

The great social evil history essay

[History](#)



The social constructs of prostitution rest on the failure of common prostitutes to meet middle-class social and gender ideals. The social structures from which middle-class writers portrayed the lower social orders subsequently influenced the popular perception of prostitution. Within the class structures of Victorian society, both rapid urbanisation and socio-economic factors were believed to have encouraged prostitution as a profession. The Victorian Era was a period of unprecedented demographic increase, in which the population doubled between 1812 to 1851 and then again by 1900; increasing by approximately ten per cent per decade (Mathias, 2005, p. 166; Royle, 2012, pp. 52-57). Demographic increases combined with the Industrial Revolution, had an overall positive impact on the living standards of English society. However, rapid urbanisation brought with it poverty, overcrowding and disease, which subsequently challenged the new opportunities which suddenly became fraught with danger. Increased proximity between the wealthy and poor highlighted the associated vices of the working class, which subsequently challenging the morality of the middle class. William Acton in 1870 wrote, Here always abound idle and wealthy men, with vicious tastes, which they spare neither pains nor expense to gratify. Here also are the needy, the improvident, and the ill-instructed, from whose ranks the victims of sensuality may be readily recruited. The close proximity of luxury and indigence cannot fail to produce a demoralizing effect upon the latter. (Acton, 2012, p. 177) Intense urbanization and industrialization therefore brought with it high unemployment and increased interaction between the two classes, from which prostitution provided an economic incentive. For many working class women their passage into prostitution was one of circumstance. With an abundance of clients and middle class protocol

<https://assignbuster.com/the-great-social-evil-history-essay/>

dictating that men could not marry until they were able to financially support a family, Elizabeth Clements argues that increasing numbers of unmarried people encouraged the practice of prostitution (Clement, 2006, pp. 212-213). These troubles were found in urban cities across the country, and will be further explored in more detail when examining the case studies of Plymouth and Southampton. However, as the majority of contemporary works published on the topic of prostitution were written by middle class males about their lower social orders, many failed to associate socio-economic factors for subsequent rises in prostitution. Yet, the invariable link between poverty and prostitution remained, supported by the testimony of those such as Ellen Reese who stated, " she did not become a regular prostitute till shoplifting failed – was miserable both ways, but going on the Streets was more profitable" (Tobias, 1972, p. 62). Therefore, class perception of prostitution often distorted the information which was gathered, thus influencing the regulation and reform acts which were later implemented. Prostitution thus became associated with the troublesome poor, with the common prostitute regarded as an undesirable criminal character. Contemporary works by William Acton, Henry Mayhew and W. R. Greg focussed on the moral argument, characterising the underclass in urbanised centres as poor, vice ridden and criminal; the perfect combination from which prostitution was to arise and threaten the social order. Andrew Mearns stated in 1883, " One of the saddest results of this overcrowding is the inevitable association of honest people with criminals" (Mearns, 1883, p. 11). Often the cause of prostitution was linked to the accompaniment of habitual drinking, with James Miller stating that " A woman that drinks will do anything" (Miller, 1859, p. 9). Former prostitutes attributed their downward

<https://assignbuster.com/the-great-social-evil-history-essay/>

spiral to impertinence as a result of alcohol, Love of the drink is the worst enemy these poor girls have to fight, often falling into sin at first when under the influence of alcohol, they drink again from misery, until the craving so gets the mastery over them, that, humanly speaking, they are beyond help. (Bartley, 2000, p. 6) Therefore the belief that prostitutes were unaffected by morals influenced public opinion and generated condemnation, from which police prosecution sequentially followed (Taylor, 1998, pp. 43-44).

Accordingly the interest in prostitution in the Victorian era stems from the need to cull immoral behaviour. In order to control the poor, legislative regulation and reform acts needed to be implemented. The Metropolitan Police Act of 1839 held that " any common prostitute loitering or soliciting for the purposes of prostitution to the annoyance of inhabitants or passengers' liable to a fine" (Laite, 2011, p. 72). In addition, the Contagious Diseases Acts passed by the British Parliament in 1864, further regulated the industry with the aim to clear urban areas of those who were deemed to be unsavoury characters, but never actually rendered the practice of prostitution as illegal. Ultimately prostitutes stemmed from the working class; a class that was seen to inflict their immoral behaviour on middle class society. Author Judith Walkowitz stated, " prostitution constituted a distressing street disorder that threatened to infect healthy neighbourhoods" (Walkowitz, 1982, p. 41).

