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Essay 2

Women's lives in Victorian England were often fraught with intense societal standards that could adversely alter their lives in mere moments. What about the women who fell victim to their circumstances, leading them into the hands of a killer? *The Five* by historian and author Hallie Rubenhold puts a spotlight on the victims of the murderer known as "Jack the Ripper". While Rubenhold investigates the entirety of these women's lives, I turn to their tipping points. Polly and Elisabeth are seemingly dissimilar in all but their death. Polly once with a husband, family, decent living conditions in the safety of Peabody Housing, and literacy skills. Meanwhile, Elisabeth came to London from Sweden to escape her label as a "Public Woman", running a business with her husband, unable to have children, and with just enough literacy skills to read The Bible. But both women struggled with alcoholism in the hostile environment of London. I believe that Polly and Elisabeth not only fell victim to a killer, but met their tipping points due to societal pressures, and the disorderly desires of men, alongside their later reliance on alcohol in an era that encouraged the belittling of women.

Both women met their fates due to societal pressures that severely restricted women of the time. However, they each reached these points differently. For Polly, her departure from her husband and family solidified her fate in the eyes of society. Rubenhold writes, "The consequences of separation in the nineteenth century were judged by many to be 'a living death'" (50). This quote highlights the prejudice from the ideals of the Victorian era, towards women in particular, who split from their families. Though a societal 'death' due to separation sealed Polly's fate, Elisabeth faced a lower mark in society due to her contraction of syphilis. Rubenhold relays that her hometown "... had left a cruel mark upon her, one that would always remain, no matter where she called home" (155). Here, Rubenhold is referring to the sexually

transmitted disease reluctantly bestowed upon her. In the nineteenth century, syphilis or any other STI indicated the life of a lowly woman, one of 'lecherous living' (Rubenhold 146) according to society. While Polly and Elisabeth's fates were sealed differently, society sullied and denoted both of their images. Perhaps pushing them deeper into an undesirable life and the throes of addiction.

While societal expectations are a vital factor, we need a closer look at who operates those standards. Both women met their point of no return due to a man, not just their murderer. It's no secret that men have ruled societies for centuries and still do today. Victorian England set unfair expectations for women, often laden with double standards. In the case of Polly, she was pushed to the brink when her husband began an affair, leading her to flee the social safety of her household. Despite this, Polly could not get a divorce from William due to the laws of the time. After departing from her family, Polly was caught in an 'irregular union': a means of survival for a woman struggling to make a living. Only then did the law allow for a divorce at William's behest. While Polly was doomed by her husband to live on the treacherous streets of London, unsupported and struggling with addiction, Elisabeth was instead stricken with disease by the dint of an unknown man. Rubenhold claims, "The incurability of the disease from which Elisabeth suffered was but one of many misfortunes to befall her..." (150). While Rubenhold asserts that syphilis was one of many misfortunes, I believe this affliction condemned Elisabeth's fate. Cursed by a man's unbridled desires, she was unable to reproduce, an expectation of women of the time, ultimately breaking up her marriage and leading her to find comfort in alcohol and onto the streets, fighting for survival. While their paths onto the streets were separate, Polly and Elisabeth were profoundly impaired by the unfettered lust of men. Whether a combination of an affair and biased laws or a sexual disease from potential assault, the unequal treatment of women and the immunity of men ultimately resulted in their deaths.

Some might argue that Polly and Elisabeth's resort to alcohol led to their demise, after all, on the nights of their deaths it is reported that they were heavily intoxicated (Rubenhold 71, 181). While I agree that alcohol played a vital role in the women's downfalls, I believe it is not

what marks their “point of no return”. Rubenhold asserts, “If Polly ... had acquired a taste for drink to dull her pain, her thirst for this medicine had grown only more acute since her separation” (49). Here, she points out that drinking was more of an underlying problem than the true tipping point, which I believe to be her separation. Parting from her family magnified the previously dormant, or unaddressed issue of addiction, which sped her fate along. Elisabeth, on the other hand, was arrested for her drunkenness on numerous occasions. Rubenhold suggests, “While this can undeniably be attributed in part to her dependency on alcohol, there may have been another contributing factor ... the disease would have potentially been entering its tertiary and final phase” (176). Alcohol led Elisabeth to an unfortunate lifestyle, but the syphilis contracted in her youth, her tipping point, amplified her addiction. Though both women fought addiction, it did not destine them into the hands of a murderer. Instead, the men who married them, alongside societal ideals, pivoted their lives drastically and fatally.

Societal ideals of Victorian England put pressure on women from all directions. If you leave your family, you have failed as a woman. If you are forced to sleep rough, you are a prostitute. If a man forces himself on you, and you contract a disease, it becomes your responsibility. A quote from Elisabeth’s death, “... the police and newspapers saw only another victim: an “unfortunate” who resided in a Whitechapel lodging house, a drunk, degenerate, broken-down woman far beyond the blush of youth” (Rubenhold 183). Unfortunately, for Polly, Elisabeth, and countless other women, survival in an aggressive city that targeted and assigned them banal stereotypes was close to impossible. Both women met their point of no return due to these norms and a man who altered the course of their lives, not just their killer. While alcohol played an essential role in these women’s downfalls, I believe that it was just one factor, not the whole reason. When Polly left the safety (in the eyes of society) of her family home, she reached her critical moment. For Elisabeth, her turning point came in the form of a sexually transmitted disease. The critical points of these women were no fault of their own, but rather a patriarchal society. Allowing men to control and dictate the lives of women fated many of them to a tragic demise.

Work Cited

Rubenholt, Hallie. *The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper*. Mariner Books Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020.