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Narrative Complexity and Identity Formation in The Diary of Jack the Ripper

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Abstract

The so-called Diary of Jack the Ripper purports to have been written by a Liverpool cotton merchant, James Maybrick, confessing to five infamous Victorian murders. However, researchers have rarely examined The Diary as a narrative in its own right. Debates about the diary's authenticity have relied on comparison with well-known fraudulent diaries, forensic and historical information. These examinations overlook how the writer tells his story across its 63 pages. Structural, hermeneutic and thematic analysis, as well the process of identity construction, shows the text building a framework to explain and justify the actions described. The diarist's imagined audience shifts during the course of writing, revealing the narrative's changing purposes. These reveal central themes of displaced anger and enjoyment of sadistic violence. Examined alongside three other first-person accounts by serial killers helps to elaborate and test the claim that narratives enable or limit harmful behaviour. Whether fraudulent or not it is an important document that illustrates how a personal narrative can support violent actions. As such, the Diary and its analyses are a valuable resource for narrative criminology.

Plain Language Summary

Analysing The Diary of jack the Ripper

Analyses of the so-called Diary of Jack the Ripper, including considerations of how the diarist constructs a distinct identity, combine to reveal a narrative with central themes of displaced anger and enjoyment of sadistic violence. These themes drive a narrative which has not previously been examined for what and how it describes the actions and emotions of serial killer. Previous studies have focused on forensic and historical considerations of authenticity. The revelation of these themes, and

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how they develop throughout the Diary provide a clear indication of the Diary's purpose. Whether fraudulent or not it is an important document that illustrates how a personal narrative can support violent actions. As such, the Diary and its analyses are a valuable resource for narrative criminology.

Keywords
Jack the Ripper, narrative criminology, performative roles, authenticity, serial killers

Introduction

The diaries of violent offenders offer unusually intimate access to the kinds of self-narration that Presser (2012) argues can facilitate and sustain harmful behaviour. That proposal also aligns with Sandberg's (2013, 2022) explorations of how narratives support identity formation. The Diary of Jack the Ripper (the Diary) is analysed to show how personal narratives drive violent actions and shape criminal identity.

The Diary is analysed using structural, hermeneutic and thematic analysis. Identity formation is also examined. In combination these methods elucidate both how personal narratives facilitate violent actions and contribute to debates about authenticity. As Fludernik (2020) elaborates, there is always a question of authenticity in any examination of a narrative, especially when it is presented as factual.

Central to the examination of a personal record of deeds, thoughts and feelings is a consideration of its purpose. That is the role it performs for the narrator of the story. Comparing the Diary with other violent men's self-narratives clarifies its particular significance, revealing how these accounts contribute to violent actions.

The special value of examining diaries to answer narrative criminology questions are elaborated in the next section of this paper. The Diary, and the unique opportunity it provides, are then described. Its contentious status is considered. This includes review of narrative anchoring of judgements of authenticity. Descriptions of the methods drawn on for examining the text of the Diary follow. The structural and hermeneutic analyses of the Diary are presented followed by consideration of revelations about the self in the Diary. Comparison of the performative roles of three other criminals' stories then allows a review of the distinct performative role of the Diary.

In conclusion the implications of these analyses if the Diary is fraudulent and if it is genuine, are summarised. The paper ends with a concluding review of the issues explored.

The Privileged Position of a Diary

The insight diaries offer to ongoing thought processes provide privileged access to the reflections and feelings of the diarist. As recently noted by Olorunfemi (2024). 'Diary studies unearth within-individual relationships that capture individual experiences and

sense-making of these experiences in a processual manner' (p. 43). Diaries also require a degree of reflection on the part of their authors, seldom available in any other accounts.

Like all self-referential storytelling, diaries are likely to reveal something of the character and ego-identity of the person writing them, in both how and what is written. If there is a clear intention for a diary to survive, the diary's existence is also likely to indicate its author's awareness of an audience either of specific individuals or a broader public.

Mildorf (2023), however, cautions against assuming any such narratives are unaffected by existing cultural scripts. Yet as Presser (2012) has pointed out, the way a criminal describes events and their reactions and experiences of them, can be fruitfully taken at face-value. They reveal the world as the author understands and perceives it, whether imagined or actual.

The Diary of Jack the Ripper

The study of diaries for narrative criminology is, understandably, rare. Personal accounts written contemporaneously when committing a series of violent crimes are scarce. That rarity makes 'The Diary of Jack the Ripper' an important resource worthy of detailed study. This is written in a Victorian scrapbook, bound in black cloth and leather, shown in Figure 1, that emerged on 9th March 1992 when a scrap-metal dealer, Michael Barrett, telephoned Rupert Crew Ltd. literary agents. He called himself Mr Williams, informing the agent that he had 'got Jack the Ripper's diary' (Smith, 2017[1]).

Although the document is a Victorian scrapbook, originally of 128 pages, 63 pages of it were used as a notebook and first-person record. Seventeen pages at the end are blank, the first 48 pages having been cut out. These notes move between accounts of what the author was planning and what has happened. It mainly describes activities relating to five gruesome murders, committed by its author, that occurred in the Whitechapel area of East London in late 1888. The murderer was given the sobriquet 'Jack the Ripper' in a signature in a letter mocking the police (Harrison, 2010). Noone has ever been charged for any of those murders.

The Diary amounts to more than 9,500 words. This document offers a rare insight for narrative criminology into the thinking of a serial killer, whose actions, and the investigation into whose murders, have been so thoroughly studied for well over a century.

Details within the document make clear that it purports to have been written by James Maybrick. In effect, it is his confession to being Jack the Ripper. James Maybrick, was a Liverpool cotton merchant, born on 24 October 1838. He died on 11 May 1889. Following Maybrick's death, no subsequent murders attributed to Jack the Ripper have been identified. His death was of note because of the trial of his wife, Florence Maybrick, who was convicted of poisoning him (Ryan, 1977).

