Guys and Dollymops

Almost two centuries ago there were some 80,000 prostitutes walking the streets of London.¹ The Napoleonic wars had just ended and Queen Victoria would soon take the throne. It was the beginning of the Victorian age. The rich were getting richer and the lower class worked 20-hour workdays for every ha-penny they could earn.² The working class lifestyle was not one to be envied by any means. Times were difficult and finding a reasonable job was even more difficult. Most lower class citizens hated their job and there only motivation to keep working was the thought of starving to death. One of the occupations that best exemplify this is prostitution. While most lower class despised their job, prostitutes in London had a most difficult lifestyle.

Prostitution in 1815 wasn’t for the thrill. It wasn’t for the great amount of money or the excitement of it all. It was some girl’s only way to survive. Most came from a small town servant community where they were not making even enough money to survive on bread and water, let alone support themselves or a family. The East End of London was full of Prostitutes. They were a majority of working class women who made their living in their local pubs or music halls. Prostitutes in 1815 tended to stick within their social class, have their regulars, and tended to get underpaid. The upper class and non-working class were not as familiar with local prostitutes because their scandalous sex (sexual) encounters were relationships between men and women in their class and not one-night stands with strangers³.

² Pool, 318.
For middle and upper class life “Nice Girls” were not to engage in premarital sex, which is strikingly funny considering in 1800 about one third of every bride was pregnant on her wedding day. There are many other characteristics familiar with the Victorian prostitute, but the best way to understand them is to explore the day-to-day life of just one of them.

She was only twelve years of age when she was forced to move out of her home and live on the streets. Her name was Leigh. Her father was of Irish Decent and met her mother, and English orange girl in the east end slums. An Orange girl was a lower class street worker that sold fruit and other small merchandise in the market for almost nothing. Her father was raised catholic, but after his move lost most of his religious heritage. He was a notorious “tosspot” or someone who was known to drink a lot. Leigh and her 5 brothers and sisters were not raised much of any religion because they had worked hard labor every day since they were able to pick up a tool in their hand. Leigh was born in Birmingham, but had moved to London with her family before she was able to remember. Her father did no have a skill of trade and was forced to support his large family by servant work. In fact, over ninety percent of Prostitutes had fathers that were unskilled to semi-skilled workingmen.

As Leigh grew older she watched as one by one her older siblings were forced to leave the family as soon as they could make it on their own. Since English law stated that you couldn’t marry until you were twenty-one or until you had permission from your parents, Leigh was forced to either let her parents choose her a husband they approved of, or leave the home like her older brothers. Since Leigh couldn’t stand her alcoholic home life, she

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4 Pool, 189

5 Pool, 347.


7 Pool, 180.
decided to leave. Soon Leigh found herself moving from job to job in search of her future. She worked in the market as an orange girl for a while following in her mother’s footsteps and even tried peddling all sorts of merchandise in the streets for a quick buck. She never thought the merchandise she would be selling would be her own body. It wasn’t until one day in the market she ran into a man who looked her up and down and approached her about her profession. A friend nearby had always referred to this man as a “Fancy Man”. A Fancy man is a pimp that hires local women to work under him and make him money. The man’s name was Charles and from that day on he took Leigh under his wing, or so he said.

Charles was a local of the area who knew many different men or the working class area, and some of the big wigs throughout the east end of town as well. Charles lured Leigh in by telling her how much money she would be making, but never informed her of the work it took to get there until she began. Leigh knew right away that it wasn’t the profession for her, but at that point she had no other choice. She was starving, had no place to live at this time, and was desperate just to survive the scary streets of London.

As time went by Leigh became accustomed to her occupation. It was a rough life becoming every man’s possession night after night. To take a better glimpse at Leigh’s life, let’s start by looking at one day.

Leigh’s morning always began with her afternoon, since she slept most of her morning away. She would finally arise with just enough time to get her chores done for her loft owner. Leigh was supposed to pay weekly, but never really had the money to afford her small, one window loft bedroom. The room consisted of a tattered bed with one leg broken, a small table with one cabinet in it, and a lamp upon the table. She lived in St. Giles, an area notorious for London’s Irish and Jewish Population. Along with Covent Garden they formed
London’s center of prostitution. During the Victorian era the prostitute was a central spectacle in a set of urban encounters and fantasies.

After Leigh would finish her chores, which most of the time ended in yelling and swearing, she would head down to the corner market to buy a small portion of bread, cheese, and sometimes even a small fruit to last her throughout the day. She would also barter her way into some cigarettes at the local corner store by whispering sweet promises to the storeowner. Many of the local prostitutes smoked cigarettes to fit in and make small talk with the men at the local pubs. One of the most prominent pubs in her area was Burgess’ Wine on Great Saffron Hill. A pint of Beer (Bier) would range between 3d. and 4d., and the gin would be about the same price but would bill served in a gill, or a quarter of a pint. Working class men in London would stay in the pubs and taverns throughout the streets socializing with fellow workers and prostitutes up until all hours of the night.

