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**Echoes of Terror: How the Jack the Ripper Murders
Exposed Victorian London's Darkest Secrets**
أصداء الرعب: كيف كشفت جرائم جاك السفاح أسرار لندن الفكتورية
الأكثر ظلاماً

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Abstract: The Victorian era (1837-1901) was a paradoxical period of immense wealth and industrial innovation juxtaposed against glaring social inequalities. This work delves into this duality, centering on the sensationalized reporting of Jack the Ripper's 1888 murders. By applying framing theory and Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model, the study scrutinizes Victorian newspaper coverage to uncover how the media leveraged these events to amplify public fear, expose societal flaws, and advocate for reform. Employing vivid metaphors, compelling narratives, and dramatic rhetoric, the press not only engaged readers but also influenced public discourse. This research offers valuable insights into the intersection of crime journalism, social awareness, and media dynamics, paving the way for further exploration of sensationalism's enduring impact.

Keywords: crime, framing theory, sensationalized reporting, Jack the Ripper, Victorian era, Press, Stuart Hall, public discourse, media dynamics, readers

Summary in Arabic:

الملخص: كانت الحقبة الفكتورية (1837-1901) فترة مليئة بالتناقضات، حيث ترافق الثراء الفاحش والابتكار الصناعي مع فوارق اجتماعية صارخة. يتناول هذا البحث هذه الثنائية المعقدة، متمحوراً حول التغطية الإعلامية المثيرة لجريمة "جاك السفاح" في عام 1888. من خلال تطبيق نظرية التأطير ونموذج الترميز/فك الترميز لستيوارت هول، يعكف البحث على تحليل تغطية الصحف الفكتورية للكشف عن كيفية استغلال وسائل الإعلام لهذه الجرائم في زيادة مخاوف الجمهور، وتسليط الضوء على عيوب المجتمع، ودعوة الإصلاحات. باستخدام الاستعارات الحية، والسرد المشوق، والخطاب



البلاغي الدرامي، لم تقتصر الصحافة على جذب القراء فحسب، بل ساهمت أيضاً في تشكيل الخطاب العام وتوجيهه. تقدم هذه الدراسة رؤى عميقة حول تقاطع صحافة الجريمة، والوعي الاجتماعي، وديناميكيات وسائل الإعلام، مما يفتح المجال لاستكشاف التأثير المستمر للهويل الإعلامي ودوره في تشكيل الرأي العام.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحقبة الفكتورية، جاك السفاح، الصحافة، الخطاب العام، الرأي العام، صحافة الجريمة، الإعلام، نظرية التأطير، نموذج الترميز/فك الترميز.

Introduction: The Victorian era (1837-1901) stands as a pivotal chapter in British history, characterized by rapid industrialization, remarkable scientific innovation, and a flourishing of cultural and intellectual life. Under Queen Victoria's reign, Britain ascended to unprecedented global dominance, propelled by technological advances in transportation, communication, and medicine, coupled with increased literacy and an expanding print culture. Yet, beneath this veneer of progress and imperial pride lay profound socioeconomic disparities. The same industrial engine that enriched the elite simultaneously subjected the working classes to dire conditions-exploitative labor, overcrowded housing, and inadequate sanitation-especially in urban districts like London's East End. Women from impoverished backgrounds were disproportionately affected, often relegated to low-wage labor or forced into prostitution as a means of survival.

These entrenched inequalities were starkly illuminated by the infamous Jack the Ripper murders of 1888, which targeted five marginalized women and underscored systemic failures in social welfare, law enforcement, and gender equity. The press coverage of these crimes, marked by sensationalism and moral panic, both captivated and unsettled the Victorian public, laying bare the contradictions of a society that championed decorum while neglecting its most vulnerable. Against this backdrop, the present study investigates how the Victorian press utilized sensationalist narratives and framing strategies in its portrayal of the Ripper case, drawing on Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model and



media framing theory to interrogate the interplay between journalism, public perception, and ideological control. Through a close analysis of selected newspaper articles, the research elucidates how the press functioned not only as a commercial institution but also as a powerful cultural apparatus that shaped, reflected, and reinforced dominant narratives about crime, class, and morality in Victorian Britain.

1- Victorian England: Progress and Paradox: The Victorian era (1837-1901), named after the long reign of Queen Victoria, was a period of profound transformation that reshaped British society. This era witnessed the rise of industrialization and scientific advancements that positioned Britain as the "workshop of the world." The expansion of steam locomotives and the development of the electric telegraph revolutionized transportation and communication, while medical innovations such as anesthesia and antiseptics significantly improved healthcare, prolonging life expectancy¹. The era also saw remarkable progress in scientific understanding, exemplified by Charles Darwin's groundbreaking theory of evolution, which altered humanity's comprehension of life and its origins².

