

Millie Chandler Dyer
2204301
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Literary Review for Independent Project: 'Canonical: The Musical'

For my Independent Project, I decided to create *Canonical: The Musical*. The plot would be based on the lives of Jack the Ripper's victims; also known as 'The Canonical Five'. Within this musical, I hoped to raise the topic of Media Sensationalisation and how it distracts the public from important matters. To gain a better understanding of my narrative's diegesis, a fearful Victorian Whitechapel, I first carried out some contextual research.

Hawksites describes 1800s Whitechapel to have been "devastatingly poor" (Shianne, 2015). They also report this area was overcrowded with multiple impoverished families being forced to live together in small single rooms. Moreover, they elucidate that there were over 200 common lodging houses in Whitechapel, but it was so populous that over 8000 people were still "homeless and destitute" every night (Shianne, 2015). In concurrence, Jack the Ripper Tours stated that Victorian Whitechapel was "not a happy place to be" and that the streets were "lined with starving, penniless inhabitants" (JTRT, 2015). Moreover, literary scholar Heather Scheele relays that "the Victorian Era was not an easy time to live in, primarily for women", adding "single women lived in this dichotomy of empathy and disgust", and confirms that "unwed mothers took drastic steps to survive" (Scheele, 2020). These three sources share the unanimous opinion that Whitechapel was indeed a place of extreme misery and squalor. From them, I deduced that my writings must be tactful and sensitive to the residents' experiences.

Following that, I explored pieces of fiction which feature descriptions of Victorian London. I revisited the political novel *Bleak House*, in which Charles Dickens protests that Victorian Londoners felt “people who did a little made a great deal of noise” but “people who did a great deal made no noise at all” (**Dickens 1852**). To me, this connotes people of authority, such as politicians and police, using their power selfishly. Furthermore, in a moving poetic stanza from *London*, William Blake describes “how Chimney-sweepers cry, every blackening Church appals, and the hapless soldiers sigh, runs in blood down Palace walls” (**Blake, 1794**). I interpreted this as another remark on the upper-class; even the Church turning a blind eye to the suffering as they reach their own hands out for donations. To boot, in his renowned story *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Robert Stevenson paints the “contrasting areas of the city, the respectable and wealthy versus the poverty-stricken and immoral areas” and how they “highlight the struggle between good and evil” (**Stevenson, 1886**). From this, I believe that London wasn’t without money, but without the care to help those in need.

A text I principally resonated with was *The Five* by Hallie Rubenhold. Just as I had always felt paramount, Rubenhold reminds the reader that “the victims of Jack the Ripper were never ‘just prostitutes’; they were daughters, wives, mothers, sisters, and lovers. They were human beings, and surely that in itself is enough” (**Rubenhold, 2020**). After all, they certainly did more than just die. Words that struck me included “at its very core, the story of Jack the Ripper is a narrative of a killers deep, abiding hatred of women, and our cultural obsession with the mythology only serves to normalise its particular brand of misogyny” (**Rubenhold, 2020**). After absorbing this, I knew that I did not want Jack the Ripper to be a lead role as “in order to gawp at and examine this miracle of malevolence we have figuratively stepped over the bodies of those he murdered” (**Rubenhold, 2020**). *Canonical: The Musical* was going to be the story of Nichols, Chapman, Stride, Eddowes, and Kelly. So, I dug deeper into their lives, piecing

scraps of evidence together and judiciously filling in the blanks to create real, understandable women. As Rubenhold elaborates, “it is only by bringing these women back to life that we can silence The Ripper and what he represents. By permitting them to speak, by attempting to understand their experiences and see their humanity, we can restore them the respect and compassion to which they are entitled” **(Rubenhold, 2020)**. Multiple sources, cited in the attached reference list, corroborate my findings on ‘The Canonical Five’.

