Uncovering Victorian Perspectives through an Analysis of a Murder

HI 318: Crime & Sex in 19th century Britain

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The Victorians were intrigued with social deviants within their society, especially when it was private matters exposed to the public. Therefore, anything published in the newspapers was more than what was on the surface. It usually uncovered the truth within Victorian society. In regards to “The Hampstead Murder” in 1890, it brings to the surface underlying aspects of 19th century Britain.[[1]](#footnote-1) Firstly, the death of Mrs. Phoebe Hogg’s and her child expose the domestic scandal behind a jealous murder and raises public interest. Moreover, Mary Eleanor Pearcey demonstrates the rarity of woman murderous to the Victorians to who reflected and contradicted the eras stereotypes of woman. In addition, through a comparison of Mrs. Pearcey and Mrs. Hogg it exposes the reality of a Victorian marriage and the new active Victorian woman. Furthermore, due to the uniqueness of the case and the timing, in the 1890s therefore it raises sympathies towards the women and suspicions towards Frank Samuel Hogg.[[2]](#footnote-2) Consequently, the accusations against Mr. Hogg tarnish his reputation and his patriarchal image both key components in Victorian society. Lastly, the verdict of wilful murder reveals the significance of this case and of doctors to criminal cases in the 19th century. Ultimately, this case provides a scandalous murder that sparks immense public interest and debate.

This case provides all the aspects of a Victorian domestic scandal, the affair, the reputations to uphold, the publicity, the involvement of family and the murder driven by jealously. Firstly, the murders spark public interest as revealed through the two articles published in the *Times* on October 27th and 29th, 1890, only a few days after the discovery of the bodies.[[3]](#footnote-3) Therefore, this also suggests the significance this case will have on society. Consequently, once the Victorian public grasps onto a private scandal it can only generate problems for the reputation of those involved. Thus, the family steps, to which could also produce a greater upheaval in public rather than adding those involved such as the involvement of Phoebe Hogg’s family.[[4]](#footnote-4) Ultimately, the role of the Victorian family during a domestic scandal is to protect the reputation of their family members and essentially the family name.[[5]](#footnote-5) In this case Mr. Hogg’s reputation is put on the stand as his affair with a single woman, Mary Eleanor Wheeler Pearcey is exposed to the public. And therefore, it is his responsibility as much as it is his mothers and sister to uphold their family name.[[6]](#footnote-6) Additionally, the letters from Mrs. Pearcey used during the trial poke holes at the masculinity of Hogg which will be examined throughout the paper.[[7]](#footnote-7) Therefore, through an analysis of a domestic scandal it demonstrates the importance of reputation within Victorian society, and how private matters sparked mass interest in public light. On the surface, the murders in Hampstead reveal a domestic scandal and murder. As the layers of this murder are pealed back the Victorian perspectives are uncovered such as their view of woman as criminals.

Furthermore, women committing crime in 19th century England was rare, hence when it occurred it was highly publicized as it both reflected and contradicted Victorian gender roles. The criminal activity of the majority of Victorian women remained in domestic matters such as infanticides or murders of husbands. Therefore, the criminal acts of woman coincided with the day to day image of the Victorian woman, who belonged in the private sphere.[[8]](#footnote-8) Moreover, these criminal women also contradicted Victorian stereotypes of the gentle motherly figure, as their crimes were usually executed with violence.[[9]](#footnote-9) Mary Eleanor Pearcey embodies this archetypal Victorian woman murderer, as her crime reflects both the desired Victorian figure of a middle class woman and contrast this image through the physical violence used against Mrs. Hogg.

Pearceys murderous intentions are driven by the Victorian desire to be the happily married woman with a loving and respected husband.[[10]](#footnote-10) This is revealed through the love letters sent to Mr. Hogg from Mrs. Pearcey, as stated in a letter, “[i]f it was not for your love, dear, I do not know what I should really do, and I am always afraid you will take that away, then I should quite give up in despair, for that is the only thing I care for on earth.”[[11]](#footnote-11) This letter in particular reveals this immense desire to have the perfect middle class Victorian relationship, as she states she does not know what she would do without him.[[12]](#footnote-12) Additionally, it also exposes the power Mr. Hogg has over Mrs. Pearcey and how she will do anything to keep him. This comes into play in court when Mr. Hogg is put on trial for his actions, as discussed later on in the analysis.[[13]](#footnote-13) Therefore, these letters address the extent of the pressure of the Victorian desire of marriage, to which drove Mrs. Pearcey to commit the violent murder.

