feminine vanity” (Helwig 199), overwhelmingly “male” kinds, such as serial murder, are persistently represented as gender-neutral, enigmatic and fractured. Post-modernism contingency is selective about its subjects.

These are the political issues of which we must be aware in our examination of the Ripper *mythos* in the current era. Post-modernism may have effectively challenged and disrupted some of the more troubling aspects of the doctor/murderer model formed at the end of the last century,

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<sup>15</sup> Scary but true— F.B.I. profiler John Douglas, interviewed recently on a Seattle afternoon talk show, insisted that the deeds of such perpetrators as the Green River Killer were “not sex crimes” because the victims weren’t raped according to technical definitions.

but it has done so at a certain expense. Lowndes' Mr. Sleuth may have been enigmatic and elusive, but at least his landlady was able to surmise with confidence that he "had a queer fear and dislike of women" (43). Now, the massive media hype bestowed upon the tiny percentage of perpetrators who do not fit the conventional model, such as lesbian serial killer Aileen Wuornos and Milwaukee cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer, suggest that we can't make such statements any more, as if the actions of one apprehended female have suddenly evened out the gender playing field. The most popular of recent "psycho" films, such as Seven and Wes Craven's Scream, feature equal opportunity killers acting on a wide cross-section of the population for a variety of (non-sexual) reasons, or sometimes for no reason at all. That such diversity rarely occurs in reality does not infringe upon our collective fantasy of serial murder's daring randomness. While Lombroso's strict taxonomy of deviance, as we have seen, perpetuated destructive stereotypes of race and class, post-modernism's invented confusion as to the typical nature of multiple murder has the potential to be just as radically apolitical and oppressive. It is now time to examine the negotiation of these concerns in our two post-modern Ripper texts: Iain Sinclair's White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings and Charles Palliser's Betrays.

***Text Crime and Criminal Texts: Sinclair's Cabalistic Jack***

*"I know that there is nothing to be written: all writing is just rewriting."  
(Sinclair, White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings 148)*

Given all that's just been said about post-modernity and the criminal, Iain Sinclair's White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings might seem like an odd novel with which to start our discussion. First published in 1987, one year before Ripper centennial "celebrations" broke out all over London, the text's choice of culprit is neither pluralistic nor particularly unconventional.

Like many “Ripperologists”<sup>16</sup> who have preceded him, Sinclair indicts real historical figure Dr. William Withey Gull as the guilty party— not just any pedestrian physician, but physician in ordinary to Queen Victoria until his (rumored by some to be faked) death in 1890. Also inculpated are a host of the era’s most prominent and notorious citizens, from libertine philosopher James Hinton to Freak-Svengali Dr. Frederick Treves, discoverer and protector of Elephant Man Joseph Merrick. Instead of a chimerical ghost story, Sinclair offers the reader a meticulously worked, highly ritualized accounts of the methods and motivations behind Whitechapel’s Autumn of Terror.

This ritualization is often highly disturbing. Gull’s deeds, motivated, as the text suggests, by the writings of his friend James Hinton, are defended with eloquence and a highly rational *ethos*. Called before a jury of his peers under charges of vivisection, he has the following to say:

I have done what was required of me. I say again that I have redeemed my time. . . I acted out the description of an act that was always there. And in doing this, I erased it. I freed that space. It could be left to madmen, prophets, millennial tremblers. . . I have hacked out an infected womb that would have bred monsters. (193)

These words bear the conviction of fate. Gull insists, in an articulate, almost poetic manner, that all his deeds, whether they be the murder of five underclass prostitutes or the roasting of a live dog, have been necessary and even ordained. He has not committed a crime, but acted for the greater good through a creed of *similia similibus curantur* (Gilman 154). Hinton’s infamous

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<sup>16</sup> Such as Stephen Knight, upon whose book Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution Sinclair bases his fictional theory.

credo echoes through the novel as an imaginative template for the murderer's actions; "By passion alone would passion be killed. Prostitution is dead, I have slain prostitution." (141)