However, beneath these monumental achievements, deep social divides emerged. Urbanization spurred mass migration to cities like London, leading to overcrowded, unsanitary conditions, particularly in districts like the East End, where poverty and disease thrived. Meanwhile, the affluent areas of the West End stood in stark contrast, flourishing with wealth and prosperity. The industrial boom, while enriching the upper classes, often subjected the working poor to grueling

1 Roy Porter, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Medicine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 148.

2 Desmond, Adrian, and James Moore. *Darwin: The Life of a Tormented Evolutionist*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1994, 479.



factory jobs, low wages, and a lack of upward mobility¹. Women, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, faced severe constraints-many turned to exploitative work in factories, while others, driven by desperation, resorted to prostitution. Victorian morality further reinforced rigid gender roles, idealizing women as pure, domestic figures while condemning those who defied these norms. Although prostitution was not formally criminalized, it became a central target of moral scrutiny and legal regulation, most notably through the enactment of the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s. These laws, which disproportionately subjected women to invasive medical examinations and state control, starkly illustrated the tensions between Victorian claims of social advancement and the deeply ingrained mechanisms of repression, particularly against the vulnerable².

Moreover, the existence of widespread prostitution-and society's ambivalent response to it-set the stage for the emergence of Jack the Ripper, whose 1888 murders came to symbolize the most harrowing failures of Victorian urban life, from inadequate policing and public health systems to the systemic marginalization of impoverished women. Indeed, the brutal killings of five women in the Whitechapel district not only exposed the precariousness of life for the impoverished but also highlighted deep flaws in policing and social welfare.

The media's sensational coverage of these crimes amplified public awareness of the rampant inequality and injustice that pervaded Victorian society. This coverage, which often played on moral panic and sensationalism, both fueled public interest and pressured the government to address the visible signs of societal decay. It accentuated the stark

1 Walkowitz, Judith R. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. University of Chicago Press, 1992, 15.

2 Levine, Philippa. *Prostitution, Race and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire*. Routledge, 2003, 69.



contrast between the technological advancements of the era and the grinding poverty that many citizens endured. As the steam-powered engines of industrial Britain transported goods to the affluent, they simultaneously carried working-class men and women into the squalor of overcrowded tenements, where basic sanitation and clean water were luxuries out of reach¹.

The juxtaposition of industrial wealth with urban poverty exposed a glaring contradiction: while the elite amassed fortunes, the working poor were often trapped in a cycle of illness, exploitation, and despair. For women, particularly those on the margins of society, options were limited, and the gulf between the promises of modernity and the reality of their lives became tragically evident. The murders of these women served as a stark reminder of how unchecked industrial growth and social neglect had left large swaths of the population vulnerable, especially those already marginalized. These events demand a reevaluation of the era's so-called progress, highlighting the importance of addressing the social and moral imperatives that should accompany technological and economic advancement. In this context, the Victorian era stands as both a symbol of human achievement and a cautionary tale about the price of progress when it is not accompanied by genuine social reform and equality.

2- Sensationalizing Crime in Victorian Media: Victorian journalism operated within a rapidly evolving media landscape shaped by rising literacy rates, advances in printing technology, and growing public appetite for accessible and engaging content. The repeal of stamp duties in the 1850s allowed for the proliferation of inexpensive daily and weekly newspapers, enabling publishers to reach an expanding working-

1 Richardson, Ruth. *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*. University of Chicago Press, 2000, 218.



and middle-class audience¹. In this highly competitive market, sensationalism became a dominant strategy to attract readership, especially among those newly literate. Papers such as *The Illustrated Police News*, *Lloyd's Weekly*, and *The Star* specialized in lurid crime reporting, often accompanied by dramatic illustrations and bold headlines. For instance, the Jack the Ripper case, unfolding during the so-called "penny press" era, presented an ideal opportunity for editors to exploit public fascination with horror, mystery, and moral crisis². In the same vein, sensationalism, characterized by exaggerated or emotionally charged reporting, was employed to dramatic effect: the killer was dubbed "the Fiend of Whitechapel" or "Leather Apron," and speculative theories about his identity filled column inches daily. These sensational narratives not only stimulated mass readership but also helped construct powerful symbolic representations of the East End as a space of social breakdown and degeneracy.

Besides, beyond merely dramatizing events, Victorian journalism employed framing techniques that selectively emphasized certain aspects of the crimes while omitting or downplaying others, thereby shaping public interpretation. Journalists often highlighted the victims' presumed roles as prostitutes, casting them as both moral transgressors and tragic figures, while underscoring the authorities' failure to maintain order. This dual focus reinforced prevailing Victorian anxieties about gender, class, and urbanization³. By framing the East End as a place of danger, disease, and vice, the press indirectly reassured middle-class readers of their own moral superiority and societal position. Moreover, the media's persistent

1 Brake, Laurel, and Marysa Demoor, editors. *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland*. Academia Press and British Library, 2009, 225.

