

# DEAR BOSS: HOAX AS POPULAR COMMUNAL NARRATIVE IN THE CASE OF THE JACK THE RIPPER LETTERS

By

Ted Remington\*  
University of Iowa

## ABSTRACT

This essay explores the phenomena of hoaxes as communally constructed narratives by examining the series of letters sent to authorities claiming to be from Jack the Ripper. The study looks at how and why the character of Jack the Ripper was created through these letters, and why this figure became a site of public fascination at the time (and remains so today). More than simply the work of cranks or psychotics, a study of the letters reveals them to be a way of articulating and managing collective anxieties. Through the work of Kenneth Burke, the essay suggests that the "Ripper letters" provided a symbolic way of dealing with the social trauma and complex emotional responses triggered by the brutal murders of several prostitutes that gripped London's East End in the autumn of 1888.

## INTRODUCTION

Consubstantiality *is* established by common involvement in a killing.  
-- Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*

A letter to the editor of a newspaper falsely claiming responsibility for an unsolved homicide shares a number of characteristics in common with an Agatha Christie murder mystery. Both tell stories about a violent crime. Both create characters. Both seek to play upon the reader's emotions. Both, if well done, generate excitement, interest, and anticipation. In short, both tell stories that revolve around the drama of death and the mystery of who bears responsibility for it.

Yet, most of us would balk at placing these two texts in the same category. In all likelihood, we would place the Christie novel in the category of entertainment, literary fiction, perhaps even art. On the other hand, the letter to the editor would likely be branded as a "hoax," with all the negative connotations that word carries.

The rationale for this distinction seems reasonable. After all, the murder described in the novel presumably never happened. The crime itself is as fictional as the characters and circumstances surrounding it. The reader enters into a dialogue with the novel presuming that none of what is being represented relates in any specific way to a reality outside the world of the story. Any truths we might look for in the novel are of a more general sort (e.g., observations about human interactions, the ageless willingness among some to do wrong for personal gain, the

triumph of right and reason over evil and chaos).

The hoax, however, relies on a more malignant mixing of truth and untruth. The crime addressed by the hoax letter is (presumably) quite real. The letter may impact the investigation of the crime by distracting and misguiding the authorities in their search for the individual responsible for the crime. This in turn could lead to needless fear, confusion, and panic among the letter's wider readership. While we may enjoy being tricked and fooled by the artificial crime presented to us in the Christie novel and the artful manipulation of our expectations that accompany it, we quite rightly would feel violated by a text that misled us in a similar manner about an actual murder, particularly if the murder occurred in our own community. The distinction between the work of literary fiction and the hoax appears to be that the novel has effects on the reader that are benign, if not positive, and does no overt harm to the social world of the reader. The hoax, on the other hand, is a negative force that tends to erode the trust, sympathy, and mutual understanding that are at the heart of productive social interactions.

Even at this level, however, the boundary between those texts we read as literature and those we condemn as hoaxes is not easily drawn. What I suggest in this essay is that the phenomenon of the hoax, while often destructive, can be at the same time a means for a community to negotiate difficult and dangerous situations. In some cases, a hoax performs a communal function, offering deeper self awareness, comfort, and understanding than any Agatha Christie novel could hope to do. Sometimes, a hoax is the story we tell ourselves to better understand the inexplicable, and in providing that understanding, however flawed it may be, the hoax can be a valuable tool with which to strengthen a sense of community.

This essay supports this contention by examining a case study in which "inauthentic" texts helped create a drama that allowed for social self-examination and alleviation of collective guilt and fear: the letters sent to newspapers and police in the autumn of 1888 claiming to be from Jack the Ripper. Beginning with a brief overview of the cultural context of the Jack the Ripper murders, I suggest that the specifics of the crimes lent themselves to sensational dramatization in the context of Victorian London. Turning to the letters themselves, I provide a short chronology of their appearance, followed by a content analysis. I suggest that while the letters were clearly written by a wide array of authors (none of them likely to have been the Ripper), they share certain key similarities that amount to a sort of unplanned collaboration in the creation of the character of "Jack the Ripper." Using concepts of literary and rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke, I offer an explanation of the social function these letters played in negotiating fears and anxieties about social order brought to the surface by the murders. Finally, I suggest what this specific case study says to us about the social value of (at least some) hoaxes and the importance of studying them.

I will begin with an axiom that is central to the thesis developed in the rest of this essay: Jack the Ripper is a fictional character. By this, I do not mean that the five women traditionally considered Jack the Ripper's victims were not real or did not actually die. They were real people who in death left behind real family and friends and who at this moment lie in very real graves in and around London. What I am suggesting, however, is that virtually everything we know, or think we know, about Jack the Ripper is based on one sort of fiction or another. To put it another way, Jack the Ripper is a hoax.

### The Ripper in Fake and Fiction

Almost from the time the murders began, people told stories about who the murderer was, why he did what he did, and the conclusions to be drawn from his actions. He became a dramatic character. To begin with, the name itself is fiction. The epithet "Jack the Ripper" bears as much responsibility for the continual interest in this series of crimes as any other single factor, yet it was almost certainly an invention of a newspaper writer (Evans and Skinner, 2001; Rumbelow, 1988).

Even before the series of murders had concluded, a dramatic monograph circulated in London in which the author suggested that the scene of one of the Ripper murders had been under a curse owing to a grisly killing that had taken place there 300 years earlier (Coville and Lucanio, 1999; Rumbelow, 1988). And while inquests were still being held in the deaths of the third and fourth Ripper victims, one could visit waxwork displays in London's East End, and for a small fee, take in life-like tableaus of the Ripper and his victims.

After the string of murders seemed to come to a halt, the number and scope of Ripper fictions grew. Within a year, the crimes became the subject of a drama on the London stage (Rumbelow, 1988). This was the first in what would become a long list of dramatizations of the murders in books, on the stage, and eventually in film, radio, and television versions.<sup>1</sup>

Additional texts that could be considered part of the Jack the Ripper collection of fictions include the innumerable articles and books written over the last century purporting to prove who the killer actually was. Any number of these theories have been shown to be little more than elaborate imaginations based on few or no facts, fantastic hypotheses created to attract the public's attention (and money) to the author.

False confessions have been a hallmark of Ripper literature, including not only the original letters sent to police and newspapers claiming to be from the killer, but also several scaffold confessions of condemned prisoners stating that they were the killer, and most recently a diary (since declared a forgery) of a Liverpool businessman in which he confessed to being responsible for the killing of London prostitutes in the autumn of 1888. Together with overtly fictional dramas about the murders, these texts continued to build a public awareness and understanding of the crimes based on almost nothing other than false statements.

