Chapter Six

Dark Despair, Sinful Surrender: Prostitutes

As we scale down the social ladder, we find the outcasts occupying the last rung. From the sphere of genteel misery, to laboring-class toil, the question of the suitability of women’s employment created a furore, and women had to battle the odds to earn their bread and fight for their survival. In charting women’s limited options to earn money, the ‘worst’ and ‘most degrading’ avenue, prostitution, cannot be overlooked. In the preceding chapters, the careers of some working women have already revealed a tendency to practise prostitution under cover. Actresses, dressmakers and domestic servants were often exposed to (what was chauvinistically assumed to be) the ‘temptation of the streets’ and they often doubled up as prostitutes or ‘dolly mops’ primarily to supplement their starvation wages. Such women concealed their private acts of prostitution and were publicly known by their day-time occupations. They did rouse suspicion and the ‘respectable’ society did view actresses, dressmakers and servants as women with low morality and of questionable virtue but at least they were not treated as social outcasts. This chapter analyses the social outcasts, the women who exclusively engaged in prostitution. They had no pretence of engaging in any ‘respectable’ occupation and almost had to declare their identities as ‘public’ women. Prostitution, often called the ‘world’s oldest profession’, was widely practised in Victorian times. It was claimed by various historians and social analysts that there were 80,000 prostitutes in London alone.\(^1\) Avoiding the debate on the accuracy of this figure, it is

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\(^1\) This figure has been greatly contested. This claim was made by the Bishop of Exeter and supported by Mr. Talbot, secretary of a society for the protection of young females. Duncan Crow affirms that this figure was ‘widely accepted’ and an attempt was made to substantiate it scientifically. Some others retorted that this inflated figure included all single women living independently and/or working, like dressmakers, and wrongly suspected of being prostitutes.
undeniable that prostitutes were present in abundant numbers and the perceived threat from their occupation is recorded in history. Kimberley Reynolds reasons that ‘the vast number of prostitutes is often cited in support of the hypocritical attitude of Victorian society to sex, largely on the basis that the widespread use of prostitutes serviced, and in some sense legitimized, the sexual double standard.’

William Acton distinguishes between a ‘kept mistress’ (a woman who apparently has or ‘pretends to have but one paramour, with whom she, in some cases, resides’ and a ‘prostitute’; again he differentiates between a ‘street-walker’ (who is the ‘well-dressed, living in lodgings’ prostitute) and a ‘common prostitute’ (who is the ‘low prostitute, infesting low neighbourhoods’ who almost are never visible at streets at ‘unseemly hours’ but transact their business quietly in their ‘houses or lodgings’). Prostitution, for Acton, constitutes ‘the fact of “hiring”, whether openly or secretly, whether by an individual or a plurality in succession’. He regards prostitution as ‘an inevitable attendant upon civilized, and especially closely-packed, population’; hence he believes that it is ‘inerradical’.

Varied expressions were used by the Victorian print media to designate prostitutes such as ‘common prostitutes, unfortunates, fallen women, women of ill repute, nymphs of the pave, the frail sisterhood, women of the town, abandoned females’ but these euphemisms did not confuse the readers especially as many of the offences described arose in brothels. The places termed by the police as ‘brothels’, are divided by Acton into ‘three

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5 Ibid, p.5.
6 Ibid, p.2.
7 Ibid, p.3.
classes of houses’. The first kind are devoted to the lodging, and sometimes boarding, of prostitutes and are meant exclusively for prostitutes. The second kind, ‘houses in which prostitutes lodge’, are those in which prostitutes reside either singly or with another fellow prostitute, with or without a ‘proprietor’. The third class ‘houses to which prostitutes resort’ refer to ‘night houses’, ‘coffee-shops’ and ‘supper-shops’. Frances Finnegan’s study confirms that York prostitutes lived in poverty-stricken areas like the ‘insanitary yard, courts and tenements within the old-walled city’ and that most prostitutes ‘drifted from one miserable hovel to another’. Poverty, liquor trade, dirt, slums, bad language were all associated with prostitution. Alcohol was easily available near the dwellings and haunts of prostitutes as is seen in Trollope’s novel *The Vicar of Bullhampton*, where the Church Minister Mr. Fenwick finds Carry Brattle living in the proprietress, Mrs. Burrows’s, brick cottage which was close to a ‘beer-house’.

Generally prostitutes had no residential stability, a fact that gets reflected in Victorian fiction as well. Martha in *David Copperfield*, when asked for her address, informs David that she does not live at any particular place for a considerable period of time. It could be attributed to several reasons like harassment by police, fear of gaining notoriety, or a preference for seclusion and anonymity. In *The Unclassed*, Mrs. Starr, Ida Starr’s mother, lives in private rented apartments, with the landlady Mrs. Ledward, who claimed to be a dressmaker.

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9 Ibid, p.5.
10 Ibid, p.5.
11 Ibid, p.5.
12 Frances Finnegan, *Poverty and Prostitution* pp. 34-35.
In Victorian England, child prostitutes were greatly in demand as it was ‘widely believed that raping a child virgin would cure syphilis’. Curbing and controlling child prostitution became more complicated as the official age of consent was twelve years. A Royal Commission acknowledged that ‘a child of twelve can hardly be deemed capable of giving consent, and should not have the power of yielding up her person’. Some critics thought that the age of consent should be raised to a higher level like thirteen or fourteen. A journalist, W. T. Stead, created a stir when he reported, in his journal Pall Mall Gazette, of the ease and existence of white slave traffic. To prove his point, he purchased a thirteen year old child virgin. His attempts prompted ‘the passing of Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which raised the age of consent to sixteen, and made procuration a criminal offence, and the penalty for assault on a child under thirteen whipping or penal servitude’. The sought-after virgin children were priced highly, averaging about twenty pounds. Parents of such children were indifferent to the prized virginity of their little girls and sometimes let their girls go for as little as five pounds. Child prostitution, being widespread, went almost unremarked and could be seen as a part of child exploitation along with other forms of exploitation like ‘working in the mines or mills, in sweat shops or factories, in the match-making industry or begging in the streets’.

Studies revealed that in real life, prostitutes were ‘drawn exclusively from the ranks of the poor’. An analysis of some fictional prostitutes reveals their mottled social background. Trollope’s Carry Brattle is the daughter of a hard-working miller. Nancy in

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14 Quoted in Ibid, p.244.
16 Ibid, p.247.
17 Frances Finnegan, *Poverty and Prostitution*, p.74.
*Oliver Twist* is an orphan of unknown parentage. Martha in *David Copperfield* is also an orphan though her father was a fisherman. She has also been to school and Emily and Martha are old schoolfellows. Ida Starr in Gissing’s *The Unclassed* is the daughter of a prostitute. Harriet Smalles, in the same novel, is the daughter of a pharmaceutical chemist. Harriet’s mother had died early due to consumption and the Smalles family was poor. Sally, a friend of Ida’s, is the daughter of a fisherman and her mother kept a laundry. Sally comes to London for a change and slaves in a ‘city workroom’ during the day but turns to prostitution at night to make ends meet. She claims that ‘all us girls are the same; we have to keep on the two jobs at the same time’ and decides to give up her day job on account of its exacting nature and miserly pay. Later, however, both Sally and Ida give up prostitution when they fall in love with gentlemen. Sally takes up a job in a chandler’s shop and ‘lives in’ there, she secures the job on account of her good looks; and Ida goes back to her laundry work. Sally would have to do the cleaning in the house as well as attend to a baby when she is not required in the shop. Alice Marwood in *Dombey and Son* is the illegitimate daughter of an impoverished rag-and-bone-vendor belonging to the lowest strata of society. Bernard Shaw’s Mrs. Warren is the daughter of a fried-fish shop owner who pretended to be a widow, hence, presumably, Mrs. Warren’s mother was also a prostitute.