But while Sinclair's choice of suspect is particularly "realist", his narrative structure lays no claim to the verisimilitude traditionally associated with realism. White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings is not simply a novel-length fictional realization of the Gull-as-Ripper theory, but rather a fragmented collage of three different narrative strings which intersect only fleetingly. The first of these deals with the frantic attempts of a group of contemporary book dealers to sell a rare 1887 edition of Doyle's A Study in Scarlet, the second with Hinton and Gull's deeds in *fin-de-siècle* Whitechapel, and the third with the attempts of sculptor Joblard and an ambiguously autobiographical narrator (referred to alternately as "Sinclair" and "I") to synthesize a truth from various competing Ripper theories in Thatcher-era London. This fragmentation is extended even further; not only is the novel as whole comprised of three competing "realities," but each of these three sections is made up of a myriad of different texts, some explicit, some obscure, which are incorporated into the prose often without any reference to the original source. Such frequent shifts in narrative voice and temporal *milieu* function, as Tani notes in his work on the metafictional detective novel, to foreground the "fictionality of reality" (Tani 113) and unsettle the reader's ability to identify with character. Sinclair's use of these deliberately unsettling and ravenously intertextual techniques has drawn the wrath of critics. In a review for The Times Literary Supplement, John Clute notes, "In aping his protagonist's disoriented and epiphany-rich immurement in the matter of London, Sinclair too frequently overloads a not remarkably powerful grasp of narrative syntax and his quasi-Joycean rhythms consequently lose steam, become swayback and stall. The effect can be one of stifling obscurity" (1193). Certainly,

Sinclair demands a lot from his reader both in terms of familiarity with Victorian culture and ability to concentrate, but these demands are well justified when we consider the purpose they serve.

It would be possible, and perhaps useful, to attempt at this point a listing of all the obscure references and cryptic sources contained within White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings. But such a taxonomic pursuit might run contrary to the intentions of the author. Sinclair's consistent lack of documentation implies that the pursuit of authentic, original sources might be somewhat meaningless. He writes in his acknowledgments, "Sub-texts have been cannibalized from many places: some are obvious, some obscure. This is not the place to list them . . . The Victorian characters lived under the names I have given them: their behavior is dictated by sources other than historical record." I will, however, point out some of the more significant traces that will directly affect our discussion. Dr. Loew, legendary creator of the Golem, appears as historical figure in the debates which comprise the text's third section, and as "real-life" acquaintance of book dealer Nicholas Lane in the first. Dastardly coachman John Netley runs his carriage through Victorian London with the murderous Gull in some chapters, while in others lending his name to the curious misprint of A Study in Scarlet which Lane discovers, almost one hundred years later, in the dusty shelves of fellow dealer Mossy Noonmann. Credos have the same versatility as characters in this novel, and at one point Gull's family motto, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it well" (28), is metamorphosed into the maxim of Aleister Crowley's Order of the Golden Dawn, "Do what thou wilt shall be all of the Law". Even the Ripper's victims are not spared this process of endless recontextualization and reversal. Joblard and Sinclair make a list of their initials and then juggle them around, hoping to find a solution in a

cabalistic anagram. The letters represent not a death toll but a canon, a sacred text. "We saw the names, we knew the names," remarks the narrator; "There were other versions of them, the victims might have rendered themselves in a dozen ways . . . they were locked together like a famous football team, they were inseparable. Part of the doctrine" (49-50).

The effect of this technique is to blur the distinction, so sacred in the field of Ripperology, between fiction and reality. In Sinclair, everything is contestable, capable of being re-written; the authentic continually reveals itself to be the product of other untraceable sources, other inventions. Thus it seems only appropriate that he should trash Stephen Knight's Gull-as-Ripper theory in one section of the novel while fictionally enacting it in another. Joblard makes the following complaints about Knight's Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution:<sup>17</sup>

If Mr. Knight had been a chemist not a journalist I wonder if he would have chosen to describe any solution as "final". A solution, according to my dictionary, is 'the act of separating the parts, specially the connected parts of any body'. Unfortunate, that. "The dissolving of a solid in a fluid; release; deliverance." This is precisely what Knight's solution does not procure. We are informed, heated, drawn into a collaboration with his version of the truth. But delivered? I think not. I don't think he understands that delivery is required. (58)

There are other digs at eminent "Jackophiles", perhaps the most pointed one contained in the instance when Nicholas Lane comes across a Colin Wilson book at a sale and dismisses it as "overpriced at nothing" (41). But it would be foolish to associate Sinclair's ridicule of certain

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<sup>17</sup> A disturbing phrase, as a colleague pointed out to me, in any post-1945 context.

Ripperologists with a general irreverence towards the many Ripper texts which White Chappell, Scarlet Traces appropriates and re-works. Indeed, text-as-magical-object functions as the central controlling principle of Sinclair's narrative. Books are valued not in a mundane sense for the *logos* they contain but for their implicit generative ability.

This notion of text as creative and transformative force is somewhat obscure and will require further clarification. Joblard and Sinclair-as-character's discussion of the Whitechapel murders is a useful illustration of this belief in the ability of literature not only to suggest, but also to engender and direct, the real. The narrator explicitly suggests that the murders were not the product of a metaphysical perpetrator, but metaphysical words.