Mary ‘Polly’ Nichols was born in 1845 and lived a turbulent life until her death in 1888. She was a daughter to Caroline Walker and Edward Walker, sister to Edward Walker II, wife to William Nichols, and mother to Percy, Edward, Eliza, Alice, Henry Nichols, and another child whose name is untraceable. Not much is known about her early life as most records, of someone of her social calibre, have not been preserved. However, we do know that she was affectionately known as ‘Polly’ and, unlike most other working-class girls, she “studied at school until she was 15, and so, not only did she learn to read, but write too” **(Baczak, 2022)**. All the while, grieving the loss of her mother from tuberculosis and assuming responsibility for her brother. Nichols married at 18 but, despite birthing 6 children for him, was abandoned by her husband. Nichols’s husband Over time, Nichols sadly succumbed to alcoholism and lost contact with her father as a result and, likely, lost her children to the workhouse. According to Casefiles, to try and support herself, she was “flitting between workhouses” and became a “domestic servant”. When she could, she resided in common lodgings and an eyewitness remembers Nichols as a “very clean woman who kept to herself as if she was melancholy” **(Holland, date unknown)**. This witness, Emily Holland also stated that Nichols was “never very fond of men”. At some stage, Nichols lost her jobs and to her dismay, Nichols was forced into sex-work to survive. Armed with this information, I imagined Nichols’ character would be

a mothering figure in ‘The Canonical 5’. Notwithstanding flaws, I would write her as a somewhat cynical guide.

Annie Chapman was born, out of wedlock, in 1841 and suffered from a chronic disease of the lungs until her death in 1888. She was a daughter to George Smith and Ruth Chapman, sister to Emily, Georgina, and Miriam, wife to John Chapman, and mother to a son and two daughters. Heartbreakingly, her eldest daughter “Emily died of meningitis at the age of 12” and her son “John was born disabled and surrendered to a charity school of care” (**Schachner, 1996**). As a side-effect of his grief, her husband became a heavy drinker and passed away from “cirrhosis of the liver” (**Schachner, 1996**). According to Casefiles, a friend, Amelia Palmer, said that after these losses, Annie “seemed to have given way altogether” (**Palmer, 1888**). Like most single women of the time, Annie had no financial support and sold her body to earn just enough for nightly lodgings. At this time, Annie was reported as feisty, even getting into a fistfight with a fellow lodger. As I expanded my knowledge on Chapman, I envisioned her character to be the rebellious one of ‘The Canonical 5’. I would write her as a strong, sassy, and independent woman.

Elizabeth Stride was born in 1843 and was known as ‘Long Liz’ until her death in 1888. Few records remain of her early life, but Swedish medical records show her to have experienced a stillbirth. She immigrated from Sweden in 1869 where she married carpenter John Stride. Elizabeth Stride’s life is, likely by her own actions, shrouded in fabrication. According to Casefiles, she was known for “telling stories to cover up the breakdown of her marriage and to garner sympathy with the church” (**Margaret, 2022**). Her husband left her in 1882 and was by then a registered prostitute. Around this time, Stride entered a short-lived relationship with Michael Kidney, from whom she experienced domestic violence. After her murder, no friends

or family came to lay Stride to rest. With my findings, I visualised Stride as an insecure character, and I believe sprinkled outlandish lies to distract from her crumbling life.

Catherine Eddowes was born in 1842 and was listed as a Christian until her death in 1888. Eddowes was a wife to soldier Thomas Conway and mother to Annie and George. Accounts from her close friends tell us that “she was lovingly called Chick.” (**Baczak, 2022**). However, by 1888, Eddowes was employed in workhouses and was cut off from her family. Around this time, she moved in with a new partner, John Kelly. It is “unclear whether or not Catherine Eddowes was actually a prostitute” (**JTRT, 2022**), but if she was, her partner was blissfully unaware. In a sardonic irony of her beliefs, Eddowes was murdered after being taken down Church Passage, Mitre Square. From my research, I pictured Eddowes as a well-kept woman, who likes to be seen as a clean-cut Christian woman.

The birth date of Mary Kelly, also known as ‘Ginger’, is uncertain but was approximately twenty-five at the time of her death in 1888. According to Casefiles, witnesses describe her as “fun”, “popular” and “usually in the company of two or three of her kind” (**Jones, date unknown**). As far as we know, Kelly was never married but did have an ‘on-and-off’ relationship with Joseph Barnett who did not financially support her. To make ends meet, for her and Barnett, Kelly worked in the sex trade. Largely, Kelly’s occupation caused arguments in their relationship. Due to her apparent popularity, I saw Kelly as a bubbly character and would allow her to be a vessel for light relief in an otherwise serious piece of theatre.