This continuing preoccupation with creating and consuming stories about Jack the Ripper raises a simple but provocative question: why would the murders of five common prostitutes become such a celebrated event in the popular culture of the time, to say nothing of the century that followed? After all, we know that the sections of London's East End where the murders occurred were places where life was held cheap. Robberies, rapes, physical assaults, and even murder were not uncommon occurrences. The fact that the authorities at the time debated the number of murders committed by Jack the Ripper substantiates this. Although what is now considered to be the first murder in the series took place at the end of August 1888, this murder was initially linked by both the police and press to two assaults on prostitutes that took place earlier that summer. And although the last murder is thought to have happened in early November of that same year, East End prostitutes continued to be the victims of physical assaults and murder afterwards, some of which were attributed to Jack the Ripper.

Just as there was nothing exceptional in and of itself about violence in the East End, the victims themselves seem to be women of little significance. They were not only prostitutes, but streetwalkers of the lowest variety--poverty-stricken, alcoholic, over-the-hill women who hoped to make enough money in an evening's work to rent themselves a pitiful bed for the night. They were individuals who lived out their existences in the shadowy, murky corners of London life. They were not young, beautiful, innocent, wealthy, or socially significant individuals. They were women whose deaths would be of little note to any beyond their immediate circle of friends and family, and even in these cases, the numbers of people directly involved were small. Why would the fictitious *nom-de-crime* of an individual who committed violence on these most common of women become a media sensation not only at the time of the crimes, but moreover still be synonymous with everything vicious, sadistic, and frightening more than a century afterward?

I will suggest that part of the explanation for this lies in the number and importance of several deeply rooted social issues and relationships foregrounded by the crimes. For now, however, I want to point out a few of the more immediate causes for the celebrity of Jack the Ripper.

Firstly, while the murder of prostitutes was not novel in London's East End, it was unusual to have this number of murders committed over a relatively short time span. Over the course of barely more than ten weeks, five grisly murders were committed. Even when set against the nearly daily violence in a place such as Whitechapel (one of the most infamous of East End locales), this constituted a crime spree that would grab the attention of even the most jaded resident of Victorian London.

Add to this the ferocity of the crimes. This, after all, was the hallmark of the Jack the Ripper slayings. The murders were not simply killings, but elaborate rituals of violence committed against the female body. The violence went far beyond a momentary burst of brutality and viciousness, but involved a monstrous fury that was hardly common in the day-to-day street thuggery of the poorest sections of London.

And while the fact that the victims were prostitutes would suggest that their deaths would not receive a great deal of attention from the public, their profession inextricably linked the crimes to social issues that were both important and titillating, fueling interest in the crimes. The murder of prostitutes brought together two primal interests of human nature: violence and sex. The identity of the victims as prostitutes brought up issues of sexual ethics in a more direct way than Victorian decorum usually allowed.

The scene of the crimes also contributed to the public interest in the crimes. Occurring in the dark, mysterious East End, the reportage of the murders allowed those outside the community in which the crimes occurred to gaze voyeuristically at the often hellish existence of their fellow Londoners from the safety of their armchairs. By 1888, the East End of London had become a source of public debate, concern, and fear about the future of the empire. In particular, the influx of immigrants and the occasional political unrest emerging from the East End signaled to many the possible dangers to Great Britain specifically and civilization generally, if the civilized were not on their guard.

Of course, the aspect of the crimes that most lent them to continuing public fascination was the inability of the authorities to solve them. Had a culprit been apprehended quickly, the

drama would have been allowed to follow its course and come to a satisfying conclusion. The questions and anxieties raised by the crimes would have faded from public consciousness. The ongoing nature of the mystery, however, asked for (perhaps even demanded) that the public imagination be engaged to find a way of explaining what was happening in Whitechapel and why. With no specific solution to these questions forthcoming, the crimes became a free floating invitation to speculation of all sorts. The lack of almost any factual information about who the criminal was and why he committed these acts provided a venue in which people could offer their own theories and explanations for the murders and, in so doing, make a variety of arguments about issues of social importance. In the reportage and commentary on the murders, a laundry list of social concerns emerges, including the need for assistance to the poor, the plight of women, the importance of maintaining law and order, worries about the influx of immigrants to Great Britain, and the perils of loose morality, prostitution in particular. The murders occasioned a cultural introspection and search for meaning and safety. As Judith R. Walkowitz says in her study of the dark side of Victorian London, *City of Dreadful Delight*, "At the height of the crisis, cultural fantasies ran rampant in speculations about the murderer's identity and the social and political significance of his crimes. These speculations also resembled the literature of the fantastic in their symptomatic expression and management of anxieties over social and political disorder" (Walkowitz, 1992, p. 196).

The means by which these concerns found a voice was the modern press corps, including a wide variety of daily and weekly newspapers in London, each with its own editorial slant and readership, and all in desperate need of stories that would engage their readers to the point of persuading them to pay the price of a copy. Along with the memorable name, the brutality of the crimes, and the inability of the authorities to catch the killer, the existence of the modern newspaper industry is one of the central contributors to the fame of "Jack the Ripper."

In this series of murders, newspaper writers had an open-ended narrative that touched on their readers' deepest fears and concerns – in short, the stuff of an enterprising journalist's dreams. It is understandable that such a story would receive greater play in the media than it might deserve based strictly on the importance of the facts. Its dramatic nature would be too appealing to pass up. It is also easy to imagine newspaper writers helping the story along a bit by creatively sketching out some specifics of the central character of the drama. This is the source of the widespread supposition, both at the time of the murders and since: the name "Jack the Ripper" was in fact the ingenious invention of a newspaper reporter who wanted to collapse the various mysteries surrounding the crimes into a specific character. If this is true, the reporter involved did much more than simply capture the interest of this audience. He helped create a symbol that stands for many of our continuing fears concerning the relationship between modern life and our basest human drives.

### **The Letters**

Even if we grant the hypothesis that the original letter that bore the signature "Jack the Ripper" was the product of a journalist, the fact remains that the mediation of the Jack the Ripper murders was not a one-way street. During the fall of 1888, hundreds of letters flooded the offices of London newspapers and law enforcement. The majority of these letters offered suggestions as to who the killer was, how to catch him, or what the underlying causes of the crimes were. These letters offer an interesting insight into the preoccupations of Victorian Londoners.

The subject of this paper is a particular subset of these letters. I am focusing on those letters in which the letter writer claims to be the killer. Like all Jack the Ripper correspondence, these letters allow the writer to become part of the drama. Also like the other letters, those purporting to be from the killer attempt to create understanding for crimes for which there seems no explanation.

But these letters go several steps further. In a sense, they create the murderer in his absence, a figure who serves as a focal point for the free-floating anxiety generated by the crimes. Despite the fact that the briefest perusal of even a small number of the letters would suggest that they could not all be authentic (and, in fact, that the majority could not be from the real killer), the Ripper letters had an enormous impact on Londoners at the time, an impact that is in large measure the reason the crimes are still so well known today. The origin of the letters (whether authentic or hoaxes) is, as Walkowitz notes, of secondary importance. "Whether authentic or not, the letters helped to establish the murders as a media event by focusing social anxieties and fantasies on a single, elusive, alienated figure, a figure who craved 'sensation' and who communicated to a 'mass' public through the newspaper" (Walkowitz, 1992, p. 200).<sup>2</sup>

For a community that felt itself under attack, these letters provide an image of the enemy they face. But what makes the letters so provocative is the extent to which this created version of the mysterious killer, this "elusive, alienated figure" seems so at home within the community to which he is laying siege.