Accepting the notion of 'presence'— I mean that certain fictions, chiefly Conan Doyle, Stevenson, but many others also, laid out a template that was more powerful than any local documentary account— the presences that they created, or 'figures' if you prefer, like Rabbi Loew's Golem, became too much and too fast to be contained in the limits of that fiction. They got out into the stream of time, the ether; they escaped into the labyrinth. They achieved an independent existence . . . Rimbaud's occult awareness was intense, he was burning his own time so recklessly, all or nothing, that he described more fiercely than any other man, then or now, the elements of the Whitechapel millennial sacrifice. And by describing them, *caused* them. They were said. They had to be. (129-31 [original emphasis])

The narrator's thesis here is grotesquely parallel to my own— texts created Jack the Ripper, not in any metaphorical or mythical sense, but literally. His deeds were impelled by fiction. This



might seem a troubling causation model given our theoretical framework, but I want to suspend any kind of political analysis until the fiction-as-productive motif has been further explicated. At the moment I will simply point out its other incarnations in the novel: Sinclair's frequent references to the Golem, a soulless creature brought to life by the insertion of *holy words* into its mouth, underlines the ability of something as seemingly ethereal as language to result in horrifyingly tangible results. From the correct arrangement of the *logos* comes animation, destruction and new meaning. Each of the book's three sections is headed by a different combination of the Ripper victims' initials—"MANAC" (Mary Ann Nichols, Annie Chapman) "MANAC ES CEM" (Nichols, Chapman, Elisabeth Stride, Catherine Eddowes, Marie), and "JK" (Jeanette Kelly). The author is quite plainly attempting some kind of cabbala with their names. While this process might seem rather ghoulish, we must defer our judgment until we comprehend the intended result of this mystical word play.

Very little has been written about Sinclair, but I think the tiny critical piece entitled "Future Memory" which he penned for a recent edition of Critical Quarterly might bring us close to an understanding of the hitherto mentioned themes. In it he suggests that his ritualized re-working of pre-existing texts aspires not to confirm myth, but rather to collapse and free himself from it:

Fiction plots to undermine itself, to subvert the shape of the plan as it's first revealed. It aspires to the trance of false memory, sets up hypnotic rhythms, changes of pace and temperature to lull the only audience that matters into an unearned sense of security: the audience of one—the writer. To delete or deny the original sustaining impulse is to *escape history*. It's the thing we all aim for,

to divorce text from its dim scribe and to set it free. (Sinclair, *Future Memory* 36

[my emphasis])

Writing, for Sinclair, functions as an extremely subversive exercise by means of which text and meaning may be freed from the tyrannical control of both original author and history. The point of re-writing, or as I prefer to term it, *writing through* the canon of Ripperana is, as Sinclair-as-character notes at the end of White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings, to “use what we have been given: go back over the Ripper text, turn each cell of it— until it means something else, something beyond us. Otherwise we will never over-reach our obsessions. We’re doomed not to re-live the past, but to die into it” (198). To liberate narrative is to liberate the self. Joblard and Sinclair’s obsession with the Ripper murders serves as an attempt to define and produce a transcendent individuality<sup>18</sup> against a backdrop of enslaving codes and rigid historical master-narratives.

Now is the time to incorporate Sinclair’s ambitious narrative project back into our discussion of power and the *mythos* of serial murder. We must avoid making any kind of reductive blanket statement about the novel’s general position in relation to multiple sex crime, as its subject is clearly not the Ripper murders *per se*, but rather their subsequent textualization. And in his treatment of this subject, it is worth noting that it is the reader/perceiver whom Sinclair invests with transformative metaphysical powers, not Jack. He refers frequently to the alchemic abilities of dealer Nicholas Lane who is able, in his wanderings through various book stalls, to “[turn] shit to gold, and gold straight back to shit again” (41). It is Lane’s mark of approval, and not inherent worth, which assigns value to particular texts. Similarly, Joblard and

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<sup>18</sup> Eerily a project which, as we have earlier seen, Morrison ascribes to the serial killer.

Sinclair-as-character act as alchemists in sifting through the Ripper canon, preserving and ennobling certain of its elements (parts of the Knight hypothesis) while discarding the dross (the Druitt theory). The author seems to suggest a way of reading through the Whitechapel texts which allows one to be sovereign rather than subject of truth, active producer (and destroyer) rather than passive recipient of morbid lore. He is concerned not with the stultifying paralysis of a “final solution,” but with the liberating possibilities afforded by exploded tradition: “Our narrative starts everywhere,” he notes; “We want to assemble all the complete movements, like cubists, until the point is reached where the crime can commit itself. That is why there are so many Ripper candidates, so many theories: and they can all be right” (61).

