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### The Ubiquitous Absence of Jack:  
*Ripper Street* and the (Neo-)Victorian Obsession

#### Abstract

Despite the title reference, the BBC’s *Ripper Street* (2012–2014) was not intended as another Jack the Ripper story; the infamous killer’s absence is acutely felt in its first three seasons, though. The paper examines the way his acts are being recalled for the characters and viewers, but also reconstructed in a performance and copycat murders, and how, even though the Ripper is long gone, people may become his victims. The absence as echoed in the series plot and setting is a commentary on both the Victorian and modern fascination with the unsolved case.

It is a plain fact that “no title on Jack the Ripper ever gathers much dust” (*Publisher’s Weekly*, qtd. in Schmid 198) and it is hard to imagine late-Victorian Whitechapel without him. Félix J. Palma, author of a Spanish steampunk novel *The Map of Time* (2008) about Wells’ time machine and nineteenth-century time travelling, presents an alternative history in which the 1888 killer is caught; one of the characters provides a somewhat unexpected comment:

> This may surprise you, gentlemen, but nobody should ever have captured Jack the Ripper. [...] for the purposes of history, Jack the Ripper would have disappeared off the face of the earth. He would have left behind him the unsolved mystery of his identity, over which as much ink would be spilled as the blood that had flowed under his knife, and which throughout the ensuing century would become the favourite pastime of researchers, detectives, and amateurs. They would all root around in Scotland Yard’s archives, desperate to be the first to put a face to the shadow that time had converted into a gruesome legend. (448)

The amount of ink used to retell the events of the autumn of terror, as it is usually called, and present yet another “real identity” of Jack the Ripper is understated. There has been “a steady trickle of Whitechapel literature” (Moore and Campbell 6) ever since the “fated combination” of a “series of murders and a nascent popular press” (Altick, qtd. in Schmid 200). The legend stands behind numerous
'true-crime’ books – the oldest being *The Curse Upon Mitre Square* (1888) and *The History of the Whitechapel Murders* (1888) – works of fiction, films, comic books, walking tours, conference papers, articles, etc. For many, “the countless resurrections of the Ripper murders” (Curtis, qtd. in Warwick and Willis 3) have become a source of income. Each retells the well-known story but offers a “repetition with variation” and “without replication” (Hutcheon 4, 7), and yet, in spite of all the adaptations and appropriations, explanations and (re)examinations, the killer keeps succeeding in eluding us? Our unquenchable thirst for anything of interest regarding the 1888 mystery is probably best depicted in Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell’s “Dance of the gull catchers”: “Truth is, this has never been about the murders, not the killer nor his victims. It’s about us. About our minds and how they dance. Jack mirrors our hysterias. Faceless, he is the receptacle for each new social panic” (22). The first three seasons of Richard Warlow’s BBC series *Ripper Street* (2012‒2014) provide an equally interesting commentary on the Victorian and neo-Victorian ways of dealing with the unsolved case and the absence of the culprit.

The series’ approach to the late nineteenth-century Whitechapel corresponds with Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn’s definition of neo-Victorian texts as “self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)view concerning the Victorians (4; original emphasis). It also relates to Louisa Hadley’s statement that “when neo-Victorian fictions incorporate historical figures, they remain committed to the historical specificity of that figure; they do not simplistically establish Victorian ‘types’ but rather question the very processes by which an historical individual becomes an exemplar of an age” (18). By not offering yet another ‘definite’ suspect, and thus not providing a solution to the case, it refocuses the viewers’ attention to the different ways in which the killer and his deeds have been construed.

