

*Black Butler: The Child Detective Hunts Jack the Ripper***Joti Bilkhu**

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Abstract: In Toboso Yana's anime *Black Butler*, she pairs the figures of the child detective with Jack the Ripper to arrive at a complex array of meanings. The Ripper figure continues to have one of the most popular afterlives following its original context of Victorian Britain, with numerous contemporary iterations and adaptations of the 1888 murders visible across contemporary popular culture. This article examines the characteristics that *Black Butler's* child detective Ciel Phantomhive has in common with the Ripper (tragic histories, violent behavior, and the strategic use of knowledge). I begin by contextualizing *Black Butler* in regards to Japanese literature, a world literature framework, and the neo-Victorian genre alike. I then turn to analyzing how Ciel deploys the knowledge he gains from the Ripper case to legitimize himself; he both unravels the mystery of this figure and allows it to persist. In essence, the Ripper phenomenon garners such interest precisely because it is a mystery, and Ciel capitalizes on the same uncertainties and (lack of) knowledge as a form of power.

Keywords: *Black Butler*, Jack the Ripper, world literature, child detective, neo-Victorian

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Set in Victorian London, Toboso Yana's manga-turned-anime *Black Butler*¹ is about a twelve-year-old aristocratic boy named Ciel Phantomhive who makes a Faustian contract with a demon after his family is murdered, and Ciel himself is sold and nearly sacrificed in a cult ritual.² The demon—Sebastian Michaelis—lends Ciel his power and unwavering loyalty until Ciel can find and avenge his family's murderers, at which point their contract will presumably end in Sebastian's consumption of Ciel's soul. Until then, however, Ciel follows in his father's footsteps by solving crimes and policing the underworld for Queen Victoria. The first significant case Ciel takes on for Her Majesty is the Jack the Ripper murders. Arguably, it is no coincidence that Toboso chose the Ripper; in the context of English popular culture, the Ripper has had a "mini-industry" devoted to him ever since the first newspaper reports of the killings in 1888.³

This article begins by exploring the conditions of emergence and continued endurance of the figure of Jack the Ripper in *Black Butler*, considered in light of Japanese, world literature, and (neo)-Victorian contexts. I then analyze how knowledge and uncertainty simultaneously characterize the Ripper sensation, and argue that Ciel manipulates such (un)certainties to access agency, demonstrating certain similarities between the two figures. Specifically, I focus on how Ciel oscillates between performing childhood and adulthood as means of power and agency.⁴

Japanese Origins

According to Kawana Sari, detective fiction has captivated the Japanese reading public since the late-nineteenth century, but the genre has also resisted rigid definitions.⁵ Not only were the Japanese unconcerned about upholding generic formats,

early writers were also willing to forfeit any claims to originality when detective fiction first began spreading in specific regions of Japan.⁶ Kawana explains that mentioning names and plots from existing works was not viewed as creative piracy in Japan at this point, but rather, it was seen as a way to demonstrate one's mastery of the genre's conventions and existing literature.⁷ Therefore, we can understand and position Toboso's adaptation of the Ripper figure and murders in the spirit of this tradition, and for her part, she contributes to the phenomenon of the Ripper by threading together several popular cultural figures, plotlines, and character archetypes.⁸

As a character, Jack the Ripper is by no means new to Japan; instead, he has already carved a space for himself in contemporary Japanese literature and popular culture.⁹ Several other anime (and their manga counterparts) that have employed the Ripper include *Soul Eater*, *Detective Conan Movie 6: The Phantom of Baker Street*, *Black Clover*, and *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure Part 1: Phantom Blood*.¹⁰ John Paul Green, observing that hundreds of books and fictions have been written about the Ripper, remarks that he is essentially a "cultural commodity to be packaged and sold," traditionally identified by his top hat, cape, and Gladstone bag.¹¹ As such, Toboso's iteration repurposes the Ripper as a symbol of ambiguity with which the figure of the child detective can engage to produce diverse meanings.

World Literature and Neo-Victorian Adaptations

The cultural iconography of and obsession with Jack the Ripper as a character constitutes what David Damrosch describes as an exemplar of world literature, since this figure "circulate[s] beyond [his] culture of origin, either in translation or in [his] original language."¹² Damrosch goes on to posit that world literature is both

multicultural and multi-temporal,¹³ and we might consider how *Black Butler* fits these criteria. In regard to the multi-temporal aspect that Damrosch identifies as distinctive of world literature, *Black Butler* is a contemporary work set in Victorian London, so it engages with the Victorian era and nineteenth-century English culture through the lens of neo-Victorianism. Aside from the Ripper, *Black Butler* also re-imagines Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) across two OVA episodes; Carroll's *Alice* books are perhaps one of the most revisited texts in the neo-Victorian genre. Many Japanese anime have created 'Alice' episodes, oftentimes by having the main character become an Alice substitute and setting off on a journey through Wonderland, in which they meet the other characters playing different roles in Carroll's world. In *Black Butler's* case, Ciel is Alice, Sebastian the White Rabbit, Grell the Cheshire Cat, and Madame Red the Queen of Hearts.