Sinclair suggests a means of challenging the hegemony of prior Ripper myths, but to what end? Or rather, whose interests does this challenge serve? This is perhaps an unfair question to level at such an author; he is a poetic, not a political, writer, and his fiction should of course be allowed an independent integrity outside of conventional social mores. Nonetheless, I think it is important that we consider what is accentuated and what is ignored in his use of the Whitechapel murders as a site for transformative re-writing. Sinclair’s style, directed towards individual emancipation as it may be, frequently fails to critique the texts which it appropriates. The writings of some of the more implausible and particularly misogynist of the Ripperologists are used primarily as blocks of material to be moved and re-arranged, not as propositions for debate. Thus one of the novel’s characters states matter-of-factly, “He [the Ripper] was a victim. He could not escape the acts that he had to perform. The will of his victims was as great as his own: rushing together into annihilation, each serving the other” (113). This notion of the perpetrator-as-victim, egged on by the psychological manipulations of either his overbearing

mother or willing victims, is one of the oldest and most fatally misogynist of all the myths attached to serial murder. Sinclair, however, lets it stand as simply another imaginative trace from which to conjure forth revelation. His concern is not with iconoclasm, but with the engenderment of new narratives. Like his character William Gull, the author kills myth with myth (193), replacing old Ripper lore with a chaos of intermingled fact and fiction. The result is both provocative and spell-binding, but hardly destabilizing. Sinclair is obviously an unique and gifted writer, and I do not suggest he should change his focus but neither should we alter ours; his vision of the Ripper contributes to the increasingly popular notion that the only truth of serial murder lies in multiplicity, fiction and fragment, that no (gender) master narrative can begin to comprise it. A truly emancipatory response to the Ripper myth must be willing to critique the *ethos* of older narratives while constructing some anew.

***Palliser's Betrays: The Faulty Logos of Cereal Killing***

Palliser's style parallels that of Sinclair in a number of ways, particularly in the manner in which it has been received. After making a name for himself with the phenomenally popular Dickensian epic The Quincunx, he went on to receive a cool response to his 1994 publication Betrays. Perhaps the shift is hardly surprising. While the former novel was a painstaking *homage* to the realist tradition, characterized by intricate detail and linear plotting, Palliser's more recent offering is comprised of a myriad of different chapters written in as many different styles, each representing contradictory versions of reality. No doubt the critical establishment felt slightly betrayed, if you'll excuse my pun, by this sudden stylistic reversal in an author whose realistic leanings had seemed so thoroughly authentic and sincere. Writes Jonathan Coe in The London Review of Books, "There's a certain haughty and unattractive superiority about

the *pasticheur* who believes there's no reason why he shouldn't turn his hand, for three or four pages, to the sort of stuff from which other (lesser?) writers have earned their fortune and wide readerships" (21). Another commentator in the Times Educational Supplement takes aim at that feature which is often so often criticized in Sinclair's work, obscurity: "The reader's attention is likely to shift to flies on the wall if (s)he isn't as respectful of designer poststructuralist clues dotted about the pages as Palliser would like" (10a). Critics, after all, don't being enjoy confounded, and Palliser quite deliberately keeps his readers in the dark throughout the length of the narrative.

Our examination will focus on the chapter of Betrays entitled "A Nice Touch". Many of the other chapters are relevant to our current discussion, but we won't be able to include them in our discussion at this point. The narrative of "A Nice Touch" appears in the form of the diary of one Sholto MacTweed, a comically disturbed crime *aficionado* who spends his days working in Central Glasgow as a book dealer (a recurring vocational motif in latter-day Ripper fiction). In the course of his work, he meets pompous, boozy and similarly murder-obsessed professor Horatio Quaife. A bizarre friendship develops between the two, and soon they start spending evenings together watching television police dramas and arguing over the solution to various unsolved historical crimes. Subsequently a series of real-life serial murders break out all over Glasgow, perpetrated by a mysterious stranger who leaves plastic scorpions (promotional prizes found in boxes of "Branny Brekkers" breakfast cereal) on the corpses of his victims. The reader becomes witness to the chaos and hilarity which ensues from MacTweed and Quaife's attempts to involve themselves in the ongoing police investigation.