2 Curtis, L. Perry. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*. Yale University Press, 2001, 50.

3 Walkowitz, Judith R. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. University of Chicago Press, 1992, 77.

critique of police inefficiency and governmental inaction stirred calls for social reform and greater state intervention, though such demands were often filtered through a paternalistic lens. Importantly, the rise of serialized reporting and daily updates contributed to a culture of constant surveillance and public engagement, transforming readers into amateur detectives and moral commentators¹. Thus, Victorian journalism not only mirrored the fears and fascinations of its era but actively constructed and amplified them. Through the Ripper coverage, the press emerged as a powerful cultural force-one that blurred the boundaries between information and entertainment, public interest and private suffering, and, ultimately, fact and fiction.

3- The Ripper's Crimes and Media Framing: The Ripper's modus operandi involved the gruesome mutilation of victims, primarily prostitutes, in public or semi-public spaces. These acts were not only heinous but also symbolic, embodying the fears and insecurities of Victorian society. Media coverage often emphasized the locations of the crimes-dark alleys, overcrowded slums, and crime-ridden neighborhoods-framing them as manifestations of urban decay². The press also used graphic language and vivid descriptions, such as "gashes from ear to ear" and "horrific disembowelments," to sensationalize the violence³. Newspapers framed the victims as "unfortunates," a euphemism for prostitutes, simultaneously eliciting sympathy and reinforcing moralistic judgments⁴. Police incompetence became another focal point, with journalists highlighting the inability to capture the killer

1 Knelman, Judith. *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press*. University of Toronto Press, 1998, 104.

2 Walkowitz, Judith R. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. University of Chicago Press, 1992, 53.

3 Curtis, L. Perry. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*. Yale University Press, 2001, 91.

4 Rumbelow, Donald. *The Complete Jack the Ripper: Fully Revised and Updated*. Penguin Books, 2004, 118.



as a failure of the justice system. This framing not only intensified public outrage but also fueled debates on urban safety and governance¹.

4. Analysis of Selected Articles: An analysis of five randomly selected Victorian newspaper articles reveals the framing strategies utilized during the Ripper case.

4.1. "Another Whitechapel Murder" (*The London Times*, September 1, 1888): The article titled "Another Whitechapel Murder," published in *The London Times* on September 1, 1888, reports on the brutal killing of Mary Ann Nichols, the first widely recognized victim of Jack the Ripper. Nichols' body was found in the early morning hours in Buck's Row, Whitechapel, a district in East London known for its poverty and overcrowding. The article opens with a dramatic description of the crime scene, stating that the woman's throat had been "cut from ear to ear" and that her body was "horribly mutilated." These graphic details serve not merely as information but as sensational content designed to provoke horror and captivate the reader's attention. The newspaper's vivid depiction of the crime set a tone that would be echoed throughout the Ripper case's media coverage: one of fascination, fear, and moral panic².

The report refers to Nichols as an "unfortunate," a common Victorian euphemism for a woman engaged in prostitution. This label carries more than just descriptive weight—it frames Nichols' murder within a moral context, subtly suggesting that her social status and life circumstances contributed to her victimhood. This terminology reflects prevailing attitudes of the time, where women who lived on the margins of society were viewed as morally suspect and thus more expendable. In doing so, the article distances the reader from the victim, portraying her less as an individual with a personal history and more as a symbol of the dangerous underworld of East London³.

1 Evans, Stewart P., and Keith Skinner. *Jack the Ripper: Letters from Hell*. Sutton Publishing, 2001, 217.

2 "Another Whitechapel Murder." *Casebook*, 1 Sept. 1888, p. 4. https://www.casebook.org/press_reports/times/18881110.html and Curtis, L. Perry. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*. Yale University Press, 2001, 84).

3 Walkowitz, Judith R. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. University of Chicago Press, 1992, 74.



The article's portrayal of the crime also raises questions about the effectiveness of the police. While not overtly accusatory, the piece implies criticism of law enforcement through its emphasis on the killer's ability to escape undetected. It notes that the murder occurred within close proximity to several occupied houses, yet no one heard or saw anything suspicious. This detail highlights a sense of vulnerability and lawlessness in the area, indirectly pointing to the Metropolitan Police's inability to maintain order or offer protection to the district's poorest residents¹.

Furthermore, the article plays into contemporary anxieties about the urban poor and the perceived decay of Victorian values. By situating the murder in the grim and shadowy streets of Whitechapel, it reinforces the idea of the East End as a breeding ground for crime, vice, and social disorder. The use of dramatic language and moralistic framing helps to create a sense of 'otherness' about the neighborhood and its residents.

This narrative not only informed public opinion but also exerted pressure on authorities to respond decisively, even if their strategies lacked effectiveness. In many ways, the article constructs a binary between the respectable readership and the criminalized poor, inviting the former to be both horrified spectators and moral arbiters².