The known facts about the letters are these: There are in existence well over 200 letters currently in public records of Scotland Yard and the London police files that purport to be from the individual responsible for the Whitechapel slayings. There are some letters currently missing from the records, but for which we have documentation in the form of reproductions made at the time of their receipt. The vast majority of the letters, when their origin can be fixed, were postmarked in or near London. Several, however, came from more distant points in Great Britain, continental Europe, and the United States.

The letters were generally sent to individual newspapers, the Central News Agency in London, or to law enforcement (e.g., the Metropolitan Police, Scotland Yard, etc.). In some cases, however, letters were simply found in locations where the writer had apparently left them, assuming they would be found. Individually, the letters vary widely in their levels of detail and literacy. Some, given their tone and elegant handwriting, appear to be the work of educated "Jacks." Others, however, are nearly incoherent, filled with misspellings so wild that they nearly defy interpretation. To the extent we can determine who the authors were (only a handful of writers were ultimately identified by authorities), we know the letters were written by men and women, old and young, rich and poor, Londoners and villagers. Yet, when read together, what emerges from the letters are threads of similarity running through them, connecting them in ways that suggest an informal, unplanned, and improvised collaboration, something made possible by the publication of facsimiles of a number of the early letters, as well as two or three sentence summaries of many of the other missives sent by "Jack the Ripper."<sup>3</sup>

The phenomenon of the Ripper letters began with a single letter sent on September 24 (just over two weeks after the second murder) and received the following day at the offices of the Metropolitan Police. The letter, addressed simply to "dear Sir" confesses to "all these murders in the last six months." The writer claims he wanted to find and kill a woman named Chapman (the

name of the second Ripper victim). Now that he has done what he sent out to do, the writer claims he wishes to give himself up, but will not do so voluntarily—the police must find him first. He goes on to suggest, despite his supposed willingness to surrender, that he may commit more murders in the near future. The letter is punctuated by a silhouette drawing of a coffin and a dagger.

This first letter did not receive a great deal of attention. It was not published by the press and does not seem to have been taken seriously by the police. Its relevance, as well as the import of the Jack the Ripper letters in general, changed forever on September 29, 1888. Two (or, perhaps more properly, three) events took place on that date that would make the creation and consumption of Ripper correspondence a media phenomenon both at the time and for more than a century afterward.

On September 29, a letter was forwarded to the police from the Central News Agency in London. The letter was said to have arrived two days earlier, although the exact date is in question. The letter itself is dated September 25 and is postmarked September 27. What we know for certain is that the Central News Agency forwarded the letter to the police only after its contents were known to the London press corps.

This letter is the infamous "Dear Boss" letter. While not the first Ripper letter, it would prove the single most influential text in the creation of the Jack the Ripper mythos. Addressed to "The Boss, Central News Office," the letter reads as follows:<sup>4</sup>

“Dear Boss,

I keep on hearing the police have caught me but they won't fix me just yet.

I have laughed when they look so clever and talk about being on the right track. That joke about Leather apron gave me real fits. I am down on whores and shant quit ripping them till I do get buckled. Grand work the last job was, I gave the lady no time to squeal How can they catch me now, I love my work and want to start again. you will soon hear of me with my funny little games. I saved some of the proper red stuff in a ginger beer bottle over the last job to write with but it went thick like glue and I cant use it. Red ink is fit enough I hope ha. ha. The next job I do I shall clip the lady s ears off and send to the [page break] police officers just for jolly wouldnt you. Keep this letter back till I do a bit more work then give it out straight. My knife's so nice and sharp I want to get to work right away if I get a chance, good luck .

yours truly

Jack the Ripper

Dont mind me giving the trade name

wasn't good enough to post this before I got all the red ink off my hands curse it.

No luck yet. They say I'm a doctor now ha ha”

It is with this letter that "Jack the Ripper," both the name and persona associated with it, is born. As we shall see, a number of themes emerging from the Jack the Ripper correspondence have their genesis in this letter. Not least of these is the name itself, which became nearly ubiquitous in future Ripper letters.

The importance of the letter was multiplied many times over, however, by the fact that within hours of its receipt at the office of the Metropolitan Police, the murderer struck not once, but twice. It was in the early morning hours of September 30 that the so-called "double event"

occurred. Two separate murders, each bearing obvious similarities to the earlier killings, happened within a couple of hours of each other in time, and within a few minutes walk in distance, of each other. The revelation of two new killings on the same day carried out (apparently) by the same culprit sent public interest and anxiety about the murders to a whole new level. Press coverage of the murders spiked dramatically in the weeks following the double event, as did the number of letters pouring into the Central News Agency, individual London papers, and the authorities. The fact that the "Dear Boss" letter was received just prior to the two murders lent it an air of credibility it might not otherwise have had. Additionally, one of the victims in the double event had part of one ear removed, a fact that echoed the reference in the "Dear Boss" letter in which the writer claims he will "clip the ladys ears off."

The frenzy of attention sparked by the "Dear Boss" letter was followed by a flurry of similar letters in the following weeks. Within a day or two of the double event, letters were arriving at newspaper and police offices from people claiming to be "Jack the Ripper" in which references were made to many of the previously published details of the killings. Although the newspapers themselves often noted the strong likelihood that such letters were the product of practical jokesters, it did not stop them from reprinting the text of a number of these letters and summarizing many others.

As more and more facts were made available to the public, along with the details of the correspondences coming in from self-styled "Jack the Rippers," the letter writers began to create an identifiable persona for the killer. It would be impossible in anything less than a book-length exploration of the subject to go into detailed textual analysis of each letter. What can be done, however, is to sketch out the template that emerges when examining these letters collectively. In short, if one wanted to create a hoax Jack the Ripper letter that would fit in with the existing body of correspondence from Ripper claimants, what form would such a letter take?

### **How to Write a Jack the Ripper Letter**

Within a couple of weeks of the double event, the form and format of the Jack the Ripper letters had assumed a fairly predictable pattern. As new facts and theories emerged, these were incorporated into the letters, but the basic form remained constant. As they accumulated, the letters collectively formed a sort of primer for future letter writers, offering a template to be used, along with themes upon which to elaborate. If you were a Londoner in the autumn of 1888 who was inclined to contribute to the growing collection of Jack the Ripper correspondence, how would you go about writing such a letter?

Following the lead of the second letter (and the first one to be published), as well as the overwhelming majority of Jack the Ripper letters that followed, you would begin with the salutation "Dear Boss," a locution that was at the time seen as an Americanism (or at least un-English). You would go on to boast about the most recent killing, and perhaps suggest that there were yet more victims who hadn't been found. You would also likely brag about your ability to elude capture. Like the majority of the letters, you would do this in a mocking, humorous tone, perhaps describing how you were right under the nose of the authorities but continued to be passed by.

