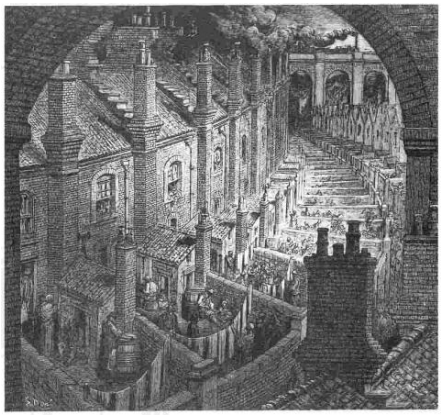
AWESOME stories

WHITECHAPEL: SCENE OF DESPAIR



0. WHITECHAPEL: SCENE OF DESPAIR - Story Preface

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What was life like in UK industrial cities, including London, at about the time of Jack the Ripper? Gustave Doré—a famous French illustrator and printmaker—shows how poor, laboring-class Londoners lived amidst squalid conditions. This image depicts his illustration entitled "Over London–by Rail" (which he created circa 1870).

Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (1840 –1922), a British poet, used words to describe the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the working poor (and the towns and cities in which they lived): "The smoke of their foul dens Broodeth on Thy fair Earth as a black pestilence, Hiding the kind day's eye. No flower, no grass there groweth, Only their engines' dung which the fierce furnace throweth." Click on the image for a full-page view of Dore's illustration included in *London: A Pilgrimage. With illustrations by Gustave Dore* (published in London during 1872).

Murders were common in 19th century Whitechapel. Pubs and prostitutes existed side-by-side with churches and commercial establishments. It was a place of poverty and despair.

An April 24, 1889 article, by Arthur G. Morrison in *The Palace Journal*, describes Whitechapel and its environs (like Spitalfields and Bethnal Green) as places of darkness where "human vermin" lived:

> *Black and noisome, the road sticky with slime, and palsied houses, rotten from chimney to cellar, leaning together, apparently by the mere coherence of their ingrained corruption. Dark, silent, uneasy shadows passing and crossing - human vermin in this reeking sink, like goblin exhalations from all that is noxious around. Women with sunken, black-rimmed eyes, whose pallid faces appear and vanish by the light of an occasional gas lamp, and look so like ill-covered skulls that we start at their stare. Horrible London? Yes.*

This part of town was not just "Horrible London" for adults. Children had to endure its hardships. It was a place for human outcasts, like Joseph (John) Merrick, more famously known as the tumor-faced "Elephant Man." Merrick was hospitalized in Whitechapel during the fall of 1888.

Morrison writes of Whitechapel, and its residents, with a patronizing sense of hopelessness:

> *Some years ago, it was fashionable to "slum" - to walk gingerly about in dirty streets, with great heroism, and go back West [to London's West End]again, with a firm conviction that "something must be done." And something must. Children must not be left in these unscoured corners. Their fathers and mothers are hopeless. And must not be allowed to rear a numerous and equally hopeless race. Light the streets better, certainly; but what use in building better houses for these poor creatures to render as foul as those that stand? The inmates may ruin the character of a house, but no house can alter the character of its inmates.*

Whitechapel. It was a terrible place to live. It was a terrible place to die.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/WHITECHAPEL-SCENE-OF-DESPAIR-Jack-the-Ripper

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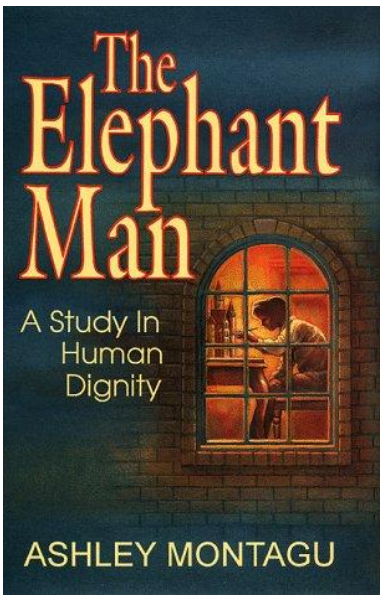
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/WHITECHAPEL-SCENE-OF-DESPAIR-Jack-the-Ripper

Media Stream



The Elephant Man: A Study in Human Dignity
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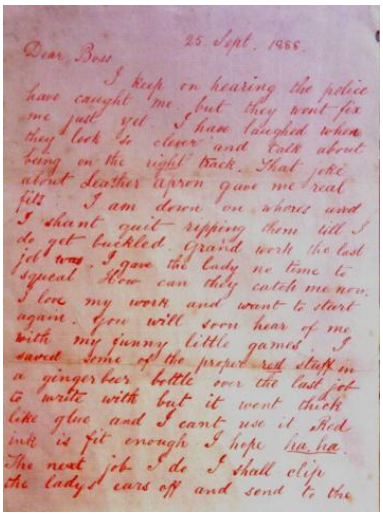
Dear Boss 25 Sept. 1888.
I keep on hearing the police have caught me but they wont fix me yet. I have laughed when they look so clever and talk about being on the right track. That joke about Leather Apron gave me real fits. I am down on whores and I shant quit ripping them till I do get buckled. Grand 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 funny little games. I saved some of the proper red stuff in a gingerbeer 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 ladys ears off and send to the

Ripper Letter Sept. 25, 1888
Image depicting the first page of the "Jack the Ripper" letter, online courtesy CaseBook.org
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