The emotional charge of the article lies in its blend of journalistic fact and literary flourish. Words such as "foulest crime" and "terrible wounds" are chosen not just for accuracy but for emotional effect. The language evokes not just physical violence, but a rupture in the social fabric, suggesting that something fundamentally evil had infiltrated the heart of London. This rhetorical style would become characteristic of the press coverage throughout the Ripper case, helping to build the myth of an elusive, monstrous killer and fueling public obsession. The murder of Mary Ann Nichols, as reported by *The London Times*, was not just a

1 Evans, Stewart P., and Keith Skinner. *Jack the Ripper: Letters from Hell*. Sutton Publishing, 2001,151.

2 Rumbelow, Donald. *The Complete Jack the Ripper: Fully Revised and Updated*. Penguin Books, 2004,103.

personal tragedy or a local crime-it became a symbol of a society struggling with inequality, fear, and the breakdown of traditional norms¹.

This article, therefore, is not simply a record of a violent event. It is a text through which we can observe the Victorian press shaping public sentiment, reinforcing social hierarchies, and dramatizing crime to both entertain and moralize. The portrayal of Nichols as a fallen woman, the subtle indictment of police inefficacy, and the dark romanticism of Whitechapel all contribute to a narrative that frames the Ripper murders as more than isolated acts—they are presented as a mirror of the anxieties and contradictions of late 19th-century British society.

4.2. "More East-End Tragedies" (*Lloyd's Weekly News*, September 30, 1888): The article titled "*More East-End Tragedies*," reporting on the infamous "double event" of September 30, 1888, documents the murders of Elizabeth Stride and Catherine Eddowes. From the outset, the headline establishes a mournful and dramatic tone, immediately situating the crimes within a continuing narrative of violence and disorder in East London. The subheadings, such as "The Victim Disembowelled and Mutilated," are stark and deliberately graphic, drawing the reader in with the promise of sensational content². This stylistic choice reflects the Victorian press's tendency to blend news with spectacle, presenting brutal facts in a theatrical frame designed to shock and captivate a morally concerned readership³.

The article emphasizes the killer's daring nature, emphasizing his ability to murder two women within an hour of each other and then vanish without a trace. This framing contributes to the growing myth of an almost supernaturally cunning figure who mocks the police and terrorizes the city. Witness accounts are integrated into the narrative to heighten the sense of urgency and realism, giving readers the illusion of being part of the investigation while reinforcing the fear that the killer

1 Curtis, L. Perry. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*. Yale University Press, 2001,99.

2 "*More East-End Tragedies*." *Casebook*, 30 Sept. 1888, p. 1.

https://www.casebook.org/press_reports/lloyds_weekly_news/18880930.html.

3 Curtis, L. Perry. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*. Yale University Press, 2001,112.



could strike again at any moment¹. By doing so, the article transforms the murders into a communal crisis, one in which every citizen is both potential witness and potential victim.

Underlying the report is a recurring portrayal of the East End as a space beyond control—a chaotic and degraded district that breeds violence and defies civil order. The focus on mutilation and disembowelment serves to amplify this perception, suggesting not only physical savagery but moral and social decay. The vivid imagery used to describe the victims' injuries turns the bodies into symbols of a larger societal breakdown. As in other reports, the choice of language and setting reinforces existing class prejudices, presenting Whitechapel not just as the scene of the crime, but as a source of corruption and danger to the wider city². The article thus functions on multiple levels: as a record of fact, a warning, and a vehicle for dramatizing Victorian anxieties about crime, poverty, and the limits of modern policing³.

4.3. "Another Whitechapel Murder" (*The London Times*, November 10, 1888): The article covering the murder of Mary Jane Kelly, the final and most horrifically mutilated victim attributed to Jack the Ripper, marks a turning point in both the narrative of the crimes and their media representation. Unlike previous murders that occurred in dimly lit streets, Kelly was killed in the privacy of her own room, a detail the article emphasizes to signal a deepening of the killer's audacity and a shift in his *modus operandi*⁴. This indoor setting adds a new layer of terror, suggesting that even the presumed safety of one's home offers no protection. The report uses emotionally charged phrases like "fiendish mutilations" and "horrific scene" to convey the scale of the violence,

1 "More East-End Tragedies." *Casebook*, 30 Sept. 1888, p. 1. https://www.casebook.org/press_reports/lloyds_weekly_news/18880930.html. and Evans, Stewart P., and Keith Skinner. *Jack the Ripper: Letters from Hell*. Sutton Publishing, 2001, 173.

2 Walkowitz, Judith R. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. University of Chicago Press, 1992, 53.

3 Knelman, Judith. *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press*. University of Toronto Press, 1998, 98.

4 "Another Whitechapel Murder." *Casebook*, 1 Sept. 1888, p. 4. https://www.casebook.org/press_reports/times/18881110.html.



inviting readers not only to imagine the horror but to feel it viscerally¹. What distinguishes this article from earlier reports is its reference to a photograph of the crime scene—a stark indication of the evolving role of visual media in late-Victorian journalism. The inclusion of such imagery reflects a growing appetite for sensational content, as newspapers increasingly relied on visual aids to amplify emotional impact and drive readership². The article does not simply recount facts; it constructs a spectacle, heightening the public's fascination with the grotesque and reinforcing the mythos of the Ripper as a figure of almost theatrical cruelty³.