In fact, humor is one of the most consistent aspects of the Jack the Ripper correspondence, and has become one of the hallmarks of the persona created for him. Often,



letter writers made reference to the murders as "funny little games" or as "good jokes." Another common source of amusement for the character of Jack was the wide variety of theories suggested about the murders, all of which, according to Jack, were laughably wrongheaded, occasionally warranting a "ha ha" to be written in as a comment on their silliness. At the time, some commentators argued that this humorous tone was evidence of the degree to which the letter writers were warped and demented. There may be merit to this observation, but it is also important to notice the formality of the inclusion of humor in the letters. Its centrality and consistent tone throughout the collection of Ripper correspondence suggest that its inclusion probably owes more to the loosely collaborative nature of the letter writing than to the dementia of individual letter writers.

Oddly enough, one of the most consistent aspects of the Jack the Ripper correspondence was the inclusion of detailed descriptions of where the writer lived and/or where the next murder would happen. Nearly all the letters suggest not only that future murders would occur, but give police some clue as to when and where they will happen, further developing the gamesmanship aspect of Jack's character.

Another specific theme any careful writer of Jack the Ripper correspondence would want to touch on is the promise to send some physical evidence of the murders to the authorities, usually in the form of a body part. This aspect of the letters took on particular significance after one letter followed through on this promise. In the middle of October, perhaps the second most infamous Jack the Ripper letter (after the original "Dear Boss" missive) arrived at the home of George Lusk, the head of the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee. This letter was notable for a number of reasons, the first being that it did not follow a number of the patterns seen in earlier letters (such as the "Dear Boss" salutation, which was not used), and more obviously by the fact that it was accompanied by what appeared to be a portion of a human kidney. The letter claimed it had been taken from one of the victims of the double event two weeks previously. There was a great deal of speculation about the validity of this letter at the time, as well as the source of the kidney. Opinions ranged from the belief that it was not even necessarily human to the assertion of some physicians who examined it that the kidney was not only definitely human, but could be linked quite specifically with one of the victims (who had, in fact, had a portion of a kidney removed).

The reference to the harvesting of body parts was an exaggeration of a theme that began with the original "Dear Boss" letter: the use of human blood in the actual writing of the letters. A number of letters were written in red ink and claimed that this was blood taken from one of the victims. Others promised that although they were not written with blood, there would soon be a new supply with which to charge the writer's pen.

As a Ripper letter writer, you also would keep abreast of the latest developments in the investigation and incorporate them into your correspondence, usually doing so with the previously-described mocking tone. For example, when it was widely reported that the police planned to use bloodhounds to track the Whitechapel killer, letters began to arrive in which Jack described his amusement at the use of "puppies" to catch him. When various theories were forwarded about whom the killer might be (e.g., a doctor, a lunatic, a butcher, etc.), letter writers would take the opportunity to explain how far off these suppositions were from reality.

From hell  
Mr Lusk  
Sov I send you half the  
Kidne I took from one woman  
preserved it for you tother piece  
fied and ate it was very nice I  
may send you the bloody way that  
took it out if you only wate a what  
longer.  
Signed  
Catch me where  
you can  
Mister Lusk -

Figure 1: The "From Hell" letter sent to George Lusk, accompanied by a portion of a (possibly human) kidney.

Any potential Ripper letter writer also would take care to avoid certain topics in his or her correspondence. Perhaps the most surprising omission in the Ripper letters is the lack of motive. Occasionally, a letter writer would suggest an antipathy toward prostitutes, resulting from either a personal injury caused to him by a specific prostitute in the past or simply from general moral outrage. However, these references are sporadic at best and hardly constitute a continuing theme.

Similarly, the character of Jack as constructed in the letters did not fall into any defined demographic group. For example, despite the theories that Jack might be an immigrant recently settled in the East End, and the worries among the authorities that this belief might spark persecution of the large Jewish immigrant population in Whitechapel, the letter writers themselves did not tend to ascribe Jewishness, or any other particular ethnicity, to Jack. Jack was an individual defined by his acts and personality, not by his social identity. Jack was, at the same time, both everyone and no one.

Underscoring this lack of social identity is the fact that the letters give Jack virtually no personal history. Other than the occasional mention of dalliances with prostitutes in the past, there is no explanation of where Jack came from or how he came to be who he is. He is born at the moment the crimes are committed.

Finally, despite the fact that the crimes were taken up by a wide array of social reformers to support their particular theories about the degeneracy of the East End, the horrors caused by poverty and class division, or the need for social and economic reform, the Jack of the letters rarely makes any statement that could be interpreted as commentary on the social aspects of his crimes. Jack is not someone who is a member of a class any more than he is a member of any ethnic group. He is in a sense the quintessential individual, one whose actions are not predestined by the past, are not determined by membership in any community, and are not carried out on behalf of anyone else or for any purpose beyond his own desire to commit them.

### **Why Did the Letters Take This Form?**

Scholars of the discourse of murder have noted a tendency of the media to portray those accused and convicted of violent crime as inscrutable "others", whose motivations are buried in darkly twisted souls. They are, in short, monsters (Curtis, 2001). But another hallmark of media coverage of murders is the revelation that those arrested for the crimes often do not appear monstrous from the outside. It is often noted how normal and unassuming they look, how quiet and peaceful they seem to those who know them, and how unexceptional they seem to be by most standards.

This tension between the murderer as an "other" on one hand, and as a next-door neighbor on the other, exists even when we have a specific individual before us onto whom we can project our questions and hypotheses. How much more prominent would this tension be in a case such as that of Jack the Ripper, where there is no flesh and blood individual into whom we can search for reconciliation of these apparent contradictions, no one to serve as a physical point of tangency between the known and unknown?

In the case of the Whitechapel murders, this basic tension in the understanding of horrific crimes, the conflicting desires to believe that the criminal is completely different from us, yet to

understand him from the inside, did not lead to a complicated understanding of a specific individual. Without a viable suspect, there was no single figure on whom to project these competing understandings. In the absence of a murderer, one who embodied these tensions had to be created. In such a figure, we would expect to see the creation of a killer who embodies contradictions at several levels. He would be at the same time an alien and an Everyman, he would be a highly specific person who lacked any true identity; he would be profoundly antisocial while still being irresistibly fascinating; he would be someone completely bizarre, yet strangely familiar. If the understanding of social relations always involves an ability to bridge the gulf between the self and others, then understanding the phenomenon of murder requires us to do so in a situation where building that bridge between otherness and self is a frightening, daunting task. Yet, the very aspect of it that makes the task so anxiety-producing, the need to allow ourselves to participate in a dialectic with the darkest aspects of ourselves and others, is perhaps what compels us to cross that bridge (or at least to attempt to do so).