Another significant aspect of the work's multi-temporality is its anachronism; Waiyee Loh demonstrates that although the narrative takes place in the late 1880s, Toboso employs "anachronistic design elements and accessories," including "lace cravats from the Restoration period (1660–80), and crinoline silhouettes from the mid-Victorian period (1844–68)."¹⁴ Anachronism also reoccurs with a character named Grell Sutcliff, a grim reaper who uses a reaper's scythe that is disguised as a motorized chainsaw. It is worth noting that while the first chainsaw was invented as early as 1830, this initial version would have been turned manually.¹⁵ Otherwise, a modern motorized version like that used by Grell was only created in the late 1920s.¹⁶ Therefore, Toboso's use of anachronism in *Black Butler* allows audiences to engage with the anime as a "palimpsestuous work,"¹⁷ and one that is, I suggest, an accumulation of various popular literary tropes and cultural artifacts.

Notably, *Black Butler* changes the chronology and details of some of the Ripper's murders to adapt the material for a neo-Victorian lens. For some, Mary Ann Nichols was the Ripper's first known victim; in Toboso's iteration though, she is, according to Ciel, not the first, but "[a]nother prostitute [. . .] found gruesomely murdered in Whitechapel."¹⁸ But in keeping with historicity, Toboso does leave Mary Jane Kelly as the last victim.¹⁹ Toboso also changes and emphasizes certain details of the murders to make the events fit her plot—namely that the victims are all missing their wombs. Further, the climax that *Black Butler* offers is the revelation that the Ripper is a male and female duo working together. The female of the pair is none other than Ciel's aunt, Madame Red. Given that the Victorian pseudo-sciences linked criminality to the "lesser" races and to women's transgressive sexualities, it is unsurprising that Kawana identifies a similar trend in Japanese criminology pre-World War I.²⁰ There may be a vestige of this tradition in the character of Madame Red, who represents failed female sexuality with her inability to conceive children after an accident that causes the loss of her uterus.²¹ Accordingly, she is furious at the prostitutes who come to the hospital (where she works as a doctor) in need of abortions, and her response is punitive; she kills the prostitutes brutally, penalizing them for an unavoidable risk of their work.

According to Stephen Snyder, contemporary Japanese writers "increasingly ignor[e] the boundaries between serious and popular fiction, often [. . .] combining elements of various genres in a single fiction."²² Jonathan Clements' earlier work lends credence to this idea by demonstrating that in the late 1990s, the content of anime could be grouped into three main strands; the child-strand, adult-strand, and significantly, the hybrid-strand.²³ Clements' classification is significant because Loh also suggests that *Black Butler* "celebrates contemporary Japan's ability to hybridize different cultures and

to disseminate its hybrid cultural commodities around the world as a cultural superpower in the age of postmodern globalization.”²⁴ Arguably, this notion of hybridization, or of intricately weaving together disparate elements, partly explains the anime’s enduring success.²⁵ Toboso has, quite skillfully, capitalized on a trend that characterizes Linda Hutcheon’s definition of adaptations, which she describes as “obsessions [. . . that] rarely disappear, even if they do mutate.”²⁶ And *Black Butler* is a compelling collection of cultural obsessions, including formulations of detective fiction, Jack the Ripper, and neo-Victorian literature.

But obsessions or adaptations must also undergo refashioning to remain prevalent in popular culture with contemporary audiences. Hutcheon maintains that adaptations are “repetition with variation,” and that they combine the comfort of ritual with the novelty of change.²⁷ Damrosch essentially makes the same claim about audiences’ responses to foreign texts, where “sharp” differences are enjoyed for their “sheer novelty,” similarities are “gratifying,” and the “middle range” of recognizing what is “*like-but-unlike*” has the most potential to produce changes in audiences’ perceptions and/or practices.²⁸ For its part, *Black Butler* retains enough historically accurate details of the Ripper murders so that the figure is recognizable, but it changes a few key elements so that viewers’ expectations are subverted—and perhaps even surpassed. Further, Hutcheon suggests that transcultural adaptations often result in changes in racial and gender politics, the latter of which is evident with *Madame Red* given that *most* neo-Victorian fictions and iterations of the Ripper—especially those written during the first half of the twentieth century—have revealed the figure to be a man.²⁹ In effect, imagining the Ripper as a man locates the character in a continuum of violent masculine behavior.³⁰ Before *Madame Red* meets the grim reaper Grell—who joins her serial

killing³¹—the anime positions the Ripper in a locus of violent feminine behavior, simultaneously conventional and original, and evoking both multiple and contradictory meanings.

The Faustian contract is another cultural obsession that *Black Butler* reworks and relocates: in this case, between a child and a demon. Damrosch determines that the story of Faust—Goethe’s iteration, at least—is a staple of many world literature courses.³² He argues that these “major canonical masterpieces are worthy of sustained attention both for aesthetic and for cultural reasons, but they persist [. . .] because they adapt so effectively to the changing needs of different times and places.”³³ The essence of the Faust tale is that a human sells their soul to a demon in exchange for knowledge, but this basic premise can easily be adapted to almost any time period and culture. Şeyda Sivrioğlu illustrates that between 1850–1900, the Faust myth was particularly popular in English novels,³⁴ which can be ascribed to the fact that knowledge itself was expanding into new, uncharted domains, both scientific and otherwise. Therefore, knowledge becomes a marketable cultural commodity.

