

CARLETON UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

SOCI 3220C
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JACK THE RIPPER AND CRIME IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Course Description

In the districts of Whitechapel and Spitalfields in the East End of London England, several women were brutally murdered in a ten-week period between August 8 and November 9 1888. All of the murdered women were prostitutes and all of them came from the same social class. They were all described in the press as middle age drabs and all were married at one time or another and were either widowed or separated from their spouses. The victims were chronic alcoholics and all were living a life of complete and utter destitution. The murders all occurred within an area about one quarter square mile and all the women were apparently seized from behind and had their throats cut though recent evidence suggests the attacker first strangled them before he slit their throats.

With one exception the victims' bodies were all badly mutilated. There was no evidence that they were sexually assaulted, the murders occurred between midnight and six o'clock in the morning and all but one killing took place outdoors. In addition the savagery appeared to increase with each murdered woman. In fact body parts were removed from at least three of the victims according to ripper researcher Philip Sugden. The soubriquet assigned to the killer came from the 'Dear Boss' letter that was received by London's Central News Agency on September 27 1888 and signed 'Jack the Ripper.' The widely held view is that Jack the Ripper murdered five women (the canonical five) starting with Mary (Polly) Nicholas in Bucks Row on August 31, 1888 and ending November 9 1888, when Mary Jane Kelly was murdered in her flat at number 13 Millers Court. There are also some ripperologists who believe Martha Tabram who was murdered on August 8 1888 was the first victim of Jack the Ripper.

No person was ever convicted of the Jack the Ripper murders and over the years legions of scholars, journalists and criminologists have tried to solve the puzzle. The questions remain: Who was Jack the Ripper? Where did he come from? Why was he never caught? and why did he slaughter so many innocent women especially prostitutes? The police had no prior experience in dealing with serial killers and forensic criminology at the time was only in its infancy. The verdict that came out of the coroners' inquests following each murder concluded that the 'murders were committed by some person or persons unknown.' This prophetic finding back in 1888 remains as true today as it did when these crimes occurred over a hundred years ago.

The murders committed by Jack the Ripper occupy a prominent place in the history of crime. Although he was not the world's first serial killer the barbaric manner in which Jack the Ripper viciously murdered his victims was certainly unprecedented for the times. The popular magazine 'Punch' characterized Jack the Ripper as the 'Nemesis of Neglect' a sort of ghoul or phantom who wreaked vengeance in order to make a social statement about the deplorable living conditions in Whitechapel. Others saw him as a monster the epitome of evil. However one may view Jack the Ripper, the fact remains that his victims were butchered and their bodies mutilated in the back alleys and streets of Whitechapel and Spitalfields with impunity. Today the legacy of his legendary crimes and victims lives on in the folklore and popular literature and films of the 21st century. In this course we will examine the subject from a criminological perspective by

looking at the social, economic and political factors that may have played a role in the creation of the fiend that became known as Jack the Ripper. We will examine the social conditions in London England at the turn of the century and place the killings in the context of social, political and economic conditions prevalent at this time in history.