William Acton pins down the causes leading to prostitution under two key headings: primary/universal and secondary/special. Natural instinct, sinful nature, idleness, vanity and love of finery are classified as primary/universal reasons while secondary/special reasons are further segregated into artificial, local and individual motives. Artificial rationale includes ‘habits and laws of society for the time being’. Local basis of prostitution charts ‘peculiar

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or particular places … which make some places specially haunts of prostitution’.\footnote{Frances Finnegan’s findings on York prostitutes point to ‘overwhelming poverty’, as the ‘principal cause’ of prostitution; along with ‘poor pay’, sordid working conditions, and extremely limited employment options for women. Judith Walkowitz proposes ‘occupational dislocation’ due to ‘rural poverty, the declining employment opportunities for women in agricultural areas, and the closing of the mines in Devon and Cornwall\footnote{Judith Walkowitz, ‘The Making of an Outcast Group: Prostitutes and Working Women in Nineteenth-Century Plymouth and Southampton’ pub. in Martha Vicinus, \textit{A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women} (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1977), p.74.} as the reason which prompted women to seek alternative employment in prostitution. Some individual grounds for prostitution are unfortunate cases of ‘seduction’ (often resulting in the birth of an illegitimate child), ‘dreadful home conditions’ and ‘bad companions’\footnote{Frances Finnegan, \textit{Poverty and Prostitution}, p.21. Dreadful home conditions could mean a drunken and disreputable, or abusive or violent parent/step-parent which would force a girl to take to the streets.} along with primary characteristics like vanity, love of pleasure, and idleness. Linda Mahood points out that ‘in the debate around the causes of prostitution it was mainly the working-class women who were scrutinized and stigmatized’.\footnote{Linda Mahood, \textit{The Magdalenes: Prostitution in the Nineteenth Century} (London: Routledge, 1990), p.155.} Linda Mahood explains that directors of Magdalene Societies and Houses of Refuge perceived that ‘poor education, broken homes, early sexual experience, and employment in the public sphere’\footnote{Ibid, p.161.} were the usual causes of prostitution. Initially some working women may have seen prostitution as an ‘attractive alternative’ to domestic service, dressmaking or manual labour, with lesser working hours, more monetary returns and apparent independence from servitude to demanding employers.}

Esther in Gaskell’s \textit{Mary Barton} becomes a prostitute as she could not withstand the drudgery of sewing for eighteen to twenty hours a day with little respite, miserable pay and no comfort. Trollope’s Carry Brattle and Dickens’s Martha become prostitutes after they are

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Ibid, p.167.}
\footnote{Ibid, p.161.}
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seduced and abandoned. Emily in *David Copperfield* would have been driven to a similar fate after her elopement with Steerforth and his desertion, had Martha not saved her. Alice Marwood in *Dombey and Son* is thrust into prostitution by her mother who is eager to gain economically from her daughter’s good looks. She complains of her birth ‘among poverty and neglect’, of her being ‘nursed’ in such squalid surroundings and of her being ignored: ‘nobody taught her, nobody stepped forward to help her, nobody cared for her.’ She rightly believes that she, like Nancy, was born under such circumstances that it led to her ‘ruin’. Her mother, Mrs. Brown, led her into becoming the kept-woman of James Carker, who tired of her soon and discarded her. He used her as a ‘short-lived toy’ and ‘flung’ her aside more ‘cruelly and carelessly’ than even toys are thrown away. When Alice is accused, tried and sentenced for robbery, Carker refuses to bail her out. It embitters Alice and she swears to be revenged on him for the atrocities done against her. We see another instance of opting for prostitution to avoid the terrible work conditions and meager pay of manual labour and/or dressmaking in Mrs. Warren’s choice. Shaw’s Mrs. Kitty Warren drifts into prostitution as she finds it more rewarding than slaving fourteen hours a day for starvation wages. Her sister Lizzie – already a successful prostitute herself – encourages Kitty as both of them are good looking, and could earn together and save together to buy a house for themselves. Kitty Warren represents the severely limited employment options for women and their (her sister’s and hers) personal lack of talent for singing, acting or journalistic writing, which forced them to make use of their good looks. Kitty asserts that prostitution allows her to be independent and give her daughter a ‘first-rate education’ while life as a scullery maid would probably lead to the ‘workhouse infirmary’. Mrs. Warren strongly supports her choice of her

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‘profession’ and curiously would not encourage her daughter to starve and slave for the sake of being ‘respectable’, by marrying a labourer or taking up factory work.

Reformers expected that inmates of ‘magdalene institutions’ and ‘houses of refuge’ would be trained to give up their ‘dirty’, ‘disgraceful’ and ‘sinful’ life as they would learn to accept and practise middle-class values such as family, hygiene, purity, domesticity, and abide by accepted feminine gender roles. Frances Finnegan affirms that ‘repentance for past sin was, of course, a necessary condition of entry – without it a prostitute could hardly hope to be admitted into an institution whose managers were as much concerned with rescuing her soul as her body.’ 27 The York Penitentiary Society was one such among hundreds of ‘Refuges, Homes, Guardians and Asylums established throughout the country during the period’. 28 Most prostitutes had to resort to such ‘chilling and grim establishment(s)’ 29 on account of their utter destitution.

Several novelists of the Victorian period took a keen interest in prostitutes partly as they were concerned about what was dubbed the ‘Great Social Evil’, partly as they perceived the injustice meted out to prostitutes, and partly as they had first-hand knowledge of prostitutes. One or a combination of these reasons impelled novelists like Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, George Gissing, Anthony Trollope, Wilkie Collins, Emile Zola, Leo Tolstoy, and Charles Louis Philippe to mention these ‘fallen women’ in their works and write sympathetically about them. Dickens, on the initiative and finances of Angela Georgina Burdett-Coutts, helped in the foundation of Urania Cottage, a Redemptive ‘Home for Fallen Women’, and it is believed that nearly a hundred women graduated from Urania Cottage between 1847 and 1859. Dickens envisioned a Home which was quite different from the

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27 Frances Finnegan, Poverty and Prostitution, p.22.
29 Ibid, p.22.
other asylums, as the common asylums sought to punish women. Dickens encouraged women to acquire domestic skills, lead a disciplined life, maintain cleanliness, adopt a refined manner of speech, and even learn how to read and write. He personally interviewed prison inmates and prostitutes from workhouses to select those to be admitted to Urania Cottage. It even had a garden and a piano for the aesthetic development of its members.

George Gissing married a prostitute called Nell in 1879. Though his marriage collapsed, he continued to sympathetically portray ‘fallen’ women and hope for their redemption and re-instatement in society. Nell’s drunkenness, ill temper, disobedience, dishonesty, and ‘low, vulgar’ friends were a source of misery and embarrassment to Gissing. Critics find elements of Nell’s character depicted in Harriet in *The Unclassed*.

Hardy’s poem ‘The Ruined Maid’ is about a prostitute who is considered to be doomed by society as she has transgressed her social and moral boundaries. In Hardy’s poem, a humorous exchange takes place between two young women who grew up in Dorset countryside and happen to meet in London after years of separation. The ‘ruined’ prostitute is slightly envied by her girlhood friend as the former is gaudily attired in silk and looks well placed in her finery. The friend admiringly comments on the prostitute’s remarkable dress, refined speech, clear complexion and a life of apparent ease and comfort. Hardy’s representation depicts one of the affluent prostitutes or ‘kept mistresses’ of a rich man. Prostitution may have provided avenues for poor girls from rural backgrounds to interact with rich city-bred gentlemen and polish their speech and manners or acquire some social graces, or benefit from the trappings of wealth, but dependable investigators like Frances Finnegan recognized that ‘the active life of a top-class prostitute was relatively short, and that as such girls sickened, took to drink or became physically less attractive, they inevitably
took the downward path first to what were described as “notorious” houses of ill fame, and finally to the streets or the workhouse.\textsuperscript{30} The glamour or perks apparently associated with prostitution were quite short lived and prostitutes generally had a pitiable end.