Further, Sivrioğlu explains that Faust is feminized in some rewritings of the myth because the magic and sorcery he uses are traditionally linked to feminine modes of knowledge and agency.³⁵ As a child who is physically weak, Ciel fits into said feminized tradition because he depends on Sebastian’s supernatural strength and their contract not only to attain more knowledge, but also to ensure that his will is carried out. As a child, he lacks the ability to physically fend off criminals on his own, so he depends on Sebastian’s demonic powers to develop his own legitimacy with adults. By contrast, Madame Red kills the prostitutes, illustrating how her physical violence draws on more conventionally masculine forms of power. Thus, similar to the Ripper, the Faust tale is

another popular cultural phenomenon with a rich history, and Toboso's decision to locate these figures in Victorian London acquires a profusion of meanings.

Considering that the Victorian era is one that developed many competing definitions of children, it is noteworthy that Ciel makes a contract with Sebastian at the age of ten. In the nineteenth century, children were beginning to be understood in a legal context, rendering them sociological subjects in their own right. Legislative examples of this shift included the changing labor laws, the Forster Education Act of 1870,³⁶ and the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which "raised the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen," but children were still exploited—for a fictionalized version of this, one need only look at Ciel's exploitation at the hands of the cult and Viscount Druitt's attempts to sell him.³⁷ Therefore, the Faustian contract made between a child and a demon allows Toboso to draw on this evolving history of children's increasing agency alongside their continued dependency. That a demon is the only being Ciel can trust with *almost* complete confidence also offers a nuanced reading of the complicated facets of children's mobility.

The Child Detective and the Ripper: Anti-heroes, Villains, and Bad

Beginnings

In the twenty-first century, there is a trend toward villains and anti-heroes who have begun to displace heroes in popular literature and entertainment.³⁸ Anime also participates in this tradition and has often been credited for its creation of "superior" characters who are distinguished for their moral complexity,³⁹ an element of which *Black Butler* takes full advantage.⁴⁰ Ciel, Madame Red, and Grell all have tragic past experiences that motivate their journeys, which effectively illustrate how the child

detective and the Ripper are not stark opposites, as one might imagine—rather, a shared history of violence, pain, and grief links this trio. For instance, when the anime reveals that Madame Red is one member of the Ripper duo, it also reveals her tragic backstory (the death of her husband and unborn child) through the “Cinematic Record” (the record of her life) while she dies, inviting viewers to feel sympathy for her.⁴¹ Such moral complexity also explains Anna Maria Jones’ characterization of Ciel as an “anti-hero.”⁴² In a later OVA episode, audiences even see Grell as a trainee at the Grim Reaper Association, which is interesting because humans who commit suicide become grim reapers as punishment. Thus, audiences might also consider how Grell, who is one member of the Ripper duo, was once victimized too.

Black Butler’s characters cannot be classified according to a simplistic good/evil binary; instead, they are multifaceted. As Poore argues, “[t]here is no evil like an unnameable evil,” and Grell embodies such unnameability.⁴³ Ciel cannot name Grell (a nonhuman entity) to Queen Victoria, but he chooses not to name Madame Red—he merely puts a stop to the murders as per Her Majesty’s orders. Grell is a complicated character; he is transgender,⁴⁴ he is called a “divine being,” he is half of the Ripper, he is a grim reaper who is “an intermediary between man and god,” and as the anime progresses, he disintegrates into a figure of homosexual comic relief, his inadequacy constantly contrasted with Sebastian’s high level of competency.⁴⁵ Sebastian, though, is no different in terms of complexity. Dressed in more black than white, he is “sinister predator, powerful protector, and abject servant” all at once.⁴⁶ He is not merely a demon who wishes to consume Ciel’s soul, but also a figure who serves him, comforts him, and even plays a paternal role of sorts.⁴⁷ Even Ciel is simultaneously a defenseless child and a killer for the Queen. Furthermore, he uses the knowledge he obtains from the Ripper

case to cement his position in Victorian society and showcase his abilities. For Ciel to manage the Ripper case successfully—a case that has produced and remains rife with uncertainties—helps to establish his agency. Therefore, the complexity and multiplicity of *Black Butler*'s characters, particularly its most central cast, render them persistently popular to twenty-first century audiences.

Co-opting the (Un)known: Knowledge as Power

To recapitulate thus far, I have endeavored to illustrate how and why Jack the Ripper has emerged and endured not only globally, but also in Japan specifically. I have also discussed how *Black Butler* employs the figure of the Ripper through a world literature and neo-Victorian lens. Now I will analyze Ciel's role as a child detective who produces, circulates, and employs knowledge in order to validate himself and access agency in society. His relationship to knowledge is one of liminality; when he performs childhood, he feigns a lack of knowledge, but when he behaves like an adult, he displays what he knows as a form of power. Fundamentally, Ciel co-opts the Ripper for his own agency. The mystery surrounding the Ripper both persists and unravels, and as a child detective, Ciel's persona is similarly shrouded in questions and unknowns, mixed with half-truths. The main overlap between the two figures is how they use knowledge as a commodity to access power.