The ubiquitous absence and ambiguous or contradictory character of the killer was stressed already at the time when he was given his moniker. On the one hand, “Jack” is “a common name that represents ubiquity: the nomenclature of the ordinary” (Bloom 91); on the other, “Jack the Ripper is not a name but a label connecting a set of related acts; he has no proper name, no address, no biographical details” (Smith, qtd. in Cunningham 166; original emphasis). From the very beginning, he has been given so many faces and motives that nowadays it is hardly possible to distinguish fact from fiction, and it seems that the sheer number of theories and narratives in circulation is closing the circle, thus turning Jack the Ripper again into a jack. What is interesting, his name is hardly used in *Ripper Street*: the killer is mostly referred to by a pronoun or common nouns with negative connotations: “Is it him?,” “Has he come?,” “maniac,” “lunatic” (“I Need Light”). The people who do use the name are the ones that profit from (re)telling his story: a tour guide and a journalist; the police – Reid and Abberline – usually use “Jack” and “Ripper” to describe the
authors of copycat slayings, not the original killer (“I Need Light,” “What Use Our Work?”).

Even though back in 1888 the West of London could “only dimly imagine what the terror must have been in those acres of narrow streets where the inhabitants knew the murderer to be lurking” (Ackroyd 273) and the serial killer has not been caught, in Ripper Street it is business as usual in 1889 Whitechapel: urchins misbehave, madams make money, abortionists flourish, opium dens and freak shows attract clients, slums make way for the railway, and slummers feed on the East End atmosphere. The policemen of the Leman Street station have to deal with anarchists, Irish bombers, anti-Semites, etc., and the journalists are following new sensations. And yet, although Jack the Ripper is absent from the series, his presence is acutely felt there. A slumming tour, a music hall show, a copycat murder, or a traumatised passive victim – all of these are present to show the Victorian fascination with the unsolved case so widely reported by the press of the day. However, as is the usual case with other neo-Victorian texts, they also serve as a comment on our absorption in the Ripper myth and demonstrate that Chief Inspector Abberline is not the only one whose engagement with it is bordering on obsession.

1. “Follow me for the haunts of Jack the Ripper”

The opening scene of the first episode depicts a sight well-known to modern in-habitants of Whitechapel: a group of people alien to the area is walking around with their faces expressing varying mixtures of curiosity and disgust, masked with vague smiles. A few years ago I saw similar mixtures of curiosity and genuine shock on the faces of the participants of one of the many Ripper tours organised in London’s East End. Unlike contemporary tours, however, the people shown in Ripper Street stand out also due to their appearance: they are groomed and smartly dressed. The guide welcomes both the group and the viewers: “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Whitechapel. [...] Follow me for the haunts of Jack the Ripper” (“I Need Light”). The depiction of the East End is fairly conventional – it is different and dangerous, threatening and thrilling at the same time. The guide’s speech reflects both the feeling of superiority and the level of hypocrisy on the part of the slummers: “All of this parish know little else but thuggery. How best to raise them up from such iniquity? Well, that’s a matter for you good people, of course” (“I Need Light”). His words seem to echo one of the earliest accounts of the murders whose anonymous author rhetorically asks: “What else can you expect in Whitechapel with its floating population of criminals and fallen women?” (The History of the Whitechapel Murders 107). The series “perpetuates the myths surrounding the east and tends to offer up middle-class ‘heroes’ as its saviors” (Gray). Unfortunately, the “good people” touring the area are not interested in
helping the unfortunates. Many of the historic middle- and upper-class ladies and gentlemen were joining lower classes either from a distance, by eagerly discussing each instalment of the narrative serialized in the newspapers, or on the spot: they “made up parties to go and view the scenes” (“Baroness Orczy...”). Scavenging crime scenes in search of blood stains and admiring waxworks depicting the murders was common.

In February 1889, one Thomas Barry was found guilty of causing a nuisance by his show at Whitechapel Road. He exhibited the Whitechapel murders of ‘Jack the Ripper,’ various fat people and dwarves, and all kinds of monstrosities. There was a waxwork inside, and boxing and other performances went on. The price of admission was a penny. [...] [and] as many as 200 people had assembled outside the show premises at one time. The pictures that attracted most attention were those relating to the Whitechapel murders [...]. One picture showed six women lying down injured and covered in blood, and with their clothes disturbed. (“A Penny Show”)