Narrative Anchoring and Judgements of Authenticity

The question of authenticity plagues considerations of the Diary. Some historians and Ripper experts place the Diary clearly within the tradition of modern Ripper hoaxes

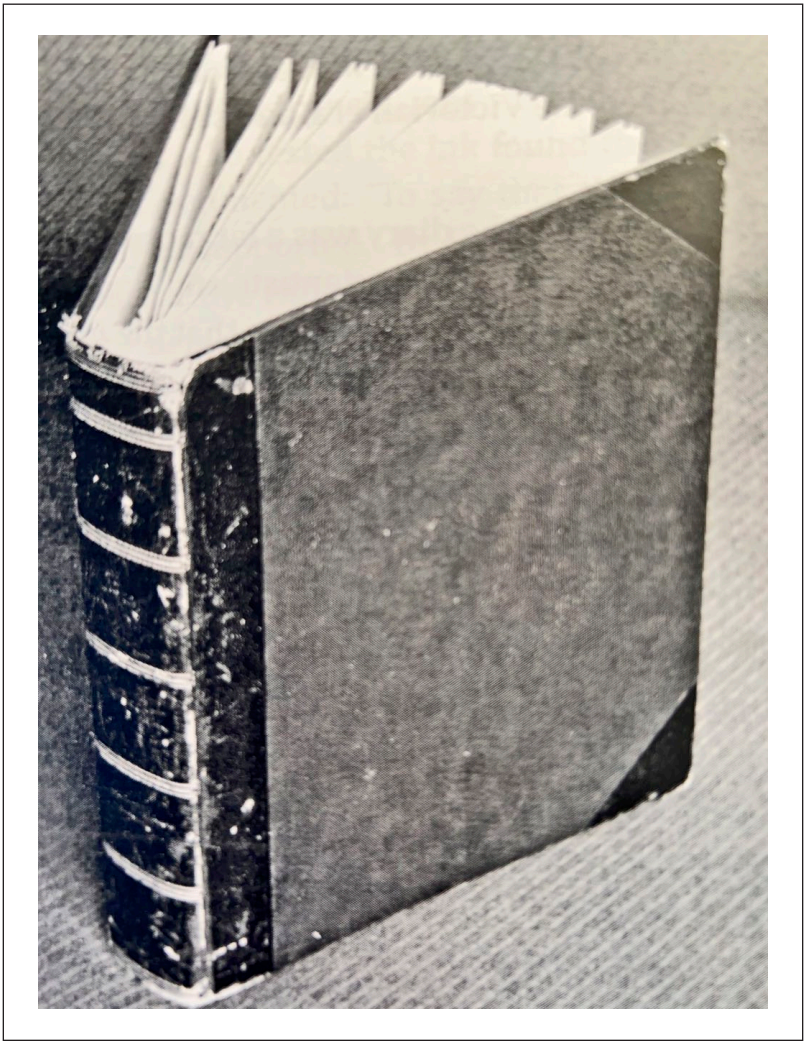

Figure 1. The victorian scrapbook referred to as The Diary of Jack the Ripper.

(Kilday et al., 2025). Yet others have argued forcefully that it is genuine (Feldman, 1998). In support of the Diarie's authenticity, Smith (2013) has summarised the many forensic examinations of the Diary he has overseen, concluding it is definitely a 19th century document and most probably genuine.

Debates about whether the Diary is fraudulent reveal how dominant narratives shaped the Diary's reception, what Presser (2012) calls 'cultural master narratives'. For the Diary, these include two notoriously fraudulent diaries that provide narratives

of commercial enterprises that utilised popular interest in well-known figures. They had created an international outcry some years before Michael Barrett produced the black Victorian scrapbook. That outcry illustrates how a document may not be evaluated in terms of its own content, but against a backdrop of other apparently similar, fraudulent claims about journals, and diaries.

One of these earlier documents consisted of 30 volumes offered, to *Life Magazine* and *Corriere della Sera* as Mussolini's personal journals. The surface details accorded with known aspects of Mussolini's life, initially convincing those assessing their genuineness (Hamlin, 1977). A subsequent police investigation determined they were forged by Amalia and Rosa Panvini, who were convicted of fraud in 1960.

After the fiasco of the Mussolini journals, in 1983, a major British Newspaper, *The Sunday Times*, had accepted the opinion of Hugh Trevor Roper, a renowned authority on the history of World War II, that the 62 'secret diaries' of Adolf Hitler being offered to the newspaper were genuine (Hamilton, 1919). Indications of fakery quickly emerged,[2] as well as the realisation that Hitler had never kept a diary. With great embarrassment *The Sunday Times* withdrew its serialisation.

The previous hoaxes contributed to the Diary becoming part of a 'contested narrative' (Hyvärinen, 2020)—competing communities creating a 'narrative struggle' by drawing on different forms of evidence to support their case. The term 'narrative struggle' emphasises that the arguments offered about authenticity are embedded in existing stories that surround a narrative.

The Diary can thus be understood as part of a 'high profile' narrative, that exists within an historical context of contested documents (Jong and M'charek' (2018). These stories proliferate when there is no accepted resolution to them. No crime narrative has had a higher profile than that of Jack the Ripper. It also has the dominant feature highlighted by Jong and M'charek (2018) that no culprit has been definitively identified.

Established narratives form genres (Mildorf, 2023). In the case of self-reflexive journals and diaries, these generic features are such as redemption, missions, trauma, or exciting adventures. The problem in evaluating these accounts, even when genuine, is what Mildorf calls 'fictional contamination'. There are, inevitably, rhetorical devices and story templates available from written and oral traditions. Frye (1957) has even demonstrated that there are a limited number of narrative arcs available in any culture, on which storytellers must draw. They can provide scripts that do not distinguish between the factual and the fictional. That difficulty in distinguishing between scripts further complicates any judgements about the authenticity of the Diary.

Arguments about the authenticity of the Diary focus on overarching narratives and detailed historical and forensic analyses of its content. None examine exactly what is written, its form and purpose. That is the task of the present study

Methods for Analysing the Diary as a Narrative

A Google search of 'Jack the Ripper' generates over 21,000 hits. The same search on Amazon US lists over 2,000 books. Yet, Google Scholar gives no academic

publication that examines directly the implications of the Diary for understanding first-person criminal narratives. No scholarly studies could be found that deal directly with the Diary, worthy of examination as a narrative, its style and structure.