One of the first forms of knowledge Ciel manipulates is his awareness of childhood as a concept and adults' expectations of children's behaviors. For example, in the first episode, Ciel invites a businessman named Damiano to his manor for dinner and insists on playing a board game. Ciel focuses on the board game so much that Damiano cannot get in a word edgewise about the expansion of Ciel's factory in India.

Under his breath, he remarks, “How childish.”⁴⁸ Ciel overhears this and looks at the man, who hastily corrects himself. In this scene, Ciel oscillates between performing the behaviors expected of children and acting like an upper-class earl who owns a very successful confection and toymaking company, leaving Damiano uncertain as to how to approach him. After dinner, Damiano tries to discuss the company again, but Ciel says, while grinning, “Children can be very demanding about their games. Surely you wouldn’t want me to get upset,” illustrating how he performs stereotypically childish behavior even though it is clear Damiano no longer wants to play this game and is running out of patience.⁴⁹ Christopher Routledge argues that the child detective “operates in a space between childhood and adulthood,” which is precisely what Ciel’s behavior indicates.⁵⁰ His method is to act childish to discover knowledge. Damiano continues to underestimate Ciel when he remarks to his accomplices on the phone, “Please, he’s only a child,” failing to realize that the young earl has tricked him with his earlier antics.⁵¹ But Ciel knows that Damiano is one of the “pawns who [has] betray[ed]”⁵² and exacts his revenge by making the man believe that the board game they played is coming to life in the Phantomhive manor. In a later episode, Sebastian sums it up quite nicely to Ciel: “You look like a helpless little child all bound up like that, but then I guess that’s appropriate.”⁵³ Helplessness is only a façade that Ciel performs. Sebastian’s comment further indicates that the image Ciel portrays is only appropriate because that is what adults want to see and what he wants to convey: vulnerability. Ciel’s portrayal of vulnerability is, in part, tied to his physical appearance. Besides the clothes he wears, which I discuss later, the one consistent accessory he wears is his eyepatch. The eyepatch conceals the mark of his contract with Sebastian—a star over his eye—but

it can easily be misread as a marker of physical disability, which is another iteration of vulnerability, especially in a child.

The board game Ciel plays with Damiano reveals that games can function as a form of knowledge for child detectives and require a mastery that adults may lack. Ciel describes Damiano as a traitorous “paw[n],” he plays a game of chess with Madame Red prior to his discovery that she is part of the Ripper duo, and the ending of games is something that the young earl remarks upon quite often.⁵⁴ Later, at a pool table with various guests, Ciel says, “It’s time to put an end to this worthless game.”⁵⁵ The phrase is ambiguous; in one sense, Ciel refers to the pool table game proper, but in another, he also refers to the game of catching rats—the Italian mafia. As a child detective, this ambiguity gives Ciel an upper hand because it allows him to exist in a liminal space, one in which he undermines the adult world’s rules and expectations by treating their world as a game. In fact, Ciel remarks that the “game” with Azzurro Vanel, a member of the Italian mafia, “wasn’t as much fun this time,” and then, to Azzurro: “Unfortunately for you, this game is over.”⁵⁶ Games allow Ciel to discover how the adult world operates and to use this information to his advantage. Sebastian also advises Ciel to use all his pawns even if their bodies pile up at foot of Ciel’s throne because “if the king falls, this game is over.”⁵⁷ He refers to both Ciel’s search for his parents’ murderers and the game that he and Ciel are playing over his soul. Earlier, when Damiano and Ciel played the board game, Ciel reminds the man that since his player on the board lost a leg on the previous turn, he cannot move forward six spaces on the board, but only three.⁵⁸ The adults do not always know how to play games, or they forget the rules, demonstrating that they cannot operate in a child’s world. A child like Ciel, however, called “Phantomhive, lord of games”⁵⁹ can operate in both worlds, and at their threshold.