I suggest that the letters from which the persona of Jack the Ripper was created did just this. They gave (and continue to give) society a figure at whom to point an accusatory finger of blame, but also a persona through whose eyes we can look. The letter writers created a Jack who was misanthropic, alien, and monstrous while at the same time oddly social, compelling, and recognizable as one of us. He is a figure that can, at one and the same time, be the epitome of monstrous violence and an odd sort of folk hero, one who can commit animalistic brutality on his fellow human beings yet do so with *élan* and *panache*, flouting social strictures and confounding authority in a way that cannot help but hold a certain appeal. In short, the letter writers created in Jack a nearly perfect monster/hero who embodied and took on the contradictions entailed both in the crimes themselves and in the desire to understand them. The creation of Jack did not solve these contradictions. Rather, he served as a symbolic construct that allowed Londoners of the time (and perhaps us as well) to deal with a certain level of anxiety and apprehension they could not help but feel when social boundaries were so explicitly and dramatically transgressed as they were in the small hours of the London night during the autumn of 1888.

It is worth remembering to what extent transgressions of social boundaries were at the forefront of the collective Victorian mind in the autumn of 1888. Concern about such violations was particularly keen in relation to the boundaries of class as they existed in both fact and in the imaginative geography of London's East and West Ends. A relatively new literary genre, the urban exploration, had become widespread in Britain. Beginning in the middle of the 1800s and continuing over the next several decades, literary studies of London life appeared with increasing frequency. These texts featured the observations of (usually) male, educated, and well-to-do writers on the astonishing discrepancies between rich and poor London, as well as a fair amount of theorizing over the causes of the physical and moral state of their most degraded neighbors. A short list of the more notable authors of urban exploration would include George Sims, Charles Booth, James Greenwood, Henry Mayhew, Frederick Engels, Charles Dickens, and Henry James. These men were, as Judith Walkowitz notes, *flaneurs*, urban tourists to the most mysterious and dangerous regions of the metropolis, attempting to both understand their mysteries through scientific logic and satisfy their own fantasies about East End life through personal, tactile, experience of it. Moreover, they created texts that allowed their readers to act as *flaneurs* by proxy through subjecting the residents of the East End to the fascinated gaze of the West End.

The two primary reactions to this voyeurism were guilt and fear. Urban explorations gave

their readers the uneasy feeling that things were going horribly wrong in at least some parts of the city that represented for them the epitome of civilization. Walkowitz says,

In this charged atmosphere fears of class conflict and social disintegration predominated over class guilt, despite the increase in charitable schemes. For many members of the propertied classes, the menacing presence of "King Mob" in their part of town threatened the imaginative boundaries erected to mark off and contain the poor. (Walkowitz, 1992, p. 29)

For Londoners in 1888, the fears of "King Mob" were quite fresh. Over an eighteen-month period from the middle of 1886 through November of 1887, a number of demonstrations took place in which East End laborers physically brought themselves and their grievances to the West End. This invasion from the East, accompanied by sporadic looting and rioting among the roughest elements of the demonstrators, caused panic among many West Enders. This culminated with the police crackdown on demonstrating laborers in Trafalgar Square on "Bloody Sunday," November 18, 1887.

By the time of the Ripper murders, Londoners were all too aware not only of the social boundaries that divided their city, but the unsettling permeability of these boundaries. Urban explorers penetrated the East End to satisfy the fascination of their West End readers. East Enders had penetrated the West End in overt demonstrations of social unrest, increasing the anxiety that the violence with which the East End was associated might be visited on London more generally in the form of a tearing apart of existing social structures. The Whitechapel murders seemed to embody the communal fears and fantasies about the East End, exacerbating anxieties that had already been stretched taut in the London psyche. The creation of "Jack the Ripper" was one means of shaping and controlling the fears not only of the murders themselves, but of the underlying guilts, fears, and desires they came to represent.

### **How Can a Hoax Be Transcendent?**

So far, our examination of the Jack the Ripper letters has examined particular characteristics of the letters and suggested reasons why these shared features are significant. But, we as yet have only touched on the purpose these letters might have served in a larger social setting. In other words, we've looked at why the letters take the form they do, but not why they exist to begin with.

I suggest that one helpful approach to this question is via the work of Kenneth Burke, the philosopher of symbolic interaction perhaps best known for his theory of dramatism as a means of understanding human relations. In terms of our current project, the aspect of Burke's work that best illuminates the issues at hand is his book *A Rhetoric of Motives*, a work that, in the words of historian of rhetoric Thomas Conley, is preoccupied with "problems of communication within the inevitable hierarchies of social, economic, and political organization" (Conley, 1994).

The central theme of this work is how human beings use language to reinforce, challenge, reconstitute, and repair social relationships within hierarchical systems. In the course of our discussion, three key terms emerge from Burke's work that will be helpful in framing the social motives of the Jack the Ripper correspondence. These are the Order, the Kill, and the Secret.

In Burke's usage, Order refers to any system of social hierarchy (e.g., an economic

system, a system of religious beliefs, a political organization, etc.). The Secret is the founding principle of a particular hierarchy (e.g., private property ownership in the case of capitalism, the Trinity in the case of Christianity). It is the mechanism that creates hierarchical relationships. The Kill is the means of creating a sense of self identity and identification with others through transformation. For Burke, identity is forged through the making of a sacrifice in which we become consubstantial with each other (e.g., in Christianity, the shared identity through the sacrifice of Christ). In the best of all possible worlds, this sacrifice is simply symbolic. However, it can take on the more malignant associations the word "kill" implies, devolving ultimately into the utter breakdown of communication and identification in the case of war. In other words, the Kill is that transformative aspect of social relationships that is necessary for identification, but must be managed in such a way that it is constructive rather than destructive.

If Burke's theories about how and why we communicate with each other and use symbols to negotiate our social surroundings have any merit whatsoever, they should be of use in examining the discourse emerging in the wake of the Whitechapel murders in 1888. Burke's approach to symbolic action is firmly rooted in physical experience, and as abstract as his theorizing can become, it is never far from the physical metaphors of the body from which his ideas spring. In fact, Burke's use of physical imagery is not simply a way of illustrating his ideas in a visceral way, but is based in his conviction that the way we interact symbolically parallels our lived, embodied experiences of the world. If anything, symbolic action is a metaphor for the human experiences of the sexual, violent, excremental, and mortal aspects of our lives, not the other way around. To this corporeality of Burke's theories of symbolic interaction we add a virtual laundry list of hierarchies challenged and broken by the murders in Whitechapel, and we have a clear invitation to examine the Jack the Ripper correspondence through a Burkean lens.<sup>5</sup>

What, then, are the hierarchies directly implicated by the murders themselves? Most obviously, the murders violated a sense of law and order, a phrase Burke would point out involves not simply a sense of status quo, but one of hierarchy as well. Add to this the issues of class that were remarked on even at the time of the crimes. The geography of the city of London underscored the divisions of class involved, inviting the murders to be understood in relation to the poor East End in which they took place, and the affluent West End in which the social power and authority to stop and prevent crime was centered. Political hierarchy was also at issue, particularly given the fact that the crimes emerged from the East End only a year after demonstrations led by members of the East End working class had been staged in the heart of Westminster.