Like Joblard and Sinclair in White Chappell, Scarlet Traces, Quaife and MacTweed firmly believe that the “truth” or “reality” of murder can both be comprehended and produced from text. MacTweed’s ridiculously over-the-top Ripper hypothesis is an amalgam of almost all the popular theories published about the case in the past century; his Jack is a titled, syphilitic, Masonic artist who managed to elude suspicion by donning a red-stained painter’s smock at the time of the murders. While the more sophisticated Quaife is quick to deride his companion’s solution, his own approach is equally illogical and text-dependent. He expounds:

Any account can have a huge gap in it which one is not aware of insofar as it has visible consequences. That is, other things might be odd because the explanation for them is missing. And of course a text may be missing too. It would be wonderful if some document emerged or was re-interpreted that gave a solution to the mystery. So the solution is in existence and findable if only we knew where and how to look. (107-8)

However disparate in professional status and mental competence, both Quaife and MacTweed have a firm investment in the *logos*— and I use that term in both its reference to “the rational” and “the word”. From the right words come reason, and hence truth.

The problem, however, is that the *logos* (once again, I use that word in both senses) upon which they so heavily rely is deeply flawed. This is represented in a very fundamental way in the frequent mis-spellings which mar MacTweed’s diary entries. Unversed in the theoretical lingo of his friend, he transcribes “matrix” as “mattress” (111), “signifier” as “Sidney Fire” (112), and the title of the scholarly journal Diaresis as Diarrhea (170).<sup>19</sup> These frequent errors

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<sup>19</sup> No doubt a pun on “real-life” theory journal Diacritics.

later furnish the reader with a singular clue as to identity of the Scorpion Killer, whom, as the police reports indicate, incorrectly spells a word in a bloody message he leaves at a murder scene. MacTweed, indeed the guilty party, is somewhat surprised at this. "At least they're now saying that the Scorpion left a message written in blood at the scene. They don't say what the message was. And apparently he miss-spelled [sic] a certain word. This naturally arouses my curiosity" (189). Palliser, a former academic himself, has been accused by some of a certain intellectual snobbery in this satiric portrayal of the unlearned MacTweed; I think it important, however, that we avoid such a reading. After all, Quaife, as embodiment of the academy, is hardly afforded a gentler treatment. This parallel will become clearer when we look at the latter's own skewed *logos*.

MacTweed is initially drawn to Quaife due to his status as a prominent and successful crime writer. His popular publication The Right Lines proposes a radical and apparently unique solution to the (fictional) real-life Killiecrankie murder case. The astute reader will notice immediately, however, that Quaife's theory is drawn directly from a prior chapter entitled "The Wrong Tracks". In other words, as Palliser teasingly implies, Quaife's right lines are based on the wrong tracks. This point becomes increasingly evident as we watch him stumble his way through the plots of the two television serials which he watches with MacTweed weekly. After forming an elaborate and carefully-plotted solution to the murders represented on crime drama Biggart ( a delicious send-up of Scottish detective programme Taggart), he is told quite blatantly by the show's star that most of the developments are meaningless. "Nobody understands these

f--king<sup>20</sup> plots. Not even the writer," asserts the actor forcefully; "Most of this stuff about the minor characters he brings in turns out to be nothing but red herrings." (141)

The failure of Quaife's logical "mattresses" are most evident, however, in relation to the murders (mostly of other academics) perpetrated by MacTweed. Despite his companion's obvious instability, obsession with crime theory and penchant for night stalking, Quaife doesn't even suspect MacTweed's guilt until he sees a murder (of the actor who plays title character Biggert, by the way) committed literally under his nose. MacTweed later says of his discovery, "I don't know which of us was the more surprised. Of course, I tried to pretend I'd just popped out at him to give him surprise but he knew straight away what was up . . . he saw I had rubber gloves and spotted my other piece of equipment before I could put it away" (201-202). Quaife's blindness may in part be attributed to the set of expectations about serial murder with which his academic training and literary experience have equipped him. Consider, for example, his reflections on the Whitechapel Murders:

He [Horatio] said the whole business of the serial killer was very relevant to his work on logic and murder. He said he was trying to devise the perfect murder . . . Horatio said it was all the more extraordinary that he was never caught because he killed repeatedly . . . I said that he was clearly an amazing man: cool-headed, brilliant, courageous. He agreed and said it was the most tantalizing enigma in criminal history. (122)

These theoretical premises, that the serial murderer must be mysterious, intelligent, and daring do not allow him to recognize the Scorpion in the sad, obsessive little book dealer whom he has

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<sup>20</sup> MacTweed, a natural prude, cannot bring himself to write profanity in his journal.



befriended. Quaife expects the killer to be heroic when in reality he is simply gullible, psychologically deficient and, most important, lucky. The consequences of his romanticized vision later prove dire.