Consequently, when the crimes committed by woman were inflicted with violence it reflected the social problems they were facing at the time. In the case of Mrs. Pearcey, it was the lack of acknowledgement from Mr. Hogg, the man she hoped would embody her middle class Victorian dream.[[14]](#footnote-14) This was clearly revealed through the above letters of Mrs. Pearcey and the violent murder inflicted on Mrs. Hogg at the hands of Pearcey. Asexposed through the multiple doctor examinations of the deceased in *The Times,* which indicated Hogg suffered severe blows to head while alive as well it provided a gruesome description of the several cuts to her throat, which ultimately led to her death.[[15]](#footnote-15) The detailed depiction of Pearcey’s aggression towards Mrs. Hogg counters the typical Victorian lady figure, “the gentle, nurturing guardian of morality and the home.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Ultimately, this exposes the passion driven murder and this new found active image of the Victorian woman.

Subsequently, by analyzing the two women involved in this case, Phoebe Hogg and Mary Pearcey, it uncovers the transformation of “the image of [Victorian] women’s nature from passivity to active involvement.”[[17]](#footnote-17) This is demonstrated through the newspaper accounts, as Hogg is repeatedly referred to as wife or mother therefore she represents the ideal middle class Victorian woman, married for two years to a loving husband who provides for her, and their eighteenth month old child.[[18]](#footnote-18) While Pearcey represents a woman who takes her fate into her own hands. But she hides behind the middle class woman image in order to achieve the Victorian dream, since she pretends to have been married to John Charles Pearcey.[[19]](#footnote-19) Therefore, each woman despite their separate roles as passive or active both want to achieve this perfect Victorian image. Further analysis, brings to the surface the underlying issue of this ideal Victorian woman versus what actually occurred in reality. As the former is not as it cracked up to be, as each woman does not achieve the stereotype.[[20]](#footnote-20) In the case of Hogg, she has marriage troubles, experiences a miscarriage, discovers her cheating husband and ends up murdered. While Pearcey’s first relationship falls apart, her second with Hogg remains distant to which results in her crime and death sentence.[[21]](#footnote-21) Despite the severity of these two cases, the reality was not this ideal Victorian woman and marriage instead, affairs, murders, children born out of wedlock and many more cases were more common than presented. Overall, neither woman reaches the model but they are not necessarily blamed for this failure in the eyes of the public.

The murders at Hampstead raise a unique case to Victorian standards, as Mrs. Pearcey deviates from the Victorian norm of violent female criminals. Violent crimes done by Victorian women were usually directed towards lovers or husbands (or at least to what became public knowledge) rather than the mistress murdering the wife and child of her lover.[[22]](#footnote-22) To which results in the newspaper and the court addressing their sympathy towards the women and their suspicions towards Mr. Hogg, ultimately, still adhering to Victorian stereotypes.[[23]](#footnote-23) *The Times* directs sympathy towards the two women involved to whom both fooled by the same man. For example, when Mrs. Pearcey nurses Mrs. Hogg back to health Mr. Hogg is blamed for not giving her the right medicine, and the relationship between the two woman remains well, while the one between the husband and wife dwindles. This is also demonstrated through the article, as the majority of the content is directed towards the where abouts of Frank Samuel Hogg during the murders of his family.[[24]](#footnote-24) On a side note, this also displays the significance of roles to the Victorians as they even had a standard norm among criminals. Furthermore, during the 1890s, about “a third of all executions were of men who had killed their wives, with several others for murder of girlfriends.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Therefore, due to the date of this crime, October 1890, the court remains uncertain with Mr. Hogg which is revealed through the interrogation of Hogg and the discussion of the letters sent to Mr. Hogg from Mrs. Pearcey.[[26]](#footnote-26) The court continuously asks Hogg about his marriage, his location during the murders and about the relationship between him and Mrs. Hogg.[[27]](#footnote-27) Thus, the Victorian’s reveal how they are influenced with the popular crimes of the time period, to which could address as a fault in their legal system and the essential role of the public. Not only do these accusations hurt the reputation of Hogg, they also attack his masculinity.