The metanarrative of Jack the Ripper and all the debates it has spawned about the provenance and authenticity of the Diary have obscured any structural, hermeneutic and thematic examination of the document. Even if the Diary is fraudulent, these examinations are likely to reveal facets of the author and what the Diary was written to achieve. This apparent first-person account of committing heinous crimes provides both a demonstration and elaboration of the role of personal narratives in violent actions.

Four complementary methodologies are used for examining the Diary.

Structural Analysis

Sandberg (2022), in his study of an interview with a drug dealer in a Norwegian prison, effectively examined the elements that typify narratives (Labov, 1972). The writing of a diary 'is often a significant event in itself' (Duyfhuizen et al., 1986). The very act of writing inevitably draws on the natural structure that narratives take within any culture.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics provide a second approaches to narrative analysis. Acklin (2018) makes clear hermeneutics are concerned 'with problems that arise when dealing with meaningful human actions and the products of such actions, most importantly texts' (p. 39). The person interpreting the text is attempting to reveal how the text's author's subjectivity indicates the processes driving the actions described.

Thematic Analysis

An elaboration of Sandberg's (2013) thematic analysis provides a third form of analysis. That draws on Riessman's (2008) development of narrative analysis methodologies. She emphasises the content of a narrative, rather than how it is structured. Her approach regards narratives as authors constructing meaning by selecting, emphasising and organise events to express particular interpretations of their experiences. This goes beyond the surface consideration, of what the narrative is about, to interpret its implications. Acklin (2018) puts it 'Interpreting involves the process were phenomena or projected upon an already existing framework of meaning' (p. 14). That process requires the examination of what the Diary reveals about the actions and experiences of the diarist and what is revealed about the author.

Identity Construction

The self-image portrayed in the Diary is a further focus of analysis. This requires the recognition that narratives are inevitably dialogues (e.g. Mildorf, 2023; Presser, 2012), even when the conversation is with the self. Frank (2024) presents that consideration as 'dialogical narrative analysis'. For Frank that is a broad ranging examination of how stories interact with other stories. In the case of the Diary the question arises of who the other party to the dialogue is. This may be the author himself or a wider audience. Importantly, it may change as the narrative unfolds.

Structural Analysis of the Diary

The organisation of the Diary belies the description of it as a 'diary'. There are no specific dates. There is no flowing account of quotidian activities, just disconnected jottings. These refer to anticipated future activities, as well as those that have happened recently. There are also attempts at composing doggerel, searching for a rhyme, as well as reference to newspaper comments on the murders. It is a journal of thoughts and experiences that the author feels impelled to write down.

This curious mixture of content in the Diary raises challenges for identifying an appropriate methodology, within narratology, for analysing it. Sandberg (2022) studied an interview with a young Norwegian man involved in gang violence using the well-established elements of narrative structure described by Labov (1972: Abstract, Orientation. Evaluation, Resolution, Coda. This may seem less appropriate for written text. Yet, although, Labov's elements aren't formally present in the Diary, they can still be detected, confirming it functions as a narrative.

The fragmented nature of the Diary is immediately apparent: it begins mid-sentence (Figure 2). This is possibly because the opening 48 pages of the scrapbook were apparently cut out (Smith, 2017). The surviving opening—*what they have in store for them. . .*—establishes a tone of threat and intent (241, p. 307). [3] Although not an 'abstract' in Labov's sense, because it does not provide a summary of what is to follow. The opening effectively sets the scene by signalling threats, inherent in the narrative to follow. It could also be regarded as engaging the reader. At this stage it is not clear who is the intended audience for the account. The diarist appears to be thinking aloud.

The writing continues with a comment on his unsuspecting victims as well as a non sequitur reference to his brother Michael:

> *But do they desire that? my answer is no. They will suffer just as I. I will see to that* (241, p. 307). The following sentences appear initially disconnected— *Received a letter from Michael. . .*before returning to the theme of revenge against the *whore and the whore master.* (241, p. 307)

As an opening to crime fiction, the paragraph is highly effective. It introduces a violent mission, unnamed accomplices or victims, and subsidiary characters, while introducing names, which add mystery. Although full interpretation depends on later

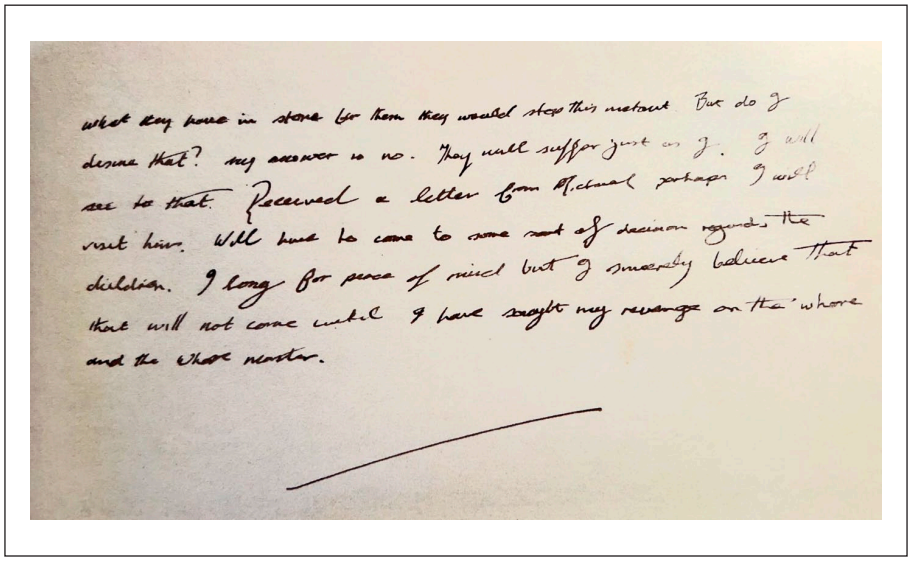

Figure 2. The opening paragraph of the Diary.

material, the passage establishes a narrative trajectory and key aspects of the author's identity.