The murders transgressed the very notion of civilization itself, and the hierarchical relationships entailed in the concept of what is "civilized." Again, this was an aspect of the crimes touched on by social commentators of the time. Specifically, the murders placed acts of barbaric, chaotic violence within the setting of Great Britain, a nation that styled itself as the most civilized society the world had ever known. Thus, the murders challenged the very national identity of Victorian England.

Closely linked to this were notions of racial hierarchy. An oft repeated theory on the murders at the time was that they certainly could not have been committed by an Englishman. Such sadistic brutality simply was not consistent with the national character. It was suggested that the much more likely culprit would be an immigrant (e.g., an Eastern European Jew, of whom there were many in the East End) or perhaps a seaman from Malaysia or some other

exotic (and hence, less civilized) locale. "Foreign looking" is a phrase peppered throughout the eyewitness testimony and police reports describing individuals suspected of involvement in the murders.

Of course, the murders also involve issues of sexuality, particularly in regard to the victims' identities as prostitutes. The victims were individuals who disobeyed or challenged the existing notions of sexual hierarchy and propriety. They did not conform to existing models of womanhood. Any discussion of the murders could not help but touch on this common characteristic of the victims. Despite all the euphemisms and circumlocutions used in the media to elide or soften the issue, the facts remained.

In short, no discussion of the crimes could avoid touching on multiple issues of hierarchies and their attendant mysteries. Moreover, in many ways, the crimes themselves were subversions or transgressions of hierarchy. The incredible interest in the murders is explained, at least in part, by the conflicting attitudes toward these various forms of hierarchy. On one hand, the murders represented attacks on existing notions of order, and therefore suggested the disturbing possibility that the social fabric was being rent. On the other hand, discussion of the crimes also revealed the negative aspects of these hierarchies, particularly the way in which lower classes were subjected by higher ones. Simultaneously, readers of media coverage of the Whitechapel murders would be repulsed and horrified by these overt transgressions of order, yet drawn sympathetically to the challenges posed to existing senses of order by the murders to the extent that they themselves felt victimized by these hierarchies.

It is this tension that helps explain the resonance these crimes had with Victorian London. To take just one example, we can look more closely at the identities of the victims. We began this study by posing the question of why the murders of a few common streetwalkers would occasion the rise of the most potent symbol for criminal horror in the English-speaking world. When we look at the crimes through Burke's terminology, however, we see that the identity of the victims as prostitutes is something that added to rather than diminished the social impact of the Jack the Ripper persona. After all, the prostitutes embodied the hierarchical tensions at issue in the murders. They were women in Victorian England, yet as individuals, they played roles that were at odds with existing models of proper womanhood. As Walkowitz notes in her study, "as the permeable and transgressed border between classes and sexes, as the carrier of physical and moral pollution, the prostitute was the object of considerable inquiry as well as the object of individual preoccupations for respectable Victorians" (Walkowitz, 1992, p. 22). By itself, this would make them provocative, but in their deaths, these particular prostitutes attained an even more potent symbolic force. As victims, they could be seen as innocent, undeserving of their fate despite their profession. They could be (and were) portrayed as victims of the hierarchies against which they transgressed. They could at the same time represent challenges to the moral order as well as victims of the breakdown of that order.<sup>6</sup>

This gave the murders a problematic potency that would not have existed had the victims been members of other social groups. Had the killer vented his rage against aristocratic ladies, shopkeepers' wives, or even children, it is doubtful he would have achieved the same notoriety as he did. The crimes would have been easier to classify as transgressions against a specific order. The reception and interpretation of the crimes would not be nearly so complex. The fact that the victims themselves existed at this nexus of economic, social, and sexual hierarchies guaranteed that any discussion of the crimes would entail a wide variety of collective anxieties about secrets

and desires for order that otherwise might not have been present.

The fact that the crimes seem to have had no motive beyond the destruction of these women as individuals also allowed the question of what hierarchy was being most clearly transgressed to be left open to public imagination and fantasy: were the victims guilty transgressors of order, or innocent victims of its violation? Even the physical realities of the way the murders occurred played into this dynamic; one of the aspects of the crimes that drew such unprecedented public attention was the ferocious yet systematic violence perpetrated on the bodies of the victims. The idea of the victims as innocent sacrifices to the forces of hierarchy is underscored by the fact that their brutalization took an overtly ritualistic form, so much so that contemporary speculation about the killer's identity included the possibilities that the murderer was a Jewish ritual animal butcher, a vengeful Mason committing ritualistic murders, or a vivisectionist bent on doing bizarre gynecological research. All these possibilities shared the common characteristic of ritualistic sacrifice perpetrated on a body in compliance with the demands of a higher order, be that order of a religious, fraternal, or scientific nature.

The murders, involving in specific ways embodiments of Burke's triad of Order, Secret, and Kill, created a drama which acted out for its Victorian audience their own preoccupations, values, tensions, and conflicts. Burke's triad describes the constantly turning dynamic among social hierarchy, the forces that create that hierarchy, and the transformative power in which such hierarchies are challenged and defended. Its contemplation offers a means by which society can perform periodic self-examinations. In the case of Jack the Ripper, the crimes illustrated the stark contrasts in social order between East End and West End: poor and wealthy, women and men, minorities and "true Englishmen", immigrant and native, and laborer and gentleman. They illuminated the darkest back alleys of Victorian society, revealing more vividly than the musings of any *flaneur* the secret world of the poverty-stricken and the "fallen women" who existed at the social order's lowest depths. And they did so by transforming through murder five prostitutes into communal sacrifices, casualties of the very social institutions that had created the most civilized and cosmopolitan city in the world.

Not only did the murders bring issues of hierarchy to the fore, but the fact that they went unsolved meant that these ruptures in hierarchy remained open, as did the threat of even greater danger to social order. Again, if Burke's work is valid in even its most basic assumptions, it suggests that the murders and the discussion of them would be disconcerting on a number of levels and that we would expect to see a symbolic attempt to come to terms with them in a way that allowed for both the revulsion and the desire stirred up by them to coexist. Coming to terms, in this sense, would not mean creating a state of social stability; Burke reminds us that Order and Disorder always exist together, with threats of destabilization in every attempt to codify hierarchy, and potentialities for new hierarchies in every dissolution of Order. Rather, it means the creation of a drama to explain and symbolically manage the anxieties produced by living in a world of flux, a world in which Order and Disorder are continually tumbling into one another.