Mr. Hogg can be compared to Marquis of Queensbury, whom came forward with his affair therefore ruining his reputation and his patriarchal image.[[28]](#footnote-28) The same occurred to Frank Samuel Hogg except he did not bring forward his own actions, the murder of his wife did. In addition, the exposure of his affair with a single woman harm the reputation of Mr. Hogg, the evidence which unravels throughout the case harms his reputation as a husband and father. Hogg failed his wife and child; therefore he failed as a man.[[29]](#footnote-29) Hogg was not in control of his household in regards to Victorian standards, as he has no idea of the where abouts of his wife and child. And to top it off Mrs. Hogg’s family accused him of not properly taking care of his wife when she is sick.[[30]](#footnote-30) Moreover, the letters expose his want to commit suicide, which further addresses his lack of masculinity. Overall, this reveals the importance of Victorian men and women to take on their assigned gender roles and to maintain their reputations.

Mrs. Pearcey was found guilty of wilful murder of Mrs. Hoggs and her child, as stated by Adrian Gray the verdict of “wilful murder was the worst capital offence in Victorian England, but juries hesitated to commit a man or woman if there was the slightest doubt [as it carried the weight of the death sentence].”[[31]](#footnote-31) Therefore, this explains why the Old Bailey records are twenty-eight pages of evidence from various neighbours such as Annie Gardner, a woman who passed Mrs. Pearcey wheeling a perambulator on the street to Frank Samuel Hogg’s, the husband of the deceased and lover of the accused.[[32]](#footnote-32) As well this exposes why multiple doctor and police officer accounts are used in the newspaper articles and during the trial.[[33]](#footnote-33) Additionally, the doctors used throughout the trial reveal the importance medical experts became to criminal cases during the 19th century.[[34]](#footnote-34) Furthermore, this continues to demonstrate the importance of reputation to the Victorians. As the jury was not going to wrongfully accuse a person of the “worst capital offense” for their own reputation, to mistakenly condemn an individual to death and ruin the reputation of that individual as well.[[35]](#footnote-35) Thus this also exposes the weight put on the jury during this time and the reason to why many individuals were not accused as extreme as they should or should not have been. Ultimately, this could raise issues among the passivity of the court towards female criminals, or towards crime in general. While also demonstrating how the death sentence as a punishment declined in public standings. Moreover, the charge of wilful murder was extremely rare in Victorian society thus continuing to address why this case sparks public interest.

“The Hampstead Murder” encompasses all the drama of the Victorian era directed towards social deviants. But this case aligns with the typical newspaper report or court case that does not expose the underlying aspects of Victorian society until analyzed, which is demonstrated above. Firstly, this case reveals a domestic scandal which is revealed through the murders of a wife and child, thus sets the stage for Victorian public interest. Furthermore, women criminals are a rare breed in Victorian society hence when one emerges becomes a hot topic, as they exhibit and contrast the ideal image of a Victorian woman. Additionally, a comparison of Mrs. Pearcey and Mrs. Hogg exposes the reality of the dream of the Victorian marriage as well as the transformation of the Victorian women’s passive role. Moreover, common Victorian methods are revealed as the 1890’s was a time of wife murderers, therefore suspicion are raised towards Mr. Hogg and public sympathy is directed towards the woman.[[36]](#footnote-36) Continually, as Mr. Hoggs is put in trial for the murder of his wife and child, also is his reputation and masculinity. Lastly, this case raises the significance due to the rare verdict of wilful murder and the multiple doctors used to support the physical evidence. An analysis of the crimes which occurred in Victorian Britain is essential in order to unpack this society and to discover where modern characteristics of the legal system and stereotypes originated.

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