

What is the fascination with Jack the Ripper?

Jack the Ripper. These three words are instantly recognisable. They conjure up images of foggy streets, tawdrily dressed prostitutes, crowded tenements, slums, dark alleys, quick and bloody deaths personified in a shrouded faceless figure prowling the night armed with a sharp knife and a dark Gladstone bag.

Why is Jack the Ripper the most famous murderer of all time? By today's standards he is a minor criminal figure with his victims not even numbering double figures. In our desensitised lives, why does this figure still inspire fear and loathing with more books, movies, graphic novels, songs or paintings produced than any other figure in history?

There are many reasons. Primarily the lack of identification of the perpetrator allows continuous re-evaluation of the information available. A lot of the original police files have been decimated – by Blitz damage, but souvenir hunters or by simply being dumped to make space in overcrowded storerooms. From the scraps that are still available, so called Ripperologists can infer and explain any theory they wish. A conspiracy theory, more than one killer, a famous suspect protected by the police or Masons – just a few of the theories running through the millions of words written about the Ripper. Improving criminal sciences proffer new interpretations of existing evidence and new evidence comes to light, whether real or phoney, to add fuel to an already hotly debated subject.

The very nature of these crimes also have a bearing on their notoriety. These crimes were blatant. The brutality of the slayings ensured that every nuance was discussed. The fact the bodies were left in the open to be quickly found by passers by and not thrown in the favourite dumping ground of the Thames. It is suggestive of wanting to be lauded, a lust for fame and discussion – almost like an artist displaying his works. The fact that the murders were conducted under the noses of the populace of the overcrowded streets of Whitechapel with no-one being

able to identify the culprit, or being able to provide damning evidence to lead the police to the killer provides more fascination to Ripperologists.

The press also have a large role to play in creating the mystery around this figure. During the time of the murders the Rippers' activities were chronicled obsessively, the actions of the police were set down one by one, there were sketches of victims and suspects, letters "written by the killer", witness testimonies and every last scrap of information were fabricated, embellished and printed by the papers of the time and made available for the whole world to read, so diffusing the line between fact and fantasy and creating this Victorian melodrama during the time of the murders. It could be said that this was the beginning of sensationalist or tabloid journalism and that the media coverage turned this series of murders into something the world had never known. Jack the Ripper, although probably not the first serial killer in history, was probably the first serial killer to come to the attention of a potentially global audience, wider than the pool from where he selected his victims. With modern society being fascinated with the lives of serial killers Jack the Ripper will never fade into obscurity.

One must also take into account the social context surrounding the murders. They happened at a time when the East End was seen as an abyss, containing all the unsavoury elements and social ills of Victoria Society – prostitution, alcohol, music-hall, immigrants, overcrowding, unemployment, disease etc and was in dire need of social reform. As each element is examined, Jack the Ripper could be seen at the centre of them all. He is not just a faceless killer, but a damning indictment as to the state of society in the 1800's.

Jack the Ripper represents the classic whodunit. All manner of sleuths, researched, artists, writers et al have attempted to solve this mystery for over 100 years and all have failed. The story continues to perpetuate and as the facts are dissected and filled with conjecture and inference, the truth about Jack the Ripper is almost disregarded or manipulated to satisfy whatever crackpot theory is fashionable at the time. A warning should be given to those

discussing the murders today, to protect the facts and allow the Ripper evidence to speak for itself. Alan Moore (From Hell) puts this warning into words. “(the crimes are)...drained of real vitality or meaning by the century of investigation or publicity attached to them.” True Ripper aficionados should steer clear of elaborate theories and stay true to that dark and violent figure stalking Victorian London.

Word Count : 768

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