Many, like Anthony Trollope, wrote with an intention to stir society’s conscience to the plight of these ruined women. Trollope, in his Preface to \textit{The Vicar of Bullhampton}, cautions against the ‘damnably false’ ‘glitter of gaudy life’\textsuperscript{31} seemingly attached to prostitution. In this Preface, Trollope clarifies his position in presenting a ‘castaway’, the ‘unfortunate’ Carry Brattle, whom the author endows with ‘qualities that may create sympathy’, and he intentionally redeems her ‘from degradation at least to decency’.\textsuperscript{32} He defends the charge of immodesty in depicting such a ‘character’ before genteel ladies by urging such ladies to ‘pity the sufferings’ of prostitutes and ‘do something perhaps to mitigate and shorten them’.\textsuperscript{33} In the novel, Mr. Fenwick, in defending Carry Brattle’s ‘fall’ and likening her to the Biblical Mary Magdalene, makes a case for all prostitutes claiming that they do not deserve ‘eternal punishment’ if they ‘repent’ and, as a minister of the Church, he argues that Carry must be spoken of as ‘any other sister or brother, - not as a thing that must be always vile because she has fallen once’.\textsuperscript{34} When Mr. Fenwick, the Vicar, decides to help Carry, he is left with two alternatives: the first, to persuade Carry’s father to accept her back into his home and the second (which seemed easier to him) to try to get Carry admitted in some ‘house of correction’ to allow her to reform. The hostile and unbearable conditions of such ‘penitentiaries’ and ‘reformatories’ are suggested in Carry’s shrinking and fear of being admitted there. Even the Vicar admits that such establishments

\textsuperscript{30} Frances Finnegan, \textit{Poverty and Prostitution}, p.17.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, p.v.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, p.vi.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, p.124.
provided ‘cold and unpleasant safety’.\textsuperscript{35} He cannot trust Carry to switch to some regular occupation like needle-work as he reasons that ‘the change from a life of fevered, though most miserable, excitement, to one of dull, pleasureless, and utterly uninteresting propriety, is one that can hardly be made without the assistance of binding control’.\textsuperscript{36}

Martha and Emily, both ‘fallen’ women in \textit{David Copperfield}, get an opportunity of starting life afresh in Australia. Miraculously, Martha even gets married there to a farm labourer who is told of her past but still accepts her. It is seemingly a fairy tale ending to Martha’s story. In real life, most prostitutes would seldom get an opportunity to get married though some authorities on the subject like Acton and Walkowitz support this view that some women were happily married and settled in domesticity after a temporary career of prostitution.

Lotty Starr, Ida’s mother in Gissing’s \textit{The Unclassed}, like many other fictional prostitutes, is overcome by guilt and remorse. She sobs to her daughter: ‘How I wish I’d never been born!’\textsuperscript{37} Lotty is another victim of seduction followed by desertion. Lotty’s father refuses to help his pregnant daughter and only agrees to do something for the newborn child Ida, if the unwed mother Lotty gives her up altogether. Failing to find any work, Lotty, at age eighteen, is forced to become a prostitute. Lotty resolves to keep Ida innocent of ‘the contamination of her mother’s way of living’\textsuperscript{38} and to bring up the child ‘respectably’. Lotty ‘had her regular clientele; she frequented the roads about Regent’s Park and Primrose Hill; and she supported herself and her child’.\textsuperscript{39} It shows that Lotty Starr was forced to become a street-walker but she tried to transact her business quietly and she earned enough for the

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, p.281.  
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, p.283.  
\textsuperscript{37} Gissing, \textit{The Unclassed}, p.14.  
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, p.22.  
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, p. 23.
upkeep of her child and herself. Lotty tries to ensure a sound education for her daughter, first by putting Ida to school at the age of five, then by placing her under Miss Rutherford, a better teacher. But Ida is dismissed from school, partially for reacting violently to a fellow pupil, Harriet, who called her mother a ‘bad’ woman, but primarily because this episode brought into the open the suspicion regarding Ida’s mother’s occupation. It highlights the ostracism faced by prostitutes and even their children/dependants or anyone associated with them. Ida’s dismissal from school crushes her mother’s ambition of making a teacher out of Ida; she resisted Ida’s training as a dressmaker as dressmaking was ‘not good enough’.40

Writers deliberately represented some stereotypes of fallen women such as the prostitute with a ‘heart-of-gold’, or the virtuous and victimized prostitute, to evoke sympathy for fallen women. However, novelists like Dickens and Gaskell continued to abide by the traditional norms of presenting prostitutes. As Marcy A. Hess indicates, Dickens’s Nancy and Gaskell’s Esther ‘paint their faces, mimic fancy dress with their shabby attire, and manifest a love of alcohol. Nancy, Esther and Alice also suffer the traditional prostitute’s death’.41 (Nancy is murdered by her lover Sikes, and Esther and Alice succumb to disease). The close proximity between respectable women and prostitutes as seen in the ties between Rose Maylie and Nancy, Mary Barton and Esther, Harriet Carker and Alice, and the attempt of the former to reform and rescue the latter, accentuates the novelists’ standpoint that such contact and effort would be ‘physically and morally safe’.42

42 Ibid, p.524.
It was generally agreed that the perks associated with prostitution offered an attractive alternative to the drudgery and monotony of other forms of manual labour. Walkowitz affirms that ‘the standard of living of prostitutes was perceptibly higher than other working women’. Some statistics reveal that prostitutes could earn in a day the weekly wages of a ‘respectable’ working woman. Prostitutes had ‘a room of their own, they dressed better, they had spending money and access to the pub’. This is observed in the case of fictional prostitutes like Gissing’s Ida Starr and her friend Sally who live as lodgers, and can afford to lead comfortable lives which they have to give up once they take up ‘respectable’ jobs as laundry-women and shop-girls. Working at the laundry gives Ida little time to read, she changes her lodgings to live in a ‘kind of tenement suitable to very poor working people’ and she declines her admirer Waymark’s offer to repeat their trip to Richmond and have dinner ‘at the old place’ because she ‘can’t afford it’. The fact that Ida Starr and Sally can change from prostitution to ‘respectable’ jobs affirms William Acton and Judith Walkowitz’s view that ‘for most “public” women prostitution represented only a temporary stage in their life that they would pass through’.

Venereal disease was one of the most threatening and notorious risks of prostitution. Bertha in Charles Louise Philippe’s novel Bubu de Montparnasse (1901) contracts syphilis and goes to hospital. Prostitutes also faced several other risks and degradations like frequent arrests. Prostitutes were frequently arrested, as Frances Finnegan finds, with charges of ‘soliciting or “wandering abroad”, as it was more commonly termed, fighting, indecency,

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44 Quoted in Ibid, p.76.
45 Gissing, The Unclassed, p. 158.
46 Ibid, p. 162.
picking their client’s pockets, or, as was often the case, with being drunk and disorderly’.\footnote{Frances Finnegan, \textit{Poverty and Prostitution}, p.12.} These were ‘regularly recorded’ in police reports, where the name of the offender, the nature of the charge, the place where the offence occurred, and the offender’s address was usually noted down. Frances Finnegan reckons that ‘prison sentences, usually of seven to fourteen days’\footnote{Ibid, p.21.} were something most prostitutes were familiar with. Even fictional prostitutes like Carry Brattle have a fair share of police raids and know that their private identity is destroyed, as they are listed in the police records. Carry bitterly laments that the police raid her place every other day. Alice Marwood in \textit{Dombey and Son} was arrested for theft and transported to foreign shores for reformation. Gissing’s Ida Starr was falsely charged of theft and sent to prison, something which caused her to lose her work at the laundry. She was sentenced for six months ‘with hard labour’. It reveals how easy it was to get a former prostitute convicted by false accusations arising out of jealousy.