Prostitutes were known as a ' social disease', and became a symbol of degradation and sin. Having threatened the social structures, prostitutes became of great concern to the middle class who suddenly found themselves living within close proximity to the poorer elements of society. Therefore the impact of class perceptions upon legislation is critical to understanding the social structures from which the figure of the prostitute was constructed. The <https://assignbuster.com/the-great-social-evil-history-essay/>

historical analysis of gender also lends itself to understanding the social constructs of prostitution. The failure of the prostitute to meet middle-class gender ideals is often reflected in the male-dominated contemporary works; in which prostitutes were observed as a danger to female sexuality. In general, women were perceived as morally superior to their male counterparts, and often subjects of imposed feminine ideals. William Tait affirmed, Men are, in general, possessed of greater mental power and activity than females; but that is why they ought to extend towards the latter that sympathy and protection to which they are entitled in virtue of their weak and unprotected condition. (Tait, 1840, p. 152) Therefore the act of prostitution challenged the male idealism of womanhood, in which the prostitute failed to live up to middle class feminine ideologies of chastity and submissiveness. In addition to a divide between the genders, a class divide existed between women themselves separating respectable women from prostitutes. In no other sphere was this duality more apparent than Victorian England, from which the righteous women of the middle class upheld the sexual morals that the fallen women of the underclass failed to maintain. Married women were believed to have a moral advantage over prostitutes, as the act of sex was understood to be solely for procreation purposes; thus creating a collision of virtue and vice. It was believed that married women offered "complete gratification of the entire human being", whilst the prostitute "affords gratification to one part only of his nature" (Acton, 2012, p. 162). Prostitutes threatened this ideal, through their unnatural state and use of unlawful love for economic purposes. Josephine Butler, a Victorian Era British feminist, argued that the male exploitation of women was responsible for this divide between the genders in addition to keeping women

subservient. The protected and refined ladies who are not only to be good, but who are, if possible, to know nothing except what is good; and those poor outcast daughters of the masses, whom they purchase with money, with whom they think they may consort in evil whenever it pleases them to do so, before returning to their own separated and protected homes. (Butler, 1879, pp. 9-10) Therefore the popular stereotype of female perfection was challenged by the presence of the prostitute. Prostitution was free from male interference, which subsequently posed a threat to Victorian patriarchal society. Middle class Victorian girls were trained to become a wife and mother, remaining within the private sphere of the home and catering to the needs of their husbands. Women had no legal rights, remaining the property of their fathers before marriage and becoming the property of their husbands later in life. Up until 1887, women had no rights to divorce or the custody of their children which reinforced the natural submission to authority that women were expected to uphold (Wilson, 2004, p. 204). The increasing view that the ideal woman was to remain within the home was challenged by the prostitute; who instead worked in the public sphere and was economically independent. Although not entirely free from the constraints imposed by a class stratified and patriarchal society; of all the working women prostitutes manipulated their situation within the urban job market to have their occupation regarded as one of the best unattractive alternatives available (Walkowitz, 1982, p. 31). Additionally, the prostitute's role as a mother figure was also brought into question, with prostitutes often portrayed as unfit mothers who corrupted their children and brought shame to their husbands. Kellow Chesney, in his book *The Victorian Underworld*, paints a vivid picture of the conditions in which many prostitutes and their

<https://assignbuster.com/the-great-social-evil-history-essay/>

children were living, hideous slums, some of them acres wide, some no more than crannies of obscure misery, make up a substantial part of the metropolis. In big, once handsome houses, thirty or more people of all ages may inhabit a single a room. (Chesney, 1970, p. 322) Consequently the crowded accommodations in which entire families shared one room, introduced poor children to the realities of life very early. Carnal knowledge was a reality for many children who were subjected to the prostitute's trade through poor living conditions. Therefore the failure of the prostitute to conform to the role prescribed to her challenged the social norms and respectively threw out the social order. Her controversial nature in regards to sin and vice subsequently highlights the double standards which exist within the moral framework of Victorian society. Clearly, during an age in which purity was vital, prostitutes became the logical target of moral reformists. The exploitative character of Victorian society regarded prostitutes as moral criminals, in which " Prostitutes, not the men who used them, were the objects of moral scrutiny" (Bartley, 2000, p. 30). Alas, women's reputations were threatened but not the men who were responsible for the prostitutes demand. The Contagious Diseases Acts demonstrate the degree of double standards which existed between men and women in Victorian society. Thus it was the women who were subjected to humiliating medical examinations, whilst the men who also carried the diseases remained unpunished. Within the contemporary works of William Landels, the double standard of gender in regards to moral considerations becomes apparent. Even if the fallen one should resolve to raise herself, the door is closed against her; for, spite of the sincerest attempts at reformation, society continues to treat her as an outcast. While she lives must she bear the brand of shame; nor can she live,