Palliser ridicules two aspects of the traditional ratiocinative approach to serial murder: firstly, as we have seen, the valorization of the perpetrator's intellect, and secondly, the detective's (ultimately pathological) fixation with "truth". For throughout the chapter the greatest advocate of concrete reality proves to be none other than the psychotic Sholto MacTweed. Thus he regularly laments the shoddy stock classification system at his workplace:

I hate the way 'Crime' covers 'True Crime' and 'Crime Fiction'. It makes me very angry. I just can't understand why people want to waste their time on reading things that are made up when there's so much interesting factual material in the world to read. Bl--ming Jerry won't give way on it, though. (96)

The problem with MacTweed's Dragnet-esque fixation on "just the facts" is that he lacks the mental clarity to distinguish reality from invention. Thus he watches the serials Gargunnoch Braes and Biggert for weeks before realizing they depict imaginary, pre-scripted scenarios rather than simultaneous real-life occurrences. In despair he records, "It turns out that the programme is all invented! . . . All that time I've wasted! D--n, d--n, d--n! What I can't understand is why anybody would want to watch it when it's all invented!" (128) Like many of today's Ripperologists, MacTweed desperately desires to construct a version of reality that is concrete and irrefutable; also like many of today's Ripperologists, the only way he can do this is by promoting fiction to the level of fact. His inability to recognize metaphor as metaphor, to distinguish the actual from the imaginary, may (and is, I believe, supposed to) read like a classic

symptom of schizophrenia, but it also a symptom which Palliser slyly implies is shared by many scholarly and pseudo-scholarly approaches to murder.

Thus, as critical readers of Palliser's Betrays, we must be aware that the joke is also on us. While I found the collapse of Horatio's logical "mattresses" hysterical, I also realized that his own project with serial murder is not that different from my own. I, too, am interested in breaking down serial murder into its discrete textual components, an enterprise which Palliser casts as somewhat ridiculous. In a world of faulty *logos*, he implies, the search for truth and authenticity is at best Quixotic, at worst, dangerous. For Palliser suggests that the intellectualization of criminal deviance renders it pruriently attractive. MacTweed apparently has little interest in committing a real murder until he meets the esteemed Quaife, who inadvertently encourages the latter with constant talk of the necessary intellectual acumen of serial killers. The Scorpion thus takes his first victim in order to "earn [Horatio's] respect" (132). By investing multiple murder with the *ethos* of intellect and power, Quaife and his peers render it a viable and attractive means for the disenfranchised to seek status and respect.

Of course, one should be wary of reading the text as simply another media-breeds-violence parable. Palliser, as suggested by his novel's title, has a greater interest in continually destabilizing the foundation which his readers occupy than in affirming a particular moral stance. Just as the fictional detectives are routinely thwarted within the text, so too the reader as "literary detective" (Tani 113) is denied any form of epistemological closure. Certainly, the murderer's identity is clear at the end of "A Nice Touch," but it has never really been a secret. The consequences of his deeds and the likelihood of his future apprehension by the police remains unknown.

Both Sinclair and Palliser employ the anti-ratiocinative and heterotopic structure of the post-modern narrative in order to destabilize the traditional Ripper *mythos* and emphasize its arbitrary nature. Palliser takes this decontextualization process one step further than Sinclair and openly jeers at the cult of the serial killer, exposing it as vainglorious, unhealthy and, most importantly, erroneously contrived. Not only does he question the killer's intellect, but also that of the surrounding society which coded him/her in such a manner in the first place. Yet our appreciation of this long overdue critique should be somewhat mitigated by the one factor which "A Nice Touch" shares with all the other Ripperological texts it seems to parody—an ignorance about gender issues. The Scorpion's sole female victim is chosen out of respect for precedent, not an from a monomaniacal hatred of women. Such an arbitrary, gender-free pattern of victim selection is only ever enacted in fiction. Of course, I do not suggest that either Sinclair or Palliser is unaware of the gendered nature of multiple murder, or that, given this awareness, they are obliged to represent it faithfully in their prose. Every work of art must be allowed its own integrity. Nonetheless, it is curious that in destroying all the other sacred cows associated with Jack the Ripper and serial murder in general, they do not also see fit to attack the one which casts the crime as "outside" routine cycles of societal violence towards women. Even in the parodic and revisionist environment of the late twentieth century, this element of serial murder remains persistently beyond the concern of both devotees and iconoclasts of the Ripper legend. If, as this study has suggested, texts inform the construction and dissemination of the serial killer-as-image, then only a text which deals with the depressingly domestic nature of gynocide will allow us to de-sensationalize the phenomena.