Frances Finnegan argues that ‘evidence regarding the criminality and drunkenness of York’s prostitutes reveals conclusively that they were brutalized and degraded by the occupation, that they suffered both physically and mentally and that they were regarded both by society and themselves as social outcasts’\footnote{Ibid, p.215.}. This is evidenced in Trollope’s Carry Brattle’s statement to church minister Mr. Fenwick, when he puts out his hand to her; she says that she is not ‘fit for the likes of you to touch’\footnote{Trollope, \textit{The Vicar of Bullhampton}, p.171.}. The pangs of ‘the sharp agonies of an intermittent conscience’\footnote{Ibid, p.172.} do not plague Carry alone but probably made most prostitutes

\begin{footnotes}
\item[48] Frances Finnegan, \textit{Poverty and Prostitution}, p.12.
\item[49] Ibid, p.21.
\item[50] Ibid, p.215.
\item[51] Trollope, \textit{The Vicar of Bullhampton}, p.171.
\item[52] Ibid, p.172.
\end{footnotes}
miserable. Carry supposes that the only relief she could gather would be from her death as she had no home, or no refuge, and she lamented that ‘nobody loves me now’.\(^{53}\)

In *Oliver Twist*, Nancy feels ‘burdened with the sense of her own deep shame’\(^{54}\) when she comes face to face with the respectable Rose Maylie. After their meeting, Nancy departs by pronouncing a blessing on Rose: ‘God bless you, sweet lady, and send as much happiness on your head as I have brought shame on mine!’\(^{55}\) It proves her pangs of guilt and her overwhelming sense of shame. With all the horrors of prostitution, ‘fallen women’, even those who lived amongst and knew only the dregs of society, were acutely aware of their sin, their crime, their degradation and their ostracized position. Fictional prostitutes frequently break down into tears and are conscious of a burning sense of shame. Nancy, being a gangster’s moll, faces a violent end despite her innate goodness, or rather, because of it. She is murdered by her lover, the criminal, Bill Sikes, after her interview with Rose Maylie, where she tries desperately to save Oliver, by imparting secret information to Rose. Ironically Nancy also declares her compulsion to be with Bill, even if he puts her to death. Dickens does not sentimentalize the issue, but Nancy gets slain by the man she loves and for whom she refuses to give up the low life she abhors. She explains herself to Rose Maylie: ‘When such as I, who have no certain roof but the coffin-lid, and no friend in sickness or death but the hospital nurse, set our rotten hearts on any man, and let him fill the place that has been a blank through all our wretched lives, who can hope to cure us?’\(^{56}\) Probably her incurable love for Bill Sikes leads her back to the criminals, but her murder is a sign of her redemption. As George Watt affirms, ‘Nancy dies in the act of saving, not in the act of

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53 Ibid, p.175.
56 Ibid, p.271.
destroying or corrupting’. The fictional death of the fallen woman was exploited extensively as a gesture of redemption and/or salvation. Perhaps to evoke sympathy from the conservative Victorian readers – for the fallen woman – Dickens never uses the word ‘prostitute’ for Nancy or Bet even once.

In *David Copperfield* Martha, two or three years older to Emily, is depicted literally and figuratively as a shadow, first as a shadow following Emily, then simply as a shadow in London. Her move to London after her seduction, then her subsequent recourse to prostitution, could easily have portended Emily’s career, had Martha not forestalled it. After Emily’s flight from home, Emily’s family seeks the help of Martha to learn the whereabouts of Emily. When David and Mr. Peggotty seek Martha out in London and follow her, Martha’s distraught conscience steers her to the river, and she is caught before she can jump into it in desperation and despair. Like Nancy, she believes that she is ‘bad’ and ‘lost’ and there is ‘no hope at all’ for her. Learning of Emily’s elopement, she is agonized about the blame that society would transfer to her, as Emily had once been sympathetic to her. It hints that Victorian prudery was eager to condemn anyone who came in contact with ‘fallen women’ or espoused their cause. A similar threat was directed at the Vicar of Bullhampton when he tried to plead for Carry Brattle. Martha breaks down due to the ‘piercing agony of her remorse and grief’ even though she had no role in, or influence over, Emily’s fall. Martha’s estimation of herself as ‘a solitary curse to myself, a living disgrace to everyone I come near’ reveals how society’s ‘pariah’ attitude to prostitutes even penetrates into the psyche of the prostitutes, and torments them endlessly. The trying effect of the prostitute’s

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60 Ibid, p.558.
occupation is seen in Martha as she appears ‘worn and haggard’ and her ‘sunken eyes’ express ‘privation and endurance’. Alice Marwood in Dombey and Son returns home ‘harder’ after a period of exile. She rates herself as a ‘criminal’, a ‘helpless little wretch’, an ‘outcast’ and one who is ‘deserted’. On being transported for reformation, she discovers a vile and vicious surrounding, much worse than the one she had left behind. Before wasting away in death, Alice summarizes her plight: ‘evil courses, and remorse, travel, want, and weather, storm within, and storm without, have worn my life away.’

Similarly, in The Unclassed, when Lotty is first seen in the novel, she is quite ill and she realizes that she cannot survive long. Ten years of her life as a prostitute have broken her down, both in body and in spirit. She dies in a hospital as a result of pneumonia. Her young daughter Ida, fiercely independent like her mother, becomes a prostitute, a street-walker, for similar reasons, as she has no better means of supporting herself.

The image of the robust prostitute replete with good health, as William Acton would like to paint, has already been challenged by researchers. In fiction, Gissing’s Ida Starr, at eighteen, comes close to this image, perhaps because she has been in this ‘profession’ only for a few months. Trollope’s Carry Brattle is a truer representative of her class as the ill effects of her occupation are clearly visible in her. She looks like a pitiable ‘sickly-looking thing’, with thin cheeks and hollow eyes, as a result of ‘riotous living and periods of want, by ill-health’, and ‘harsh usage’. It points to the poverty and misery of a common prostitute’s life.

The existence and crowding of specialized Lock hospitals, for treatment of syphilis and other venereal diseases, prove the hypocritical attitude of the Victorians with regard to

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61 Dickens, Dombey and Son, p. 782.
62 Trollope, The Vicar of Bullhampton, p.172.
illicit sexual activity. Lock hospitals were created for the treatment of venereal diseases like syphilis and the hospitals claimed to ‘cure inmates’ to ‘virtuous habits’. Venereal diseases almost threatened to reach epidemic proportions especially among the army and the government passed laws in a desperate attempt to curb the ravages caused by it. Prostitution became such a social menace in Victorian England, especially in garrison towns, that the government tried to control, not prostitution, but the spread of venereal diseases by passing the first of the Contagious Diseases Acts (CD Acts) in 1864. It passed two similar Acts in 1866 and 1869. The primary elements of the CD Acts were the registration and the regulation of prostitutes. It allowed the obligatory inspection of prostitutes for venereal disease in some military camps in both England and Ireland. Under the Acts, a woman could be arrested by a policeman on the mere suspicion of being a prostitute and taken before a magistrate, who had the power to certify her as a common prostitute and order her to acquiesce to a fortnightly internal examination. If the prostitute was found to be infected with venereal diseases, like gonorrhoea or syphilis, she would be forcibly detained in a Lock hospital for a period of six to nine months. These Acts accorded unbridled power to the police. As there was no exact definition of a prostitute mentioned in the CD Acts, nor was such a definition handed to the police, all single women who ventured out of their house, who worked, who lived independently, who had no male guardians to befriend and protect them, could be suspected of being prostitutes. The CD Acts provoked outrage and protests by women’s societies (like the ‘Ladies’ National Association’ led by Josephine Butler), the Quakers, Wesleyan Methodists and Congregationalists. The Acts were opposed on the grounds of the hindrance to social freedom, ‘recognition’ and ‘sanction’ of immorality by the State, the class partiality