Children's detective fiction must effectively eliminate childhood for the child to act like an adult or a detective.⁶⁰ Since Ciel lost his parents and was sold to a cult, there is no real childhood left for him—at least, not as the Victorians imagined it. For an upper-class child such as Ciel, the Victorians would have at least imagined childhood to consist of a lack of exploitation in regard to sexuality and labor.⁶¹ When he operates in the liminal space between childhood and adulthood, he only performs childhood to uncover schemes in the adult world. For instance, while he and Sebastian investigate Viscount Druitt, Ciel crossdresses as a girl and tells the Viscount she is looking for “other amusements,” to which Druitt responds, “You might be a bit young yet.”⁶² Ciel counters with, “I’m a lady, not a little girl,” and the sexual innuendos are clear.⁶³ Physically, Ciel is costumed as a young girl, but he performs adulthood by indicating he has sexual knowledge. Jones offers an insightful analysis about Ciel as the “paradoxically knowing-innocent child,” where the innocent child is presented as a victim, but simultaneously, the knowing child is presented as an agent.⁶⁴ Ciel embodies this paradox through his explicit orders to Sebastian to kill people, but he is also portrayed as a victim on numerous occasions: when Azzurro beats him, when Sebastian tries to shield his eyes from Mary Kelly’s butchered, bloody body, and when Madame Red attacks him with a knife.⁶⁵ The Phantomhive servants Mey-Rin and Finny comment that Ciel looks like a “baby” when Sebastian carries him, a sharp contrast to Sir Randall calling him a “vulture.”⁶⁶ This is precisely the dichotomy Jones emphasizes; the helpless and dependent ‘baby’ coexists with the bird of prey that ensnares people.

As with the Ripper’s multiplicity, this recognition of Ciel as a child, yet also undeniably adult-like, is part of his hybrid identity that allows him to access the child, adult, and underworlds all at once. He is not the only one who exemplifies such

hybridity, though: similarly, Grell traverses both the human world and the afterlife, and Madame Red saves people as a doctor but also ends some lives as the Ripper. The trio's multiplicity exemplifies not only how they each exploit knowledge as a cultural commodity to gain power, but it also emphasizes Smith's argument that, "[a]n important element of the portrayal of the detective is the attributes that he has in common with the Ripper."⁶⁷ Aside from this trio's tragic histories, their capability for extreme violence links them and, interestingly, Ciel and Grell's positions as keepers of order. The Ripper duo's murders make a violent spectacle of female bodies, and likewise, Ciel is always willing to commit acts of violence to stop criminals. As a keeper of order, Ciel controls the public's knowledge about the Ripper and its circulation in society. Philippa Gates explains that even when Jack the Ripper's identity is uncovered, justice—in the legal sense—is never achieved, illustrating how the character eludes the detective fiction genre's convention of providing closure.⁶⁸ Grell eludes justice and, like Ciel, he exists in a liminal space.

The knowledge Ciel attains through his investigation of the Ripper murders captures the notion that "contemporary postmodernist children's mysteries [. . .] are not predictable [. . .] and do not conclude in knowingness."⁶⁹ When Grell is first revealed as one member of the Ripper duo, audiences do not expect Madame Red's revelation two entire minutes later.⁷⁰ According to Karen Coats, postmodern knowledge tends toward undecidability.⁷¹ Ciel knows the identities of the Ripper, and as mentioned previously, while Grell is an "unnameable evil,"⁷² Madame Red is not. Ciel could have revealed that his aunt was the Ripper, but he chooses to hide this fact because this revelation might have discredited his carefully crafted persona as "[t]he Queens's guard dog."⁷³

Therefore, in Toboso's iteration, Ciel's silence and refusal to circulate this information at

the end of the case enhances his power by allowing him to construct and shape the public's reality and knowledge of the Ripper as an unknowable and undefined entity. Moreover, there is an element of uncertainty to Ciel's actions; does he remain silent about Madame Red's gruesome nightlife to spare her, or to prevent the Phantomhive name from being stained for its connection with her? The anime seems to suggest both with the exposition of Madame Red's tragic past, her murder at Grell's hands, and the sentimentalized funeral scene where Ciel brings a red dress to cover his aunt's body adorned in white—because red was her favorite color.⁷⁴

Another mode of legitimization that Ciel deploys is his position and its link to knowledge. He is referred to as “the policeman of England's underworld [. . .] the Queen's guard dog,” indicating that his profession is about maintaining order and finding knowledge or truths.⁷⁵ Flanders argues that, “Detection – in fiction, at any rate – made the world safe.”⁷⁶ In relation to the Ripper murders, Madame Red comments that, “[t]he Queen's guard dog has a new scent to follow.”⁷⁷ In effect, Ciel legitimizes himself through other agents of power—in this case, Queen Victoria is the highest agent of power. He fashions himself as an extension of her power by highlighting his connection to her; he is *her* guard dog, and not any guard dog, as it were. In light of the discovery that his aunt is part of the Ripper duo, he states that he was searching for a murderer and that “degree of relation to me did not matter.”⁷⁸ Ciel demonstrates his impartiality when dealing with tasks from the Queen, which effectively validates and reaffirms his capabilities to be the guard dog in the first place. He will not be led astray by sentimentality. Further, this moniker of ‘the Queen's guard dog’ is repeated throughout the anime. If naming is an act of recognition and of knowing oneself, then Ciel's repeated naming—whether by himself or others—can be seen as reiterations of his

identity and self-knowledge. His position as the Queen's guard dog is decidedly different from when he remarks that Azzurro's men are "lapdogs" who "better [. . .] know how to fetch."⁷⁹ In effect, Ciel reasserts his superiority by establishing a hierarchy of power through dog types, in which lapdogs rank lower than the guard dog. Yet this is not without its own downsides. The Undertaker, one of Ciel's tentative allies, warns, "Lord Phantomhive, you should be wary of the path down which duty will take you—that collar may choke you yet."⁸⁰ Dogs wear collars, and the Undertaker's warning suggests Ciel could either become trapped in this guard dog identity—in other words, this child detective identity—or strangled by it. As much as naming is an act of power, it can also become a snare.