> *Received a letter from Michael perhaps I will visit him. Will have to come to some sort of decision regards the children*. (241, p. 307)

After that, there is reference back to the opening topic.

> *I long for peace of mind but I sincerely believe that that will not come until I have sought my revenge on the whore and the whore master*. (241, p. 307)

The context of the narrative, akin to Labov's 'orientation', appears on the third page of the Diary, where the diarist reflects on the danger of recording his intentions. He recognises the risk of exposure but describes an irresistible compulsion—and pleasure—in writing about future acts of violence. This frames the Diary as a secret, subjective account of anticipated crimes. An account that could be found by his assistant Smith.

> *I am beginning to believe it is unwise to continue writing. If I am to down a whore, then nothing shall lead the pursuers back to me, and yet there are times when I feel an overwhelming compulsion to place my thoughts to paper. It is dangerous, that I know. If Smith should find this then I am done before my campaign begins. However, the pleasure of writing off all that lays ahead of me, and indeed the pleasure of thoughts of deeds that lays ahead of me.* (243, p. 307)

Statements as to the risks associated with writing reappear throughout the early pages and function as a form of evaluation (Labov, 1972). The diarist refers to impaired judgement, possibly due to drug use, and fears both losing control and having the Diary discovered. These self-referential moments heighten tension by threatening both the execution of the author's plans and the act of narration itself, demonstrating how evaluation intensifies emotional engagement in the narrative.

> *I have taken too much. My thoughts are not where they should be. I recall little of the events of yesterday. Thank God I stopped myself in time. I will show my wrath towards the bastard in such a manner that he will wish he had never brought up the subject. No one, not even God himself will away the pleasure of writing my thoughts.* (249, p. 309)

The Diary's resolution returns to its central tension: the impulse to record versus the wisdom of destroying the Diary. Although he recognises the danger, the diarist admits he cannot destroy the journal and suggests a desire for future readers to understand his transformation. This closing declaration clarifies the Diary's performative purpose and provides a thematic denouement, or coda (Labov, 1972) that explains both the actions described and the compulsion to document them.

> *Perhaps it would be wiser to destroy this, but in my heart I cannot bring myself to do so. I have tried once before, but like the coward I am. I could not. Perhaps in my tormented mind, I wish for some to read this and understand that the man I have become was not the man I was born.* (301, p. 326)

How the writing of the Diary supports the violent actions it describes is one insight that emerges from these analyses. A second insight is a growing awareness of the possible audience for the Diary and the implications that carries for the Diary's existence. A third are the unfolding, temporal changes in the relationship to a notional audience and with that a shaping of the diarist's identity through writing the Diary.

The details revealed through this analysis demonstrate the overlap of categories of diaries that Mallon (1984) provides. It is both a chronicle of events, past and planned, as well as a confession. That draws attention to the power of the act of recording one's thoughts. A narrative also acts as a confession, even if the confessional aspects are not consciously present.

A Dialogic Narrative

'Dialogical narrative' (Frank, 2024; Sandberg, 2013) draws attention to mischievous moments in the Diary, when the audience for the narrative is the diarist himself. These are most apparent in fragmented sections of the Diary. A paragraph or two of text is often separated by blank parts of pages, or lines drawn across the page. Doggerel sometimes fills a number of pages, for example, Figure 3 shows page 21 of the Diary.

The diarist seems to be amusing himself with silly verses and a play on words. They typically feature thoughts about himself and his deeds. The self-absorption this