64 Cited by Frances Finnegan in Poverty and Prostitution, p.9.
of the Acts (only the lower-class common prostitute and street-walkers would be vulnerable to arrest, examination and detention), the unchecked power of the police in being able to arrest any woman on the mere suspicion of being a prostitute, the palpable abuse inherent in such power, and the glaring ‘sexual discrimination’ of the Acts as it castigated women but not men for indulging in the same act of fornication. This sexual discrimination made the Acts ineffective and unjust by ‘legislating only against street-walkers but not their clients, who remained free to spread infection, even to their wives’.65 The efficacy of the CD Acts was challenged and the Acts were counter-productive as it drove prostitutes ‘underground’ and they began to resist medical examination. Some authorities however believed that the Acts imposed cleanliness, reduced the spread of diseases and also the number of prostitutes. The drawbacks of the Acts and its inadequacies made the campaign against it gain momentum till the Acts were suspended in 1883 and finally repealed in 1886. Judith Walkowitz observes that the CD Acts ‘were designed to force prostitutes to accept their status as public women by destroying their private identities and associations with the poor working-class community’.66

The fictional prostitute’s career is framed by the themes of rejection and expulsion. Family members, friends, relatives, neighbours, community and society at large, refuse to interact with and even admit the existence of prostitutes. Several scholars like Ronald Pearsall and Frances Finnegan proved that even well brought up genteel ladies could not have been totally ignorant of these abandoned females, who were seen prowling the streets, nudging and negotiating with passers-by, and whose drunken episodes were reported regularly in the newspapers. Trollope in 1870 wonders whether such supposed ‘ignorance’

on the part of ladies was ‘good’ but is convinced that ‘it exists no longer’. His Carry Brattle is ‘transformed from happy country wench to social leper’; her position as an outcast is depicted in the novel and her punishment is underscored through the novel. She knows that the punishment meted out to her is in accordance with a ‘larger social law’ wherein it is ‘the active duty of every citizen being to shun, reject, hound and insult in public, but to hire in private’. Carry Brattle faces rejection at every level, from her immediate family to strangers in society. Her father refuses to see her, speak to her, and much less admit her in his home again; her married brother George Brattle blames her for bringing willful humiliation both on herself and her family, ‘she brought it on herself, and on all of us’; his wife refuses to help her sister-in-law Carry on many social grounds, like the evil influence on her daughters, sullying their respectability, and on what she is convinced of is the irreversible character of Carry’s fall. She, like many members of the society around her believes in the maxim of ‘once-a-prostitute-always-a-prostitute’; so she declares, ‘they never leaves it’. The usual arguments for the ostracism and expulsion of prostitutes centred on these attitudes, of the sin being unending and unpardonable, and of the sinners or prostitutes as having ‘sold their souls to the devil for a life of feasting and crime’. To Molly Brattle, Carry’s sister-in-law, the life of a prostitute is one of riches, unjustifiable finery and debauchery. She cannot admit the real picture of the sordid poverty, disease, deprivation and distress of a prostitute’s life. When, in trying to persuade Molly to accept Carry in her home, the Vicar asks Molly if she would allow Carry to starve, she replies:

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67 Trollope, The Vicar of Bullhampton, p.vi.
69 Ibid, p.49.
70 Trollope, The Vicar of Bullhampton, p.286.
There ain't no question of starving. Such as her don't starve. As long as it lasts, they've the best of eating and drinking,—only too much of it. There's prisons; let 'em go there if they means repentance. But they never does,—never, till there ain't nobody to notice 'em any longer; and by that time they're mostly thieves and pickpockets.\textsuperscript{73}

Dissipation leading to criminality is the pattern that Molly Brattle can foresee for Carry and her likes, and she believes that there can be no repentance or redemption for prostitutes, nor should they be given any opportunity for reformation since, according to Molly, prostitutes can never be reformed. Dickens’s Mr. Peggotty’s earlier response to the ‘fallen’ Martha, – ‘I thowt this girl, Martha, a’most like the dirt underneath my Em’ly’s feet\textsuperscript{74} – undergoes a softening when he is compelled to seek Martha’s help in tracking down Emily who had eloped. George Watt perceptively points out that ‘the prevailing hard-line stance was supposedly to prevent prostitution and moral decline, yet the very stubbornness of the reaction forced many to remain outcasts’.\textsuperscript{75} The English prostitute’s response to her situation was, almost always, an overwhelming sense of shame and repentance, misery, and longing for death. The French (Zola’s) Nana’s response is more assertive and differs from this apologetic and submissive stance. Nana, apparently a theatre actress on stage, but actually a high profile prostitute off stage, shows how she resents her experience with some clients. The perks associated with prostitution surround her, one of her clients keeps her in a large flat by paying the rent, she has a lady’s maid to attend on her and lives in visible financial comfort; but she expresses her irritation and anger after meeting one of her clients one afternoon. Nana is presented as a voluptuous and tremendously seductive woman. She has so many lovers

\textsuperscript{73} Trollope, \textit{The Vicar of Bullhampton}, pp.289-290.

\textsuperscript{74} Dickens, \textit{David Copperfield}, p.553.

\textsuperscript{75} Watt, \textit{The Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel}, p.53.
vying for her time that she has to keep separate days for them. She has to balance and soothe many of her creditors and she also has a child, Louis, born when she was sixteen years old. Interestingly, however, Shaw presents Mrs. Warren as a shrewd, practical woman of business, first a prostitute, then a thriving brothel-owner, who works with her business partner, the wealthy and seedy George Croft, to make more money and give herself a life of leisure and provide substantially for her daughter.

Esther in *Mary Barton* is good looking, which probably predisposes her ‘fall’. She is the prototype of the seduced and abandoned girl driven to prostitution. Later in the novel, Esther is marked out as a prostitute by her clothes and the distasteful and inadequate covering provided by them. The fragile fabrics, gauze and muslin, are totally unfitted for physical labour and are the conserve of the privileged classes. Even the ‘gay’ colour of her shawl is a sign of her love of finery that influences a young, good-looking girl to transgress the ‘respectable’ sphere. Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* shows Nancy’s accomplice Bet in a garish outfit, wearing ‘a red gown, green boots, and yellow curl-papers’. Prostitutes could be marked by their bold and loud dressing.

Trollope’s Carry Brattle, like Esther and Lotty (Ida Starr’s mother in *The Unclassed*), follows the seduced and abandoned pattern. Again, like Esther, Lotty, and Ida, Carry is also good looking with her ‘heavy curls’ and musical voice. Dickens’s Nancy and Bet in *Oliver Twist* are first presented as young girls who ‘wore a good deal of hair, not very neatly turned up behind, and [who] were rather untidy about the shoes and stockings. They were not exactly pretty, perhaps; but they had a great deal of colour in their faces, and looked quite stout and hearty’. Waymark in *The Unclassed* gets bewitched by Ida’s ‘rare beauty and

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76 Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, p.92.
77 Ibid, p.70.
endless charms’.\textsuperscript{78} Alice Marwood in \textit{Dombey and Son} considers her good looks a major disadvantage, as it brought her to ‘ruin’. Her ‘gifts of nature’ – or her natural beauty – ‘had been made curses to her’.\textsuperscript{79} Hardy’s Tess, whose good looks are a curse to her – she tries to disfigure her face by shaving off her eyebrows – ends up as Alec’s kept mistress. Emile Zola’s Nana, like many other fallen sisters in fiction, is exceptionally good looking and is ‘exceedingly tall, exceedingly strong for her eighteen years’.\textsuperscript{80} Mrs. Warren and her sister Lizzy are also pretty. All these gorgeous fictional prostitutes imply that loveliness in form and feature ensured a successful phase in prostitution.

