
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cultural Depiction of Prostitution and Poverty in The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon and In Darkest London

Rawafid Al Najajeer

Assistant Lecturer, General Directorate of Education of Babylon, Babylon, 51001, Iraq

Corresponding Author: Rawafid Al Najajeer, **E-mail:** rawafid84@gmail.com

| ABSTRACT

This discussion looks at two of the landmark texts on the themes of prostitution and urban poverty in late Victorian Britain: The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon (1885) by W. T. Stead and In Darkest London (1889) by Margaret Harkness. The paper will also look at how the two writers deal with the epidemic childhood sexualization, rampant poverty and institutional insensitivity by the established authority especially in the infamous slums of the East End in London. In this example by Stead, the story would serve as a weapon of investigative journalism that aims to induce outrage and arouse the moral anger of the people in order to create the necessary pressure that would succeed in changing the law. Employing sensationalism of journalism and evocative language, Stead deliberately propagates a moral panic to reveal how female innocence is commodified and those with seemingly big power are accomplices to it. By contrast, the difference between the literary style of Harkness and her realist prose with its explicit description of poverty-stricken life of people living in the urban area and the strength of these people contrasting the inefficiency of the existing institutions is quite startling. The influence of the most visible themes in the two works is the gender aspects of social suppression, the commercial and feminine exploitation of female weakness, the hypocrisy of the moral meaning displayed by governing classes, and the failure of state and humanitarian monitoring. By making use of thorough investigations into primary sources and interactions with secondary sources, the analysis determines that both Stead and Harkness apply journalistic sensationalism and social realism interchangeably, not only using these literary forms as the means of narration but as tools of social awareness and critical social thinkers. Although the stylistic and ideological distinctions that distinguish between two authors are big, both of them are successful at turning their literary works into a kind of socio-political activism that reflects on the laxity of readers and highlights the institutionalized ills of Victorian London.

| KEYWORDS

Prostitution - Slums - Gender Oppression - Social Criticism - Victorian London

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 October 2025

PUBLISHED: 17 October 2025

DOI: 10.32996/ijts.2025.5.4.1

Introduction

Some of the things that caused this depiction of the Victorian era included the issues of morality, gender issues, poverty, and the fact that life in the city had seemingly degenerated. Prostitution and the conditions in the poverty-stricken areas of London were considered to be of great concern to the society at that time, and they were regarded as major social problems which affected the people then. In the following research paper, I will discuss how these matters have been presented in the initial work by W. T. Stead, The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon (1885), and Margaret Harkness, In Darkest London (1888). Both pieces vividly depict the victimization of helpless girls and women especially in the poor East End because the female body, unlike the poor people, is viewed as a viability to be exploited and the working poor are forgotten in their plight. The exposing work of investigative journalism performed by Stead triggered the outburst of social outrage and resulted in rapid legislative changes by exposing the epidemic of child prostitution. Instead, Harkness uses a graver, more documentary kind of approach and shows the life in the slum, where everything is pessimistic, dirty, and there is a moral and social necessity to rescue people.

Copyright: © 2025 the Author(s). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Published by Al-Kindi Centre for Research and Development, London, United Kingdom.

This paper will attempt a comparison of the two books focusing on how they address prostitution, life in the slums, the victimization of both sexes of the society, and the mistreatment of people belonging to a particular category. Both writers use the literature and journalism as the genre of narration as well as, the conscious tool of moral enslavement and social disruption, which was a widespread idea in the late-Victorian era, which held the belief in a power of the word.

Inclusion of prostitution in nineteenth century London was a close outcome of lack of nice houses and the unavailability of honourable job avenues. Many modern writers tried to make people realize the social and ethical wrongs of this business. These included, among others, W. T. Stead, whose release in 1885, *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*, noted the kidnapping, luring and consequent blackmailing of under-age children into the profession of street prostitution. This paper discusses these heinous acts as discussed by Stead in his publication giving more focus on his intention to stir out the people into lamentations and influence a legal change. The novel *In Darkest London* by Margaret Harkness (1888) dealing with the squalid state of the east end slums compared with the relative luxury of the west end will also be analysed. Harkness wrote the novel during a time when murder and crime were rampant in London and thus, the semi-geographical image of the metropolis and the immense social economic stratification is preserved in the novel.

