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Misrepresentation of Victimhood During the Victorian Period

Elizabeth Davidson

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The sensation novel in the Victorian period often portrayed female victims as "fallen women." These women encompassed those who suffered from addiction, engaged in prostitution, changed their identities, or were otherwise homeless. However, "fallen women" were generally misrepresented in both novel and reality. Anne Catherick, the female victim in *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins, and the victims of Jack the Ripper are all represented as ending up in precarious situations resulting in their deaths by their own accord. However, these sets of victims traversed a multitude of missteps and unavoidable tragedy before their untimely deaths. The women who fell victim to Jack the Ripper as well as "the woman in white" have more similarities than previously understood. I will be arguing that in both *The Woman in White* as well as through the lives of Jack the Ripper's victims, you will be able to see that Victorian women are misrepresented as just the victim and that their demise was not purely a result of poor individual choices. These fictional and historical victims are similar in several ways and have suffered the same fate in the remembrance of their stories in the last several decades. These women could have changed their fates, if they had only been given the opportunity and the tools to do so.

The victims of Jack the Ripper are preserved through photographs of the crime scenes where they were found. The visual representation of each victim is similar to mug shots of men; these photographs are meant to show the victims as criminals themselves, sex workers and prostitutes. These images were seen more as portraits than evidence; they were presented as justifications for their killing rather than as evidence against the killer (Anwer 434). The assumption that all of Jack the Ripper's victims were prostitutes strips these women of their identity while also creating a voyeuristic channel to view the dead in. By typifying these women as prostitutes and creating images that support that assumption, they become "the other." This

allows the rest of society to view their murders as a separation from society. However, one image of Mary Jane Kelly shows her "looking" directly at the photographer, forcing the viewer to return her gaze (Anwer 439).

Image of Mary Jane Kelly, as referenced above – creating a type of eye contact with viewer, event after death. Image from casebook.org.

This interruption of the voyeuristic tendencies surrounding these images forces the viewer to identify her as a human being. This momentary identification forces the viewer to question her death and in turn how she is presented as a victim. Once the viewer begins questioning the events surrounding her death, she becomes more easily recognized as a victim of fate rather than a victim of her own accord.

This voyeurism is also present for the reader of *The Woman in White*; the readers are allowed access to court documents that explain the reasoning behind the deaths of several characters. These court documents are both narratives given by individuals involved and excerpts from Marian Halcombe's diary, which creates a newfound intimacy between the reader and the story. This intimacy builds as the reader is given insight into who, what, where and why each

death occurs before it is unraveled for the characters within the novel. The death of women in the London streets and in Collins' novel initially ask those "viewing" the dead to blame the victim, but in Victorian England it is rarely just the victims' missteps that result in their deaths.

The most obvious comparison that can be drawn between the victims of Jack the Ripper and the female victims in *The Woman in White* is that all of these women should be considered victims of happenstance. Each of the victims of Jack the Ripper were killed in the early morning, in dark alleys, where few people would have been able to witness the murder. These women ended up in the area of Whitechapel for several reasons, including alcoholism. One such example was Polly Nichols. After being separated from her husband, she succumbed to a life of addiction and "tramping" through the streets of London (Rubenhold 49, 62). During the periods in which Polly was homeless, she spent time in some of London's workhouses, where tenets would receive a bed and food in exchange for work the next day (Rubenhold 55). Polly's stay at the workhouses would have been a last resort both because of their conditions and the limited options presented to Polly.

The circumstances that surrounded Polly's demise are similar to those surrounding Anne Catherick. The women of White Chapel had little control over their own lives and what would become of them in their adulthood, which is exactly the predicament that Anne Catherick found herself in after she escaped from the asylum. Prior to this escape, Anne Catherick spent a portion of her childhood in company with Lady Fairlie and Laura Fairlie (Collins 665-666). During this period, Anne became very attached to Lady Fairlie, even after she left Limmeridge house. Anne and Lady Fairlie would never be reunified in the physical world; Lady Fairlie died before Anne could return to Limmeridge House. Meanwhile, Mrs. Catherick, Anne's mother, became privy to a secret held by Sir Percival Glyde (Collins 659-661), who would later become Laura Fairlie's

husband. Glyde's secret parentage ultimately led to Anne's admitted into an asylum and later, her demise. The entrance into the asylum is the first event in *The Woman in White* that illustrates the inability for Anne to control her own fate. Anne Catherick's time in the asylum was not due to her own actions or illness, but rather because she was in the wrong place at the wrong time and was thought to have overheard private information while in her mother's home (Collins 667-668).[1] Anne Catherick continues to be in the wrong place at the wrong time throughout Collins' novel. Anne's admittance into the asylum and Polly's entrance into the workhouse both represent a change in venue for these women that was outside of their control. Both were subjected to these lodgings because of societal and familial requirements. Each of these women fell victim to different fates, purely by happenstance.