<https://assignbuster.com/the-great-social-evil-history-essay/>

often, without descending deeper and deeper in her downward curse. (Landels, 1858, p. 37) It was the religious revival of the nineteenth century which subsequently resulted in religious sentiment becoming increasingly involved in moral debates on prostitution. Early responses to prostitution attracted the attention of individuals from the religious world, which were influenced by evangelical doctrine. As supporters of the patriarchal family, they regarded prostitutes as a source of moral pollution. Once again, it was the woman who threatened the moral respectability of society, creating the sexual temptation that men were forced to struggle against throughout their natural life. Although sympathy for prostitutes could be associated with moral and religious attitudes within their teachings, it also helps explain why Victorian society often labelled prostitutes as moral vermin. According to William Tait, "the habits of prostitute... destroy every moral and religious impression which may have been produced" (Tait, 1840, p. 31). Evangelical reformers endeavoured to invoke the biblical story of Adam and Eve as an example of female sin; in which prostitutes replicated the actions of unrestrained fornication accordingly forbidden in the Bible. Additionally, a commonly cited passage was Corinthians which reads; Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor coveters, nor drunkards, nor railers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. (Tait, 1840, p. 204) Writers such as Tait have cited this passage, thus identifying the practice of prostitution as a sin against God and rendering it their mission to provide the public with an accurate impression of the destructive effects this ungodliness. Henceforth, religious sentiment underpinned the moral

<https://assignbuster.com/the-great-social-evil-history-essay/>

constructs of prostitution, whilst reinforcing the double standards of gender. Victorian society was conditioned to tolerate a man's habitual fall from grace, whilst morally securitising a woman as soon as her offence was known. Notably, the stereotyped images painted by Action and Tait would dominate the debates surrounding the prevalence of venereal disease and the subsequent Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s. The figures concerning both the numbers of prostitutes and the spread of venereal disease were often speculated, " according to the opportunities, credulity, or religious fervour of observers, and the width of interpretation they have put upon the word" (Acton, 2012, p. 3). Therefore, attempts by Action to give estimates on the number of prostitutes in London resulted in figures which ranged from; 6, 371, as presented to parliament by the constabulary force in 1839, to as high as 80, 000, as estimated by the Bishop of Exeter (Acton, 2012, p. 3). This subsequently proved that there was very little consensus or any real statistical calculations that could be accurately referred to when drawing up regulation. As such, up until the mid-nineteenth century prostitution had been only loosely regulated and of little interest to middle class society, as the Victorian prostitute's customer base consisted of mainly poor working class men, sailors and soldiers. Because of their economic disadvantage, prostitutes had always been responsible for spreading venereal disease; however by 1864 a surge in numbers found that one in three military illnesses could be attributed to syphilis (Hayden, 2003, p. 92). With the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent increased proximity between the classes, the middle class male became the common prostitute's new customer. Gentleman's clubs and brothels attracted affluent customers with readily available disposable income. Consequently, these indulgences in