Stead explains the orderly logic that is applied in kidnapping and seducing minor girls after which the girls are forced into prostitution. After being captured, these girls have no choice but rather to compromise their integrity and dignity in order to be able to deliver goods worth only a few pence. He laments on the state of affairs saying that "Such crimes are growing with impunity and without checks or watchdogs, not to mention that they are even officially encouraged by the law" (Stead, 2012, p. 11). He notices that such outrageous crimes were not responded to by the law. Judith Walkowitz criticizes the Victorian perceptions of the so-called fallen woman as the sin of society that corrupts men and that such women are the victims of male paws and the most abused by patriarchal norms and male desire (Walkowitz, 1980, p. 125). This school of thought holds that women cannot be considered as evil by nature but are victims of female oppressive systems which prevail in their social and economic environments.

Stead diligently conducts an investigation into the facts.

"I have been exploring the London Inferno". "It has been a strange and unexpected experience". "For a month I have oscillated between the noblest and the meanest of mankind, the saviours and destroyers of their race, spending hours alternately in brothels and hospitals, in the streets and in refuges, in company of procuresses and of bishops (Stead 2012: 12)".

Stead employs direct personal engagement over the issue while downplaying the overall expenditures incurred by the nation. Mumford describes an innocent and impoverished young lady who is sold into prostitution, typically by her mother, and abandoned in the gin bars of working-class London, where affluent men pay to exploit and violate her (Mumford, 1993, p. 358). The victims were predominantly virgins, lacking any understanding of sexual relations or the masculine gender, until they were coercively drawn into the lucrative and exploitative prostitute industry.

Similarly, Margaret Harkness, in her 1888 novel *In Darkest London*, seeks to provoke public awareness of the moral and social atrocities of the slums. Harkness was a socialist and feminist who, akin to other authors addressing urban poverty, resided in the East End to firsthand experience urban destitution and uncover its cultural origins. Her book parallels that of Stead in its examination of the more socioeconomic realities of the era; but, unlike his work, it extends beyond prostitution to encompass related tragedies such as infanticide, famine, filth, and assassination. The young woman's solitary status was perceived as sexually compromising, as noted by Deborah Epstein Nord, as she was observed without the presence of a parent, male escort, or spouse (Nord, 1990, p. 734). The nineteenth century posed significant dangers for women, as they navigated a landscape marked by poverty, gender inequity, and moral double standards that severely constrained their prospects for achieving a safe and dignified existence.

Stead examines the agents of affluent individuals who exploit their financial resources to corrupt the innocence and purity of young girls. He depicts the rapist as beastly, violent, and filthy to an extent that a respectable individual cannot fathom (Stead 2012: 13). The victims, typically ensnared by other women, invariably originate from impoverished slum areas. Deborah Gorham asserts that the affluent men who acquired them were depicted as malevolent individuals (Gorham 1978: 353354). Stead used stark and harrowing imagery of young girls victimized by strangers and criminals to evoke moral outrage and to impact the legal domain in addressing these offenses. Gorham contends, He elicited a sense of outrage that prompted a diverse spectrum of opinion in the country to sympathize (Gorham 1978: 354). Stead demonstrates that individuals must advocate for change and oppose laws that allow sexual contact with girls as young as thirteen.

Stead commences his investigation with accounts from girls who are seduced, ensnared, and assaulted, either while under the influence or after prolonged confinement in a locked room, or who are enticed into a perilous space under various false

pretended and subsequently denied exit until they are deprived of what a woman should value above her own existence (Stead 2012: 15). His inquiries encompassed customers, police officers, and the victims themselves, executed with the intent to uncover the reasons and context of such illegal conduct.

"Stead constructed sexual danger as a national issue for national readership, building on the prior reform agitation against the state regulation of prostitution and the grass-roots organizing efforts of an emerging social and purity movement (Walkowitz 1992: 84)".

Stead examines urban pornography and fantasy, akin to Harkness in her novel set in the slums.