The visual representation of the ‘fallen’ woman in paintings usually represented good looking women, in adverse circumstances. A painting by William Holman Hunt entitled ‘The Awakening Conscience’ shows a pretty young girl who has ‘fallen’ in becoming the mistress of a young man. The painting captures the moment when she feels a prick of conscience. Her getting up from the lap of her lover could mean a ray for hope for her redemption. Many visual representations focused on the expulsion and rejection of the fallen woman, first by her immediate family: father, brother, or husband, then by the society at large. Richard Redgrave’s painting ‘The Outcast’ shows an angry father turning his ‘fallen’ daughter and her illegitimate infant out of his house, however, the other family members are sympathetic to her plight, but their pleadings, with the authoritative patriarch, fall on deaf ears. Being turned out of the house, with no family support, an unwed mother would find it extremely difficult to bring up her child. In Ford Madox Brown’s ‘Take your Son, Sir’ a weary unwed mother, an outcast, is shown, in the act of giving up her newborn son to its wealthy father. If the father was not willing to take the child, the other option would be

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{78} Gissing, \textit{The Unclassed}, p.111.
\bibitem{79} Dickens, \textit{Dombey and Son}, p.469.
\end{thebibliography}
suicide as depicted in Augustus Leopold Egg’s painting, Pant and Present, No. 3 – the third in a series of three paintings – which shows an abandoned and destitute woman after her ‘fall’, with a child in her arms, probably contemplating suicide. Another painting by George Frederic Watts, entitled ‘Found Drowned’ depicts the probable result of being an outcast, and such despairing contemplation, which leads to suicide. It illustrates the body of a young woman washed ashore after drowning. The calmness seen on the drowned woman’s face suggests that after death, she may have finally found peace from the torments of life. Foregrounding of the ‘fallen’ woman to elicit sympathy for her is a common theme in both literature and art.
This picture shows a man and a woman living "in sin", that is, out of wedlock, with no wedding ring on her finger. The ‘awakening’ referred to in the title is the moment when the young woman realises that what she is doing is wrong. She is probably reminded of her country roots by the music the man plays (the sheet music to Thomas Moore’s *Oft in the Silly Nights* sits on the piano).

'The Outcast' by Richard Redgrave (1851)

Here a strict father disowns his daughter, casting her out into the cold, with her newly born illegitimate baby. Apparently, the brother of the ‘fallen’ woman brother his head to weep, while various sisters cry and plead with their father in vain.

Source: http://www.artfund.org/what-to-see/exhibitions/2011/12/09/dickens-and-london
'Take your son, Sir', unfinished painting by Ford Madox Brown (c.1851)

Woman in White holding out a Baby

The woman’s face shows exhaustion with a sense of relief. A mirror behind her head reflects the grinning figure of the father, with open arms, ready to take possession of his infant. The ‘fallen’ mother would presumably have to give up all ties with her infant, but is relieved that the thought of the son’s material comfort with the rich father

Past and Present, No. 3 by Augustus Leopold Egg (1854)

The painting shows a destitute and, apparently, ‘fallen’ woman, who has taken refuge under one of the Adelphi arches. Under her shawl she shelters a young child, clearly the result of her adulterous affair, which is now over. Directly behind her a poster advertises two plays at the Haymarket Theatre, *Victims* and *The Cure for Love*; another announces ‘Pleasure Excursions to Paris’. It highlights the fact that suicide or death was perhaps the only fate that awaited such ‘fallen’ women.

Source:
<http://www.estherlederberg.com/Elmages/Extracurricular/Dickens%20Universe/Page%202011%20CounterFactuals.html>
‘Found Drowned’ by George Frederic Watts (1850)

According to Veronica Franklin Gould, ‘Found Drowned’, a legal term indicating suicide, shows the body of a drowned woman on the shore beneath Waterloo Bridge, her legs immersed in the polluted Thames. It is conjectured that the idea of the painting came from Thomas Hood’s poem ‘The Bridge of Sighs’ (1845).

Source: http://mongoosemagazine.com/artists/george-frederic-watts/
Lynn Nead talks about the portrayal of ‘magdalenes’ in Victorian iconography, that is, in paintings and in print, suggesting that motifs of remorse, guilt and nostalgia for past innocence are superimposed in a reading of such paintings and portraits.\textsuperscript{81} Victorian literature abounds in images and impressions of the ‘fallen woman’, the ‘prostitute’ as a victim, and in showcasing her tragic life and death. Frances Finnegan comments that ‘the literature of the period was concerned less with the prostitutes themselves than with a general account of the problem’.\textsuperscript{82} The term ‘magdalene’ for prostitute further softens the attitude to the prostitute, as represented in literature and art, that gained currency in the period – as it instantly evokes the ‘Christian figure of Mary Magdalene who was redeemed’.\textsuperscript{83}

Dickens breaks the stereotype of the gangster’s moll by presenting Nancy as a grey character with shades of both vice and virtue. As companion to murderers and thieves, her innate virtue has not been thoroughly corrupted. She is a victim of circumstances, sucked into the grim and dark world of London low life before she was aware of it herself. She sobs to Rose Maylie: ‘Thank Heaven upon your knees, dear lady … that you had friends to care for and keep you in your childhood, and that you were never in the midst of cold and hunger, and riot and drunkenness, and--and--something worse than all--as I have been from my cradle. I may use the word, for the alley and the gutter were mine, as they will be my deathbed.’\textsuperscript{84}

When Nancy defends Oliver against Fagin for the first time, she shouts, ‘I thieved for you when I was a child not half as old as this!’ pointing to Oliver. ‘I have been in the same trade, and in the same service, for twelve years since. Don’t you know it? Speak out! Don’t you

\textsuperscript{82} Frances Finnegan, \textit{Poverty and Prostitution}, p.10.
\textsuperscript{83} Linda Mahood, \textit{The Magdalenes}, p.162.
\textsuperscript{84} Dickens, \textit{Oliver Twist}, p.267.
know it? Assuming Oliver was about ten years of age, Nancy was younger than five when she was inducted into the world of crime, and twelve years later, she is probably around seventeen.

Gissing in *The Unclassed* presents two polar kinds of women who perhaps interested and fascinated him, the Victorian genteel lady and the outcast, the ‘fallen’ woman. Waymark seems to be divided between his attentions to two women, Maud Enderby, the lady, and Ida Starr, the prostitute:

The interview with Maud Enderby seemed so unnaturally long ago; that with Ida Starr, so impossibly fresh and recent. Yet both had undoubtedly taken place. He, who but yesterday morning had felt so bitterly his loneliness in the world, and, above all, the impossibility of what he most longed for – woman's companionship – found himself all at once on terms of at least friendly intimacy with two women, both young, both beautiful, yet so wholly different. Each answered to an ideal which he cherished, and the two ideals were so diverse, so mutually exclusive.86

When Ida talks of her experience as a prostitute and compares her life with other innocent girls of her age (eighteen), barely out of school, Waymark comforts her with his opinion: ‘your knowledge is better in my eyes than their ignorance. My ideal woman is the one who, knowing every darkest secret of life, keeps yet a pure mind – as you do, Ida.’87 Waymark here seems to present a feeling akin to admiration for the prostitute as an experienced woman.