Alongside its gruesome details, the article critiques the authorities for their continued failure to apprehend the killer. By pointing out the repeated nature of the crimes and the escalation in violence, it subtly frames the police as ineffective and overwhelmed. This recurring critique, echoed throughout the Ripper coverage, served to erode public confidence in law enforcement and magnify the sense of helplessness and fear. Kelly's murder, presented as the climax of the Ripper saga, encapsulates not only the horror of the crimes but also the broader anxieties of a society grappling with urban poverty, social instability, and the perceived collapse of moral order⁴.

4.4. "Details of the Seventh Crime of the Murder Maniac" (*The Star*, November 10, 1888): This article, published in the aftermath of Mary Jane Kelly's murder, positions itself as both a report and a critique, reflecting growing public frustration and suspicion surrounding the Ripper case. From the outset, it sets a tone of disillusionment, drawing attention to the continued failure of the police to apprehend the murderer

1 Curtis, L. Perry. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*. Yale University Press, 2001, 121.

2 Knelman, Judith. *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press*. University of Toronto Press, 1998, 104.

3 "Another Whitechapel Murder." *Casebook*, 1 Sept. 1888, p. 4. https://www.casebook.org/press_reports/times/18881110.html.

4 Walkowitz, Judith R. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. University of Chicago Press, 1992, 65.



and casting doubt on the reliability of local accounts¹. The content centers on the most gruesome killing attributed to Jack the Ripper, describing the scene of Kelly's death with explicit detail and graphic imagery. Unlike earlier, more restrained pieces, this report combines sensationalism with a scathing commentary on the institutions and individuals entangled in the case².

Subheadings such as "The Police Again Completely Baffled" and "Brisk Manufacture of Details by Local Residents" encapsulate the article's central themes: the perceived incompetence of the authorities and the opportunism of civilians eager for attention. By accusing witnesses of fabricating stories, the article distances itself from the emotionalism of earlier reports, replacing sympathy with skepticism. This change in tone reflects a shift in public mood—from horror to impatience, from fear to anger³.

The description of Kelly's murder includes stark phrases like "horrific carnage" and "appalling mutilations," invoking not only the extremity of the violence but also reinforcing the idea of a killer who grows bolder and more grotesque with each act. These descriptors, though vivid, are not neutral—they serve a rhetorical purpose, escalating the reader's emotional engagement while simultaneously reinforcing the narrative of a city gripped by chaos⁴.

Perhaps most notably, the article includes a map tracing the locations of the Ripper's murders. This visual component offers a chilling sense of spatial awareness, underscoring the concentrated nature of the crimes and portraying Whitechapel as a battlefield. The map's presence transforms the report from mere text into a visual indictment, emphasizing the killer's dominance over a defined area and symbolizing the police's ongoing inability to reclaim control. Through this blend of journalistic

1 "Details of the Seventh Crime of the Murder Maniac." *Casebook*, 10 Nov. 1888, p. 3. https://www.casebook.org/press_reports/star/s881110.html.

2 Curtis, L. Perry. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*. Yale University Press, 2001, 129.

3 "Details of the Seventh Crime of the Murder Maniac." *Casebook*, 10 Nov. 1888, p. 3. https://www.casebook.org/press_reports/star/s881110.html.

4 Walkowitz, Judith R. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. University of Chicago Press, 1992, 79.



narrative, visual representation, and social critique, the article not only documents events but actively shapes public perception of the Ripper's reign and the institutions that failed to stop him¹

4.5. Murder in Whitechapel" (*The Daily News*, September 10, 1888)

This article, published in the wake of one of the Whitechapel murders attributed to Jack the Ripper, stands out for its socially conscious framing of the crime. Unlike reports that focus solely on the sensational aspects of the violence, this piece uses the murder scene as an entry point into a broader critique of Victorian London's social inequalities. It not only recounts the details of the crime but also situates them within the grim reality of life in the East End, exposing the deep-rooted issues of poverty, neglect, and systemic failure that shaped the lives—and deaths—of many of its residents².

The article presents the crime scene as a grim metaphor for the state of Whitechapel itself, a district plagued by overcrowding, filth, and despair. Descriptions such as "ripped open abdomen" shock the reader, but they are strategically juxtaposed with observations about the area's unsanitary conditions and inadequate housing. This contrast creates a narrative that transcends individual tragedy and speaks to societal decay. Rather than painting the violence as an isolated act, the article implies that it is a natural outgrowth of the environment in which it occurred³.