Clothing and accessories help Ciel to cement his performance as an adult. The sapphire Phantomhive ring he wears as the head of his household highlights his position as an earl in Victorian society, even if the ring only fits his thumb. As a result, when his fiancée Elizabeth destroys the ring, a symbol of legitimacy, he nearly strikes her.⁸¹ With Sebastian's timely interference, however, Ciel controls his anger and hides how troubled he is to convey an air of maturity. This performance of adulthood is reiterated with the walking stick Ciel and Sebastian pick up at a shop. The shopkeeper's comment about the "short" walking stick has Ciel frowning because the man undermines his authority by implying that Ciel is only a child and that an adult—or a man—would use a longer stick.⁸² The same point can be made about the heeled shoes Ciel wears. In effect, these are the props of legitimacy, of a child performing adulthood.

On the subject of neo-Victorian works in the twenty-first century, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn suggest that the "domestic location of the family home [. . .] serves as an important link to the generational past of the protagonists."⁸³ Alongside the ring,

the domestic space aids Ciel in defining and knowing himself. For instance, when Ciel orders the servants to remove the painting of his deceased parents, he literally places them into ‘the generational past’ while situating himself as his genealogy’s present.⁸⁴ In so doing, he claims a sort of ownership of the Phantomhive manor, demonstrating that he controls this domestic space as an adult should. Additionally, the Phantomhive manor marks the place where Ciel was both victimized (his parents died in the house, making him an orphan), but it is also the place that represents his agency now. The domestic space embodies Ciel’s power in the form of Sebastian, a demon butler, and extraordinary servants: Mey-Rin is a former sniper, Bardroy a war veteran, and Finny is an experimental test subject who has superhuman strength. Therefore, in the present moment, the domestic space functions as a site in which Ciel consolidates his power.

Conclusion

As a child, Ciel operates within a unique breadth of both child and adult performance, and manipulates knowledge in order to validate his authority in Victorian society at large. When he states, “[t]he rats will soon come looking for their forbidden cheese, and I hold the keys to the storehouse,” it demonstrates Ciel’s constant awareness of his position of power; he is the cat that plays with the rats.⁸⁵ To function in the adult world, however, he performs childhood and its associated behaviors so that he, too, can pass undetected. One can argue that *Black Butler* has remained popular over the years because Toboso has effectively used a collection of popular cultural and literary figures, namely Jack the Ripper, framed through the distinct genre of neo-Victorianism, and by establishing a personal relationship between the child detective and the Ripper. Toboso is certainly not the first nor the last author to use the Ripper, but her Ripper is more

complicated than some of her Japanese contemporaries.' *Black Butler* demonstrates interesting overlaps between the child detective and the Ripper, including tragic histories, a capacity for violence, and most importantly, both characters use knowledge to develop their own agency. Toboso presents the Ripper in conjunction with the child detective, and Ciel employs the knowledge he gleans from the case as a way to legitimize himself by simultaneously demystifying and leaving the mystery of such a pervasive cultural icon intact.

Notes:

¹ The Japanese name of the work is *Kuroshitsuji* but I will use the English name in this article.

² *Black Butler* was serialized in the magazine *Monthly GFantasy* starting in 2006. The Japanese publisher Square Enix printed the manga in paperback form starting in 2007, and the anime's first season was released in 2008, the second season following in 2010. Special episodes called original video animation (OVA) followed as well as a live-action film in 2014. Further, *Black Butler's Book of Circus* arc was animated in 2014, the *Book of Murder* arc following in 2015, and the *Book of the Atlantic* arc was animated as a feature-length film that released in 2017. The series also inspired a videogame that released in 2009, a musical, and merchandise for fans, including cosplay, clothing, postcards, and stickers. At the time of writing, the manga is still on-going, and the anime has been renewed for a fourth season slated for release in 2024.

³ John Paul Green, "Ripping Yards: Capturing (not catching) and constructing the myth of Jack the Ripper in nineteenth-century London," in *Making* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 213.

⁴ Considering that my focus is the Jack the Ripper arc, my analysis of *Black Butler* spans season 1, episodes 1–6, but I make references beyond this scope when needed.

⁵ Kawana Sari, *Murder Most Modern: Detective Fiction and Japanese Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 1.

⁶ Kawana, 10, 24.

⁷ Kawana, 25.