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85 Ibid. p.116.
87 Ibid, p.131.
Prostitutes were far removed from the security and comfort of domesticity. Generally it was accepted that they were the sinners, the outcasts and, to use Judith Walkowitz’s idea, that ‘literally’ and ‘figuratively’ they represented the disease/contagion that polluted society. Though many working women indulged in secret prostitution, the State branded prostitutes and bullied them as criminals. Victorian prudery publicly condemned prostitution as the worst earning option and a fate ‘worse than death’, but privately promoted and encouraged it. Representations of fictional prostitutes chart a consistent effort to propagate the images of ‘prostitute-as-victim’, the ‘repentant-prostitute’ as well as the ‘golden hearted prostitute’. Many writers, unsure of the response of their conservative readers, refrained from highlighting ‘sordid’ details like the pay received by prostitutes, their usual work hours, or their response to their often drunken and loathsome clients, or the hardships of their occupation, though frequent mention is made of its degrading effects. The brutal realities of prostitution are passed over in silence. Only a very few prostitutes like Zola’s Nana, Philippe’s Berthe, and Shaw’s Mrs. Warren voice the disgust and unwillingness they felt in the company of some of their repugnant clients and the vile nature of their job.

Prostitutes, according to Steven Marcus, were treated as ‘the other Victorians’, 88 imaged as Ronald Pearsall suggests as ‘the worm in the bud’ or ‘night’s black angels’. 89 They were the most obvious symbols of Victorian sexual hypocrisy, of the obsession with ‘public purity’ but active engagement with ‘private (illicit) pleasure’. 90

Appendix

Letter from a London Prostitute

To the Editor of The Times.—Sir, Another ‘Unfortunate’, but of a class entirely different from the one who has already instructed the public in your columns, presumes to address you. I am a stranger to all the [f]ine sentiments which still linger in the bosom of your correspondent. I have none of those youthful recollections which, contrasting her early days with her present life, aggravate the misery of the latter.

My parents did not give me any education; they did not instil into my mind virtuous precepts nor set me a good example. All my experiences in early life were gleaned among associates who knew nothing of the laws of God but by dim tradition and faint report, and whose chiefest triumphs of wisdom consisted in picking their way through the paths of destitution in which they were cast by cunning evasion or in open defiance of the laws of man.

I do not think of my parents (long in their graves) with any such compunctions as your correspondent describes. They gave me in their lifetime, according to their means and knowledge, and as they had probably received from their parents, shelter and protection, mixed with curses and caresses. I received all as a matter of course, and, knowing nothing better, was content in that kind of contentedness which springs from insensibility; I returned their affection in like kind as they gave it to me. As long as they lived, I looked up to them as my parents. I assisted them in their poverty, and made them comfortable. They looked on me and I on them with pride, for I was proud to be able to minister to their wants; and as for shame, although they knew perfectly well the means by which I obtained money, I do assure you, Sir, that by them, as by myself, my success was regarded as the reward of a proper ambition, and was a source of real pleasure and gratification.

Let me tell you something of my parents. My father’s most profitable occupation was brickmaking. When not employed at this, he did anything he could get to do. My mother worked with him in the brickfield, and so did I and a progeny of brothers and sisters; for somehow or other, although my parents occupied a very unimportant space in the world, it pleased God to make them fruitful. We all slept in the same room. There were few privacies, few family secrets in our house.

Father and mother both loved drink. In the household expenses, had accounts been kept, gin or beer would have been the heaviest items. We, the children, were indulged occasionally with a drop, but my honoured parents reserved to themselves the exclusive privilege of getting drunk, ‘and they were the same as their parents had been’. I give you a chapter of the history of common life which may be stereotyped as the history of generation upon generation.

We knew not anything of religion. Sometimes when a neighbour died we went to the burial, and thus got within a few steps of the church. If a grand funeral chanced to fall in our way we went to see that, too—the fine black horses and nodding plumes—as we went to see the soldiers when we could for a lark. No parson ever came near us. The place where we lived was too dirty for nicely-shod gentlemen. ‘The Publicans and Sinners’ of our circumscribed, but thickly populated locality had no ‘friend’ among them.

Our neighbourhood furnished many subjects to the treadmill, the hulks, and the colonies, and some to the gallows. We lived with the fear of those things, and not with the fear of God before our eyes.
I was a very pretty child, and had a sweet voice; of course I used to sing. Most London boys and girls of the lower classes sing. ‘My face is my fortune, kind sir, she said’, was the ditty on which I bestowed most pains, and my father and mother would wink knowingly as I sang it. The latter would also tell me how pretty she was when young, and how she sang, and what a fool she had been, and how well she might have done had she been wise.

Frequently we had quite a stir in our colony. Some young lady who had quitted the paternal restraints, or perhaps, had started off, none knew whither or how, to seek her fortune, would reappear among us with a profusion of ribands, fine clothes, and lots of cash. Visiting the neighbours, treating indiscriminately, was the order of the day on such occasions, without any more definite information of the means by which the dazzling transformation had been effected than could be conveyed by knowing winks and the words ‘luck’ and ‘friends’. Then she would disappear and leave us in our dirt, penury, and obscurity. You cannot conceive, Sir, how our ambition was stirred by these visitations.

Now commences an important era in my life. I was a fine, robust, healthy girl, 13 years of age. I had larked with the boys of my own age. I had huddled with them, boys and girls together, all night long in our common haunts. I had seen much and heard abundantly of the mysteries of the sexes. To me such things had been matters of common sight and common talk. For some time I had coquetted on the verge of a strong curiosity, and a natural desire, and without a particle of affection, scarce a partiality, I lost—what? not my virtue, for I never had any.

That which is commonly, but untruly called virtue, I gave away. You reverend Mr Philanthropist—what call you virtue? Is it not the principle, the essence, which keeps watch and ward over the conduct, the substance, the materiality? No such principle ever kept watch and ward over me, and I repeat that I never lost that which I never had: my virtue.

According to my own ideas at the time I only extended my rightful enjoyments. Opportunity was not long wanting to put my newly acquired knowledge to profitable use. In the commencement of my fifteenth year one of our be-ribanded visitors took me off, and introduced me to the great world, and thus commenced my career as what you better classes call a prostitute. I cannot say that I felt any other shame than the bashfulness of a noviciate introduced to strange society. Remarkable for good looks, and no less so for good temper, I gained money, dressed gaily, and soon agreeably astonished my parents and old neighbours by making a descent upon them.

Passing over the vicissitudes of my course, alternating between reckless gaiety and extreme destitution, I improved myself greatly; and at the age of 15 was living partly under the protection of one who thought he discovered that I had talent, and some good qualities as well as beauty, who treated me more kindly and considerately than I had ever before been treated, and thus drew from me something like a feeling of regard, but not sufficiently strong to lift me to that sense of my position which the so-called virtuous and respectable members of society seem to entertain. Under the protection of this gentleman, and encouraged by him, I commenced the work of my education; that portion of education which is comprised in some knowledge of my own language and the ordinary accomplishments of my sex;—moral science, as I believe it is called, has always been an enigma to me, and is so to this day. I suppose it is because I am one of those who, as Rousseau says, are ‘born to be prostitutes’.

Common honesty I believe in rigidly. I have always paid my debts, and, though I
say it, I have always been charitable to my fellow creatures. I have not neglected my duty to my family. I supported my parents while they lived, and buried them decently when they died. I paid a celebrated lawyer heavily for defending unsuccessfully my eldest brother, who had the folly to be caught in the commission of a robbery. I forgave him the offence against the law in the theft, and the offence against discretion in being caught. This cost me some effort, for I always abhorred stealing. I apprenticed my younger brother to a good trade, and helped him into a little business. Drink frustrated my efforts in his behalf. Through the influence of a very influential gentleman, a very particular friend of mine, he is now a well-conducted member of the police. My sister[s], whose early life was in all respects the counterpart of my own, I brought out and started in the world. The elder of the two is kept by a nobleman, the next by an officer in the army; the third has not yet come to years of discretion, and is ‘having her fling’ before she settles down.