As reported by the press, the reason for including the Ripper killings was very plain: Barry’s “ordinary attractions had failed to arouse public interest [so] he took advantage of the excitement which had been caused by the murders in Whitechapel to exhibit ghastly and disgusting representations of the victims” (“Whitechapel Nuisances”). Simple, effective, and victim/gore oriented. Another Victorian example of using those murders for profit is the case of a man who, a year after the autumn of terror, was selling newspapers shouting: “Another horrible murder and mutilation; Jack the Ripper at work again,” even though the paper reported nothing of the kind. For obtaining money by false pretences he was sentenced to twenty-one-day imprisonment and hard labour (“James Kendrick”). Whereas both men had to face consequences of their actions, contemporary tourists may safely engage in the (sometimes) guilty pleasure of visiting Madame Tussauds or the London Dungeon in search of the thrill similar to the one felt by late-Victorian slummers. No form of Jack the Ripper is there, “his presence is implied by moving shadows and the sound of retreating footsteps” (Cunningham 162). Moreover, sightseers taking part in the East End walking tours, preoccupied with “the ghosts of the past crimes, [are] unlikely to notice the conditions of such crimes in the present” (Cunningham 161).

2. “The man and his works abide”

The first major crime the Leman Street police have to deal with in the series is a murder. A female body is found in a back street, “carved,” her left carotid is cut in a way suggesting a left to right stroke, characteristic of the Ripper victims;
her eyelids are star-shaped slit, like Catherine Eddowes’ and Mary Kelly’s; there is a message on the wall next to her, reminiscent of the one found next to Eddowes’ apron, but this one reads “Down on whores,” which is a quotation from the “Dear Boss” letter received at the Central News Agency on September 27, 1888. The writing turns out to be a journalist’s doing, to highlight what he considers “plain” – that “our friend is back” (“I Need Light”). If everyone believes it, two people would profit most: The Star journalist, due to the increase in circulation of the paper, and the real killer. Inspector Reid, however, stands in their way. Even though Chief Inspector Abberline is overexcited at the possibility of finally catching the Ripper, Reid believes the victim was “dressed as Jack for [their] eyes;” the woman was not an East End prostitute, the cause of her death was different, and the cuts are “a postscript, an afterthought” (“I Need Light”) merely leading the investigators to the wrong track.

The other copycat murder is staged for different reasons. A body of a prostitute is found in a back alley, and her injuries make the surgeon conducting the autopsy and Abberline believe “she is Ripper”: “Throat-cut commencing left, terminating right. Abrasions on the spine. Access to the pelvic organs secured with one incision, ribcage to pubis. As before, parts of the bladder taken. And the womb also. That organ recovered at Captain Jackson’s lodgings on Tenter Street” (“What Use Our Work”). “That organ” is a kidney found wrapped together with a bloody knife (“A Man of My Company”), which is a reference to the “From Hell” letter to Mr Lusk, head of the Vigilance Committee, received on October 16, 1888. It read: “I send you half the Kidne I took from one woman and prasarved it for you tother piece I fried and ate it was very nise. I may send you the bloody knif that took it out if you only wate a whil longer” (“Ripper letters”). It appears the Ripper has kept his word, especially since the body bears so many of his victims’ signature traits. Here, again, the ambiguous role of the press is highlighted, since the cuts were made on the basis of the pictures of the real victims: the killer used newspaper cuttings as models to copy. Later, he planted the kidney and the knife on the man he wanted to take revenge on. Such false accusations were not uncommon back in the nineteenth century: a certain man lost his job after being “mistaken for Jack the Ripper,” followed by a crowd and detained a few hours at the police station – “simply out of malice” (“You are Jack the Ripper”).