The victims of Jack the Ripper and Anne Catherick also share a commonality in their deaths and how these deaths could have been avoided. Anne Catherick leaves the safety of her living space to accompany Lord Fosco on a journey to speak with Lady Glyde (Laura Fairlie). This misstep in trusting Fosco would lead to her death (Collins 759-762). Anne Catherick trusted that Count Fosco was not leading her into harm's way, when in fact he was setting her up to die in Lady Glyde's place. Although Anne's death was accidental, the plan for her to switch places with Lady Glyde was premeditated. Likewise, it is said in Rubenhold's book that Annie Smith, the second victim of Jack the Ripper, had enough money for lodgings earlier in the evening the night she was killed. However, instead of immediately using that money for a roof over her head, she drank the money away and was unable to pay for her room. If Annie Smith had remained sober upon the night of September 8, 1888 and taken lodging earlier in the evening, she may

[1] Anne does threaten to use the secret against Sir Percival, but Mrs. Catherick admits to not knowing how much of this secret Anne accurately knew.

have avoided a gruesome death (Rubenhold 131-133); Annie's addiction was certainly in control of her actions the night of her death. These women's deaths certainly give the reader of both the newspaper and *The Woman in White* reason to pause and consider different paths for the female victims.

The mythos that surrounds the victims of Jack the Ripper portrays all the women as being prostitutes and engaging in sexual acts during or right before they were murdered. This mythos creates a less sympathetic view of these women, allowing survivors to feel "holier than thou art" and that their life decisions were clearly on a more intelligent plane. One of the main reasons that this become a common misconception was in part due to the lodging houses that all the victims were reported to have stayed; these lodgings were typically used by prostitutes and their clients because of the low cost. Another primary reason these victims were considered prostitutes was due to the coroner reports and the personal opinions of this coroner. Coroner Wynne Baxter believed that these murders, and bodily mutilations, were connected to a physician who was offering payment for organs, specifically twenty pounds for the uterus (Begg and Bennett 33). It was believed that these organs were desired by an American doctor for a type of research (Begg and Bennett 33). The focus on the missing organs removed the humanity from the victims and reinforced the general public's ability to ignore these murders and the circumstances surrounding the deaths. The coroner's own speculation and the reputation attached to the lodging houses created a perfect backdrop to assume all of the women were sex workers and met a deserved demise.

This unsympathetic view of a female death is associated with Anne Catherick when she is first introduced to the reader as well. Walter encounters Anne on a dark road on his back to London and assumes she just needs an escort into town, as she is traveling alone. However, as he

bids her adieu once they reach town, he encounters policemen who are looking for a young woman, telling him that "[i]f you, or any of your men meet with the woman, stop her, and send her in careful keeping to that address…[s]he has escaped from my Asylum. Don't forget: a woman in white" (Collins 29-30). This initially portrays Anne in the light of someone who is mentally unwell or dangerous. The interaction with both "the woman in white" and the police stays with Walter for weeks to come; he continues to dwell on this woman even after he begins his work at Limmeridge House as an art tutor (Collins 30-32). This continual association of being unwell and Anne Catherick allows the reader to speculate that she may be dangerous and that those around her should use caution, much like the women associated with prostitution on the streets of London. Jack the Ripper's victims and Anne Catherick are painted negatively, which allows for the public to write these women off, categorize them as "fallen women" and move on to other news. Yet, when additional information is presented in the newspapers of London, as well as an increase in knowledge presented through Collins' narratives about Ann Catherick, the reader begins to piece together that these women were not dispensable, that they may be able to shed light on a greater mystery that had been brushed under the rug by reporters and participants alike.

The inability to accurately document the victims of Jack the Ripper creates a misrepresentation that is also seen in *The Woman in White.* Although not displayed as a coroner's report, Collins includes a narrative section from the doctor on the cause of Anne Catherick/Lady Glyde's death under Count Fosco's direction. Dr. Alfred Goodricke notes that the cause of death was an aneurism and that it was unknown as to how long the young woman had suffered from the illness (Collins 499). There is then an attestation procured from Jane Gould, who had prepared the dead body and placed it in its casket. This casket was nailed shut at

the conclusion of the attestation to prove that in no way could the individual have been removed or exchanged for a different body (Collins 499-500). The inability for the coroner placed in charge of Jack the Ripper's victims and both the doctor's and undertaker's inability to accurately identify these women correctly creates a gray area to form one's own opinion surrounding the deceased. The victims of the Ripper were mistaken as prostitutes, when in fact, most were only down on their luck and there is little to no evidence that all of these women were prostitutes by trade. Both the doctor and undertaker in Collins' work misidentified Anne Catherick as Lady Glyde, albeit they were informed of her identity by Count Fosco and had no reason to mistrust his assertion. All three individuals misrepresented victims in a way that would create generally incorrect assumptions, as well as mysterious outcomes, for years to come.