The men in London referred to prostitutes as dollymops. As the evening drew closer to dusk, Leigh made her way to the Strand. The Strand was the Shore along the Thames River in London. It was three quarters of a mile and was a common hang out for prostitutes. In fact, rumor has it that you couldn’t walk down the street without being seduced from every angle. It was there that Leigh would change into her nightly attire.

“Prostitutes banned together and adopted an outward appearance and a more affluent style of

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9 Pool, 368.
13 Ibid, 14.
14 Pool, 378.
life that distinguished them from other working-class women. The most visible symbol of
the prostitute was her dress. Leigh tended to wear bright and gaudy clothes, cheap blue
silk, and never wore a shawl. Prostitutes also partially tucked their skirts up as a badge of
their calling. They presented themselves much like our prostitutes today with only one goal
in mind, to present themselves available and for sale.

As Leigh walked down the dirty street along the Strand she picked up the daily paper,
*The London Times*, and read through some of the local classified adds. She read about ads
for French schoolteachers and apprenticeships that she would never know about first hand.
Most prostitutes in the early Victorian era couldn’t even write their name much less read, but
Leigh was taught by an older Irish Gentleman that worked in the market place with her for a
time. He was raised a pretty wealthy life, but lost all his money to drinking and making bets.
He now works in the market selling almost rotten meat to poor Irish and Jewish peasants.
Every time she read the thrown out *London Times* lying in the street it would only make her
dream about what her life could be like. It was as if the world was just getting worse.
Before throwing the paper down she looked to see when the show times were for the
theaters. Leigh loved the theater. Many of the shows she had seen over and over, but never
the first half. Most of the local shows had a half-price admission where you were allowed in
at intermission for only half of the cost. This was still a large price to pay for a working
class girl, but Leigh saved up for the shows at all cost.

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17 Pool, 318.
From here Leigh would meet Charles on the Strand and head into the Haymarket area. This is where it all begins. As evening is drawing to a close the streets get darker and even creepier. Many different prostitutes line the streets, theaters and dining halls. The pubs are filled with after work drinking and socializing. Most of the dollymops would approach the men and ask for Gin, or rent money and pay the price to get it.

As the night goes by Leigh ran into her first customer. His name is James and he is a shop owner from three streets back. He is single and is known to linger around these streets at night. Most of the Dollymops have had him once or twice, since he is known to be drunk and overpay without even realizing. Since Leigh had a set fee and commission to turn into Charles she would usually pocket the rest for herself or save it for the shows.

The next man was new. He didn’t share his name or where he was from, but he was a sailor and probably only in the area a short time. Most of the sailors were known to be regulars. Leigh had a few that were almost like boyfriends because they were so regular. The few regulars that she had never paid well, but they were a client and that is all that mattered. Working nights wore Leigh out as she rarely saw the sunlight and felt doomed to the darkness of London’s nightlife.

The night seemed to never end. Every night was another horror after another. Leigh dreamed that one day she would live the life of a virtuous woman in the town. She lived her life through characters in the shows. It was sad to think that Leigh would never have a normal life, marry, and have kids, for she had contracted gonorrhea from one of her clients. Venereal diseases were raging throughout London, especially on the street corners. Most

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18 Pool, 189.
19 Pool, 189.
20 Walkowitz, Prostitution and Victorian Society, 29.
21 Ibid, 49.
prostitutes carried them and they were especially prevalent throughout the lower and working classes in town.

Leigh’s night soon came to an end as she met back with Charles in very early morning to settle wages and converse. As she walked down the early morning street to her small one window room, everything was quiet. She hummed piano tunes from the pub the night before and exited the Strand and into her east end slums. As the sun starting rising in the east she walked the narrow stairway to her room and collapsed.

Victorian London was full of working class men and women. Their jobs ranged from the market to the coal mines and many jobs in between. Most all of these jobs required heavy physical labor or a grotesque job. They were tiresome on the body and tiresome on the soul. Day after day of these repeated jobs resulted in fatigue and desperation. It wasn’t that Victorian Prostitutes had more work than anyone else: it was just that they were desperate and on there last attempt at an occupation paying enough to survive. Venereal diseases took the lives of most prostitutes in 1815. It was a rapid plague sweeping across the city. Prostitutes would end up in Lock Hospitals like the one in downtown London established in 1746. 22 These Hospitals were set up to treat venereal and sexually degrading diseases but even by Victorian standards, these facilities failed as sanitary and therapeutic institutions. 23

Overall London was a booming city with every walk of life. The streets of the city were so vast at times it could seem like you were in two different countries just by walking from the west end of the city to the east. Every working class citizen knew that times were hard, but especially the prostitutes. Every lower class worker re-enacted the same exact day time and time again, and especially the prostitutes. Every upper class gentlemen tried to

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23 Ibid, 57.
pretend that they didn’t exist, but they lurked on every street corner in east London from dusk to sunrise. Prostitutes will always be a part of big city life, whether they are outlawed or not. As for 1815 London, England they were a central figure to society. Since most of our central figures today have a very easy and prominent lifestyle it is hard for us to picture how hard it was for a Victorian prostitute. For Leigh, along with other prostitutes it was a last resort and though we might look at prostitution in a different light today, there were some 80,000 roaming the streets of London “just doing their job!”

Bibliography