Some years ago, another TV series introduced the concept of the Ripper copycat. The first season of Whitechapel (2009) also makes extensive use of replicas of the 1888 letters, newspaper cuttings, autopsy photographs, medical reports, etc., to solve crimes committed in modern London by another serial killer. He is not merely labelled the Ripper, like “The Yorkshire Ripper,” Peter Sutcliffe was – he painstakingly recreates Jack’s work. And we, the modern audience, once again engage in resurrecting the murders and revisiting the Ripper’s haunting ground.
3. “Jack’s idea of fun, fun, fun, fun, fun”

The killer’s given name is common, and his appearance is unknown – not only due to the fact that he was not caught, but also because the descriptions provided by the witnesses were contradictory (tall/medium, dark/light etc.). Some fictional accounts are interestingly tainted with Hyde-like qualities – as the *Ripper Street* witness explains: “It is what I have tried to tell you. Yes, that night, I saw him. But I saw nothing in him. Where his face should be, only darkness. This Ripper, he is dybbuk” (“What Use Our Work”). Temporary possession by an evil spirit may account for different bodies being described but does not seem to be a particularly attractive theory. In one of the episodes, Jack is given a face and a costume that is reminiscent of a Victorian gentleman, or, a far-fetched analogy to early-cinematic depictions of another Victorian villain, Count Dracula: white shirt, black suit, and a black cloak with red lining. He appears on the music-hall stage and performs mock killings accompanied by a counting-out song.

The lyrics begin with “Eight little whores / With no hope of heaven,” and do more than retell the killings. In the first stanza there is a reference to William Ewart Gladstone’s attempts at rescuing and rehabilitating London prostitutes (“Gladstone may save one / Then there’ll be seven”) (“Become Man”); in the second Heneage Court is mentioned, which must be a reference to the story of an arrest of a respected doctor made there (“Frederick Richard Chapman”). Jack appears in the third, and already in the fourth he is boasting about “set[ting] the town alight;” the majority of the listeners are definitely alight with the performance and the character. When the counting out stops at two,

Jack’s knife flashes  
Then there is but one  
And the last one is the ripest  
For Jack’s idea of fun, fun, fun, fun, fun. (“Become Man”)

This last stanza is of particular importance. Not only Jack is having fun: the audience, looking even smarter than the first episode tour participants, enjoy the performance and laugh with gusto at the long knife and hands covered in red paint. The question arises: whose idea of fun is more disturbing: Jack’s or the audience’s?

According to Clive Bloom, the very letters attributed to the Ripper convey not only “a black humour and a certain ‘bravado,’” but also “a music-hall atmosphere and a self-important theatricality through which [they] create an imaginary persona for the perpetrator. [...] Jack goes into his music-hall act for the bewildered audience – appalled, amazed (and applauding) the virtuoso performance” (94). By the time the letters became widely known, the killer had become “a multiplicity of performing personas for the popular imagination. The possibility of
copycat crimes (although finally dismissed from at least two other ‘torso’ cases) lent to Jack the amorphous ability to inhabit more than one physical body” (95), which may be read as validating the dybbuk comparison.

The actual readers of the serialised sensational story consisting of the letters and articles, as well as the music-hall audience of Ripper Street, share with the viewers of the series the interest and the will to engage in the process of reinventing Jack to their tastes. There are others who, for different reasons, need to go a step further and recreate his crimes.

4. “Where the Ripper did his work, my daughter now follows”

Back in 1888 and 1889, “sightseers were flocking Berner Street and George Yard and Flower and Dean Street” (Ackroyd 273). These places, together with Brick Lane, The Frying Pan, Osborn Street, Spitalfields Market, Brushfield Street, Little Paternoster Row, and Hanbury Street, ring a bell not only to ripperologists. Ripper Street recalls them not to follow and find the killer, thus terminating Abberline’s obsession, but to save Jack’s *in absentia* passive victim and bring an end to Inspector Reid’s private problems.