Furthermore, the report directs blame not only toward the elusive murderer but also toward the authorities and institutions that failed to address the root causes of crime. It critiques ineffective policing and the broader system that marginalized the urban poor, particularly women forced into precarious circumstances. In doing so, it casts the Ripper's crimes as both a personal horror and a public indictment⁴.

1 Knelman, Judith. *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press*. University of Toronto Press, 1998, 110 and Evans, Stewart P., and Keith Skinner. *Jack the Ripper: Letters from Hell*. Sutton Publishing, 2001, 192.

2 "Another Whitechapel Murder." *Casebook*, 1 Sept. 1888, p. 4.
https://www.casebook.org/press_reports/times/18881110.html

3 Richardson, Ruth. *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*. University of Chicago Press, 2000, 187.

4 Walkowitz, Judith R. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. University of Chicago Press, 1992, 88.



Notably, the article avoids demonizing the victim and instead frames her as a symbol of society's failure to protect its most vulnerable. She is portrayed not with moral judgment but with compassion, which serves to humanize her and intensify the article's moral appeal. In this way, the article functions as both a report and a call for reform, urging readers to confront the uncomfortable truth that such atrocities are rooted in systemic neglect and social injustice¹.

5. **Insights from the Analysis:** The Victorian press played a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of the Jack the Ripper murders, blending sensationalism with social commentary to capture the imagination of readers. Newspaper articles, such as those detailing the murder of Mary Ann Nichols, presented graphic descriptions of the crimes alongside critiques of the conditions in Whitechapel, drawing attention to the region's poverty and overcrowding². Nichols, referred to as an "unfortunate," was depersonalized, framing her death within a broader narrative of social decay. The language used in these reports not only heightened the sense of horror but also implicitly called for societal reform, highlighting the ineffectiveness of both the police and the broader social infrastructure in protecting vulnerable populations³.

As the murders continued, media coverage increasingly linked the violence to the larger societal issues plaguing Whitechapel. The coverage of the "double event" involving Elizabeth Stride and Catherine Eddowes emphasized the killer's audacity and the helplessness of law enforcement⁴.

1 "Another Whitechapel Murder." *Casebook*, 1 Sept. 1888, p. 4. https://www.casebook.org/press_reports/times/18881110.html and Curtis, L. Perry. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*. Yale University Press, 2001, 135.

2 "Another Whitechapel Murder." *Casebook*, 1 Sept. 1888, p. 4. https://www.casebook.org/press_reports/times/18881110.html and Curtis, L. Perry. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*. Yale University Press, 2001, 184.

3 Walkowitz, Judith R. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. University of Chicago Press, 1992, 74 and Richardson, Ruth. *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*. University of Chicago Press, 2000, 103.

4 "More East-End Tragedies." *Casebook*, 30 Sept. 1888, p. 1. https://www.casebook.org/press_reports/lloyds_weekly_news/18880930.html and Evans, Stewart P., and Keith Skinner. *Jack the Ripper: Letters from Hell*. Sutton Publishing, 2001, 173.

Articles portraying the Ripper as an almost mythical figure reinforced the growing terror surrounding the case, casting Whitechapel as a lawless, chaotic space. The reports juxtaposed descriptions of mutilation with critiques of the police, further eroding public trust in their ability to solve the case. The killer's continued elusiveness fostered an image of Jack the Ripper as an unstoppable force, adding to the public's fascination with the mystery¹.

These reports, while sensationalizing the brutality of the crimes, also revealed deep-seated anxieties about class division, crime, and the inadequacies of the police force, all of which were integral to the media's portrayal of the case. The coverage of Mary Jane Kelly's murder, the final Ripper victim, marked a shift in the narrative, as the press began to criticize the authorities more directly for their failure to apprehend the killer². Descriptions of Kelly's brutal death, including the term "fiendish mutilations," further amplified the horror of the case.

However, it was not just the violence that was highlighted, but also the systemic issues within Whitechapel that facilitated such crimes. Some articles took a more critical tone, focusing on the lack of protection for the district's vulnerable residents and the failure of law enforcement to provide safety³. These reports framed Kelly's death as not merely the result of a deranged individual but as part of a larger societal issue of neglect and class inequality. By humanizing the victim and linking her death to broader social failures, the press shifted from pure sensationalism to a more pointed social critique, underscoring the need for reform and questioning the effectiveness of both local authorities and societal structures.

1 Curtis, L. Perry. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*. Yale University Press, 2001, 112.

2 "Another Whitechapel Murder." *Casebook*, 1 Sept. 1888, p. 4. https://www.casebook.org/press_reports/times/18881110.html and Knelman, Judith. *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press*. University of Toronto Press, 1998, 104.

3 "Another Whitechapel Murder." *Casebook*, 1 Sept. 1888, p. 4. https://www.casebook.org/press_reports/times/18881110.html and Richardson, Ruth. *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*. University of Chicago Press, 2000, 187.