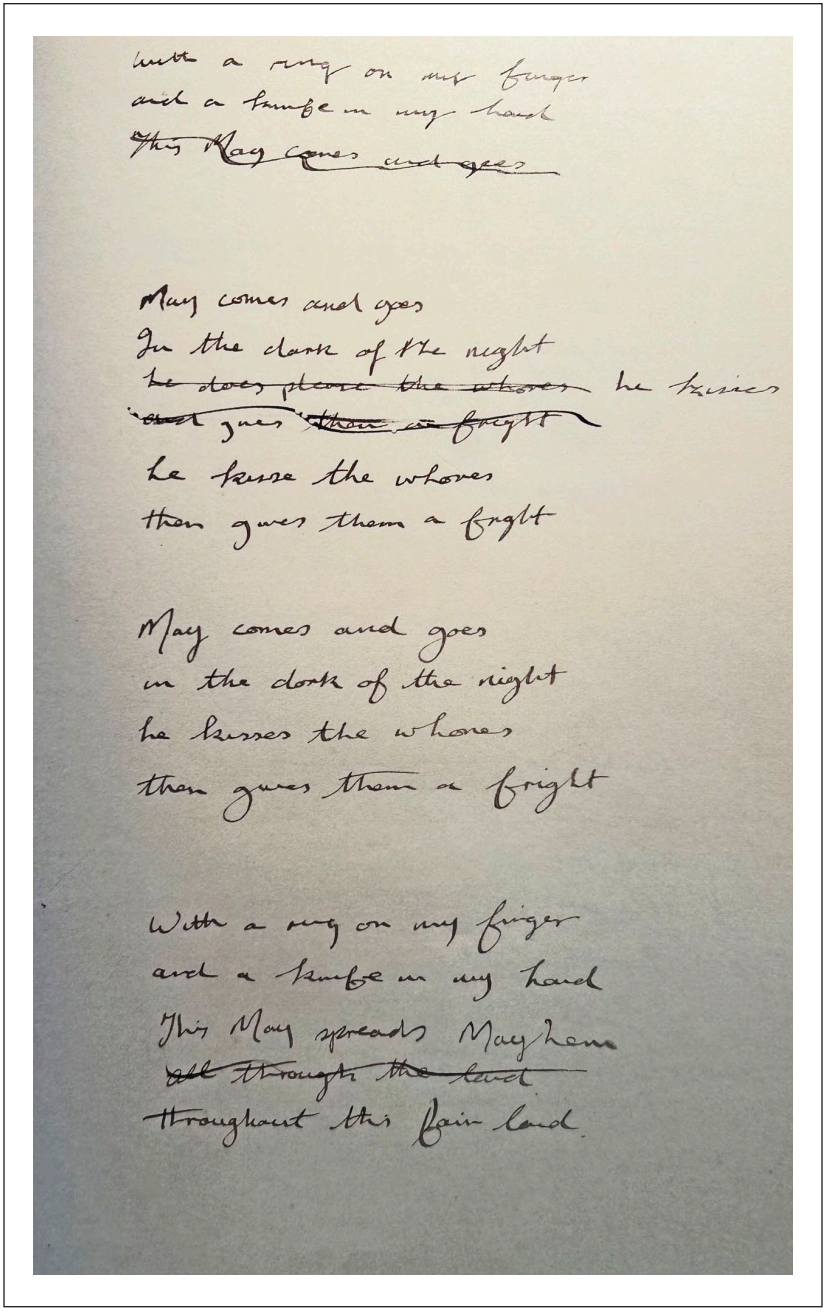

Figure 3. A page of the Diary that illustrates example of the doggerel.

indicates reveals that in these moments the only audience for the writing is the diarist himself. The apparently playful writing in the Diary is a different personal voice to the one that opens the Diary. In those early paragraphs, the self that is part of the dialogue is one struggling with the need to record planned violent actions.

This structural analysis highlights the existence of recognisable features of more conventional narrative forms. The identification of these features supports the treatment of the Diary as a narrative and also illustrates the ways in which the narrator communes both with himself and a protentional wider audience.

Hermeneutics Analysis

Hermeneutic consideration of the content of the Diary reveals how it facilitates the actions the diarist seeks to carry out.

Preparation for Violence

A person, intent on a campaign of killing, needs to determine how the killing is going to be possible. The Diary reveals that if the diarist thinks there may be difficulties in fulfilling his ultimate aim, he may try out various possibilities for carrying out murders. The Diary describes the first murder as taking place in Manchester, not London.

> *Tomorrow I travel to Manchester. Will take some of them my medicine and think hard on the matter. I believe I could do so, though I shake with fear of capture. A fear I will have to overcome. I believe I have the strength.* (244, p. 308)

Learning how to be a killer and mastering the associated experiences is described, including squeezing his victim to death. As an experience it was not as exciting for him as he had expected. He says *There was no pleasure as I squeezed, I felt nothing* (245, p. 308). The act is not as satisfying as the prior thoughts about it (Hickey, 2002). A search for the experience he anticipated prompts him on to the next murder. This allows an interpretation that the pleasure he seeks is from brutally hurting and mutilating his victims. These killings are not just an act of revenge, or a mission, but a search for a gratifying experience. It is also open to the interpretation that the diarist feels no remorse at all for the heinous killing he has carried out and intends to continue doing.

He considers pouring acid on his victims. *The thought of them riddling and screaming while the acid burns deep thrills me. ha.* (245, p. 208). Eventually he decides to purchase the *finest knife money can buy* (251, p. 309) and return to his original idea of finding victims in London. Yet, he realised that he had not allowed for *the red stuff, gallons of it.* This is a controlled killer who is seeking to test himself. Here is a person who thinks through the implications of his actions and considers how he will deal with his inner demons.

The diarist's feelings and reflections are changing in the light of his direct experiences. The Diary thus captures the dynamic nature of actions and experiences. The details of how, and probably why, each crime is committed depends on what happened

and what was experienced in a previous crime. Narratives are dynamic in themselves. They have a sequence to them. They also reflect changing ideas about the self and the writers' interpretation of his deed. Whether the Diary is fraudulent or genuine, the self-reflection and ways decisions are made to avoid detection, are instructive in revealing the sorts of planning that can go into even the most bizarre criminal activity.

The hermeneutic examination of the Diary, shows the diarist learning how the excitement that he imagined was less than he had anticipated, driving him to seek harsher, more thrilling violence. This also reflects evolving motives, and a lack of remorse, revealing how each murder reshapes his identity and decisions, whether the Diary is authentic or fraudulent.

Identity Construction

The Diary is self-referential on many occasions. It indicates an author communicating with himself. He takes on the role of different audiences. On a number of occasions, he seems to be writing as a way of organising his thoughts. These offer examples of the management of the desires which maintain his 'campaign'. At the start of the Diary he is writing it in order *to work up the courage to begin my campaign. I have thought long and hard over the matter and still I cannot come to a decision to when I should begin. Opportunity is there of that fact I am certain* (242, p. 307). Thereafter there are many statements that show his narrative is looking to the future as a way of encouraging himself to act; *I enjoy thinking of the whores waiting for my nice shining knife* (290, p. 322).

He is very proud of getting away with the murders, despite being nearly discovered on some occasions. In addition, there are over 30 mentions in the Diary of what a '*clever fellow'* he is. These declarations occur both in relation to avoiding detection and after he has written some rhymes.[4] He delights in presenting himself as a mild-mannered gentleman who carries out hideous crimes. *The gentle man with gentle thoughts will strike again soon* (253, p. 310).

The Diary reveals a number of self-narratives besides that of the clever killer. Sandberg (2022) develops the concept self-narrative as a form of dialogue the writer has with himself. The different audiences implied, being reflected in different 'voices or cultural narratives'.

For the Diary one of the voices is that of a parent, which distracts him from his 'campaign'. *I will force myself not to think of the children* (244, p. 308) but he still returns to concern for them: *I worry so over Bobo and Gladys, no others matter* (264, p. 313).

Another voice is that of the friendly brother, who is mentioned without any irony: *Indeed only the other day did not Edwin say of me I was the most gentlest of men he had encountered. A compliment from my dear brother which I have found exceedingly flattering* (243, p. 307).