⁸ For instance, Anna Maria Jones and a part of *Black Butler's* fandom argue that Toboso was inspired by Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes story, "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" (1892) for the plot of *Black Butler: Book of Murder* (Jones, "The Victorian" 4). One blog even points out that in *Book of Murder*, the writer who is invited to the Phantomhive manor goes by the name of 'Arthur,' arguing that he is the detective fiction writer Arthur Conan Doyle. The blog identifies several connections to Doyle's canon, including, "The Hound of the Baskervilles" (1902)—which is the case Ciel takes on following the Ripper—, Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872), and other detective fiction references peppered throughout the anime; Elise Stella Noire. "Sherlock Black Butler?" Amino. Published July 18, 2018. Accessed December 14, 2019.

https://aminoapps.com/c/black-butler/page/blog/sherlockblackbutler/n5km_oM1FLuaGEoLqgawXmvnxrZpwQnJPJ

⁹ Japan has a history of borrowing from English culture; for instance, the British magazine *Punch* (1841–2002) had a Japanese version called *Japan Punch*, established in 1862 by Charles Wirgman in Yokohama; Robert Shail, "For the benefit of old boys, young boys, odd boys generally, and even girls': The irresistible rise of the British comic, 1884–1900," in *Making* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 157; Katharine Buljan, and Carole M. Cusack, *Anime, Religion and Spirituality: Profane and Sacred Worlds in Contemporary Japan* (Bristol: Equinox Publishing, 2015), 21. Later in the anime, Ciel is also seen reading *Punch*.

¹⁰ *Soul Eater's* Jack the Ripper is a minor antagonist who is half-man, half-machine and is killed off very quickly. *Black Clover's* Jack the Ripper only seems to employ the epithet and does not characterize him the way much of popular culture has done so.

- Similarly, *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure's* Jack seems to be a minor antagonist. "Jack the Ripper." MyAnimeList. Accessed November 6, 2019. <https://myanimelist.net/search/all?q=jack%20the%20ripper>.
- ¹¹ Green, 214–5; Clare Smith, *Jack the Ripper in Film and Culture: Top Hat, Gladstone Bag and Fog* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 57; Mark Jones, "Jack the Representation: The Ripper in Culture," in *Neo-Victorian Villains* (Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2017), 162.
- ¹² David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003), 4.
- ¹³ Damrosch, 16.
- ¹⁴ Waiyee Loh, "Superflat and the Postmodern Gothic: Images of Western Modernity in *Kuroshitsuji*," *Mechademia* 7 (2012): 116.
- ¹⁵ "When Were Chainsaws Invented?" Chainsaw Library. Accessed December 14, 2019. <https://chainsawlibrary.com/when-were-chainsaws-invented/>.
- ¹⁶ There were new chainsaw inventions in the 1860s and 1880s, but they still required human labor to function; "When Were."
- ¹⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 6.
- ¹⁸ "Casebook: Jack the Ripper – Victims." Casebook. Accessed December 23, 2019. www.casebook.org/; *Black Butler*, episode 4, "His Butler, Capricious," directed by Shinohara Toshiya, aired October 23, 2008.
- ¹⁹ "Casebook"; *Black Butler*, episode 5, "His Butler, Chance Encounter," directed by Shinohara Toshiya, aired October 31, 2008.
- ²⁰ Kawana, 16–7.
- ²¹ "His Butler, Chance Encounter."
- ²² Stephen Snyder, "Contemporary Japanese fiction," in *The Cambridge History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016), 762.
- ²³ Jonathan Clements, *Anime: A History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 189.
- ²⁴ Loh, 112.
- ²⁵ Another way to measure *Black Butler's* success is by looking at which English networks have picked it up; Netflix is a major one, and the website shows that *Black Butler* was available in 2016 for about nine months, taken down at the end of 2016, and then picked up again by the distributor on December 2nd, 2018 ("Info Page: Black Butler"). As of January 2023, Netflix is still carrying *Black Butler's* second season along with its OVA episodes; "Kuroshitsuji (anime)." Fandom. Accessed December 14, 2019. [https://kuroshitsuji.fandom.com/wiki/Kuroshitsuji_\(anime\)](https://kuroshitsuji.fandom.com/wiki/Kuroshitsuji_(anime)).
- ²⁶ Hutcheon, xii.
- ²⁷ Hutcheon, 4.
- ²⁸ Damrosch, 11–2.
- ²⁹ Hutcheon, 147; Benjamin Poore, "The Villain-Effect: Distance and Ubiquity in Neo-Victorian Popular Culture," in *Neo-Victorian Villains* (Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2017), 6; Jones, "Jack," 165.
- ³⁰ Poore, 6; Jones, "Jack," 165.
- ³¹ "His Butler, Chance Encounter."
- ³² Damrosch, 134.
- ³³ Damrosch, 135.
- ³⁴ Şeyda Sivrioğlu, *The Faustus Myth in the English Novel* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 10.

³⁵ Sivrioğlu, 2, 21–2.

³⁶ “Synopsis of the Forster Education Act 1870.” British Library. Accessed December 20, 2019. www.bl.uk/collection-items/synopsis-of-the-forster-education-act-1870.

³⁷ Anna Maria Jones, “The Victorian Childhood of Manga: Toward a Queer Theory of the Child in Toboso Yana’s *Kuroshitsuji*,” *Criticism* 55, no. 1 (2013): 16; “His Butler, Capricious.”