<https://assignbuster.com/the-great-social-evil-history-essay/>

vice led to the spread of venereal disease within the middle class male populations, which subsequently became of concern as the lifestyle of the prostitute now impacted upon the comfort and sanctity of the middle class family. Suddenly the eradication of prostitution became a pressing issue for moral reformers. The widespread nature of venereal disease was the catalyst needed for the government to intervene in the lives of common prostitutes. Advances in medicine and the understanding of human anatomy and disease prevention during the nineteenth century, alerted doctors and public officials to the serious health implications directly linked with prostitution. Newly available medical statistics on venereal disease highlighted the threat these diseases posed to the nation's health, simultaneously emphasizing the need for preventative measures. As such, health concerns swiftly became a new construct of the nineteenth century, with the prostitute regarded as a pestilence upon humanity. According to Walkowitz, medical rationale for a regulation system was guided by three principles, That syphilis was spread through promiscuous sexual contact with diseased prostitutes; that existing voluntary facilities for treating female venereal patients were ineffective as preventative and therapeutic institutions; that available diagnostic and therapeutic methods were adequate to carry out the medical provisions of a regulation system. (Walkowitz, 1982, p. 48) As a result, the prevailing view that prostitutes needed to be regulated or removed from society, became a key aspect of preserving the health of the public. In particular, preventative measures focussed on the sanitary supervision of the common prostitute. The eradication of venereal disease took centre stage with the introduction of the Contagious Disease Acts of the 1864, 1867 and 1869, with their intended purpose aimed at keeping diseased prostitutes from infecting

<https://assignbuster.com/the-great-social-evil-history-essay/>

soldiers and middle class men. Suspected prostitutes were required to undergo harsh and involuntary internal physical examinations by medical personnel and, if determined to have any type of venereal disease, were admitted to a Lock Hospital for a period of up to six months (Watts, 1997, pp. 345-346). The treatment of venereal disease conformed to the accepted medial and clinical standards, " but was also governed by the dominant sexual and social ideology" which initially propelled prostitution into the Victorian consciousness (Walkowitz, 1982, p. 48). A key point here is that class prejudice and the double standard of sexuality influenced the medical treatments which successively followed the incidence of venereal disease. In addition, ideological influences moulded the institutional facilities which cared for sufferers of such diseases. Attempts to protect the moral and physical wellbeing of the population were enacted in the form of the Contagious Diseases Acts, which placed public health on a social level by challenging diseases which were a result of individual actions (Fisher, 1996, p. 33). As such, both social and health reforms helped to construct the figure of the prostitute and the problems she embodied at a public level.

Importantly, as prostitutes were seen as the source of disease, medical concerns were aimed towards men. When examining the effects of venereal disease upon society, doctors who perceived prostitutes as the source of infection rarely regarded them in a sympathetic light, instead more concerned with the health implications to the man and his wife and children. In Henry Mayhews *London Labour and the London Poor*, Bracebridge Hemyng accused the prostitute of, Contaminating the very air, like a deadly upas tree, and poisoning the blood of the nation, with the most audacious recklessness. It is useless to say that such things should not be. They exist,

<https://assignbuster.com/the-great-social-evil-history-essay/>

and they will exist. The woman was nothing better than a paid murderess, committing crime with her impunity. (Hemyng, 1862, p. 234) Noteworthy, the medical texts, attitudes of doctors and the writings of those such as Hemyng, not only revealed moral beliefs, but were the opinions of middle class men who were both the principal producers and audience of the literature on prostitution. The likes of these men were responsible for the Acts which forced contaminated prostitutes to be admitted to Lock Hospitals, which were harshly run government institutions that forced women to labour as if in a workhouse and submit to frequent medical checks to confirm if their infection was still present. The penitentiary system was the first method of reform, in which 'Magdalene Hospitals' or 'asylums' became a popular form of charitable grounds during the 1860s and 1870s. In addition, to help save these women, many were exposed to moral training and biblical teachings as a means of educating and saving their fallen souls. Subsequently, this method of reformation incorporated the involvement of middle class women through the social purity movement, who attempted to mould these former prostitutes into upright and productive members of Victorian society (Bartley, 2000, p. 25). According to Paula Bartley, "Reform was entirely about working-class women being saved by their middle-class superiors" (Bartley, 2000, p. 25). The actual relationship between working class women and their female moral reformers was "hierarchical, controlling, and punitive", with middle class women imparting superior knowledge and virtue which they paradoxically acquired from handbooks and ladies journals (Walkowitz, 1982, p. 131). Notable here, is that the Contagious Disease Acts made the 'Great Social Evil' a public concern, in which the "the mind and conscience of the nation are awakened, and opinions which would have been

<https://assignbuster.com/the-great-social-evil-history-essay/>

formerly dismissed as idle dreams, are deemed worthy of serious attention" (Acton, 2012, p. ix). Therefore prostitution was no longer just a fear of the medical community, but instead became a civil interest in which middle class women felt compelled to contribute to reform programs.