The document is a vehicle for the author to record and enjoy his action and the plan for his campaign. The dominant moods are those of anger and self-congratulation, but above all a record of his feelings of achievement. He declares: *I have shown all that I mean business, the pleasure was far better than I imagined. The whore was only too willing to do her business. I recall all and it thrills me* (151, p. 309). The

diarist presents himself as powerful and dominant. When frustrated by an individual, or perhaps, being discovered by him, the diarist exerts his angry authority. He indicates this by reference to a junior assistant, Lowry, who seems to have asked a question about a matter that Lowry had no authority to ask.

> *I could have killed the bastard Lowry with my bare hands there and then I would have done so. How dare he questioned me on any matter? It is I that should question him. Damn him, damn him, damn him.* (249, p. 309)

Combined with the references to how clever he is, the pleasure he has in escaping detection, and his insistence on his inherent authority, the diarist creates an arrogant, entitled identity, pleased to be able to present himself as person *Who, it has been said, would never hurt a fly* (243, p. 307), despite his obvious paranoia and sadism.

What The Diary Indicates about its Author

The Diary shows a man of some intelligence, literate and capable of expressing his emotions, which are extremely volatile. He appears thoughtful about his experiences and the risks involved in keeping the Diary. The regularity and frequency with which the journal is kept indicates someone who is probably known to be obsessive.

The apparently irrelevant comments in the Diary, such as those about his family or his anger with Lowry (an assistant) and others, are the character he is creating of himself. They are not consistent with a man who enjoys murdering and mutilating others. After violent outburst, he notes that the children enjoyed Christmas. Through these asides a surprisingly insecure protagonist is created, seeking assurance from others, especially his brother, Michael. If the Diary was not written by James Maybrick or Jack the Ripper, then it is still an important account that shows how an inventive author conceives of the self-identity of such an horrific killer.

Direct consideration of the characteristics of the diarist reveals the identity he is presenting of himself. This is a consciously created construction of identity. A declaration of the powerful, loving, clever, even kind person he wants to be seen as by others. The style, structure and content of the Diary shows a person who is demonstrably, intellectually able and determined, as well as someone with an unfolding mission that he feels compelled to record

Thematic Analysis

What is the point of The Diary? What is its central theme? As Sandberg (2022) puts it ‘what is the story about’? (p. 217). Graham and Carol (1999) offer an interesting view on these issues when recounting the death of Maybrick and the conviction of his wife for his murder. They suggest that James Maybrick suspected his wife of having an affair. She is described as the ‘whore’ in The Diary and her lover the ‘whore master’. The campaign in the Diary is consequently presented as a displacement activity in the sense that Sigmund Freud would recognise. Instead of attacking his wife Maybrick

uses the Freudian defence mechanism of displacing his anger on to another that symbolises what he despises in his wife. This can also be seen as assigning his victims the role of 'vehicle' for his anger—a role elaborated by Canter and Youngs (2012) in their review of violent offenders' personal narratives.

In other words, unable to attack his wife directly he implies in The Diary that he is instead, killing all the 'whores' he can. He even mentions that he is displacing these killing from Liverpool's Whitechapel area to an area of the same name in London.

A second theme is the excitement and thrill of carrying out the murders and mutilations. The detailed accounts of the killings indicate the diarist's delight in writing about those murders. These murders as contextualised by hatred for street sex workers. This contempt for them is clear from the opening pages. *All who sell their dirty wares shall pay* (242, p. 307). This accords with a well-known serial killer type, referred to as a 'Mission Killer' (Holmes & Holmes, 2009). These criminals do typically target street sex workers and other readily available vulnerable female victims. Yet, the combination of this 'mission' with the sadistic delight in mutilation, shows how such typologies are porous. They are not totally distinct types.

Thematic analysis elucidates a core theme of displaced anger. The Diarist is seen to channel rage at the 'whore', presumably his wife, into killing street sex workers, 'whores'. However, a second theme emerges that rather undermines this displacement activity as the sole motivator. That is the thrill of murder. This blends mission-driven hatred with sadistic excitement, showing fluid, overlapping drives to kill.

Comparing the Performative Roles of Criminals' Narratives

The examination of the structure and themes of the Diary provide a basis for investigating the performative roles it portrays. This is an examination of how stories *do things*, Presser (2012) and Presser and Sandberg (2017) argue, narratives are performative: they shape events, identities, and actions. This idea traces back to Austin's (1975) insight that utterances are not merely descriptive but accomplish social tasks. Social psychologists later showed how such performances operate rhetorically to manage self-presentation and influence notional actual audiences (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Riessman, 2008).

Understanding the performative role of the Diary becomes clearer when it is compared with first-person accounts by other multiple killers. Three such narratives are considered. Although each is unique, they were all generated as direct accounts and explanations for the murderous acts carried out. They illustrate different performative roles which killers' first-person narratives can take. That allows a productive elucidation of the particular role of the Diary.

Anders Breivik

Sandberg's (2013) analysis of, what is known as the 'manifesto' of Anders Breivik's—produced before his attacks—shows how a narrative can function as ideological

justification. Breivik was responsible for mass killings in Norway on 22 July 2011. Sandberg (2013) shows that Brevik constructed four narrative identities: revolutionary, evangelist, pragmatist, and sociable person. These roles drew heavily on existing Islamophobic rhetoric. Sandberg deliberately avoids psychological speculation, treating the 'manifesto' as a text performing work for Breivik: legitimising violence, embedding it within broader extremist discourse, and positioning himself as an historical actor. The accuracy of Brevik's claims is irrelevant to understanding the narrative's performative function.

Fred West

A contrasting example is Fred West, who wrote a rambling, semi-literate journal while on remand for multiple murders (Wansell, 1996). Despite his limited intelligence and partial education, West had evaded detection for his murders for two decades. His journal never mentions his crimes. Instead, it constructs a sentimental, almost novelette account of love and domesticity. In one passage, he describes the joy of a young woman—whom he had in fact murdered while she was pregnant—imagining himself as a tender, conflicted romantic.