³⁸ Poore, 10, 12. For instance, *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood*’s homunculi and Father/the dwarf in the flask, *Attack on Titan*’s Eren Yeager is arguably both villain and anti-hero at once, and *Demon Slayer*’s upper-moon demons are villainous characters with tragic histories.

³⁹ Susan J. Napier, *From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 172–3, 176.

⁴⁰ Anime was never sanitized or censored for Japanese audiences but when America began airing anime on television (especially in the 1990s), much was done in the way of sanitization, editing out violence and other disagreeable elements for American children and audiences, which is why viewers of anime have been known to call Japanese characters/villains superior; Fred Patten, *Watching Anime, Reading Manga: 25 Years of Essays and Reviews* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2004), 63.

⁴¹ “His Butler, Chance Encounter.”

⁴² Anna Maria Jones, “Transnational Neo-Victorian Studies: Notes on the Possibilities and Limitations of a Discipline,” *Literature Compass* 15, no. 7 (2018): 9.

⁴³ Poore, 40.

⁴⁴ Grell uses she/her pronouns to self-identify, but the other characters persist in gendering Grell as male. Thus far, the manga also indicates that there are no “female” grim reapers, and it is unclear whether Toboso’s representation of Grell as transgender is genuine. To my knowledge, there is no scholarship about Grell being a transgender character in the context of Japanese culture and/or literature in the 2000s.

⁴⁵ “His Butler, Chance Encounter.”; After the Ripper arc, Grell makes repeated appearances throughout the anime, oftentimes to reap souls when people are dying around Ciel and Sebastian, but also because of his persisting sexual interest in Sebastian, which is first expressed through intertextual allusions to *Romeo and Juliet*.

⁴⁶ Jones, “The Victorian,” 8–9.

⁴⁷ Audiences have pointed out that Sebastian resembles Ciel’s deceased father Vincent.

⁴⁸ *Black Butler*, episode 1, “His Butler, Able,” directed by Shinohara Toshiya, aired October 2, 2008.

⁴⁹ “His Butler, Able.”

⁵⁰ Christopher Routledge, “Children’s Detective Fiction and the ‘Perfect Crime’ of Adulthood,” in *Mystery* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 70.

⁵¹ “His Butler, Able.”

⁵² “His Butler, Chance Encounter.”

⁵³ *Black Butler*, episode 2, “His Butler, Strongest,” directed by Shinohara Toshiya, aired October 9, 2008.

⁵⁴ “His Butler, Chance Encounter.”

⁵⁵ “His Butler, Strongest.”

⁵⁶ “His Butler, Strongest.”

⁵⁷ *Black Butler*, episode 6, “His Butler, at the Funeral,” directed by Shinohara Toshiya, aired November 6, 2008.

⁵⁸ “His Butler, Able.”

⁵⁹ “His Butler, Strongest.”

⁶⁰ Routledge, 66.

⁶¹ Death would not have been an experience excluded from childhood given that it was part and parcel of nineteenth-century life. For example, people died from everyday causes such as disease and pregnancy, as well as during war and colonial activities.

⁶² “His Butler, Capricious.”

⁶³ There is also an undeniably suggestive sexual quality to Ciel and Sebastian’s relationship that allows the manga/anime to be classified in the genre of ‘boys’ love’ (Jones, “The Victorian,” 4). The multi-genre appeal of *Black Butler* (detective fiction, neo-Victorian, thriller, revenge, boys’ love) demonstrates how the work’s hybrid quality invites various audiences, which also explains its continued success.

⁶⁴ Jones, “The Victorian,” 12, 8.

⁶⁵ “His Butler, Strongest.”; “His Butler, Chance Encounter.”; Jones, “The Victorian,” 14.

⁶⁶ “His Butler, Strongest.”

⁶⁷ Smith, 121.

⁶⁸ Smith, 119.

⁶⁹ Adrienne E. Gavin and Christopher Routledge, “Mystery in Children’s Literature from the Rational to the Supernatural: an Introduction,” in *Mystery* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 12.

⁷⁰ “His Butler, Chance Encounter.”

⁷¹ Karen Coats, “The Mysteries of Postmodern Epistemology: Stratemeyer, Stine, and Contemporary Mystery for Children,” in *Mystery* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 188.

⁷² Poore, 40.

⁷³ “His Butler, at the Funeral.”; “His Butler, Capricious.”

⁷⁴ “His Butler, at the Funeral.”

⁷⁵ “His Butler, Strongest.”

⁷⁶ Judith Flanders, *The Invention of Murder: How the Victorians Revelled in Death and Detection and Created Modern Crime* (London: HarperPress, 2011), 466.

⁷⁷ “His Butler, Capricious.”

⁷⁸ “His Butler, Chance Encounter.”

⁷⁹ “His Butler, Strongest.”

⁸⁰ “His Butler, at the Funeral.”

⁸¹ *Black Butler*, episode 3, “His Butler, Omnipotent,” directed by Shinohara Toshiya, aired October 16, 2008.

⁸² “His Butler, Omnipotent.”

⁸³ Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 28.

⁸⁴ “His Butler, Able.”

⁸⁵ “His Butler, Strongest.”

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