The key to finding Mathilda, Reid’s lost daughter, turns out to be the map of Whitechapel with the locations of the first two canonical Ripper’s victims and their few possessions, “the fine details of the Ripper case […] not even those hounds at *The Star*” knew, such as “the shard of glass that Polly Nichols had in her purse, [and] the red and white neckerchief that Annie Chapman had tied around her neck” (“Your Father, My Friend”). Mathilda gets similar objects and tries to locate the places the women visited on their last night; it is the report of her saying “See what a jolly bonnet I’ve got now” (“Your Father, My Friend”) – quoting Polly Nichols – that gives her father a clue. The map Reid prepared while working on the case became a step towards losing his daughter: the post-mortem pictures of the victims that marked the crime scenes scarred the little girl, as evidenced by her drawings of dead women made a few years later. Fanciful as the idea of her looking through the case files may be (cf. Gray), and even though she herself was not hurt by the Ripper, Mathilda is presented as another victim of his work. What is interesting, though, is that she did not become one passively – she did some marking on the map of her own, putting pins to locate the place where she thought the victims would be safe: her family home, with “her daddy” there to protect them (“Your Father, My Friend”). Preoccupied with the case, Reid was unable to protect his own daughter, and even when he does get Mathilda back, the “dead of Whitechapel” are said to have priority over her (“Live Free, Live True”).

The dead of Whitechapel, especially those five canonical victims, keep coming back; Jack, however, does not (at least not yet), despite continuous efforts on the part of historians and ripperologists. The theories amount and while some of
them are seen as fairly reasonable, others are discredited very quickly. What is interesting, those that turn out to be fairly short-lived are the ones that use modern technology with its accompanying claims to be definitive and conclusive. Patricia Cornwell’s *Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper – Case Closed* (2002) and Russell Edwards’ *Naming Jack the Ripper* (2014) are dismissed on the same basis: the problems with using mitochondrial DNA evidence (Ryder). Even if such books sell well, the media frenzy is short-lived and the writers themselves become a kind of passive victims of the Ripper myth.

5. “A little joy in his continuous absence”

The meticulous approach to recreating late-Victorian reality combined with placing the plot six months after the last canonical Ripper murder and still calling it *Ripper Street* may have resulted in the reception of the title as a mere catchphrase attracting the viewers to “an investigative procedural about dedicated policemen” (“Ripper Street”). What it also meant was that the killer’s absence had to become a necessary part of the setting. Towards the end of the first episode, Reid suggests Abberline “to undertake this: that we find a little joy in his continued absence, […]. All that we can hope for now is that he is gone and stays gone” (“I Need Light”). And that is what makes the series interesting: it does not create yet another Ripper-figure on the basis of vague theories. Jack’s shadow resurfaces as a form of commentary on the ways of dealing with failure on the part of the police – not solving the case, hence not bringing order and resolution – and the success on the part of the press – creating a best-selling sensational story, which is still being re-imagined for modern audiences. But more importantly, the series presents both the Victorians and us, the modern audiences, as obsessed with his legend, the narrative in which “fiction and history meet and mutate” (Bloom 96). We are “watching our social and psychological concerns performed in costume” (Whelehan 278).

Our obsession is used by some marketing departments, as evident in the subtitle added to the Polish version of the series: *Ripper Street: The Mystery of Jack the Ripper* [*Ripper Street: Tajemnica Kuby Rozpruwacza*], which signals that the series might be yet another attempt at discovering who the killer was (or that the people in the local marketing department have no clue regarding what the series is about). Another example is the cover of the Blu-ray edition of the second season, which relies on the stereotypical signifiers of the Ripper: a pool of blood on a cobbled street, a long knife dripping with blood, and a long coat; even though only the lower part of the man is visible, he is standing back to the viewer, walking away, leaving the crime scene and leaving us – the viewers.

Whereas the historic people of Whitechapel were relieved the Ripper was gone and the TV Leman Street police officers were looking for some joy in his
absence, modern audiences seem to find joy in reimagining the autumn of terror from a safe distance, reading (and watching) all about it. Almost a century ago, in the 1920s, Edmund Pearson stated that while writing about true crime, we are “constructing the criminal as a comfortably distant monster” (Schmid 203). Coming to terms with the fact that the killer was not caught and we may never learn his true identity, *Ripper Street* goes a step further building the character around his conspicuous and ubiquitous absence.

**References**


**Filmography**


“Become Man.” 2013. Episode 2.3.