West's narrative performs a different task from Breivik's. It attempts to recast West as harmless, loving, and incapable of violence, implicitly distancing his wife Rose from the murders as well. The memoir reveals how he presented himself to others: bumbling, affectionate, and non-threatening. This persona likely helped him lure victims and avoid suspicion. His narrative draws on familiar cultural tropes of domestic bliss, demonstrating that even individuals with severe cognitive limitations can mobilise dominant cultural scripts to craft a self-serving identity.

Confessions of a Serial Killer

Pettigrew's (2020) study of a serial killer's confession shows how narratives perform the work of justification and neutralisation. The offender minimises responsibility ('things. . . are not planned'), denies victims' legitimacy ('he was a vagrant type'), and elevates himself ('a quasi-God role'). These align with Sykes and Matza's (1957) classic techniques of neutralisation. Although these techniques were initially demonstrated in the accounts of juvenile delinquents, they have been identified in the cognitive processes of many other offenders.

Pettigrew's (2020) argues that the serial killer's narrative serves two audiences simultaneously—detectives and the offender himself. By framing his actions as unavoidable, unintentional, or socially beneficial, he maintains the psychological conditions that allowed continued offending.

Across manifestos, memoirs, and confessions, violent offenders' narratives perform distinct roles shaped by context and audience. Whether justifying ideology, constructing innocence, or neutralising guilt, these stories reveal how narrative performance enables, sustains, and rationalises harmful behaviour.

These three examples, as with most memoirs and autobiographies of serial killers, are justifications, or even denials of any guilt. Some are self-indulgent quasi-philosophical attempts to present the killer as a mystic or revolutionary, such as Ian Brady's *The Gates of Janus.* Other examples (Carlo, 2013; Hall, 1999; Michaud & Hazelwood, 2010) differ from the three examples above. They share a common attempt to exonerate the criminal as well as indulge in some notoriety from what they have achieved.

The Performative Roles of the Diary 'So History Do Tell'

As noted earlier, the Diary opens with an account of what is intended and a pressing need to write that down, no matter how dangerous that may be to revealing the diarist's identity if discovered. But it slowly starts mentioning the diarist's concern with getting recognition for his crimes.

> *The wait to read about my triumph seemed long, although it was not. I am not disappointed, they have all written well. The next time they will have a great deal more to write. Of that fact I have no doubt haha*. (252, p. 310)

That awareness of the popular interest in his crimes takes an increasing significance in his writing. He begins to see himself, or at least his sobriquet, as something that will be notorious.

> *Before I am finished, all of England will know the name I have given myself. It shall be before long on every person's lips within the land.* (265, p. 314)

The writing takes over from being merely an account of his campaign and a way of recording his thrills. He starts to declare the document as a legacy that defends his role. As he sees it, the document is both proof and explanation of his actions.

> *Think think think write tell all prove to them that you are who you say you are make them believe it is the truth I tell.* (284, p. 321)

The intensity of this desire comes across in the insistent writing here. It lacks his usual punctuation. It expresses the intensity of needing to *make them believe.*

This performative role of the Diary has taken over by the end when he signs off.

> *I place this now in a place where it shall be found. I pray whoever should read this will find it in their heart to forgive me. Remind all, whoever you may be, that I was once a gentle man. May the good Lord have mercy on my soul, and forgive me for all have done.*
>
> *I give my name that all know of me, so history do tell, what love can do to a gentleman born. Yours truly*
>
> *Jack the Ripper*
>
> *Dated this third day of May 1889.* (303, p. 326)

This formal ending, turning the Diary into a testimony, converts the whole text into a defence of his actions and a plea for forgiveness. It demonstrates that the performative roles of any narrative can evolve during the course of the telling.

The testimonial quality of the ending preforms the role of a penitent who comes to terms with his deeds. But that still reflects the self-presentation of a significant individual who wishes to embrace the name he claims to have given himself.

At times, the diarist is keen to mention how mild-mannered he is thought to be. He frequently makes clear his role as a gentleman, usually with the clear statement of being a man who is regarded as gentle.

A further, more dominant role, is the avenger seeking redress for the injustices that he feels 'the whore', presumably his wife, has done to him. This overlaps with the mission to destroy street sex workers.

The diarist also makes clear his delight in the violence he carries out on his victims. This he shares with the US serial killer, Gaskins (1993), who also sees his sadistic desires as a defence for what he does. The thrill he gets out of this bloodshed is provided as both an explanation and an implied excuse for his actions. As with many individuals who manage to evade detection and capture, he begins to see that escape as an indication of the God given justice of his mission.

> *I am convinced God placed me here to kill all whores, for he must have done so, am I still not here.* (275, p. 317)

Overall, the Diary can be seen as a justification for his actions, as such personal narratives almost always are when told by serial criminals. This includes at the end, the role of the distressed lover: *what love can do to a gentleman born*, whose emotional turmoil turns him to violence.

The Diary's Performativeness

Although on first reading The Diary may appear fragmented, being little more than the meandering thoughts of a violent man who delights in attacking and mutilating street sex workers, the analysis presented demonstrates how the different facets explored combine to reveal the overall role the document is playing.

The Diary also illustrates how self-referential features are virtually inevitable in a personal account of actions and experiences. These, in turn, generate both a creation of a layering of identities and implicit indications of the character which the author wished to convey of himself. In doing that, the central themes emerge of what the Diary ostensively generates, unfolding throughout the document. It starts with declarations of a mission, or 'campaign' as the diarists describes it. This evolves into a vendetta against a target of street sex workers. It ends by taking on a narcissistic repentant role, whilst still seeking recognition for the significance of his deeds. All these facets combine to demonstrate the central performative role of the Diary—justification for his horrific depravity.

If a Fake

The Diary is certainly a remarkable document. It does not deserve being dismissed as *merely* a fake. The narrative analysis provides a perspective on whether it is authentic or not. This is just one further contribution to the debate about authenticity.

Fludernik (2020) makes the important point that, although factual narratives tend to have their own conventions and rhetorical strategies, the distinction between fictional and factual forms of narrative is not as clear cut as may be expected. Her emphasis is that the distinction between factual and fictional narratives is not binary. There is an inevitable overlap between the two. In the case of the Diary this offers the possibility that if fictional it still offers a special way of thinking about and understanding the actions of Jack the Ripper, drawing on known facts about his murders.