I suggest that we see exactly this symbolic move in the creation of the persona of Jack the Ripper through hoax letters written to London newspapers and police. The mystery of Jack the Ripper is a way of consolidating the various anxieties posed by the acts of murder into a single mystery to explore, one that allowed the contemplation and discussion of the various social hierarchies involved.<sup>7</sup> By creating a murderer who is distinctly "other" and seems incapable of being confined by the same strictures of hierarchy that contain the rest of us, the



letter writers allow individuals to distance themselves from not simply the crimes, but the transgression of hierarchy involved in them. Yet, by creating this character in a way that allows him to be seen as familiar and understandable, if not actually sympathetic, the letter writers allow their readers to vicariously participate in these transgressions. Jack the Ripper is an embodiment of conflicting attitudes not simply about law and order, but about guilt over several of the most basic social hierarchies in which his Victorian creators lived, including those of class, ethnicity, and gender. The fact that the crimes went unsolved allowed the drama of the Ripper to remain unresolved, just as Burke suggests the dynamic of Order, Secret, and Kill never resolves itself into any one of those terms. Jack the Ripper carried (and continues to carry) such social potency because of his elusiveness, both literal and figurative.

More specifically, the creation of a persona for the killer mythologized the crimes in a way that allowed them to become a source of communal identity, the victims becoming a sort of sacrifice in which the rest of the community became consubstantial. They filled the symbolic function of the scapegoat, suffering directly for the sins of the community from which they came or the community beyond the East End that had negligently allowed the poor and desperate to fall into increasingly deprived conditions, depending on one's point of view.<sup>8</sup> Londoners could see themselves as sharing aspects of both the murderer and the murdered, existing inside and outside social hierarchies, as defenders of order while imaginatively transgressing that order at the same time. The dialectic of Ripper correspondence between the letter writers and the greater public via the London press allowed for fuller participation in the Burkean notion of the Kill, allowing the community of readers who took them in to participate in the acts of murder not simply as potential victims, but as the collective accomplice of the murderer, a character created in a way as that allowed accusatory fingers to be pointed, but also suggested the uncomfortable parallels between the actual killer and his public (or at least their unstated wishes and frustrations).

In short, what the Ripper letter writers did was create a character at the center of a drama that represented and managed the fears and desires aroused by the murders, fears and desires that were keyed into some of the most basic underlying structures of social order. As such, Jack the Ripper became, to use Burke's phrase, an example of the symbol as enigma, a symbol of "both clarification and obfuscation, speech and silence, of publicity and secrecy [that] simultaneously expresses and conceals the thing symbolized" (Burke, 1969, p. 120). In fact, it would be difficult to come up with a better example of the social symbol than Jack the Ripper, a cultural figure who so clearly combines the known and unknown, the specific and the general, the comfortably familiar and the monstrous other.

### **What Does Jack the Ripper Have to Say to Us About Hoax in General?**

This discussion of the social purpose of the Jack the Ripper persona and the letters that created him should not be taken to mean that those individuals who wrote the letters were aware of the role they were playing. Their motives are largely lost to us, as are their individual identities. To the extent we know anything about them, we know that they were motivated to write for apparently simplistic, narrow-minded reasons such as the desire for publicity, the thrill of causing panic, the desire to get back at individuals they disliked by putting a good scare into them, and so on.

However, as we have seen by looking at the letters as a body of work, they show a

definite tendency toward collaboration, a willingness to play the same game with each other. What this suggests about the phenomenon of hoaxes is that while the individual motivations may be concrete and individual, the reasons they take the form they do, and the effect they have, can be based on rather important social realities. What I have suggested in this paper is that the Jack the Ripper letters, nearly all of which clearly fall under the heading of hoax, serve a collective purpose by creating a character, a symbol, that allowed a certain amount of sense to be made out of a horrifying situation. They did this by allowing a fuller drama to be performed, by conjuring from the haze of fear and uncertainty an identifiable antagonist. By creating a character that Londoners could at the same time abhor yet find oddly familiar and even human, the collective hoax of the Jack the Ripper letters served the purpose of containing and framing a chaotic situation. While an Agatha Christie novel creates a fictional mystery and goes on to give us the satisfaction of solving it, the Jack the Ripper correspondence provided a satisfaction for its readership by framing and controlling an all-too-real murder mystery that defied any simple narrative closure.

Moreover, the fiction of Jack the Ripper allowed for certain social realities to be contemplated and discussed indirectly. It allowed the various anxieties produced by the murders to be managed by the creation of a symbol to stand in the place of a vast collection of fears and desires emerging from the transgression of hierarchies.

In sum, a hoax is not necessarily a public service, by any stretch of the imagination, and it would be wrong to suggest that it was even in the specific case of Jack the Ripper. Yet, what it can do is provide a way of dealing symbolically with those aspects of society that are kept secret and silent. And for those of us who study them, hoaxes can be signs of the fears and desires of those who create and consume them. After all, hoaxes appear only when there is a willingness, desire, or perhaps even need to believe them. To study hoax is to study our desire to believe. By asking how and why these desires manifest themselves, we come to a better understanding not only hoaxes and those who perpetrate them, but our own collective role in creating the need that such hoaxes attempt to meet.

---

## ENDNOTES

### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ted Remington received his doctorate in rhetorical studies from the University of Iowa in 2002. He authored several entries in the forthcoming "Encyclopedia of American Conspiracy Theory" and has presented papers on the topics of conspiracy theory and Kenneth Burke at meetings of the Pop Culture Association/American Culture Association and the Midwest Communication Association. He currently is an instructor in the Rhetoric Department at the University of Iowa and teaches composition at Kirkwood Community College.

### AUTHOR'S NOTE:

The author would like to thank the editors and reviewers of JCJPC, Dr. Bruce Gronbeck (University of Iowa) for his helpful review of the text, and Dr. Peter Knight (University of Manchester) and Dr. Jonathan Long (University of Durham) for their organization and hosting of the "Fakes and Forgeries, Conmen and Counterfeits" conference held at Durham Castle, Durham, UK in 2002, where this paper was first presented. Correspondence should be directed to Ted Remington, Rhetoric Department, University of Iowa, English/Philosophy Building 171, Iowa City, IA 52242, or to [Theodore-remington@uiowa.edu](mailto:Theodore-remington@uiowa.edu).

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that those interested in using the Ripper murders as the basis for drama needed to alter many of the known facts of the case in order to find an audience. In *Jack the Ripper: His Life and Crimes in Popular Entertainment* (1999), Gary Coville and Patrick Lucanio note that, until the middle of the twentieth century, dramatic adaptations of the Ripper story had to change or avoid such details as the names of the people involved (including the victims and Jack himself), the setting, and the manner of death of the victims, lest the distasteful realities of the crimes be called to mind too vividly. Most significantly, the stories needed to remedy the fact that the real Jack was never apprehended. In particular, radio and television dramatizations based, however loosely, on the Ripper crimes were required by broadcast standards to include a denouement in which the murderer was either apprehended by the authorities or met with his own demise. In order to tell the story of the Ripper, what few facts existed needed to be faked.