When looking closer at *The Woman in White* and this case of mistaken identity, Walter Hartright is a main character in the novel who has been affected. Upon his return from Central America and learning the news that Lady Glyde has passed, he ventures to Limmeridge House to visit Laura Fairlie's grave. After spending several hours at the grave site, he sees two women approaching; Walter recognizes one figure as Marian Halcombe (Collins 503-506). The other figure "…Laura, Lady Glyde, was standing by the inscription, and was looking at me over the grave" (Collins 507). The misrepresentation of Laura Fairlie as a victim at all is clear within this scene; it also brings to light what is later acknowledged as the death of Anne Catherick in Laura's place. This misrepresentation of victims allows Walter and Marian to begin their work on dislodging the mystery of Sir Percival Glyde, Count Fosco, and the initial desire for Laura's death.

Anne Catherick's reputation was never fully repaired from her time spent in the asylum prior to her death, but she remained well thought of by Mrs. Clements; she gives only positive

reports of Anne, both as a child and in her adulthood (Collins 566-568). As the reader, Mrs. Clements' words are taken at face value as vouching for Anne's character. The idea of vouching for someone's character is used for Elisabeth Ericcson's transition from being homeless to a reformed woman of London society (Rubenhold 151-152). As part of this transition, "[r]ehabilitation involved retraining as a housemaid or a laundress and learning how to clean, iron, cook, tend children and the sick, sew, and create traditional handicrafts" (Rubenhold 151). In these cases, the households hiring "fallen women" would bear witness to their changed behavior and take responsibility for them as long as they remained under their household. The phrase that Rubenhold uses is turning "a public woman into a private woman" (151). Both Anne's removal from the asylum and Elisabeth's removal from the streets of London create an idea that these women are powerless to change their situations and need saviors to rescue them. This reinforces the argument that these women were victims of fate, rather than victims of their own choices. If they were not cast out by society, in need of a societal savior, and able to rebuild their lives without needing handouts, they may have avoided their untimely ends.

The use of a third party to validate both Anne and Elisabeth's character further minimized their own voices but continued to place their victimhood as being entirely of their own making. The loss of autonomy alongside the forced responsibility for their societal mishaps is a strange juxtaposition. These women should be totally and completely responsible for their fall in society and the assigned reputation that the public gives them, but they are not able to restore any part of these doomed reputations. This reliance on others to "save" or protect them creates an even more limited sense of autonomy for both the victims of Jack the Ripper and for Anne Catherick. The loss of autonomy contrasted with the accountability placed on them as

victims creates an impossible situation for these women; they are not able to move in any direction on their own to reclaim their lives or repair their reputations.

The loss of autonomy that is seen throughout Anne Catherick's role in *The Woman in White* as well as the women killed by Jack the Ripper can be related back to Megha Anwer's article "Murder in Black and White: Victorian Crime Scenes and the Ripper Photographs." The images of the women killed by Jack the Ripper attempts to remove their humanity, and in relation their autonomy over their bodies, while simultaneously putting blame on these women for their own deaths. The inability for these women to speak up about how their bodies were depicted or how their stories were told, removes the ability to take responsibility for their deaths. Anne Catherick was in a vulnerable situation from birth and was never able to attain a sense of safety or make known Sir Percival's secret that hung around her neck, chaining her to a fate that was not her own. Polly and Annie suffered from the wearisome addiction to alcohol, slaves to a substance that they could not completely give up. Both the fictional and historical women discussed throughout this paper suffered due to their loss of autonomy and were victims of fate, rather than controlled choices of their own.

Throughout the comparison of Anne Catherick in *The Women in White* and the women who were killed by Jack the Ripper, the women of the Victorian period were pressured to shoulder responsibilities that were out of their control. Anne Catherick was expected to maintain a secret that was not hers to hide, while Polly and Annie both suffered from addiction in silence, with little support from family or society. The commonalities between these individuals allows their representation to shift from women who earned their fates, to women who met their demise without an ability to escape. This misrepresentation is harmful for many reasons, but most importantly because it allowed history to focus on the killer, rather than the victims, in both

reality and literature. *The Woman in White* weaves an incredible sensation story that is told from several perspectives, but never from Anne Catherick's. Her point of view is glossed over and her interactions are told by others. This removes her voice and her ability to represent herself in a more authentic way. Likewise, the victims of Jack the Ripper have all but been forgotten in recent recollections. Jack the Ripper is depicted in contemporary fiction, for example the series *Stalking Jack the Ripper* by Kerri Maniscalco, as well as popular dramas and true crime documentaries. With the focus on the killer, the victims are often forgotten; this allows for the assumptions put forward by the coroner and London journalists during the Victorian period to remain at the forefront of how we identify these women. However, these victims were not prostitutes by trade; they were mothers, sisters, and friends. Even if they had participated in sex work, how does that become their entire identity over one hundred and thirty years later? Labeling "fallen women" as victims and then dismissing their entire identities, strips them of their autonomy as well as the truth surrounding their deaths. Anne Catherick, Polly Nichols, Annie Smith, Elisabeth Ericcson, Kate Eddowes, and Mary Jane Kelly were more than the rumors, secrets, and assumptions that literature has created them to be. These women were victims of fate; they happened to be in the wrong places at the wrong time but did not deserve to pay with their lives.

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