## CONCLUSION

Eight years after the last of the Ripper murders, Heinemann London published the first edition of H.G. Wells' The Island of Doctor Moreau. The story, now a familiar staple of science fiction, relays the misadventures of castaway Edward Prendick upon a remote Pacific Island inhabited only by a community of half-human, half-animal "Beastfolk" and their maniacal genius creator, Dr. Moreau. One of the novel's most compelling passages focuses on Prendick's horror at witnessing the quasi-religious awe with which the mutant creatures regard the cruel progenitor who has transformed them through a series of torturous, un-anaesthetized operations. Huddled within the cramped House of the Law, they direct a bizarre parody of Christian litany towards Moreau. "His is the House of Pain, His is the hand that makes, His is the hand that wounds, His is the hand that heals" (118) Once branded an amoral vivisectionist, the doctor has now become a God. And how has he effected this self-transformation? By geographically alienating himself from the scientific society which spawned him, using spatial distance to suggest his own intellectual distance and ethical exemption from the mores of conventional Victorian society. Exoticism and alienation grants Moreau the *ethos* that the domestic cannot. His reign, however, is relatively short-lived. At the novel's climax, one of the laboratory creatures breaks free and wreaks a terrible vengeance on the doctor. With the death of their mutilating father, the beastfolk are free to discard the Law and revert back to their natural state.

So too is it time for the cowed progeny of the Ripper legend to revolt. And by "progeny" I do not, of course, refer simply to the actual victims of serial murder, but more importantly to the vast percentage of women and men alike in whom cultural discourse has induced a reverence,

if not esteem, for serialized violence. The multiple murderer has become a Moreau-like figure, his mutilations viewed as iconoclastic, his hyped-up omnipotence predicated on his supposed psychopathological distance from the social centre. But, as this thesis has argued, these latter distinguishing characteristics of the violent individual are only feasible within the realms of fiction. The bloody events which transpired in London's East End in 1888 were neither radical, foreign, nor unprecedented. Indeed, the age-old debate over the correct number of victims is a product of the sheer pedestrian nature of the crimes; from a purely practical point of view, it has proved difficult to distinguish the women who died at the Ripper's hands from those who fell prey to Whitechapel's routine cycles of violence. One should wonder why the latter seem so much less important than the former— compared to the mighty canon of Ripperature, virtually nothing has been written to commemorate the infinitely larger percentage of prostitutes who were simultaneously sacrificed, with equal brutality, to the less compelling and more pervasive forces of domestic violence and organized crime. The "bizarre" slaughter of five women has been used to efface and trivialize the deaths of thousands of others.

Our study has argued that narrative works in the Ripper myth as the ocean functions in the Moreau story, providing violence with the distance it requires to appear exotic and titillating rather than depressing and mundane. In both modernist and post-modernist culture, as we have seen, the serial murderer has been characterized by his supposed resistance to prevalent identity paradigms. The *fin-de-siècle* Ripper thus appeared as a daring grotesque of reason and madness, while the post-modern killer increasingly appears, according to Morrison (381) and Black (178), as a Quixotic defender of the real in an environment dominated by simulacra. In either case the perpetrator is made Other, and, as such, liable to co-option by the avant-garde due to his

perceived outsider status. But surely if we have learned anything about serial murder in the hundred-plus years since it first entered the public consciousness, it is that its patterns are reflexive of, not resistant to, prevalent power relations. While all symptoms seem to suggest that this category of crime has an internal social source, we continue to exorcise our anxieties and responsibilities by allying it with an insurgent and alien *logos*.

The serial killer-as-outsider model has been both produced and critiqued in the texts we have examined. Lowndes' Mrs. Bunting avoids directly confronting what Camilla Griggers' terms "the serial killing machine" (163) due to its pervasive cultural popularity. It proves easier to contain and placate the real murderer than to oppose the community which creates and celebrates his cult.<sup>21</sup> This strategy of evasion, although pragmatic and socially realistic, is doomed to failure. Sleuth vanishes without a trace, leaving Mrs. Bunting, as "everywoman" haunted by the threat of his eventual return.