6. The Ripper's Crimes through Stuart Hall's Lens: Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Theory provides a valuable framework for analyzing the Victorian press's portrayal of the Jack the Ripper murders. This theory posits that media messages are encoded with specific meanings by producers (journalists) and subsequently decoded by audiences (readers), whose interpretations may align with, oppose, or negotiate the intended message¹. This dynamic interplay between encoding and decoding is particularly evident in how Victorian newspapers framed the Ripper's crimes to evoke specific responses from their audience.

6.1. Encoding the Ripper's Narrative: Victorian journalists employed a range of sophisticated encoding strategies to ensure their coverage of the Jack the Ripper murders both captivated readers and subtly directed moral judgment. Foremost among these was the use of sensational language, in which reporters paired lurid adjectives ("horrific," "fiendish," "grisly") with vivid metaphors ("the alley became a river of blood," "the night air tasted of fear") to engage the reader's emotions and reinforce the lurid spectacle². This choice of diction not only amplified the gruesomeness of each crime scene but also implicitly positioned the East End as a place beyond the pale of respectable Victorian society.

Closely linked was the tactic of moral framing: by labeling victims as "unfortunates" or "fallen women," the press both evoked sympathy and reiterated contemporary prejudices against sex workers—a dual move that attracted charitable concern while upholding dominant codes of sexual propriety³. Furthermore, newspapers repeatedly cultivated a narrative of institutional critique, highlighting every misstep and delay by the Metropolitan Police (e.g., "once again baffled by narrow alleyways,"

1 Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding." *Culture, Media, Language*, edited by Stuart Hall et al., Routledge, 1993, pp. 128–38.
<https://www.routledge.com/Culture-Media-Language/Hall/p/book/9780415079064>.

2 Curtis, L. Perry. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*. Yale University Press, 2001, 84-92.

3 Walkowitz, Judith R. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. University of Chicago Press, 1992, 74 and Richardson, Ruth. *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*. University of Chicago Press, 2000, 103.



“lacking the tools to pursue the unseen assailant”) to cast law enforcement as ineffectual guardians of public safety¹.

Through thematic structuring, individual reports were woven into an overarching storyline of urban decay, with repeated references to dimly lit thoroughfares, overcrowded lodging houses, and malfunctioning street lamps—each detail encoded to suggest that the very infrastructure of modern London had become complicit in crime². Collectively, these techniques formed a coherent framing strategy: by layering sensationalism, moral judgment, and institutional criticism, the Victorian press turned the Ripper case into a moral drama that exposed broader anxieties about class, gender, and the limits of progress.

6.2. Decoding Public Reactions: Audiences decoded the media’s portrayal of the Ripper murders in diverse ways. Some accepted the encoded messages, aligning with the press’s depiction of the East End as a site of moral and social decay. Others, particularly social reformers, used the coverage to advocate for improved living conditions and stricter policing in impoverished areas³. The sensational framing also fueled public fear and fascination. Readers were captivated by the gruesome details, which reinforced anxieties about urban crime while providing a macabre form of entertainment⁴.

However, not all audiences accepted the media’s narrative uncritically. Skeptics criticized the press for exploiting the murders to boost circulation, arguing that the sensationalism detracted from the victims’ humanity and the broader societal issues at play⁵. This variance

1 Evans, Stewart P., and Keith Skinner. *Jack the Ripper: Letters from Hell*. Sutton Publishing, 2001, 151–54.

2 "More East-End Tragedies." *Casebook*, 30 Sept. 1888, p. 1. https://www.casebook.org/press_reports/lloyds_weekly_news/18880930.html.

3 Richardson, Ruth. *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*. University of Chicago Press, 2000, 191.

4 Curtis, L. Perry. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*. Yale University Press, 2001, 102.

5 Knelman, Judith. *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press*. University of Toronto Press, 1998, 110 and Walkowitz, Judith R. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. University of Chicago Press, 1992, 79.



in reception illustrates Hall's contention that audiences are not passive consumers of media content, but active interpreters whose cultural, social, and ideological positions shape their responses.

6.3. Analysis of Encoding and Decoding in Selected Articles

6.3.1. Encoding Techniques in Selected Articles: The encoding process in Victorian newspapers was marked by several recurring techniques:

- **Sensational Language:** Journalists used graphic and emotive terms such as "horrific mutilations" and "fiendish slaughter" to captivate readers and evoke strong emotional responses¹.
- **Moral Framing:** Articles framed the victims as fallen women deserving both sympathy and judgment, reflecting the era's moralistic attitudes toward gender and poverty².
- **Critique of Authority:** The press frequently highlighted police failures, encoding the narrative with implicit critiques of institutional incompetence³.

6.3.2 Decoding Responses from the Public: The public's decoding of these encoded messages varied:

- **Fear and Fascination:** Many readers internalized the media's framing, viewing the Ripper as both a monstrous figure and a symbol of urban danger⁴.
- **Calls for Reform:** Social reformers decoded the coverage as evidence of systemic failures, using it to advocate for better housing, healthcare, and policing⁵.