In a manner akin to Stead, Harkness emphasizes life in London's East End by noting that Murder in Whitechapel is an antiquated narrative (Harkness 2003: 17). She continues by stating that the East-End populace is primarily concerned with two matters: murders and funerals. The existence of these individuals is exceedingly monotonous, and nothing could invigorate their stagnant vitality" (Harkness 2003: 17). Harkness asserts that the pervasive presence of hunger and the frequent use of alcohol among the populace diminishes cognitive capacity. Her narrative highlighted the activities of the Salvation Army, exemplified by Captain Lobe and other philanthropic figures such as Ruth, a middle-class woman engaged in charitable endeavors. Harkness depicts both middle-class laborers in impoverished areas and Salvation Army officials, reflecting the socioeconomic reality of the era (Nord 1990: 746). Harkness based her work on her firsthand experiences in the East End.

Similarly, Stead integrates his investigative experiences into his work. He recounts an encounter with a police officer, stating: "But the policeman on the beat?" The officer replies, He has no business intervening, even if he had heard something (Stead 2012: 16). This represents a tradeoff that underscores the legal and institutional ineffectiveness lack protecting young victims, even from their own law enforcement agencies. Stead exposes the hypocrisy of affluent criminals residing in the West End and inhabiting prime properties (Stead 2012: 27), while detailing the financial dealings involved in procurement within these affluent areas.

Stead underscores the price disparity in the procurement of females across different London locales, noting that, The girls are more expensive in the West End when acquired in the East He specifies: "Prices are as follows: The wholesale establishment of Mdmes X and Z, which I will discuss shortly, is 5, an East-End brothel is 10, and the West End is 20 (Stead 2012: 48). According to The Maiden Tribute, all the girls depicted are from the working class; as Catherine Robson observes, the anxieties surrounding the working-class girl that were implicitly sexual in the 1840s have now become overtly sexualized. More significantly, the prototypical abused child has transitioned from being a collier or mill worker to a prostitute (Robson 2001: 14). These data assist Stead in not only demonstrating moral issues but also in elucidating the economic structures behind the presence of prostitution.

Concurrently with Stead's examination of the social divide between London's East End and West End, Harkness employs a similar thematic approach. She composes:

"I told you," the doctor continued as they walked on, "that the whole East-End is starving. "The West-End is bad, or mad; not to see that if things go on like this we must have a revolution. One fine day the people about here will grow desperate; and they will walk westwards, cutting throats and hurling brickbats" (Harkness 2003: 154)".

Harkness, as an observer, draws upon her personal experiences, particularly her time in Whitechapel, which she characterizes as replete with dread and hopelessness. She depicts the slums as authentic locales characterized by uniform material deprivation and non-verbal human anguish, capable of really evoking compassion and prompting action (Koven 2004: 4). The conditions in the slums, as articulated by her, are exacerbated by the systematic neglect; the inhabitants are effectively abandoned by legal and governmental institutions.

In The Maiden Tribute, Stead introduces a stark paradox in which female innocent victims are portrayed as meek, while masculine exhibit violent aggression. He observes that processes are adept, whereas women are vulnerable and ill-equipped, provided that the males has financial resources (Stead 2012: 17). The girls are likened as prey pursued by cunning and ruthless predators. Ann Robson notes:

"When, therefore the Pall Mall Gazette (after warning its readers that parental discretion should be exercised) called a prostitute, a prostitute and a lecher, a lecher, when it printed a recital of verifiable facts without euphemism or circumlocution, when it delivered with a tea and crumpets a description of money changing hands for the rape of unwitting and unwilling little victims, gave details of the medical examination performed to obtain a certificate of virginity to satisfy the purchaser of leather straps, padded

rooms and smothered screams, W.T Stead was not simply exposing vice but challenging Victorian society (Robson 1978: 52)".

The Victorian society was cognizant of these offenses yet failed to take action; they did not encourage the judicial system to address these violations. Harkness directs her attention towards the pervasive poverty and hunger experienced by those traversing the dismal streets of Victorian London's slums. She highlights that tension in gender relations and many forms of abuse were exacerbated in marginalized districts, particularly in the East End. Contrary to societal views, Harkness asserts that hunger is neither a consequence of social issues or Divine Fiat (Harkness 2003: 62).