Contrasting Lowndes, Palliser and Sinclair's narratives wage a direct attack on the myth of the Ripper, the latter literally pulling apart, refuting and re-arranging some of the canon's most eminent texts. One wonders how cathartic this approach really is, however, if it simply reinstates the alliance between (textual, in this case) mutilation and transcendence. Sinclair's characters attempt to deliver themselves from the archetypal Jack by becoming Jacks themselves, acting on bodies of language rather than of prostitutes. Palliser, while decidedly more skeptical about the transcendent and/or ritualistic nature of serialized violence than Sinclair, is equally unwilling to trace the source of that violence back to its appropriate disciplinary precinct. The resistance of all three novels to the dominant tropes of serial murder must thus be termed, at best, partial.

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<sup>21</sup> A scenario arguably paralleled in the cases of women who court and marry imprisoned multiple murderers.

How then is a more adequate resistance to be formed? What needs to change for us to re-write the wrongs of the Ripper adequately? Perhaps one obvious answer is narrative. We have suggested, after all, that today's dominant model of the multiple owes more to shifting textual conventions than to concrete fact. Might we then assume it possible to disrupt the Ripper's iconic status by finding a new way of speaking through and writing about him? This is an attractive yet limited solution. Misogynist veneration of the male destroyer figure has historically accommodated itself in a number of different narrative styles and genres. It is unlikely that a shift in aesthetic trends, without an accompanying political destabilization, will produce a sudden reversal. The glorification of feminine death is just as prevalent in our culture's radical margins as it is in its more mainstream manifestations. While certainly there needs to be a new way of narrating serial murder, some other fundamental changes are required for this shift to be truly emancipatory.

I suggest that one of these changes should affect our understanding of, and attitude towards, the iconoclast-figure. Part of the reason for the Ripper's popularity as artistic symbol has been his supposed antagonism towards bourgeois convention. Yet unfortunately, as I have argued, the exploitation and violent elimination of "undesirable" sub-classes is anything but oppositional to the tenets of Western urban culture. Jack's brand of iconoclasm bears the trademark of the society which spawned it. Violence directed towards the vulnerable is one of our time-honored traditions, not a singular and rare strategy of marginal deviants. It is time to stop garnishing destruction with the laurels of uniqueness. Serial murder replicates, rather than opposes, convention. In our current culture of sanctified violence, the true iconoclast rejects the

devaluation of human substance and life. If we can't put an end to the serial slaughter, we can at least render it an inappropriate vehicle for neophilia.

Similarly, we must closely examine the implied connections between identity, celebrity and the *logos* of violence. At a time when most pre-established markers of selfhood, such as race, class and gender, are being de-stabilized, our culture continually implies that serial murder offers a viable means of becoming a "somebody". Joel Black touches upon this situation in his discussion of murder and the media (140). He quotes a 1976 letter to the police from the "Wichita Killer", which complains bitterly "How many times do I have to kill before I get a name in the paper or some national attention?" (qt. in Black 141) The murderer craved the affirmation of identity which only the national press could grant. Similarly, upon visiting a waxwork Hall of Villains in his childhood, the notorious German murderer Peter Kurten is reputed to have said "I am going to be famous like those men one of these days" (qt. in Black 140). And indeed, while never attaining the celebrity of the Ripper, he went on to receive far more acclaim and attention than his career as a civil servant would ever have merited.

Apprehended serial murderers frequently suggest that their deeds provide them with an otherwise unattainable importance, and society at large does nothing to contradict this perception. I am not suggesting that the media alone is the central catalyst of extravagant violence (millions, after all, crave a similar stability without resorting to murder), but rather that our current criteria for celebrating the individual, that is, of producing "celebrities", is pathological. The multiple murderer affirms his/her individuality by, quite literally, transforming his victims into a series or precession of simulacra, a process theoretically allied with current youth culture movements which allow the consumer to assert his/her individuality by viewing the surrounding culture as



homogeneous and typified. Serial murder is perhaps only possible in an environment which sees humanity as serializable, and grants kudos and attention to those able to become sovereign rather than subject of taxonomic order.

Thus a new narratology of multiple murder must be based not only on a recognition of the crime's gendered origins, but also upon a radical re-conceptualization of the deviant individual's status. It is not sufficient to conclude here that the Whitechapel murders were the result of domestic malaise rather than exotic psychopathological Otherness. We must go one step further and acknowledge that even if Jack the Ripper was the bizarre, one-of-kind creative genius which the most disturbed of his devotees claim him to be, it would still be absurd and offensive to portray him reverentially. The perceived uniqueness of a certain breed of violence should and must never render it beyond our outrage. If we are to liberate ourselves fully from the catatonic thrall in which the serial killer-as-icon holds us, we must disable both misogynist myth and the apparatus which engenders it.

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