Now, what if I am a prostitute, what business has society to abuse me? Have I received any favours at the hands of society? If I am a hideous cancer in society, are not the causes of the disease to be sought in the rottenness of the carcass? Am I not its legitimate child; no bastard, Sir? Why does my unnatural parent repudiate me, and what has society ever done for me, that I should do anything for it, and what have I ever done against society that it should drive me into a corner and crush me to the earth? I have neither stolen (at least since I was a child), nor murdered, nor defrauded. I earn my money and pay my way, and try to do good with it, according to my ideas of good. I do not get drunk, nor fight, nor create uproar in the streets or out of them. I do not use bad language. I do not offend the public eye by open indecencies. I go to the Opera, I go to Almack’s, I go to the theatres, I go to quiet, well-conducted casinos, I go to all the places of public amusement, behaving myself with as much propriety as society can exact. I pay business visits to my tradespeople, the most fashionable of the West-end. My milliners, my silkmercers, my bootmakers, know, all of them, who I am and how I live, and they solicit my patronage as earnestly and cringingly as if I were Madam, the Lady of the right Rev, patron of the Society for the Suppression of Vice. They find my money as good and my pay better (for we are robbed on every hand) than that of Madam, my Lady; and, if all the circumstances and conditions of our lives had been reversed, would Madam, my Lady, have done better or been better than I?

I speak of others as well as for myself, for the very great majority, nearly all the real undisguised prostitutes in London, spring from my class, and are made by and under pretty much such conditions of life as I have narrated, and particularly by untutored and unrestrained intercourse of the sexes in early life. We come from the dregs of society, as our so-called betters term it. What business has society to have dregs—such dregs as we? You railers of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, you the pious, the moral, the respectable, as you call yourselves, who stand on your smooth and pleasant side of the great gulf you have dug and keep between yourselves and the dregs, why don’t you bridge it over, or fill it up, and by some humane and generous process absorb us into your leavened mass, until we become interpenetrated with goodness like yourselves? What have we to be ashamed of, we who do not know what shame is—the shame you mean?

I conduct myself prudently, and defy you and your policemen too. Why stand you there mouthing with sleek face about morality? What is morality? Will you make us responsible for what we never knew? Teach us what is right and tutor us
in what is good before you punish us for doing wrong. We who are the real
prostitutes of the true natural growth of society, and no impostors, will not be
judged by ‘One more unfortunate’, nor measured by any standard of her setting up.
She is a mere chance intruder in our ranks, and has no business there. She does
understand what shame means and knows all about it, at least so it seems, and if
she has a particle left, let her accept ‘Amicus’s’ kind offer as soon as possible.

Like ‘One more unfortunate’ there are other intruders among us—a few, very
few, ‘victims of seduction’. But seduction is not the root of the evil—scarcely a fibre
of the root. A rigorous law should be passed and rigorously carried out to punish
seduction, but it will not perceptibly thin the ranks of prostitution. Seduction is the
common story of numbers of well brought up, who never were seduced, and who
are voluntary and inexcusable profligates. Vanity and idleness send us a large body
of recruits. Servant girls, who wish to ape their mistress’ finery, and whose wages
won’t permit them to do so honestly—these set up seduction as their excuse.
Married women, who have no respect for their husbands, and are not content with
their lawful earnings, these are the worst among us, and it is a pity they cannot be
picked out and punished. They have no principle of any kind and are a disgrace to
us. If I were a married woman I would be true to my husband. I speak for my class,
the regular standing army of the force.

Gentlemen of philanthropic societies and members of the Society for the
Suppression of Vice may build reformatories and open houses of refuge and
Magdalen asylums, and ‘Amicus’ may save occasionally a ‘fallen sister’ who can
prevail on herself to be saved; but we who never were sisters—who never had any
relationship, part, interest, or communion with the large family of this world’s
virtues, moralities, and proprieties—we, who are not fallen, but were always
down—who never had any virtue to lose—we who are the natural growth of things,
and are constantly ripening for the harvest—who, interspersed in our little, but
swarming colonies throughout the kingdom at large, hold the source of supply and
keep it fruitful—what do they propose to do with us? Cannot society devise some
plan to reach us?

‘One more unfortunate’ proposes a ‘skimming’ progress. But what of the great
bubbling cauldron? Remove from the streets a score or two of ‘foreign women’, and
‘double as many English’, and you diminish the competition of those that remain;
the quiet, clever, cunning cajolers described by ‘One more unfortunate’. You hide a
prurient pimple of the ‘great sin’ with a patch of that plaster known as the
‘observance of propriety’, and nothing more. You ‘miss’ the evil, but it is existent
still. After all it is something to save the eye from offence, so remove them; and not
only a score or two, but something like two hundred foreign women, whose open
and disgusting indecencies and practices have contributed more than anything
else to bring on our heads the present storm of indignation. It is rare that English
women, even prostitutes, give cause of gross public offence. Cannot they be packed
off to their own countries with their base, filthy and filthy-living men, whom they
maintain, and clothe, and feed, to superintend their fortunes, and who are a still
greater disgrace to London than these women are?

Hurling big figures at us, it is said that there are 80,000 of us in London alone—
which is a monstrous falsehood—and of those 80,000 poor hardworking sewing
girls, sewing women, are numbered in by thousands, and called indiscriminately
prostitutes; writing, preaching, speechifying, that they have lost their virtue too.

It is a cruel calumny to call them [e]n mass prostitutes; and, as for their virtue,
they lose it as one loses his watch who is robbed by the highway thief. Their virtue
is the watch, and society is the thief. These poor women toiling on starvation wages, while penury, misery, and famine clutch them by the throat and say, 'Render up your body or die'.

Admire this magnificent shop in this fashionable street; its front, fittings, and decorations cost no less than a thousand pounds. The respectable master of the establishment keeps his carriage and lives in his country-house. He has daughters too; his patronesses are fine ladies, the choicest impersonations of society. Do they think, as they admire the taste and elegance of that tradesman's show, of the poor creatures who wrought it, and what they were paid for it? Do they reflect on the weary toiling fingers, on the eyes dim with watching, on the bowels yearning with hunger, on the bended frames, on the broken constitutions, on poor human nature driven to its coldest corner and reduced to its narrowest means in the production of these luxuries and adornments? This is an old story! Would it not be truer and more charitable to call these poor souls 'victims'—some gentler, some more humane name than prostitute—to soften by some Christian expression, if you cannot better the un-Christian system, the opprobrium of a fate to which society has driven them by the direst straits? What business has society to point its finger in scorn, to raise its voice in reprobation of them? Are they not its children, born of the cold indifference, of its callous selfishness, of its cruel pride?

Sir, I have trespassed on your patience beyond limit, and yet much remains to be said... The difficulty of dealing with the evil is not so great as society considers it. Setting aside 'the sin', we are not so bad as we are thought to be. The difficulty is for society to set itself, with the necessary earnestness, self-humiliation, and self-denial, to the work. To deprive us of proper and harmless amusements, to subject us [e]n mass to the pressure of force—of force wielded, for the most part, by ignorant, and often by brutal men—is only to add the cruelty of active persecution to the cruelty of passive indifference which made us as we are. I remain, your humble servant, Another Unfortunate.

(Letter published in The Times, London, February 24, 1858, under the heading ‘The Great Social Evil’)

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