She emphasizes the instrumental role of parents in maintaining family cohesion, asserting that charity begins at home (Harkness 2003: 85). To support this perspective, Nord observes:

"Not only did Harkness introduce an agenda of socialist politics into fin de siècle realism, but also added the perspective of the socially engaged, independent middle-class woman whose relationship to her own class is marginalized and strained (Nord 1990: 745)".

Harkness portrays Ruth, a heroine estranged from her father, as a slum rescuer who traverses impoverished streets in an effort to save vulnerable women and children.

Stead and Harkness converge on the same theme of the East End slums as a site of profound despair and exploitation. Stead asserts that, owing to widespread poverty and hunger, inebriated parents frequently sell their children to brothel proprietors located in the East-End, where an unending supply of young girls is readily available (Stead 2012: 19). Harkness reinforces this idea by emphasizing the same lamentable conditions:

"This square was quiet enough, except at midnight". "The public- houses that flanked its entrance vomited forth their cargoes of depravity and vice, and the air rang with the oaths of women who sell their babies for two shillings or eighteen pence (Harkness 2003: 23)".

This pertains to the narrow and dimly lit alleyways teeming with malevolence that parasitically drain the vitality of others. Prostitution is an industry in which minors are sold and exploited for the advantage of others. It exists

"The image of child sexual abuse of 1885 was that of the helpless victim sold as a 'five pound virgin' to satisfy the jaded lusts of a perverted aristocrat. It was a mercenary, loveless, heterosexual event across a wide chasm of age, power and social class (McIntosh 1988: 9)".

The egregious behavior persists unimpeded by legal or societal intervention.

Stead consistently expresses concern for girls who are sold, lured, and raped, characterizing them as orphans, offspring of alcoholic parents, children of sex workers, and kids separated from their peers (Stead 2012: 25). He emphatically characterizes these losses as the offspring of the populace, killed to cater to the desires of the affluent (Stead 2012: 9). Cecily Devereux elucidates Stead's approach, noting that his racial apprehension over English girls coerced into prostitution was primarily intended to emphasize a national crisis rather than mere railway disparities (Devereux 2000: 14). No one is present to rescue the girls despite their anguish and cries. Stead disturbs us with the assertion that for certain individuals, the sound of suffering embodies their pleasures, and they would not suppress even a single note of the anguished cries they revel in (Stead 2012: 29). This underscores the harrowing reality that the victims endure suffering for the gratification of the perpetrators, who derive pleasure from the victims' screams as a means to fulfill their fetishes.

The paper by Stead illustrates how the law facilitates illegal activity. He composes:

"Against their wiles the law offers the child over thirteen next to no protection". "If a child of fourteen is cajoled or frightened, or over born by anything short of direct force or the threat of immediate bodily harm, into however an unwilling acquiescence in an act the nature of which she most imperfectly apprehends, the law steps in to shield her violator? (Stead 2012: 32)".

The law often serves the interests of criminals rather than safeguarding the victims. Carole S. Vance asserts that the melodramatic narrative surrounding trafficking seeks to emphasize sexual peril, the innocence of women, and male desire as primary reasons and justifications for the coerced movement of women (Vance 2011: 135). However, these narratives frequently overlook the government's overarching failure to enact and enforce legislation that safeguards the dignity and rights of women.

Both Stead and Harkness underscore the awful reality of children being sold by their parents. Stead depicts the situation of Lily, a thirteen-year-old girl sold by her mother; the brothel-keeper dispatched to get her gave a sovereign for her acquisition. The

lady was destitute, errant, and indifferent to all matters as long as alcohol was available" (Stead 2012: 33). In this instance, the circumstances of abject poverty compel the mother to sell her infant to the procurers who would exploit the girls with callousness.

"The assertion of a mother's right to defend "daughter "was both an extension of woman's traditional role within the family and a political device aimed at subverting patriarchal authority: it gave mothers not fathers, the right to control sexual access to the daughter (Walkowitz 1980: 125)".

Through this action, the mother extinguishes the modesty within the girl, who is meant to symbolize purity.