<sup>2</sup> On the issue of authenticity, the general consensus among current scholars of the case is that virtually all of the letters are inauthentic (in the sense that they were not written by the individual responsible for the crime). Even a brief glance at the text of the letters leaves little room for doubt that most of them cannot be by the murderer. The wide variety of handwriting styles, the variations in dialect, the distinctions in literacy levels that turn up in the letters strongly suggest that very few could have been written by the same individual, let alone by the actual murderer. Moreover, one odd commonality of the letters is the recurring insistence that previous letters were not from the real killer. The letter that is most often noted as having the best chance of being authentic is the "From Hell" letter sent to George Lusk, accompanied by a portion of a kidney. This letter is discussed further in the following section: "How to Write a Jack the Ripper Letter."

<sup>3</sup> The variety of authors behind these letters and their informal collaboration is expressed well in a scene shot for the Hughes brothers' film *From Hell* (although cut from the final edit of the theatrical release), a telling of the Jack the Ripper tale based on allegations of a Masonic conspiracy and royal complicity in the murders. In the scene, a well-to-do gentleman is sitting at his desk late at night and tells his wife he will come to bed shortly after finishing a last bit of business. After she disappears, he begins writing on a piece of paper. A voiceover begins to read the text of the "Dear Boss" letter. A montage of images shows us a wide variety of other Londoners of differing ages, genders, and economic classes penning similar letters. As the images change, so do the voices reading the text of the letter, mirroring the different authors. This sequence, available on the DVD release of the film, captures the varied yet collaborative voices that created the character of Jack the Ripper in the autumn of 1888.

<sup>4</sup> This transcript is based on that given in Stewart P. Evans and Keith Skinner's *Jack the Ripper: Letters from Hell* (2001), a study of the Ripper correspondence featuring transcripts of most of the known letters as well as facsimiles of many of the originals.

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting parenthetically that the East End itself was portrayed by writers at the time in language that fits nearly perfectly with Burkean notions of the symbolic. In *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*, (2001) L. Perry Curtis, Jr. notes that a dominant metaphor for those writing about the East End even before the murders was that of a jungle. Use of this particular trope conjures up not only hierarchical distinctions between civilized and uncivilized, but also carries specifically sexual overtones (particularly given the prevailing understanding of Londoners of the time about the behavior of the inhabitants of the actual jungles to which the East End was being compared). Even more explicitly Burkean is the writing of would-be reformer Rev. Lord Sidney Godolphin Osbourne. Writing in the *Times* in September of 1888, Osbourne deployed a number of excremental metaphors in describing the East End, suggesting that just as raw sewage leads to pestilence, so did the "human sewage" of the East End lead to the depravity of which the latest series of murders was the most recent symptom.

<sup>6</sup> In a sense, Jack the Ripper can be seen as a dark, twisted version of Robin Hood, the "prince of the Forest" Burke cites as an representative example of the mythic hero who challenges existing social hierarchy. Jack, like Robin, possesses an uncanny ability to avoid capture while committing affronts to the social order. Rather than serving the underclass at the direct expense of those in power, however, Jack defies the authorities by victimizing those who are already most oppressed by existing hierarchies. The reversal becomes even deeper if one accepts the suggestion made from the time of the murders onwards, that Jack the Ripper might be a "gentleman" of social standing or even an aristocrat. This problematic parallelism/opposition suggests one reason why Jack the Ripper at the same time can be seen as the epitome of misogynistic violence or the depravity of modern, urban life, yet also inspire the sorts of playful, irreverent symbolic practices (e.g., musicals, games, the ubiquitous souvenir t-shirt) which are undeniably popular, but often derided as being a glorification of horrific acts.

<sup>7</sup> The Jack the Ripper correspondence can be understood as a special case of the drive to solve arbitrary puzzles in the face of social frustration. Burke suggests that by taking up and solving mysteries that seem to have little direct effect one's own position in life, individuals can experience the satisfaction of "solving" puzzles that stand in for the true mystery (social hierarchy and the Scramble always involved in it) that is the true source of their frustration but

which is ultimately beyond their influence. This could be said of the preoccupation with the Ripper in general, but the authors of the Ripper correspondence are a particularly illustrative example of this phenomena in that their discourse much more clearly is "the saying of something, not for an extra-verbal advantage to be got by the saying, but because of a satisfaction intrinsic to the saying" (Burke 1969, 269). While those suggesting possible culprits or social morals to be gleaned from the killings could be said to be motivated by an honest desire to give concrete assistance to their community, the Ripper letter writers create a solution (of sorts) to the mystery through the creation of a character on whom to place the blame. This is done anonymously and with no motivation of tangible assistance to their fellow Londoners. They approach, much more closely than the letter-writing would-be detectives or social reformers, Burke's notion of pure persuasion.

<sup>8</sup> This is a distinction that would depend largely on who happened to be telling the story; in conservative circles (such as the Ripper reportage in the *Times*), the tendency would be to focus on the depravity of the individuals inhabiting the East End as the source of the problem. In liberal or radical circles (e.g., the *Star* newspaper), the blame would more likely be placed at the feet of the wealthy West End and of the political and social elites it represented. In either case, the victims were portrayed as having suffered their fates, at least in part, because of collective sins of their fellow Londoners.

### Works Cited

- Burke, Kenneth. 1969. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Conley, Thomas. 1994. *Rhetoric in the European Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Coville, Gary and Patrick Lucanio. 1999. *Jack the Ripper: His Life and Times in Popular Culture*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.
- Curtis, Jr., L. Perry. 2001. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Evans, Stewart P. and Keith Skinner. 2001. *Jack the Ripper: Letters from Hell*. Stroud, U.K.: Sutton Publishing.
- Rumbelow, Donald. 1988. *The Complete Jack the Ripper*. London: Penguin Books.
- Walkowitz, Judith R. 1992. *City of Dreadful Delight*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dear Boss

25. Sept. 1888.

I keep on hearing the police have caught me. but they wont fix me just yet. I have laughed when they look so clever and talk about being on the right track. That joke about Leather Apron gave me real fits. I am down on whores and I shant quit ripping them till I do get buckled. Grand work the last job was. I gave the lady no time to squeal. How can they catch me now. I love my work and want to start again. You will soon hear of me with my gunny little games. I saved some of the proper red stuff in a ginger beer bottle over the last job to write with but it went thick like glue and I cant use it. Red ink is fit enough. I hope ha ha. The next job I do I shall clip the lady's ears off and send to the

police officers just for jolly wouldnt  
 you. Keep this letter back till I  
 do a bit more work. then give  
 it out straight My knife's so nice  
 and sharp I want to get to work  
 right away if I get a chance.  
 Good luck.  
 yours truly  
 Jack the Ripper  
 Dont mind me giving the trade name  
  
 want good enough  
 to post this before  
 I got all the red  
 ink off my hands  
 curse it  
 No luck yet. They  
 say I'm a doctor  
 now- ha ha

Figure 2: Facsimile of the "Dear Boss" letter sent to the Central News Agency in which the name "Jack the Ripper" first appeared.