Fludernik's (2020) insistence that fictionality is not a special property of a text is of note. She claims the decision on fact or fiction derives from the context in which the narrative is approached. That includes the stance taken towards the text. The stance taken to the Diary was biassed from the start. This bias was in the context of historical and widespread cultural expectations. It was also a view that factual, forensic features of the Diary should be the focus of any judgement about authenticity. In the absence of definitive forensic indications, it is worthwhile considering the light thrown on the Diary's authenticity from the narrative analyses reviewed here.

If It Is Genuine

The Diary appears to serve several interconnected purposes for its author. It functions initially as a means of steeling himself for the actions he plans to undertake. It enables him to provide personal justifications for violence. The document also becomes an outlet for anger that he seems unable to express face to face with his wife, allowing emotional discharge alongside practical planning.

As the notoriety of Jack the Ripper grows, the Diary increasingly records both achievements and perceived failures, with repeated references to his own 'cleverness' arguably serving to bolster a fragile self-esteem. Over time, the function of the Diary shifts, as the author comes to recognise its potential historical significance and makes a deliberate decision to preserve it for posterity.

As the notoriety of Jack the Ripper develops, the narrative increasingly documents both his successes and perceived failures. The repeated assertions of cleverness doing important identity-work by bolstering self-esteem and affirming a competent role as an offender. What emerges is that, over the time the Diary is being written, its function alters. It shifts from an inward-facing, dialogical narrative addressed primarily to the self, towards an outward-facing account oriented to an imagined public audience. Having completed such a full account of his actions and experiences, the author comes to recognise the text's potential historical significance. This encourages him to preserve it as a legacy for posterity.

A further point is worth repeating. If it is a fake, it still provides an insight into the imaginative thought processes of someone aiming to reflect the experiences, plans and justifications of a heinous serial killer. Such an author may be considered extremely skilled in generating such a complex verisimilitude for the mind of a violent killer.

The Purpose of the Diary

Whether it is a fake or a hoax, the reason for the existence of he Diary still remains open to interpretation. What is its overall performative significance? In other words, what task does the Diary set out to achieve? Some answers can be derived from the history of other fraudulent diaries and journals. The most obvious purpose would be for financial gain. That was a dominant objective for both the Hitler and Mussolini fraudulent journals. That would require that the originator create a process that would generate real income from selling the document. Michael Barrett sold it to Robert Smith for £1. Shirley Harrison made some income from the book she produced, but she was not involved in the origination of the document. A hubristic reason could be to demonstrate skill and significance in creating such a powerful work of fiction. After many years of the Diary being public knowledge, no-one has ever come forward to claim that crown. Nor has anyone been identified who could clearly be shown to be such a skilled author.

One further suggestion has emerged in recent years. That is the claim that the Diary is a cleverly devious attempt to incriminate James Maybrick. That claim has recently been put forth by Jones and Dolgin (2024), although originally proposed by Robinson (2015). They claim that the Diary was indeed written by Jack the Ripper but with the intention of indicating James Maybrick was the author. In that scenario the author of the Diary was Michael Maybrick, James' younger brother. That does seem a remarkably convoluted way of incriminating his brother, however. Incriminating artefacts from the crimes could have been more readily placed in James' possession, particularly in his dying days. Writing a 9,500 words document to carry out this subterfuge hardly seems plausible.

Conclusions

Despite its disputed authenticity the *Diary of Jack the Ripper* is a valuable resource for narrative criminology. If genuine, it reflects how a late 19th-century serial killer conceptualised his murders and shaped his identity through writing about his actions. If a fake, it illustrates foundational cultural tropes, which offer personal explanations and rationalisations for violence. Examining the Diary reveals how violent men's self-narratives shape their identity and facilitates their violence. The Diary also contributes to the growing archive of case studies of self-referential accounts by criminals. As with all narratives, though, differences between them are fruitfully understood as in part derived from what Hydén (2013) calls 'co-construction'—a collaborative venture between the diary's author and an implicit audience. Effron et al. (2019) takes this further, arguing that the reader should be considered when examining any narrative.

The debates around the provenance and authenticity of the Diary also illustrate the social and historical contexts in which such significant documents are examined. As Fludernik (2020) and many other narratologists make clear, narratives are evaluated with reference to social, cultural and historical conventions. They emerge within the expectations of those whose professions (e.g., journalists or historians), have embedded methods for determining authenticity. More generally, there are societal assumptions about how truthfulness is manifested.

The structural and hermeneutic analyses of the Diary, together with considerations of how the diarist constructs a self-referential identity, combine to reveal a narrative with central themes of displaced anger and enjoyment of sadistic violence. These themes drive a narrative which has not previously been examined, instead preferencing forensic and historical considerations. The revelation of these themes, and how they develop throughout the Diary provide a clear indication of the Diaries purpose. Whether fraudulent or not it is an important document that illustrates how a personal narrative can support violent actions. As such, the Diary and its analyses are a valuable resource for narrative criminology.

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A complete facsimile of The Diary is provided in Harrison (2010) with a transcript of the document. An actual size facsimile of the document with a transcript that corrects some minor errors in the Harrison book is available in Smith (2017), although that is a limited-edition publication. Robert Smith is the publisher who first published Shirley Harrison's account of The Diary. He is the legal owner of the document, which is privately stored in a secure safe.

Notes

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2. https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20250414-the-fake-hitler-diaries-that-fooled-rupert-murdoch.
3. These refer to the page numbers assigned to the Diary and page numbers in the book by Harrison (1994)
4. The mention of 'funny little games' in the Diary can be taken to mean his murders, or his delight in playing with words. This has led one author to carry out minute scrutiny of the possible word games in the Diary and in the letters attributed to Jack the Ripper sent to the police. The detailed examination of these as clues to decode, is claimed to give indications of the identity of the diarist (Davies, 2019). Exploring such cryptology is probably outside the remit of narrative criminology.

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