While Stead explicitly expresses the necessity for legal change, Harkness refrains from directly addressing the role of law in the murders, kidnappings, and tortures depicted in her work. Stead vehemently denounces the legislation that permits the sexual exploitation of minors, asserting that a girl is deemed a mature woman under the law upon reaching the age of thirteen (Stead 2012: 42). He further exposes the systemic dishonesty by designating the policeman as the one who is bribed (Stead 2012: 42), highlighting how law enforcement officials accept payments to neglect their duties.

The novel by Harkness was written during the notorious era of the unidentified serial killer Jack the Ripper. Seth Koven asserts that the grotesque sexual violence and human degradation associated with the Jack the Ripper murders compelled global attention towards this labyrinth of suffering (Koven 2004: 1). Despite the efforts of humanitarian groups to rectify the situation, violence and poverty continued to escalate in the East End.

Slums can be characterized in several manners. It might be characterized as a site of conflicting emotions or a significant venue for analysis.

"The metropolitan slums provided well- to do philanthropic men and women with an actual and imagined location where, with the approval of society, they could challenge prevailing norms about class and gender relations and sexuality (Koven 2004: 4)".

Harkness characterizes the slums distinctively, even alluding to the concept of infanticide as "so many children killed in sheer despair by their parents" (Harkness 2003: 204). Infanticide is another concern depicted in slum literature.

Conclusion

The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon by Stead effectively elevated the discourse surrounding prostitution-related issues, leading to the enactment of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which amended the age of consent to include sixteen years. Conversely, Harkness, In Darkest London examines slum life and the role of humanitarian institutions in alleviating poverty and misery. She is highlighting pressing social issues via her art and urgently urges the elite and authorities to take action and uplift individuals living in dire circumstances.

This study refers to a significant original contribution by highlighting how Victorian-era literature and investigative journalism—specifically The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon by W.T. Stead and In Darkest London by Margaret Harkness—functioned as powerful catalysts for social reform. By analyzing these two works not merely as literary artifacts but as active agents of societal transformation, the study foregrounds the historical interplay between reform and narrative. It uniquely positions these texts as early examples of media-driven activism that helped shape public discourse and legislative outcomes, such as the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. Furthermore, the study contributes to contemporary scholarship by urging researchers to re-examine the legacy of social reform literature in informing modern policy, moral consciousness, and pedagogical practice. In doing so, it opens a valuable interdisciplinary pathway linking literature, history, sociology, and public policy, reaffirming the enduring relevance of Victorian activism to current conversations on class, gender, and social justice.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

Bibliography

- [1] Devereux, C., 2000. "The Maiden Tribute" and the Rise of the White Slave in the Nineteenth Century: The Making of an Imperial Construct. *Victorian Review*, 1-23.
- [2] Gorham, D., 1978. The "Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" Re-Examined: Child Prostitution and the Idea of Childhood in Late-Victorian England. *Victorian Studies*, 21, 353-379.
- [3] Harkness, M., 2003. *In Darkest London*: Black Apollo Press.
- [4] Kevin, M.J., 1993. City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London by Judith Walkowitz. *History and Theory*, 32, 356-363.
- [5] Koven, S., 2004. *Slumming: sexual and social politics in Victorian London*: Princeton University Press.
- [6] McIntosh, M., 1988. Introduction to an issue: family secrets as public drama. *Feminist Review*, 6-15.
- [7] Nord, D.E., 1990. "Neither Pairs nor Odd": Female Community in Late Nineteenth-Century London. *Signs*, 15, 733-754.
- [8] Robson, A., 1978. The Significance of "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon". *Victorian periodicals newsletter*, 11, 50-57.
- [9] Robson, C., 2001. *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentlemen*: Princeton University Press.
- [10] Stead, W.T., 2012. *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*: Lowood Press: MMXI.
- [11] Vance, C.S., 2011. Thinking trafficking, thinking sex. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 17, 135-143.
- [12] Walkowitz, J.R., 1980. The politics of prostitution. *Signs*, 6, 123-135.
- [13] Walkowitz, J.R., 1992. *City of dreadful delight: Narratives of sexual danger in late-Victorian London*: University of Chicago Press.