1 Curtis, L. Perry. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*. Yale University Press, 2001, 121 and "Another Whitechapel Murder." *Casebook*, 1 Sept. 1888, p. 4. https://www.casebook.org/press_reports/times/18881110.html.

2 Rumbelow, Donald. *The Complete Jack the Ripper: Fully Revised and Updated*. Penguin Books, 2004, 103 and Walkowitz, Judith R. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. University of Chicago Press, 1992, 74.

3 "Details of the Seventh Crime of the Murder Maniac." *Casebook*, 10 Nov. 1888, p. 3. https://www.casebook.org/press_reports/star/s881110.html and Evans, Stewart P., and Keith Skinner. *Jack the Ripper: Letters from Hell*. Sutton Publishing, 2001, 188.

4 Knelman, Judith. *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press*. University of Toronto Press, 1998, 110.

5 Richardson, Ruth. *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*. University of Chicago Press, 2000, 187.



- **Criticism of Sensationalism:** Some audiences rejected the encoded sensationalism, accusing the press of exploiting tragedy for profit while dehumanizing the victims¹.

7. The Impact of Media Encoding and Decoding: The sensationalized coverage of Jack the Ripper's crimes had profound implications for Victorian society, shaping public perceptions of crime, poverty, and institutional authority. By framing the murders within the larger context of urban decay and systemic inequality, the press magnified societal anxieties about the East End as a breeding ground for vice and danger.

Through evocative language, vivid imagery, and moral framing, newspapers not only heightened the public's fear of crime but also evoked sympathy for the marginalized victims, drawing attention to the deplorable conditions faced by the working class. This interplay of fear and empathy encouraged a complex public dialogue, where the plight of impoverished women and the inadequacies of law enforcement became central to debates about urban reform and social justice².

Moreover, the media's framing of the murders reflected and reinforced the era's stark social divides. The sensationalism amplified the perception of the East End as a morally and physically degraded space, contrasting sharply with the affluence of the West End. While this portrayal boosted newspaper circulation by captivating readers with lurid details, it also catalyzed calls for social reforms addressing the root causes of crime, such as poverty, overcrowding, and inadequate policing³. The coverage established sensational crime reporting as a powerful tool for influencing public opinion and policy, illustrating how media can simultaneously exploit tragedy for profit and serve as a platform for societal reflection and change. This duality highlights the enduring legacy of Victorian press practices in modern journalism,

1 Walkowitz, Judith R. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. University of Chicago Press, 1992, 88.

2 Curtis, L. Perry. *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*. Yale University Press, 2001, 121 and Walkowitz, Judith R. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. University of Chicago Press, 1992, 88.

3 Evans, Stewart P., and Keith Skinner. *Jack the Ripper: Letters from Hell*. Sutton Publishing, 2001, 192 and Richardson, Ruth. *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*. University of Chicago Press, 2000, 187.



underscoring the media's role in both illuminating and shaping societal values¹.

Conclusion: The Ripper's murders of 1888 transcended the realm of criminal atrocity to become a potent cultural and sociopolitical touchstone that laid bare the fissures within Victorian Britain. As this study has demonstrated, the press played a pivotal role in mediating public understanding of these events, employing a nexus of sensationalist rhetoric, moral codification, and institutional critique to construct a narrative that was as ideologically charged as it was emotionally evocative. By deploying framing strategies and drawing upon Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding paradigm, Victorian journalists encoded meanings that reflected and reinforced prevailing anxieties concerning class stratification, gender norms, and the destabilizing forces of urban modernity.

The media's portrayal of the East End as a locus of degeneracy and its depiction of the victims as morally ambivalent figures simultaneously elicited sympathy and reinforced hegemonic values. These rhetorical and representational choices not only served to captivate a rapidly expanding readership but also shaped the parameters of public discourse, galvanizing debates on law enforcement efficacy, social reform, and the moral fabric of the nation. The polyvalent responses of the public—ranging from credulous acceptance to critical interrogation—underscore the dynamic processes of meaning-making and ideological negotiation inherent in media consumption.

In essence, the Ripper reportage epitomizes the Victorian press's dual function as both a purveyor of popular entertainment and a conduit of ideological transmission. It foregrounded the paradoxes of a society at the zenith of industrial progress yet mired in social inequity and institutional inertia. The enduring fascination with these crimes is thus not merely a testament to their brutality, but to their revelatory power as symbolic artifacts of an era defined by contradiction. In illuminating the tensions between spectacle and substance, between public horror and private suffering, the media's treatment of the Ripper case offers a

1 Knelman, Judith. *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press*. University of Toronto Press, 1998, 110.



compelling lens through which to examine the ethical responsibilities of journalism and the sociocultural legacies of sensationalism.

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- "Another Whitechapel Murder." Casebook, 1 Sept. 1888, p. 4.
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https://www.casebook.org/press_reports/star/s881110.html.
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