According to Rubenhold, all five victims were treated with the level of “disdain and disgust reserved for a prostitute” and were seen as “sexually and therefore morally ruined” (**Rubenhold, 2020**). Likewise, in *John’s Chronicle*, Lucy Parr identified the Victorian view of

these women to be “children who do not accept respectable values”, “lazy and unwilling to engage in legitimate work”, “a symbol of disorder and improvidence”, and “a source of disease and contagion” (**Parr, 2021**). Evidence of this can be found in Newspaper articles on their murders, brandished as nothing more than ‘prostitutes’ and ‘bodies’; rarely, were the victims named in a tabloid.

As for Jack the Ripper himself, his identity remains a mystery. Ryan Bugara, in his *Unsolved* docu-series, and Richard Cob, in his *All the Suspects Revealed* biography, agree the assailant’s alleged description was aged 25-35 years, 5’5’ to 5’7 in height, stocky, and of fair complexion with a moustache. However, there are many theories and suspects, but three names are most frequent in this case: Montague Druitt Aaron Kosminski, and Joseph Barnett. Though, the book *The Complete History of Jack the Ripper* contests “the memories of men are too frail a thread to hang history from” and that we may never name the true culprit (**Sugden 2012**). Despite this, some Ripperologists conspire Prince Albert Victor, Queen Victoria’s son, as the culprit. Hereof, I decided The Ripper’s character would be minimal and I wanted to find a way of concealing the actor’s face. Ideally, if I had access to a large ensemble, I would have liked a different cast member to play him each night.

So, why are we so attracted to the macabre? Both Dr Marvin Zuckerman and Dr Patrick Little carried out a study on morbid fascination, as detailed in their 1996 psychology textbook *Personality and Individual Differences*. The study was devised to test the relationship of “sensation seeking, extroversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism” about our inborn human interest in violent, morbid, and sexual events; particularly, in the media (**Zuckerman, 1996**). This study included about 300 people and discovered that men generally have a higher attraction to this content. Furthermore, renowned psychologist Jordan Peterson purports that

“to understand evil is to also understand good” (**Peterson, date unknown**). He suggests that this explains the public’s infatuation with serial killers and true crime; “society may follow the fundamental narrative of good versus evil” (**Singh, 2019**). Additionally, Boston University expert Sophie Yarin opines “our media environment is especially well suited to creating this idea of the celebrity criminal, and serial killers’ kind of turn into celebrities” (**Yarin, 2023**). Yarin argues that, though men are statistically more rapt with the macabre, there are still over 70% of women who consume true crime content but for a separate reason: “preventative education” (**Yarin, 2023**).

In the case of ‘The Canonical 5’ serial killings, the victim’s names are all but forgotten by the public. In such horrifying media circuses, how our society ‘celebratise’ the perpetrators has always disturbed me. As uncovered in my research, I understand the innate instinct of attraction to the abnormal. I propose this to be one of society’s greatest hamartias. Moreover, I opine that people lose their humanity when, in mysteries like Jack the Ripper, we begin to almost enjoy scandals at the cost of others’ suffering.

To support my claim, I created and distributed an anonymous survey which was completed by 88 people. This survey asked if they knew who serial killers Ted Bundy, Jack the Ripper, and Peter Sutcliffe were. Interweaved, the survey asked if they had heard of Annie Chapman, Karen Sparks, and Josephine Whitaker; victims of the aforementioned murderers. Of these 88 people, 90% knew of Ted Bundy, 97% knew of Jack the Ripper, and 62% knew of Peter Sutcliffe. Meanwhile, only 34% had heard of Annie Chapman, 13% had heard of Karen Sparks, and a miniscule 8% had heard of Josephine Whitaker. These statistics confirmed my findings and cemented my beliefs on the misdirection of attention being exacerbated by Media Sensationalisation.

Conclusively, it is clear the victims of Jack the Ripper are carelessly overlooked. So, I began pondering how I bring Nichols, Chapman, Stride, Eddowes, and Kelly to life through a piece of musical theatre.

I looked for musical inspiration for the Opening Number. Three pieces stood out to me:

‘Façade’ from *Jekyll and Hyde*, ‘Jack the Ripper’ from *Assassin’s Creed*, and ‘At the end of the Day’ from *Les Misérables*.

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